

Kisetsu Morita


Illustration by Benio

12

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** **12**
Illustration by **Benio**





Ghost from the Dead Kingdom
Nahna Nahna

The Witch of the Highlands
Azusa





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SPIN-OFF

The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls

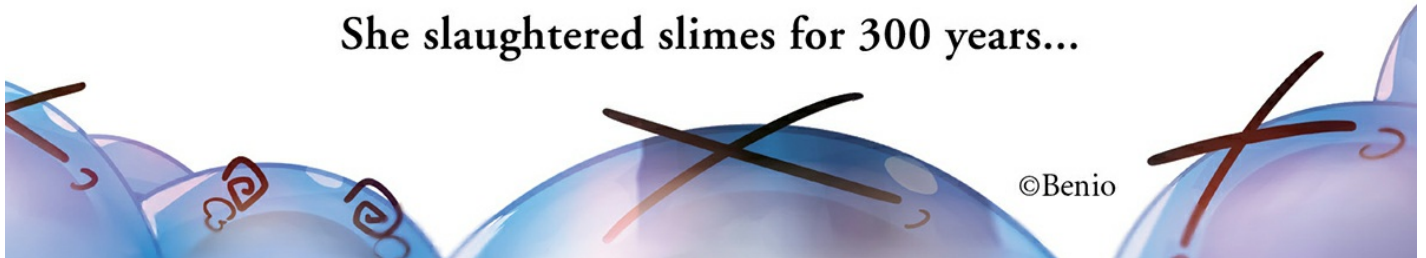


Surpassing **Wyrmspeed**

The Academy **Field Trip**

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 12

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**



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I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level, Vol. 12

KISETSU MORITA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by Benio

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SLIME TAOSHITE SANBYAKUNEN, SHIRANAIUCHINI LEVEL MAX NI
NATTEMASHITA vol. 12

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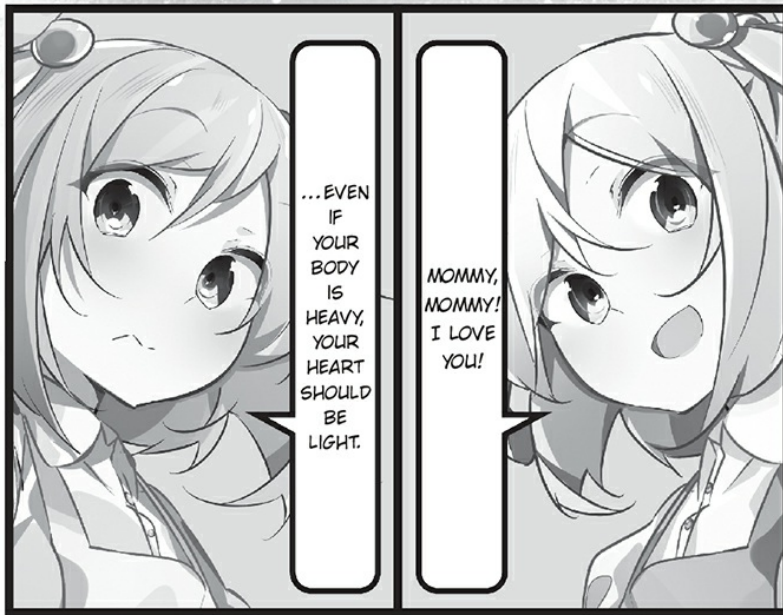
AZUSA AIZAWA

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*.





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.



BEELEZEBUB

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.



FLATORTE

A blue dragon-girl who obeys what Azusa says. Since she's a dragon like Laika, there is somewhat of a rivalry between them, but she's an optimistic and energetic girl. Unlike Laika, she has a tail in human form.

ROSALIE

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



SANDRA

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





ANYFIN'
GOES, SO
LONG'S
IT'S GOOD.
THE BEST
PEOPLE
ARE THE
BEST AT
SOMEFIN'.

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.



NAHNA NAHNA

Chief maid and minister of the dead kingdom. Minds Muu as her adviser and caretaker. She is earnest and capable, but she has a sharp wit and loves making others squirm. Once she finds Muu's and Azusa's weaknesses and pet peeves, she annoys them indirectly.



HOW COW-
ARDLY OF
YOU, YOUR
MAJESTY.
ACT MORE
LIKE A
LEADER.



THE
TRANSPAR-
ENCY
OF
JELLYFISH
ALLOWS
US TO
SEE
ALL THE
UGLINESS
INSIDE.

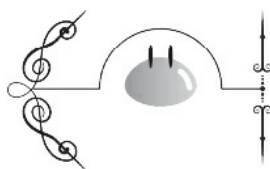
CURALINA

A jellyfish spirit and wandering artist. Like a jellyfish caught in the waves, she drifts aimlessly around the world.

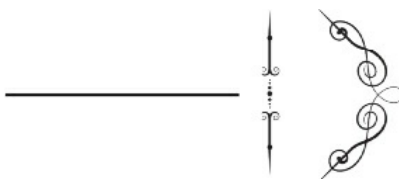
With her characteristic gloomy, heavy themes and ghastly, dark brushwork, she is well-received among the demons and a few curious people.







MAKING DONBURI FOR DRAGONS



That day, I'd come to the southern part of the kingdom to pick plants that might make for good medicine.

The harvesting part of the whole ordeal was going smoothly, but—

“Ooh... I'm so sweaty... It's so hard to move...”

Flatorte was exhausted. I felt like her tail was drooping more than usual.

“Are you okay, Flatorte...? You seem kinda...blah.”

It was rare to see her so lethargic.

“Lady Azusa, this is Flatorte's own fault, so you may ignore her. I told her we would be going to a warm region, yet she insisted on coming along.” Laika sounded annoyed as she walked beside me.

Now, this might seem pretty harsh at first glance, but before we left...

“No, we are going south. You will not like it. You will immediately complain about being tired. Don't go if you don't have to.” (Laika)

“I'll be fine. And I don't have anything to do today, so I'm going, too!”
(Flatorte)

...they had this conversation, so Laika's attitude was inevitable.

“Flatorte, if you're really that exhausted, you know you can rest, right?”

She reminded me of a little kid throwing a fit because they wanted to come with their parent to work but then complained about work being boring when they got there.

Falfa and Shalsha were generally interested in anything wherever they went, and Sandra wasn't at all interested in traveling and rarely came with us, so I'd never experienced anything like this before.

"Mistress, I'm not *that* exhausted. Blue dragons are strong, so this really isn't a problem for me. Fire spirits? The sun? I don't care; bring it on!"

"The sun would definitely win in a fight, though."

Her refusal to admit weakness made it hard to tell, but it genuinely seemed like she had some energy to spare. Well, not like she's made of ice.

"But...the air is sticky, and I'm sweating, and I feel gross..."

Right, that.

"It feels so uncomfortable, like I'm being attacked really slowly..."

"I get what you mean... I'm sweating, too..."

All this humidity reminded me of Japanese summers. Shade would cool you right down in dry heat, but the humidity meant there was nowhere for us to run.

The house in the highlands was refreshing in that regard. I'd completely acclimated to all that dry air after living there for three hundred years, and now I was even more thankful for it after coming south.

"Honestly, how pitiful. You have no stamina, Flatorte. I know your kind cannot handle the heat well, but I believe you should learn a bit more patience—"

"Hey, Mistress, let's get something to eat! I bet I'll feel much better if I eat a lot!"

"It is important to eat well and fortify one's body against the heat. Let us partake, Lady Azusa."

The dragons were on the same page when it came to food!

Don't let their cute appearances fool you; they had bigger appetites than any jock. That was a given, considering they had to maintain their massive dragon bodies, though.

"You're right. I can stop here for work, so let's find a restaurant."



We went to the nearby town and came to a cheap eatery.

“I still do not know the food in this area very well. I suppose that is expected, though; I will simply order everything on this page.”

“Then I, the great Flatorte, will order everything on the next page of the menu!”

“You sure eat a lot...”

If they weren’t worried about their weight, I thought they should just eat what they could.

The restaurant worker who came to take their order was shocked. Which was the normal reaction. You don’t usually order things from a menu by the page.

“Ma’am, we have a challenge for our customers where you must eat the top-ten most popular dishes in order before you can go home; would you like to try that?”

“No! I simply want to eat a lot!”

“I see... Well...everything on that page comes as a meal, so everything will come with rice and soup. Are you all right with that?”

Oooh, good question.

In case you were wondering, some restaurants gave the option of bread or rice, but this place was rice only. After all, this was rice country.

But I kind of knew how things were going to go.

“Not a problem for me, Flatorte! Bring it all out!”

I knew it!

Dragons didn’t mind extra carbs. Actually, she probably would miss the meal staple if she didn’t order it.

I thought she might not want any of the soup...but she had been sweating a lot, so it was probably good for her to rehydrate.

Once our order had been taken, all we had to do was wait. My entrée was some chicken mixed with rice and fried. I had a feeling whatever I got would

have some spicy seasoning. I got a general grasp on how things tasted here the last time we came.

Then our food arrived. Along with an extra table. Otherwise, none of Flatorte's rice or soup would have been able to fit...

I could hear some other customers wondering, "Is this an eating competition?" In a way, they weren't wrong.

"Yes, time to fortify my body against the heat! I'll get even stronger!" Flatorte gave her convenient explanation of her meal before digging in.

I slowly partook of my own locally seasoned dish. Well, I wasn't eating all that slow, actually, but compared to Flatorte, everyone seemed slow.

Also, Laika was eating with impeccable manners, but each bite was so big that she was proceeding fast, too.

"This is seafood dressed in a starchy sauce. We don't often eat this at home, so it is a new experience for me. This is the fried fish. The meat is so soft and plump. This small dish here, encased in a wheat-flour wrapper, is also very good. This soup has a rather unique sourness to it. Moving on to the next dish."

"You eat so much; I almost can't take my eyes off you."

Money wasn't a problem for us, but I kind of wanted to kill a few more slimes per day and collect more magic stones for a bit.

Meanwhile, there was an unbelievably messy scarfing noise coming from Flatorte.

To be honest, I was worried. I didn't remember her ever making noises like that during our regular meals, so this was probably less of a problem of table manners and more of a food issue.

"Mmm, *chomp*, this rice stuff is...*chomp, chomp*...kind of, *chomp*, sticky."

"Flatorte, don't speak with your mouth full."

Flatorte gulped down everything she had in her mouth before continuing. "It looks like it'll fall apart, but it's sticky when I bite into it. It doesn't dry out my throat as much as bread does."

That sounded like an opinion coming from someone who wasn't accustomed to eating rice.

That said, this rice was longer and a little looser than the kind I was used to in Japan. As an ex-Japanese girl, this rice didn't feel all that sticky to me, but Flatorte was having a different experience.

"Right, people don't really eat much rice where we live."

Strictly speaking, the edible slimes and the leaf slimes I made around the same time are both mochi products, but that way of using rice and this kind of rice are totally different.

At this point, I no longer considered rice just a way to fill my stomach.

"Rice does not take well to colder climates. That is why bread is the staple carbohydrate in the north," Laika explained.

"Yeah, that makes sense."

They grew rice up in Hokkaido, too, but I think that was as a result of crossbreeding... I bet the rice was shocked about it, too. *Huh? What do you mean we can grow in places this cold?*

Still, even with all that knowledge, it didn't seem like Laika was sold on this particular staple.

I scooped some of the rice into my own spoon.

As I stared at the oil glistening on the grains, a thought came to me. I'd eaten this stuff every day in my past life, too many times to count.

Maybe it was about time I took a shot at cooking it with the stuff in this world.

Personally, it brought back a lot of memories, but...

When I watched Flatorte and Laika partaking in their meals—Laika quietly, Flatorte violently—I had a feeling that rice suited them better than bread did.

But simply swapping out one staple for another wasn't very interesting, and I wasn't sure if they'd go for that. I'd been eating mainly bread for the past three hundred years, too. If I had the choice between the two, I'd probably pick bread. That was especially the case for the rest of my family.

I had to make something that *needed* rice.

“You full already, Mistress? I’ll eat it for you.”

“No, I can keep going... I didn’t stop because I was full...”

I stared hard at the rice in my spoon, searching for some kind of hint. What I saw was a bunch of white grains mixed with chunks of chicken.

“Hey! That’s it!”

A light flipped on in my head. The second I got back home, I was going to make it happen.

“Lady Azusa, did you come up with a good combination for that dish? Shall I order some more?”

“I’m perfectly fine with this, Laika!”

Dragons never compromised when it came to food. But watching them was only making my idea take shape.

“Let’s go to a shop that sells rice later.”

“Oh-ho. Will you be making poultices?”

“Not at all. I want to see my options for food.”

That was when I remembered video games had rice balls that recovered HP, so I wondered if there was any part of Japan that saw rice as a health-recovery agent... Thinking about it, though, it was kind of odd that just eating a rice ball could make an injured person better.

When I finished my meal, the dragons were eating fruit for dessert.

“Man, just looking at you makes me feel full!”

When we left, the one staff member said to us with a smile, “Come back anytime!”

They saw us as perfect customers...

I went to a grocery store, picked a rice variety with the perfect kind of stickiness, and bought it.

I was glad the dragons were around. They could carry anything I ordered—

and I needed to stock up while we were here.

We didn't have any convenient appliances like a rice cooker, so I also bought a specialty pot. All that was left was to find the perfect preparation method through a little trial and error.

"Are we going to eat rice at home, too, Mistress?"

"Yep. There's something I want to try out. We've been eating bread as our staple so far, right? So... Hmm, I guess the best way to put it is I'm going to make something more rice-friendly."

Breaking the routine every once in a while wasn't so bad.

"So we will be eating both rice and bread, then. That will be worthwhile!"

"That's not what I meant!"

They weren't thinking of bread *or* rice; they were thinking of bread *and* rice...



After getting back to the house in the highlands, I immediately started putting together my menu in the kitchen. I say "putting together," but I actually had the completed image already in my head. All I needed to do was get as close as I could to it with the ingredients I had in this world.

"Oof... The rice is still al dente... It won't absorb any flavors like this... And I don't think the broth tastes very good, either. And the batter is way too hard. This would hurt the inside of somebody's mouth. Did I fry it at the wrong temperature?"

The family would occasionally come in and peek at what I was doing, but it was hard to explain, so I just said I was thinking up a new dish. It wouldn't be easy to describe something that didn't exist in this world.

Meanwhile, somebody else was in charge of food today. That was Halkara—she came into the kitchen and started washing the vegetables.

"You've been quite passionate about this, Madam Teacher~"

"I'm not sure that's a good thing, considering I'm supposed to be a witch who makes medicines, but I guess it's the truth..."

She was right that I'd been particularly enthusiastic about this culinary experiment.

"I'll be making a salad, and that's much easier. I just need to be careful I don't include any poisonous mushrooms." She sometimes included mushrooms that could be eaten raw.

"But your salads are great, Halkara. Even my daughters clear their plates."

Neither Falfa nor Shalsha liked vegetables very much—same for the dragons. Although, the dragons didn't so much hate vegetables as find them less filling.

"I believe it must be my special, homemade dressing~ I spruced it up a bit to make sure you keep coming back for more!"

Halkara looked proud. Maybe elves were the only ones who knew how to make vegetables taste good.

"Huh. How do you make this mystery dressing anyway?"

"Would you ask the magician to reveal her secrets?! But I suppose I have nothing to hide, so I'll tell you."

It wasn't a genuine company secret, so she was ready to give it up right away.

Halkara took out the designated dressing bottle. "This is our usual dressing."

"Uh-huh."

The dressing was sold in Flatta and was a faint-orange color.

Then Halkara took something else down from the kitchen shelves.

It was full with a dark liquid. The label read ELVIN and had a picture of an elf man waving.

"I put in a dash of elvin, an elf's best friend at the dinner table, and it deepens the flavor in a jiffy!"

"Ohh, you use that stuff!"

Elvin was a seasoning much like soy sauce, made from fermented beans. It was apparently a unique seasoning to the elves, and it was Halkara who first told me about it.

...Wait a second.

If it was like soy sauce...wouldn't that be a revolution for my own personal project?

"Halkara!"

I grasped her arms.

"Oh, Madam Teacher... Is our forbidden household romance finally igniting...? I accept all of it and all of you!"

She sure was quick to accept...

She was getting the wrong idea, but it was too much trouble to snark at her.

"Do you have any more of this elvin?"

"Oh yes... You won't even explain that I have gotten the wrong idea. I see... I have three unopened bottles so far, so you may use one in your experiments..."

I immediately decided to use the elvin to make broth and dipping sauce.

As I thought, I could immediately tell that I'd taken a huge step toward the right answer, at least compared to all the trial and error I'd gone through so far. Soy sauce and rice were best friends.

—And then a week of experimenting passed.

"This is it!"

With a great spark of inspiration, I brought rice dishes into this world.

...Of course, the demons had probably already created something similar, but I'm not going to count any weird coincidences.

I honestly wouldn't be surprised with whatever the demons came up with... I mean, they had curry and ramen and stuff...





When the dragons finished their run and came into the dining room, I turned to speak to them.

“Hey, you two, I want you to taste test something for me. That okay?”

“I shall be right there, Lady Azusa.”

“If it’s going to take time, then I’ll just go take a jog until it’s ready.”

Both Laika and Flatorte gave me their willing consent and eagerly waited in the dining room.

I was already ready to go, so I got straight to cooking.

“Can you tell us what it is, Lady Azusa?” Laika asked from the dining room.

“It’s something with rice, actually.”

“I thought so. I have seen you experimenting with it recently.”

She was so clever; she already seemed to have an inkling as to what was going on. Or maybe she’d just noticed what I’d been doing in the kitchen all week.

“Hey, it’s starting to smell good! You’re using elvin, aren’t you? And it smells kind of like egg, too.”

On the other hand, Flatorte’s wild instinct sniffed out all my ingredients...

“Both of you always eat so much. That’s why I wanted to come up with a dish that will leave you full and satisfied.”

“I see... I would be, um...happy...with a larger serving... I thought about keeping my food intake down in the past, but...” Laika’s face went red from embarrassment.

“Oh, it’s all fine! Don’t starve yourself, okay?!”

One reason why Laika started eating more was because Flatorte’s unapologetic appetite had influenced her. In her efforts to keep up with her fellow dragon, she stopped minding her portion size.

As a result, Flatorte had smashed down the walls of hesitancy that Laika had built up around herself. At the end of the day, the two of them had created

great synergy between them.

My cooking, by the way, was going great.

People weren't really fans of runny eggs in this world, so I made sure to cook the egg thoroughly. I was basically at the final stages of preparation already. I couldn't really handle dishes with too many steps anyway.

I scooped a whole bunch of freshly cooked rice into a deep bowl. Ladling that much into such a deep bowl made me want to call it a meal instead of just rice.

The rice was cooked perfectly. It was not too gloopy and not too dry—the grains were holding together on their own.

On top of it, I slid the mass of the chicken and egg from the pot.

I didn't have any Japanese parsley for the garnish, but I sprinkled on something very similar.

I stuck in the spoon, and it was done!

“It's ready! First we have Azusa's special *oyakodon*!”

Yes—the first thing I made was, of course, *oyakodon*: chicken and egg over rice.

This would surely satisfy the big eaters.

I placed two bowls of the *oyakodon* in front of them.

I could almost see their eyes shining. Anyone who liked rice would certainly enjoy it. They could finish it in an instant.

“I'm using rice that's a bit on the stickier side. So just give it a taste, and—”

But they were already chowing down.

They concentrated on nothing but putting their spoons in their mouths; their entire worlds had shrunk to the *oyakodon* before them.

They were so focused on eating that they didn't stop to offer compliments after the first bite, like most food reporters did...

In a way, that was the greatest honor to the one who made the dish, but it was going to be a while until I got to hear their thoughts...

Well, whatever. It wasn't like either of them were going to be full after one bowl of *oyakodon*, and I was going to make another dish anyway. I decided to get started on that one.

Cooking it was very similar to the last. I just had to dip the pork into bread crumbs and fry it in hot oil. If I nailed the *katsu*, it'd work out.

After working for a while, the two of them finished their *oyakodon*.

"That was delicious, Lady Azusa. I believe around five servings would be enough for me."

"I think any dish would fill you up after five servings..."

Their bowls were completely clear; it almost made me think they'd been starving.

"Mistress, I shouldn't lick the bowl, should I?"

"No! No licking! It's improper!"

"I didn't much care for rice initially, when it's so difficult to handle, but placing something juicy on top of it makes it the perfect combination. The rice absorbs the juice."

"Yes, exactly! Rice is delicious when it soaks up all that broth!"

Rice in any kind of broth or sauce was good on its own. The person who first came up with it honestly deserves a Nobel Peace Prize.

"The sweet and salty flavors were perfect! I, Flatorte, even licked some off my bowl!"

"And after I told you it's improper!"

Well, I couldn't complain about a positive review, at least, so my tinges of worry vanished. It was pretty nerve-racking to have someone test out a new creation of yours.

This wasn't just about the skill of the preparation but also a question of cultural differences. Japanese people eat rice from a young age, but people who grow up in bread cultures have a harder time with rice in bowls.

"Oh, and I made sure to cook the eggs through. You like that, right?"

“Yes... I would be a bit hesitant to eat them if they were not completely cooked.” Laika’s reaction was somewhat apologetic. I guess they don’t eat raw eggs in her culture.

“What about you, Flatorte?”

“I sometimes eat whole eggs raw, shell and all, and those are pretty good, too.”

“What the hell?”

Flatorte might not mind a runny egg, but I decided to go with the fully cooked version for our first time.

“I’m making dish number two right now, so sit tight.”

“I’ll eat as many as you make!”

Well, it’s not like I have an endless supply... I probably underestimated how much dragons eat.

Now, then. I filled a deep bowl with rice once again.

And this time, I put *tonkatsu* dressed with egg right on top!

“Dish number two is *katsudon*! The breading is perfectly crispy, so I hope to hear some love for that!”

I thought it was a fantastic bowl of *katsudon*, if I do say so myself, but I wondered how they felt.

Once again, they attacked their meal with spoons as their weapons.

I guess I wouldn’t be able to hear their thoughts on the breading until they were done eating... Oh well. I should be happy they were so enthusiastic about it.

I thought it was fun talking about food that looked pretty—or Insta-worthy, as I used to say. It was fun to enjoy things with our eyes and noses, too. I don’t like rules that make food boring.

But it’s also nice to have someone devour the food like a predator.

Both of them were very serious about eating their *katsudon*—but on closer inspection, I saw slight differences between Laika and Flatorte.

Laika didn't mix the toppings with the rice very much but instead broke down the *katsu* bit by bit into the rice.

Flatorte mixed it together right from the start, making an even blend of the egg and *katsu* elements all over.

If this was curry, then I'm sure she would be the type to mix the sauce and the rice first... I did the same thing as a kid, but I stopped doing it at some point.

"That is a messy way to eat, Flatorte," Laika warned her, unable to condone her manners. "If you mix it all together, you will be unable to differentiate the ingredients and differences in texture. You need to insert your spoon vertically —"

Laika stopped there—but not because Flatorte was talking back. Flatorte was saying nothing.

She wasn't minding Laika at all, instead only concentrating on her mixed bowl of *katsudon* with a big smile.

"My dragon instincts tell me it's delicious!"

Ahhh... Even if it looks like a mess, I had nothing else to say when she smiled so brightly. It reminded me of the real significance of a meal. I was going to make more things she could enjoy.

"Yes, I suppose that is the way you eat."

Laika withdrew her statement and returned to her meal. Her expression had softened, too. She wasn't going to start copying her fellow dragon, but she was beginning to acknowledge that Flatorte had her own way of life.

I was glad I'd made the *oyakodon* and *katsudon*.

Even though white rice and side dishes weren't common in this culture, I was right to guess that they would accept rice bowls like *donburi*.

I had the dragons act as a test audience this time, but their reactions told me that Falfa, Shalsha, and Halkara would be happy to eat these dishes, too. There were basically no vegetables in them, which the kids hated anyway. *Maybe I should leave out the garnish...?*

There came the dry plunk of a spoon hitting a bowl.

Both of them had completely cleaned out the *katsudon*.

There wasn't much point asking them what they thought now that they'd finished.

"This is quite substantial, Lady Azusa. I had never imagined rice could serve such a purpose. You do indeed have quite a broad perspective."

"Aw, shucks, you're too much."

This wasn't my original idea—I'd just used past knowledge.

"I believe three bowls for dinner would be perfect."

"You'll be too full to sleep!"

I'd been making them extra-large servings to begin with, but maybe it still wasn't enough...

There was clear delight on Flatorte's face as her hand rested on her stomach and she leaned back.

"That was good. I feel like I've had a good meal."

It was a simple impression, but I understood well how she felt.

My cooking repertoire had grown, and that was just the cherry on top. I'd say this was a win-win.

But then, both of them turned to look at me.

""Where is dish number three?""

They asked in unison.

Oh no! So expectant! I had no plans for a third dish!

Well, shoot. I really wish I could put myself fully in a dragon's shoes.

Wait, I still had ingredients. I still had rice. I was clever enough to come up with something, right?

"Just hold on a sec. Let me whip something up."

I took out all the sauces and dressings we had in the house and mixed a bunch of them together.

It slowly approached the vague completed vision I had in my mind.

“I think it’s a bit too sour. Not sweet enough. Still too runny, maybe...”

I felt like it’d been a while since I started focusing on this in the kitchen.

I had patrons waiting for their third dish out there, after all.

Finally, I came up with a sauce I was satisfied with, and the rest was easy. I once again fried up some *tonkatsu*.

I put the *katsu* on the rice and poured a bunch of my homemade sauce on top!

And for a final flourish, I added peas!

“Yes! The demi-glace *katsudon* is ready!”

That’s right—there were different kinds of *katsudon*.

There was the traditional kind, the one encased in egg. There was the kind where the *katsu* sat on a bed of thinly sliced cabbage and soy sauce was poured on top. There was *misokatsu*, where a miso sauce was poured on top. And then there was the demi-glace kind!

*They sometimes call it a demi-glace sauce, but I’m used to just *demi-glace*.

I placed the *katsudon* down on the table where Laika and Flatorte were waiting.

Once again, they both dove into the world of food right away.

I felt like a great mage who’s built her own personal bubble!

“Isn’t it good? The sauce is decadently sour, which is a perfect match for the rice, and it adds such a nice sheen to the *katsu*! *Katsu* can take on so many gorgeous forms!”

I couldn’t ask what the people who were eating thought, so I decided to praise myself.

It wasn’t long before two empty bowls sat side by side on the table.

““That was delicious!””

It almost seemed like it wasn’t just their voices but their smiles that were in

unison this time.

“Yes, your positive review was reason enough to have made it.”

I had three new dishes in my repertoire now. I had to write down the ingredients for the demi-glace before I forgot about it.

““What is dish number four?””

You know that feeling when you’re sure you’ve beaten the final boss, and then they throw another one at you?

“Honestly, how much can you dragons eat? Can you eat forever?”

“No, I cannot eat forever. But rice dishes are healthy, so...” Laika was hesitant as she talked, but she wasn’t joking around; she was being genuine.

“So you think using rice makes it healthy...?”

“I get what Laika’s saying. There isn’t a whole lot of meat. Half of it is rice. The rice is doing just as good work as the meat is, Mistress.”

I’d made a big mistake.

“Dragon meals...are all about how much meat you can eat; I see...”

It didn’t matter if it came with bread. Or rice. All that was just extra fluff for the dragons.

“Lady Azusa, could you do the same thing with boar meat next time?”

“Then I, Flatorte, want the same but with extra mutton on the side.”

They were thinking of rice like extra veggies on the side with a steak!

What was I supposed to do...? I didn’t doubt there were places where boar and mutton with rice were a thing, but I didn’t know how to make them! I didn’t have the skills to make them stop tasting gamey!

“We’re done for today!”

I now had an excellent sense of just how difficult it was to fill a dragon’s stomach, and it didn’t matter if it was with bread or rice.

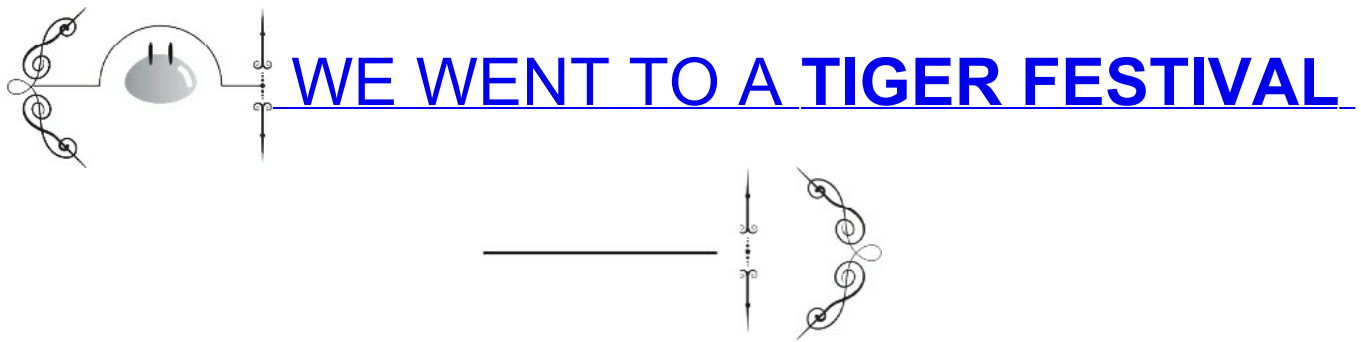
By the by, Falfa and Shalsha both enjoyed my cooking immensely, but...

“Can you take off the peas from the demi-glace *katsudon*, please?”

“The green is ruining the visual harmony. It feels more complete without them.”

“You don’t like the peas...? I guess I understand...”

I decided not to put the peas on anymore.



Today was a holiday.

In my past life, holidays just meant a day off from work. But in this world, they were still partially meant to celebrate well-known saints.

That said, we didn't really live in an area that worshipped anybody, so it just turned out to be a day off anyway...

The other effect holidays had on the house was...

Halkara was home.

"Oh, it would be nice if there were more days off, wouldn't it? Going to work does offer a nice variety to life, but I do need to reward myself every once in a while~"

Halkara had slept in more than usual that day. She'd told me her plans beforehand, so I woke her up later.

Now she sat alone at the dining table while I was washing the other family members' dishes.

"I feel like my soul is getting cleansed when I take it slow like this~ 🎵"

"I know you're exaggerating, but I can tell you're happy to have the day off."

Halkara herself was a CEO, so it would be completely acceptable for her to arrive late to work on "management" hours, but she never did that. She was earnest when it came to her work.

"I may go for a walk to Flatta. I'll pick up anything we need there."

"I think we're good, but I appreciate it. I think a lot of places will be closed

today since it's a holiday anyway."

"Oh yes, it is some sort of saint's day, related to some god or another, right?"

She had no idea, did she? Well, I was at the same level, so I wasn't going to comment.

"There must be a ton of saints in this world, considering how many gods there are."

"Indeed. Elves don't know very much about the teachings that humans believe in, but every day is some sort of holiday, strictly speaking."

I figured it'd be best to ask Shalsha about this stuff, so I called her in. She had just finished the washing.

"You can indeed say that various days throughout the year count as some kind of holiday or another. For example, today is the anniversary of the death of Saint Madqua, worshipped all over the world. There are not many days off during this part of the year, so it became a day of rest as well."

"So a popular saint's day becomes a day off, right?"

"Your understanding is generally correct, Mom." Shalsha nodded. "Madqua is a saint of the god Shokackey and is said to have proselytized to the demons and animals as well. He last preached to a tiger, but the tiger ate him. Madqua was a martyr."

"I can't tell if this is tragic or stupid..."

"Those who live in places that worship Saint Madqua will wear tiger hats and parade around town today."

"That feels a little thoughtless... But I guess that's what holidays are like."

As we sat chatting, Sandra the mandragora came into the house.

"Tigers are cute. I want to see a festival like that."

"You like tigers, Sandra? I didn't know that."

"Tigers are heroes that eat herbivores!"

No human could have ever thought of that!

But since a daughter of mine was showing interest in this festival, I wanted to bring her to the action if I could.

“Shalsha, is there any place near here taking part in the tiger festival?”

“Yes. In Nanterre province, there is a town called Widon that has a Madqua church. The tiger festival is rather lively there.”

Oh, Laika and Flatorte could take us there.

“All righty, then! Let’s go see this tiger festival!”

“What? Really? We can go?” Sandra’s eyes sparkled.

Of course. What was my time for if not to make my daughters smile?

“Festivals only happen so often. If one’s happening nearby, then we should go.”

“You’re right. I want to watch herbivores get eaten by a tiger.”

“I don’t think we’ll get to see that.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go to such a bloody festival.

“Ahhh, a festival~ That is a nice way to spend the time on a day off. I would like to announce that I’m going with you, but I will pass this time—I’d like to stay home and take care of some things,” Halkara said.

“Are you going to sleep until sunset like you usually do on your days off, Miss Halkara?”

“You want to sleep while the sun’s out? Lazy.”

“No, Shalsha and Sandra. It is a genuine, honest reason, I promise!”

My girls thought Halkara was a sloth...

“I want to organize our treasures. We haven’t touched them for a long time, you see.”

“Treasures? When did we get treasures?”

I know we sometimes work part-time as adventurers, but I couldn’t remember ever picking up anything in particular from dungeons.

“You’ve forgotten already, Madam Teacher...? Remember when we cleaned

the goddess Nintan's pond, we got a lot of treasure?"

Then I finally remembered. "Oh! She asked us to get rid of the mosquitoes, and we ended up draining the whole pond!"

The central location of the Nintan faith had received a mountain of donations, so neither the priests nor the goddess herself had been able to manage it all.

Part of it had been given to us as thanks for clearing out the mosquitoes. It was basically a regift.

"We chucked them in an empty room and left them there. I think we should sort them out soon, otherwise we won't touch them for years."

"Yeah... Thanks for taking care of that..."

Now I went around to the family telling them we'd be going to the festival in a place called Widon, but I couldn't find Flatorte or Rosalie. Falfa told me about them.

"Miss Flatorte said she was going to fly as fast as she could across the sky because the weather is nice. Miss Rosalie said she was going along with her."

"It's like they're street racing..."

In the end, it was my three daughters and me hitching a ride on Laika to the town of Widon.

"If we hurry, it will take less than an hour to get there. Regular humans traveling on foot would take over two days to get through these hills, but flying will make it much easier."

"You are honestly so reliable, Laika."

We would pop in to Widon and then pop right out.



Just as Laika said, we got to Widon pretty quickly.

It was almost in the neighboring province, and it was on one of the highest points in Nanterre, but it took no time to get there on Laika. We were there in basically forty minutes.

Then, when we came to the center of town—

“It’s so yellow!”

That was my first impression.

Everyone walking around town wore hats with tiger faces on them. “Hat” was a little broad, though—the back part was long enough to hide the back of the wearer’s neck. That section looked like it represented the tiger’s body.

“It’s so bright! There are tigers everywhere! I can even see white tiger hats!” Falfa had sharp eyesight. She had to mention it before I started spotting the rare non-yellow hats.

“Wearing these reminds us of Saint Madqua’s death to the tiger,” Shalsha explained. As always, I let her handle the historical background.

“Good, very good. It’s nice and lively.” Sandra seemed pleased, which was great to see.

The tiger hats were not the only things that stood out, though.

Lots of people had thin wooden boards sticking up from their shoulders, like big popsicle sticks.

“Hey, Shalsha, what are those sticks?”

“You hit them, and the sound goes to Saint Madqua.”

I see. Sound was a necessary component in festivals, so this was how they checked that box.

“There are so many stalls~ They all look tasty!” Falfa’s attention had been stolen away by the street food on each side of the road.

It really was like a fair. I’d never gotten the chance to take my girls to something that was so obviously a festival, so this was perfect.

But on the other hand, Laika seemed down for some reason. I could tell right away. She was never one to talk much, but she was very expressive.

“Did something happen, Laika?”

“We just passed the Widon Public Museum, but it was closed.”

“You really like museums, don’t you?!”

“I would think that museums generally remain open on holidays, but I suppose they close so that they may celebrate the saint here...”

I agreed—I felt like facilities like museums typically stayed open during holidays; I guess it was the same in this world.

“W-well... It’s not too far away, so you can always come on your own if you’re that interested...”

“Yes, I will do just that. I have been completely unaware of this tiger festival, so I would like to read into it a bit later as well.”

I bet the people who ran this festival would be delighted to hear how interested she was in it.

Now the streets were busy, so we ran a real risk of getting lost.

Also, Sandra couldn’t see much of the actual festival because there were so many people.

This meant we had to work together. I came to the side of the road and knelt down. “Sandra, get on my shoulders.”

“Th-that’s a little childish, but fine. I’ll do it.” Sandra seemed a bit embarrassed about it, but she didn’t turn me down.

But I also knew that Falfa and Shalsha would ask me to do the same for them.

Their quiet stares turned to me.

“Falfa, Shalsha, hold Mommy’s hands. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes, Mommy! 🎵”

“As you wish.”

They agreed, at least for now. Falfa came to my left, and Shalsha came to my right.

“This is good. Now that the tiger hats are at my eye level, they seem so fierce.” Sandra was pleased that she had a better perspective now. If she was happy with that, then her mother would have an easier time of it, too.

I could also tell that the girls on either side of me were enjoying the festive atmosphere. Yes, it’s always the simple pleasures. This was perfect for walking

around a small-town festival with the children.

There were a lot of loud, distracting things happening in our lives, generally.

Actually, I'd say events spiraled into something big whenever the demons got involved...

Today, we were just going to leisurely enjoy the small festival in this little town.

But—I noticed something off once again.

There was a stall selling food I vaguely recognized.

It was called saucecake.

The dish was cabbage mixed in with flour, then fried flat on a griddle with a bit of pork on top; then finally, a sauce was drizzled over the completed pancake.

It reminded me a lot of...

"...Okonomiyaki?!"

I couldn't say I knew a whole lot about *okonomiyaki*, so maybe the details were completely off, but the finished product closely resembled it.

"Are you interested in that food, Mom?" Shalsha had apparently heard me speak. "Saucecake is sold during the tiger festival. You can try it if you're interested."

"Lady Azusa, I was just getting hungry, so I shall buy ten of them, including your portions."

"I appreciate it, Laika, but how many do you think one person is going to eat?"

I doubted the kids could eat two whole pancakes each. Sandra didn't even eat.

"Well, one for everyone, and seven for me, is what I was thinking. Oh, perhaps seven is too much... I will have five instead."

I think she was trying to look a bit more ladylike, but that was still way more than usual. That's how much you'd buy to bring back to your coworkers.

Afterward, we sat at an empty table and ate our saucecakes.

They really tasted like *okonomiyaki*... All they were missing was the seaweed.

I was getting a horrible feeling. I thought this was just a simple festival at first, but maybe there was something deeper here...?

There came a voice.

“Oi, oi! I see you lot’ve shown up. Thought I might find ya ’ere.”

Oh no, that accent...

There stood Muu, queen of the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.

“Oh, Miss Muu!”

“Ah, the queen of the ghosts.”

Falfa and Sandra reacted. Shalsha had just bit into her saucecake, so she couldn’t say anything.

What a time to run into Muu...

Everything lined up too nicely for this to be a coincidence.

The thought had occurred to me before, but now...

Wasn’t this entire festival kind of Osaka-y...?

“Hey, Muu... Why are you here?”

I’d understand if she’d come to the house to hang out, but why would she ever come to Nanterre if not to see us? Maybe she was planning on visiting after stopping by the festival?

“It’s ’cause this town’s miraculously passed down a festival we use’ta cel’brate in my country. It’s only now that I ’eard ’bout it, though.”

They inherited the festival?

“Hey, Muu, I don’t really get what you’re trying to say. Do you mean that this town’s festival has something to do with your civilization?”

I thought there was a rupture in continuity between the ancient civilization and the modern civilization. After all, the magic of the two was completely different.

“Yeah, I says it were a miracle, didn’t I? This Saint Madqua’s nearly the same as a god we worshipped yonks ago: Duuma Quahmee.”

I felt like I was hearing a lot of unfamiliar names today.

“From Duuma Quahmee to Madqua. Though words often change in pronunciation, Shalsha finds such a dramatic shift difficult to believe,” Shalsha said, giving a sound argument. As her mother, I put a vote in her tally.

“It’s ‘cause it’s changed after a real long time, yeah? Ya get me?! The tiger story sounds the same, an’ we ate that sauce fing back in the day, too! The recipe got chucked in wiv the Madqua myth an’ just happened to get passed down.”

I see...

Shalsha looked like she still thought it was a bit of a stretch, but...what Muu was saying was probably accurate.

So these Osaka-esque elements were part of Muu’s ancient civilization, too.

This couldn’t be a coincidence.

There was even a dish in her civilization that looked just like *takoyaki* to me, called gem o’ the crimson devil. That meant it was kind of a given that *okonomiyaki* would come along, too.

Honestly, I thought they both had the same sort of taste (just personally, though).

“By the way, Muu, what did you call this dish?”

“The deep-green bog o’ death.”

“Not something more...appetizing?”

My own appetite had vanished. Who wants to eat a “bog”?!

“Would you like one, Miss Muu?” Laika offered her a whole saucecake.

“Nah, I might ‘ave a body, but I ain’t alive enough to eat. But ta. Cheers.”

“Oh, I see... I am sorry, I did not mean to offend...” Laika looked like she’d made a mistake.

“Nah, don’t get ya knickers in a twist. Not offended at all.”

“See? If she can survive without eating, then that makes perfect sense,” said Sandra the plant, who didn’t eat for different reasons.

I felt kind of sorry for Muu, but I guess it wouldn’t be a big deal to anyone who was used to not eating. Laika didn’t need to worry too much about it at all.

“Huh... From my perspective, I see it as a terrible ordeal not to be able to walk around eating during a festival...”

“You love eating, Laika, so your perspective’s a bit twisted.”

Things were getting complicated; too many people here with unique circumstances.

“Miss Muu? Did you come a long way just to see the festival?” Falfa asked. She was right—I remember Muu had a really hard time moving around.

“Deffo. Got my bloody blood boilin’!” she exclaimed before putting on a tiger hat that was bigger and more realistic than all the other tiger hats.

At that point, it was less of a hat and more like a whole outfit. Fabric patterned after a tiger stretched down to her legs over her back.

“These ’ere are the ’ats we used! Should be the main shindig soon!”

She then started walking toward the central festival avenue. Although, she didn’t get past the shade of the tent area.

“You’re walking faster now, Muu.”

In the past, she would have gotten exhausted just taking a single step. Right now, she just looked like someone with a slower gait.

“Nah, usin’ magic t’ lift up my body, aren’t I?”

“Oh, I see...”

“I got Nahna t’ time me runnin’ wiv my body, by the by, and I been slowin’ down... My time went up an hour...”

Seriously? Her running time went up by an entire hour? That didn’t make sense.

Maybe she would just keep herself afloat with magic from now on.

What was the festival's main event, though?

Muu was holding those big popsicle sticks, like the other festival participants had been, and started smacking them together with a *bang, bang, bang*.

Hey, I've heard that rhythm somewhere before.

"Hiddit, hiddit, hiddit good! Madqua, Madqua, taykimdahn!"

"Is this a baseball chant?!"

To be honest, I was kind of expecting this. I was getting a ton of baseball vibes this whole time.

"When you say 'hiddit,' what are you hitting?"

"Mom, *hiddit* and *taykimdahn* are rhythmical filler that do not have any precise meaning."

I figured Shalsha was supposed to be giving me an earnest explanation, but this whole thing sounded like a joke.

"Both *hiddit* and *taykimdahn* mean *to beat up* in my language, see. You'd say it like, *Oi, wot's 'e makin' a mess of all dis for? I'll taykimdahn, the wankah!*"

"Sheesh, bad language for a queen."

"I-it seems...your ancient civilization has indeed survived through the festivals of Saint Madqua..." Shalsha's voice was deep with thought as she shivered.

This was apparently a huge discovery for her.

Muu wasn't the only one, though. At some point, the other people wearing tiger hats took their big popsicle sticks in hand and began smacking them together.

Not only that, but I heard the sounds of wind instruments.

The melody sounded a lot like something I'd hear at a ballpark. I didn't know the name of it, though...

At this point, I had nothing to say anymore. It'd never end, there was so much. Festivals were supposed to be lively, and so I shouldn't complain about

all the excitement.

““Hiddit, hiddit, hiddit good! Madqua, Madqua, run at house!””

“What’s ‘run at house’ supposed to mean?!”

I couldn’t help but comment on this new addition to the chant.

“Mom, there are tales of Saint Madqua that said that he would run in a diamond shape in his house whenever he was deep in thought. That was then called ‘running at house.’”

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“Thanks for that, Shalsha. But I feel like some of this stuff still isn’t clear, and that isn’t enough to explain it all...”

“Indeed, no one solid interpretation as to why he would run in a diamond pattern in his own house has been settled upon. You are correct to recognize the ambiguity.”

My daughter complimented me, but I wasn’t an academic struggling to interpret a historical mystery.

Oh, I got it. But if I said it out loud, they would wonder what was up with me. And so, I decided to yell internally.

Run at house *means* home run!!!

“You lot giv’ it a go. Use ya hands if ya don’t ’ave any of th’ wood. Hiddit, hiddit, hiddit good! Madqua, Madqua, taykimdahn!”

Muu urged us on, so we all stood. I guess we had to cheer now.

Laika bought some wooden sticks. Today was the only day she could use them, but it wouldn’t be as much fun if she cheaped out on the opportunity.

I yelled, too. “Hiddit, hiddit, hiddit good! Madqua, Madqua, hooome run!”

But Muu gave me a strange look. *What? I wasn’t off the beat at all.*

“Oi, Azusa? Wot’s an ’ome run?”

Oops, I went with the wording I was more familiar with.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s, uh, a different dialect. It means *run at house...*”

We ultimately ended up cheering on (?) Saint Madqua for a little while.

It was a weird festival, but it was fun in its own right. Taking part is always a good idea.

In the end, we all clapped our popsicle sticks in an applause. It was probably similar to what we’d do when the batter hit the ball in baseball.

When we were finished cheering, Shalsha started crying for some reason.

“What’s wrong? Did something sad happen?” I panicked when I saw my daughter’s tears.

“An ancient faith lives on in the present. Shalsha sees now that that magic is in this festival. What a stirring experience...”

“I suppose, from your perspective, that is true. It’d be an unbelievable discovery.”

But to me, it felt like a huge joke, so I had a hard time taking this seriously... My past memories were getting in my way...

“By the by, the last fmg we’d do is go pray at Coshyen Park. Guess that didn’t survive. But Coshyen Park were destroyed yonks ago, so I don’t blame ’em for not knowin’ it.”

It sounded a lot like Koshien Stadium, the holy grail of Japanese baseball! *But I’m just going to file that away as a coincidence!*

“An’ the ritual where we preten’ t’ stomp on the giants didn’t survive neivvah.”

“W-well... Wouldn’t it be better to try to get along with them...?”

“Oi, it’s not even lunchtime yet. Since I’m ’ere, may as well ’ead to yours. Rosalie’s ’round, right?”

Rosalie and Flatorte had gone out, but they would probably be back for lunch. Flatorte was in charge of lunch anyway.

“Sure thing. Come along.”

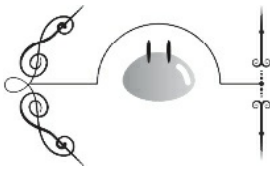
The festival had just been around the corner, so we still had a lot of day left. This was turning out to be a good holiday.

“Do you think you can carry one more, Laika? Things will probably work out because most of us are kids, right?”

“That would be perfectly fine, but I see them selling rabbit over there. Is it all right if I have some before we go?”

She really was a big eater!

Muu mentioned that rabbit meat was customary, and Shalsha was moved when she learned there was another connection between the ancient faith and Saint Madqua.



THE APPRAISAL KNIGHTS DROPPED

BY _____



After our little outing at the tiger festival, we went home.

When we arrived, we were greeted by the smell of roasting meat. Flatorte was in charge of lunch today, so this was her doing.

“Welcome back, Mistress! I’m frying up the venison and the onions now! Sprinkle some rock salt over it and dig in!”

“Sounds yummy! Quite a daring meal you came up with, huh?”

Lunch was turning into a *wild* game feast. I was still a little full from the *okonomiyaki*, so I wondered if I had any room left.

Muu found Rosalie, and the ghosts began their lively chatter.

It sounded like they were complaining about people these days becoming evil spirits over the stupidest things.

I guess people complained about the newer generation in every community. It was just a human (ghost, more specifically) thing.

Falfa and Shalsha were telling Flatorte all about the tiger festival in the kitchen.

“Tigers, huh. I haven’t fought any tigers at all lately.”

This festival didn’t let you fight the tigers, you know. And the way she said that made it sound like she used to fight them... RIP the tigers, I guess.

Well, either way, she was free to go take a look if she was interested. She could get there in no time, after all.

“Halkara must still be sorting through the treasures. I’ll go get her since it’s

almost lunchtime.”

I went to the room that served as our treasure vault and found all kinds of expensive-looking items in a heap in the hallway.

There were chests decorated with exquisite carvings and candelabras made of silver—and all looked like they had considerable artistic value. They were supposed to be offerings made to a god, so the people wouldn’t be bringing junk.

I opened the door to the room, and it seemed like it was more of a mess than it was before.

“It sure is dusty in here... And Halkara’s gone.”

She must have started, decided the task would never end, and given up.

It wasn’t like we had any shelves or boxes to sort all this stuff out anyway, so there was only so much she could do. All she could manage was placing things in categorized piles.

But as that thought crossed my mind, I found a note resting on an expensive-looking chair.

I WENT TO FLATTA
AND/OR NASCÚTE TO SEE
IF THEY SOLD DISPLAY
CASES ANYWHERE.

HALKARA



Ah, so Halkara had realized we needed shelves.

But if we were going to deal with every single item here, then we would probably need to build an extra storage building onto our house—and our house is already pretty big. Laika could probably build a storage building in a few days if I asked her, though, so that wasn't much of a problem.

I decided to step into the room, but there were so many shiny and sparkly things in there that it hurt my eyes.

They were all meant to be divine offerings, so a lot of these things ignored practicality, like gold furniture. I even found a frog made entirely out of jewels.

Did Nintan just decide she didn't want any of this and loaded it all off on us...?

"It looks expensive, but I have no idea how much any of this is worth. I guess people who know, know."

We would have the option of selling it all off if we were strapped for cash, but

our lifestyle was luckily stable, and even if it did earn us a lot of money, I would still stick with my habit of killing slimes to make money. It was good to maintain a routine.

I went back to the dining room, and as I sat waiting for lunch to be ready, Halkara ran into the house.

“You don’t ever need to rush to get home, Halkara.”

“Madam Teacher! Something amazing has come to Flatta! It must be because it’s Saint Madqua’s holiday!”

“Amazing how? I can’t follow you if you don’t get a little more specific.”

All I could tell was that Halkara was very excited.

“There are so many demons in Flatta right now.”

“What? Demons?”

The first person I thought of was Beelzebub, but if there was a whole group, then it probably wasn’t her.

“This day celebrates Saint Madqua, who tried to spread the gods’ teachings to the demons, so maybe that’s why they came!”

“Ah, could be.”

I felt like more and more demons had been coming to visit Flatta, but many places in the human world still had some misgivings about the demons. And others were just too far away.

I think it was less genuine fear and more that they were too far away to have much interaction. The humans scarcely had any method to actually reach the demon lands, and the demons would usually drop by alone and on wyvern.

And so maybe they did come in droves sometimes when they had a holiday as an excuse. Maybe even demons who usually stayed away from the human lands would take the chance to visit.

“What kind of demons were they?”

Halkara would have already told me if it was Beelzebub or Pecora, so they must not have been part of the usual crowd.

“They called themselves the Appraisal Knights!”

I didn’t really understand her answer.

Sure, maybe there were knights’ orders among the demons, but I didn’t really get why they put *appraisal* before it. Knights and appraising didn’t really have much in common.

“I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to tell me more. The humans around this area won’t recognize the name.”

“It means exactly what it says! Oh, this is truly a lifesaver! Miss Laika, Miss Flatorte, will you help me carry some things once we’re finished with lunch?”

“*Sigh...* I do not mind, but what will you have us carry?”

“Sure, I’d prefer to carry the heavy stuff. That way we can see who can carry more.”

Everything was a competition to Flatorte.

“The gifts we received from the goddess Nintan! We will be taking them to Flatta.”

That is when I understood why Halkara was so enthusiastic.

“The Appraisal Knights go all over the country and investigate the value of various items there. Let’s have them tell us how much our things are worth!”

No way. A knight order like that couldn’t actually exist.

—*Well, that’s what I wanted to say, but I guess they did...*

“Oh-ho. That is a great idea. I have been wondering what those articles are worth.”

Laika’s reaction suggested she was interested, too. I’d heard that dragons tended to hoard treasures, and Laika had a bit of her own collection going.

“Oh! Are we comparing prices in Flatta? I can’t lose, then!”

Was comparing prices really a kind of competition for her?!

Either way, it sounded like we were headed to Flatta after lunch—but I still had some questions.

Could demons really appraise treasures from the human world?

And what kind of demons were here to appraise?



Even just looking down toward Flatta from the house in the highlands, I could already tell that the demons were there.

That wasn't because they were titans or anything, but because I saw a few wyverns in the sky.

The family, Muu, and I all made our way toward the town.

Laika, Flatorte, and Halkara had gone on their own because they were carrying the treasures, but Flatta wasn't all that big, so we would run into them in no time.

They had a sign and everything.

The demons loved events like these. Actually, lots of humans in this world liked special events, too.

"It seems it's being held in the central village square. They've prepared so much!" Halkara said, jogging toward us from the center of town. "We placed the hoard in the square. Oh gosh, I'm so excited to learn how much it will all be!" She was clearly thrilled about this.

"Were you always this into knickknacks?"

"I would be simply delighted if they fetched a high price."

I could understand that feeling.

"And if they're unable to determine the value of some of the items, then we would have to decide which ones we should keep. We should throw out whatever turns out to be junk."

I knew that feeling, too. It was a lot if we kept them all together. I wanted to get rid of some of this stuff.



When we came to the square, there was already a sizable crowd of villagers, nearby residents, and demons.

“Huh? There are demons in the audience, too?”

I spotted the mayor right away, so I went to ask him. He, at least, didn’t seem to care a bit. I could tell by the look on his face before we even started talking.

“Um, there seem to be a lot of demons around here.”

“Ah, great Witch of the Highlands. It seems the Appraisal Knights’ show is very

popular in the demon lands, so there are many who come to watch.”

“It’s like a tour...”

“Today is Saint Madqua’s Day, so we must get along with the demons today. I think it’s perfect. And I am grateful they will be spending money in town, too.”

A flexible response to things like this was what made Flatta, Flatta.

“Now, I think it’s time for us to get started.”

A special stage had been set up in the square for this, and guild employee Natalie came to stand on it.

“I’m sorry to keep you all waiting! The demon Appraisal Knights have come to visit us here in Flatta on tour. They will be assigning value to the not-yet-appraised treasures lying in wait in your home!”

The people of Flatta seemed to have built up an immunity to the demons. I guess that was because Beelzebub had come to visit so many times.

“Allow me to introduce the members of the Appraisal Knights!”

The first person who came up onstage was a cat-eared undead very familiar to me—it was Pondeli!

“First, we have Pondeli, toy specialist!”

“Hi there, hello, hello! My work has brought me into contact with many games and toys, and I lived in the human world for a very long time, so I am aware of their value.”

She wasn’t wrong. She’d spent forty years living in the human world, hiding that she was undead.

But “toy specialist” was awfully specific... Didn’t they have someone who was broadly familiar with curios in general?

“And though we call ourselves knights, I’ve never held a sword or ridden a horse. I thought it would be good if I came along, even temporarily, because I’m familiar with the human world.”

They were forgiving about that kind of stuff. The “knights” part was in name only, and they didn’t do anything any real knight order would do.

“Thank you very much for coming today, Pondeli! Now, if we can have our second member come onstage.”

I didn’t think the next person to come up would be someone I was familiar with, too.

Still, it wasn’t like we’d seen each other frequently. But I remembered this pretty blond hair and witchlike appearance well.

“Hello, everyone! My name is Wizly. I mostly work with items related to magic, more commonly known as artifacts.”

It was Wizly, the Wizard Slime!

She spotted us and waved.

She had helped us once a while back, so I waved in return.

When Falfa had suddenly turned into a slime and hadn’t been able to turn back, we had gone to Wizly’s house for help.

And according to Wynona, she was an instructor in all things magical. My stepdaughter’s teacher, in short. We had a bit of a connection.

“You don’t seem very demon-like, Wizly. Are you a demon?” Natalie asked.

“Broadly, yes. I am more of a demon than the Witch of the Highlands.”

Part of the crowd started saying things like, “Oh yeah, so she’s basically a demon.”

Wait, does that put me more on the demon side of things, then? I am still a human, you know...

“I used to live in the human lands, myself, so that is why I was suddenly summoned to be on the Appraisal Roadshow this time. I have never been a knight.”

So they were knights in name only, then.

“Now then, we have our third and final Appraisal Knight. She is the one and only genuine member of the group this time around!”

That meant it was someone I didn’t know—and I certainly didn’t recognize her.

After all, the lower half of her body was that of a snake.

She was a part of a race called the naga. Her upper half was that of a woman with pale green hair, though. She also wore distinct-looking glasses that looked like a stage prop.

“Hello, I am Sorya, Appraisal Knight. I have run an antique shop in the town near Vanzeld Castle for centuries now. I am happy to be here.”

One of the demons in the audience yelled, “There’s Sorya!” She must be famous.

“These three here will be appraising your goods! We have our first entry here, Mr. Calhis from the Anto Company in Flatta. Come on up!”

The aging Calhis brought up a huge plate that needed to be carried with both hands.

“This was a plate my great-grandfather cared for very dearly, but I have no idea if it is worth anything, which is why I brought it along.”

“I see! How much do you imagine this will fetch you?”

Calhis unfolded a board he had brought up ahead of time. “I would be happy with three hundred thousand gold.”

“Very well, Appraisal Knights. Appraise away!”

The Appraisal Knights—Pondeli, Wizly, and Sorya—began inspecting the plate.

Wizly cast a spell to detect any sort of magic on the plate. Sorya the naga was inspecting the details by magnifying them with her glasses. They were taking this seriously.

Pondeli, however, stood in the back with her arms crossed and head tilted.

This wasn’t a toy, so she probably didn’t know... Not that she could do much with things outside her expertise.

Also, the family and I found some seats and were watching. The kids, especially, would get tired if they stood and watched the whole time.

“Ahhh, that kind of plate.”

Apparently, Sandra had some thoughts about it.

“I didn’t think you’d be interested in such curios, Sandra—but are you?”

I guess it was a bit weird for kids to be interested in antiques, and Sandra had an especially negative view of things that humans made.

“Ceramics like that get smashed to pieces and mixed in with the earth. There’s a lot of them around sites where houses used to sit. They clash with my roots and sting.”

“I knew you’d have a plant perspective!”

CALHIS'S
GREAT-GRANDFATHER'S
PRECIOUS PLATE

3000

GOLD

SORYA

5000

GOLD

WIZLY

I DON'T KNOW.

GOLD

PONDELI

Meanwhile, the Appraisal Knights started writing their numbers on special boards.

“The price has been set. Appraisal Knights, please show us the numbers!”

A tense smile stretched over Calhis’s face when they showed the value. Everyone in the audience gasped with delight.

“Oh dear, that’s a low number. First, Sorya, will you explain this for us?”

“This is in the style of earthenware fired in old furnaces called Sanagé kilns, but this is a rather new item. I believe it was made while your great-grandfather was still alive. It is a very good imitation, though.”

This was her job, so her appraisal sounded genuine to me.

“And you’ve written down five thousand gold, Wizly.”

“Well, it’s not a magical artifact. But the patterns on this plate do belong in a magic circle. I believe it would be a stylish addition to a wizard’s home.”

She was judging by a wizard’s standard...

“You’ve written here that you don’t know, Pondeli, but I will ask anyway.”

“It’s not a game, so I don’t know.”

She hadn’t even tried.

“Next, we have our second entry, Miss Veranne all the way from Nascúte, who has brought with her a large urn!”

An older lady stepped onto the stage. “I bought this thirty years ago for eight hundred thousand gold because I was told it would free me from my bad luck.”

What an obvious scam!

All the items certainly made an impression, at least.

I hope it’s worth at least as much as I paid for it. The man who sold it to me was arrested, by the way.”

Then it was *definitely* a scam! No way is that actually worth eight hundred thousand!

The appraisal started again; our experts were studying this very seriously.

“We have our results!”

Hey, that was a surprisingly high price. Sorya went first.

“It is not worth eight hundred thousand, but it is a good urn. It’s of Tockonan make. Oh, and I did set the price a bit on the high side to get the audience excited. And be warned that an antique shop will not give you this much for it.”

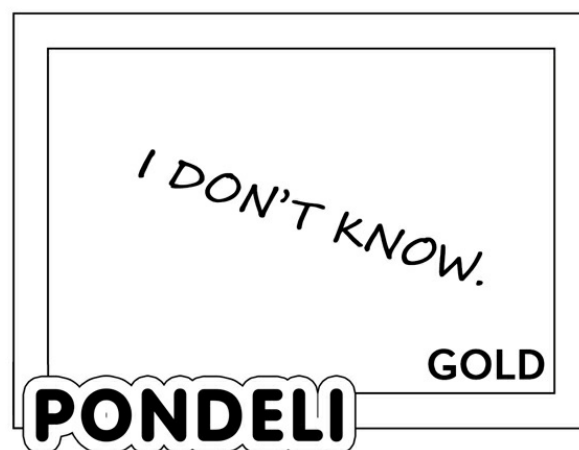
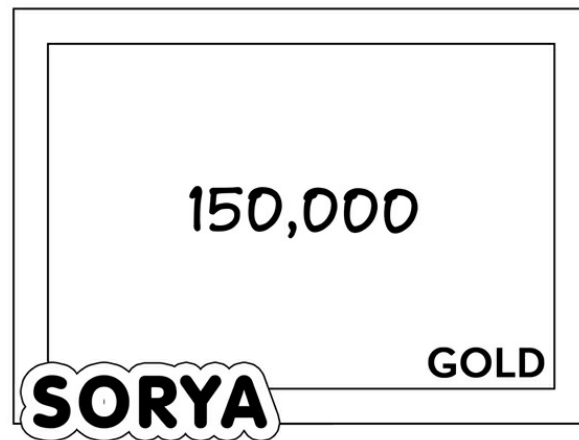
Was she supposed to be this honest?

On the other hand, Wizly seemed troubled.

“Well... This item won’t be freeing you from your bad luck, that’s for sure. It has a dangerous spell cast on it. You must get rid of it as soon as possible... You shouldn’t break it, of course, so please feel free to abandon it in the wilderness and get as far away from it as you can. It might even be the perfect thing to sell to the one person you dislike the most.”

Apparently, it was so cursed that Wizly had gone pale...

VERANNE FROM
NASCÚTE'S LARGE URN



“If I had a guess, I would say that the one who sold it to you was arrested because of his curse...”

The one who sold it off was cursed instead!

Pondeli said, “That’s a big urn.”

Not much of a contribution there. Maybe it would be best just to let her stay quiet if it wasn’t a toy. I’m sure she wasn’t enjoying this, either.

But the crowd was getting excited.

This was an interesting project. And just as I'd imagined, Laika and Shalsha were watching the whole thing very intently.

Afterward, all kinds of goodies were brought onstage to be appraised.

The owner of the restaurant the Savvy Eagle brought up a painting (expected price: 100,000 gold): An adventurer who just happened to be in Flatta brought in an amulet (expected price: 20,000 gold): Natalie from the guild brought up a doll (expected value: 5,000 gold):

PAINTING FROM THE OWNER
OF THE SAVVY EAGLE

20,000

GOLD

SORYA

Cursed.

GOLD

WIZLY

I DON'T KNOW.

GOLD

PONDELI

And so on and so forth.

When the doll came out, Pondeli seemed a bit happier now that her expertise finally had a use.

“Um, Lady Azusa? Don’t you think there are quite a lot of cursed items?” Laika, who was sitting behind me, leaned forward and whispered to me.

“I was thinking the same thing...”

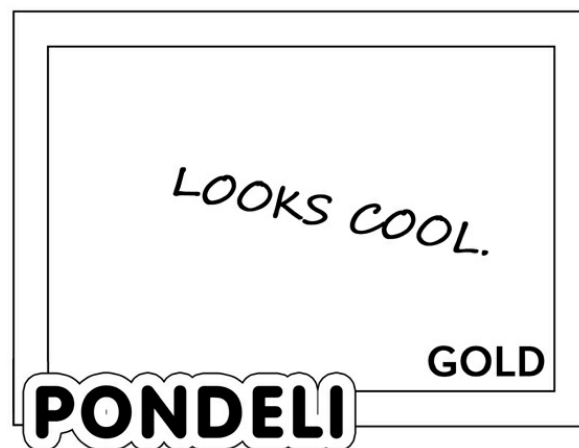
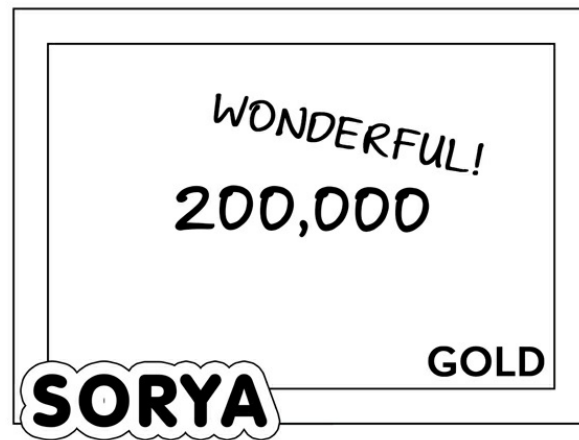
It was all very ominous.

“I wonder if items that have been around for a long time have been imbued with another’s thoughts and feelings.”

“That might be it... But the things people like to keep in their houses are nothing compared to what we brought in...” My face clouded over as I looked to the mountain of things we got from Nintan, piled next to the stage. “Sure hope all of *that* isn’t cursed, too...”

And it had all been given as offerings to a god. What if one of them offered an item in prayer in hopes that someone else would get sick or something? The whole thing would be made of pure hatred right from the get-go.

ADVENTURER'S AMULET



Laika shivered. “Lady Azusa, please do not say such things... You must not speak of that...”

“Sorry, I hate that stuff, too, but I couldn’t help myself...”

“Guys, you live with me, and I’m a ghost. Shouldn’t you be able to handle this stuff better now?” Rosalie said from above us. That wasn’t the problem, though. What was scary was still scary.

“Curse? Nah, that’s just the start. No one’ll die from that. It won’t even ruin yer family name. There’s a whole range to this, I tells ya. A range,” said Muu,

queen of the ghosts, but I didn't trust her standards for this.

The appraisals themselves went on, and at last they called my name.

“All right, this is our last one. Great Witch of the Highlands and her family! Come on up!”

NATALIE FROM THE
GUILD'S DOLL

20,000
GOLD?

SORYA

GOLD

*Its hair is growing
on its own.*

WIZLY

GOLD

*10,000
and change.*

PONDELI

GOLD

I couldn't exactly ignore the call once she'd used my name, but it was Halkara who led the charge on this whole thing, so I brought her up onstage with me.

It had been a long time since I had the whole village's attention like this. But it

was just the perfect amount of attention.

“Great Witch of the Highlands, what treasures have you brought to us today? Well, I think the audience already has a bit of an inkling as to what it might be.”

Natalie brought the conversation to me, as a good emcee would. This was a small village, so I reckoned she was going through a lot of trouble having to do other things beside work in the guild.

“Everything behind me. They’re all things we got from the Grand Nintan Temple...”

There was a whole row of items next to the stage that just screamed “important cultural assets.”

It looked like an antiques shop was going to be setting up shop somewhere else.

“Let me ask you, Halkara. How much are you expecting from all of this?”

Halkara was holding her own board. She must have had it ready beforehand.

“Here! Ta-daa!”

Her board read five hundred million!

That was huge!

And in the lower right, she had written *Nutri-Spirits by Halkara Pharmaceuticals*. She was always advertising when she had the chance. How graceful.

“Five hundred million, I see. Compared to our previous amounts, this is by far and away the biggest! What are the chances that she is right?!”

“Oh, well, I thought it would be more exciting if I was to present such a big number. And we are the final act of the day, too.”

“Thank you for being so considerate.”

She was aware of the strangest things.

“Now, there are many items here, so we’ll have our Appraisal Knights get right to it! And...what should we do about the time...? We weren’t expecting someone to bring in so much...”

It seemed as though Natalie's ad-libbing skills were running thin. I guess it would be a surprise if a whole store's worth was brought in for what was ostensibly a roadshow... *I'm sorry...*

"Er... Great Witch, will you sing us a song?"

"Absolutely not, no! This isn't a party! Find something related to appraisal!"

It was more difficult for me when they treated me like the village's guardian spirit, but it also wasn't very nice to be treated like disposable entertainment.

"*Ahem...* Understood. Then I will introduce to you the Appraisal Knights' personal establishments."

Right, she was going to buy them time with advertisements.

"Pondeli runs an establishment called Arcade PON☆de☆LI in the demon's town near Vanzeld Castle in between Back Alley Way 7 and Gallows Bridge."

I could hear some of the villagers in the audience saying, "I can't get there."

It is in the demon world, after all...

"We have all sorts of games there, so please drop by if you have a chance."

Pondeli popped out and waved. I mentally told her to go back to work, but maybe all this stuff was outside of her expertise, too.

"Pondeli is also the designer for the card game Ket Keto and owner of the Dead or Undead card game shop. They run tournaments and other kinds of events every week, so please pay a visit if you can."

"That store is right at the start of Passing Dwarf Street coming off the central avenue," Pondeli said, providing the address.

I heard more people saying, "I can't go." There was probably good reason for doing all this when the show was in the demon lands, but Flatta was too far away.

"And next, we have the wizard Wizly's workshop. The location is entirely a secret. Please drop by if you are interested."

I could hear some demons watching from behind say, "I can't go."

That wasn't even an advertisement.

“And finally, we have Sorya the naga’s antique shop, Ten Thousand Dragons. This is situated at the corner where Ghoul Bridge Street meets the fiend church. It says here that you are to look out for the big skull. However, I am unable to visit myself, so I can’t say for sure.”

I could hear some people in the crowd saying, “I don’t want to go.”

There was hardly any point to any of this advertising!

But Halkara would never let an opportunity like this pass.

“Hello! We are Halkara Pharmaceuticals, happily chugging away at business in Nascúte. If you come by and say you were in the audience for the Appraisal Knights, we will add on an extra bottle of Nutri-Spirits straight from us to your purchase for the next three days, starting tomorrow!”

I could hear people cheering, “I can go!” Finally, a relevant ad.

“We are also currently selling the well-known sweet, edible slimes. Do pick up some tasty, calming treats to munch on! Perfect for a gift to give your family or someone you love. Edible slimes are now on sale.”

That was a lot of advertising. I guess she has been in the business for a long time.

A thought suddenly came to me. Would this be the same as a commercial break on TV?

After that, another familiar face appeared to seize some of the airtime—Misjantie the pine spirit.

With a *huge* pine strapped to her back.

Sure, it made an impression, but it was so weird!

“Spend precious moments with that precious someone—memories of your wedding at the pine spirit Misjantie Temple will last a lifetime...man!”

And she walked off the stage.

“Who was that?” “I think it was someone from the temple.” “That looked heavy.”

I heard a lot of assorted comments in the audience.

The people of Flatta didn't recognize Misjantie as the pine spirit. She did suddenly appear as a human just for her advertisement, after all...

Afterward, a good number of others came up onstage to advertise their businesses in Flatta and Nascúte, and knights Sorya and Wizly were going over all sorts of things together in the meantime.

"Goodness me, this is fantastic." "I thought so—this will curse its wearer." "And look at this!" "Ah, this has quite the history. It has been stained with the dedicator's blood." "The sore loser marquis of Macosia was the one who gifted this." "What a powerful negative aura."

I could hear terrifying words coming from the Appraisal Knights.

Were we even okay to leave any of that stuff in the house?!

"Oh, it seems we have our results from the inspection! Why don't you show us?"

The real numbers would soon be revealed to us!

Halkara clasped her hands together tightly, as though praying.

She was probably hoping it would reach the number she was wishing for. I could understand the joy of seeing a higher number, of course.

But if the number was *too* high, then managing all that stuff would be a headache. So maybe it was better to have cheaper stuff?

Personally, I'd take any value they told us.

And? What was our result?!

"What incredible value!"

Those were shocking numbers; I could hear cries of surprise coming from the audience.

"We did it, Madam Teacher! We won!"

"Won what?!"

Halkara pulled me into a hug. I didn't really get it, but she was happy with her "victory." I guess it was cause for...some sort of celebration.

“What value!” cried the emcee. “Look at those mind-boggling numbers! I almost wish I could have just ten percent of that! Or even ten percent of that ten percent!”

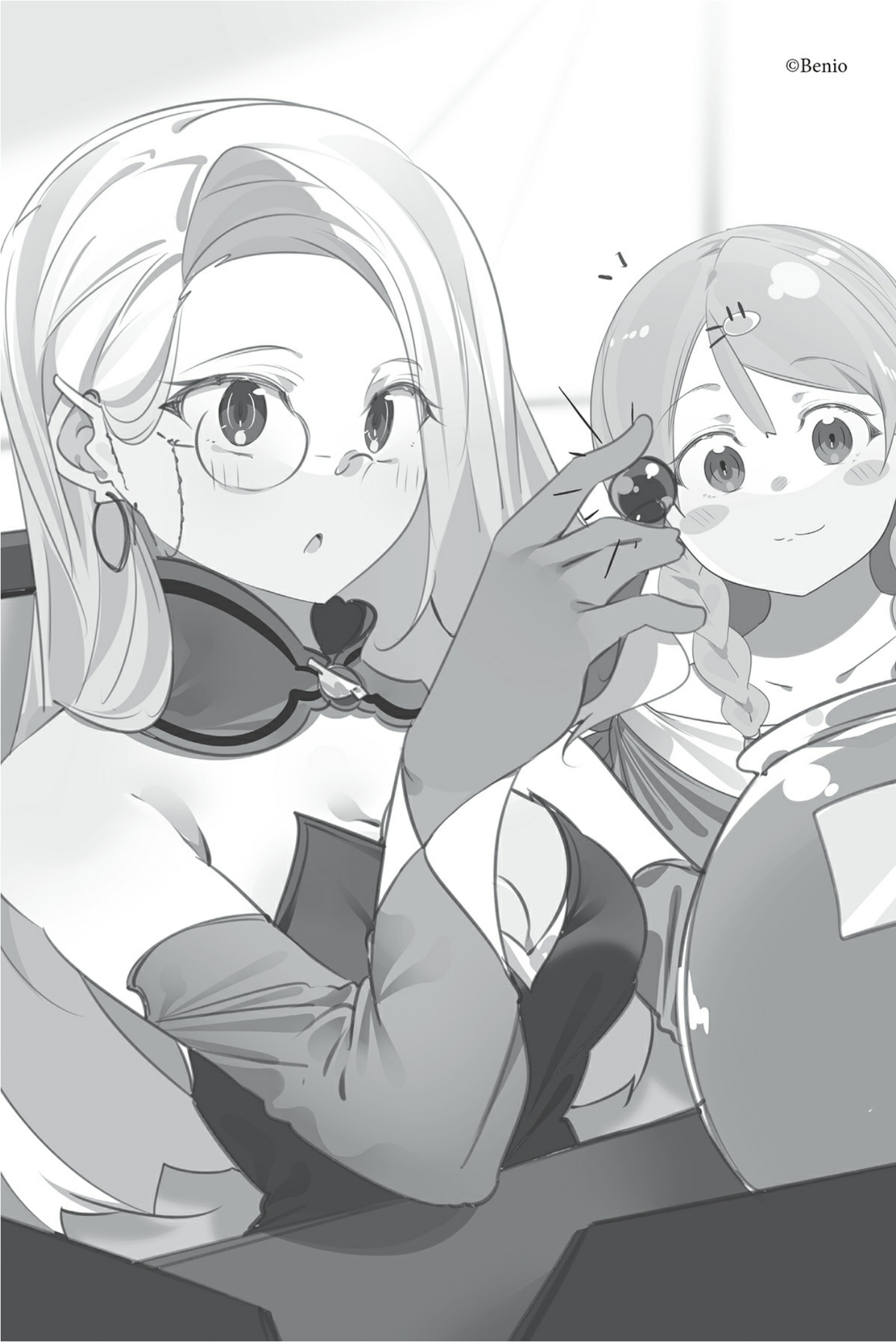
Your true colors are showing, Natalie!

“Now let’s hear what our Appraisal Knights have to say!”

Wizly was the first one to answer. “We have several fantastic artifacts in here. This is an incredible collection, even from a wizard’s perspective, so of course I believe preserving them or setting them up for display would be the appropriate course of action. You can truly get a sense of the fervent devotion for the old goddess Nintan and the breadth of her faith based on the place names carved into these offerings.”

Ooh, that was a real explanation.

“However, there are many items here that have absorbed very strong feelings. You will need a specialist for dispelling curses. Quite a few here will bring disaster to anyone other than the goddess herself if handled too frequently.”



TREASURE THE GREAT
WITCH RECEIVED FROM
THE GRAND NINTAN TEMPLE

Certainly over
twenty billion!

GOLD

SORYA

Around
twenty-five billion!
Curse dispelling
necessary.

GOLD

WIZLY

THIS IS MUSEUM
STUFF.

GOLD

PONDELI

Well, that was because some very expensive items were offered in prayer...

Rosalie floated over toward us.

“Letting them sit won’t bring misfortune to anyone, so we don’t really need to worry about them. Although, if someone stole something, they’d be in for a little danger.”

“Right, I guess we can just let them sit...”

But it would still feel bad if a burglar broke in and died three days after

stealing something, so I'd probably get them cleansed anyway. It sounded like my magic wouldn't do, and we'd need a more specialized dispel incantation.

It was now Sorya's turn to go over her reasoning.

"There are so many articles that I would need more time to appraise them thoroughly, but there is no doubt that every item here was a genuine offering to the goddess Nintan. They are from across different eras, and one item in particular, this desk and chair set made with the image of the goddess herself, was offered by Nasuna the Bold one thousand years ago. We can verify this fact from the historical records, which makes this an extremely valuable item. I won't give you a thorough explanation of every single item, but...this is not something that should be kept in a corner of a private home. I want you to consider what you will do with all this."

I could see beads of sweat on Sorya's forehead; this was no ordinary matter.

And Halkara had been hugging me this entire time, so I gingerly peeled her away. I didn't mind a hug, but it was getting too long.

Someone in the audience started clapping, and that set off a standing ovation.

Personally, I had only brought in gifts I'd received, so it was a little embarrassing. Still, those were some unbelievable results.

"Your thoughts, great Witch?" Natalie turned the conversation to me.

"Um... Thank you for your hearty cheers (?). And...I want to make sure nothing gets stolen."

The house on the highlands was at quite an elevation, so it was super easy to tell if any suspicious individual was coming our way. Our security was probably fine. I'd make sure to prioritize spells for our barriers from now on.

"Do you have anything to say, Halkara?"

"I no longer have anything to worry about if Halkara Pharmaceuticals goes into a slump! I was thinking about putting this collection to auction."

Things were getting too realistic right now.

Anyway, what was clear now was that the treasures the goddess Nintan gave us were all a true treasure trove.

As I scanned everything before us, I realized we really had to figure out how we would preserve them or deal with them another way...

When the event finished, Muu hopped on a wyvern to go home. “I oughtta get some of our treasures looked at,” she said. I had a feeling that’d include alien and eldritch items, so I kind of hoped she wouldn’t.

The other guests left, but we had to bring our treasures home. As we waited, Pondeli approached us. Behind her were the other two appraisers.

“We’ve rented out a place called the Savvy Eagle for the evening; would you care to join us?”

It wasn’t like there was any other place to hold any wrap-up parties in Flatta. I had a feeling we definitely should go.

“Of course. Would you mind if the whole family came along?”

“Absolutely not.” Wizly in the back shook her head with a smile.

I could never have imagined that the village restaurant I used to come to all the time would serve as the demons’ spot for celebration.



The whole family joined the Appraisal Knights at the Savvy Eagle to celebrate a successful show. There were a lot of people, and there were no assigned seats; everyone was free to roam as they pleased.

Pondeli came over to me as I was grabbing some food.

“It’s so nice to see you again, Miss Azusa. You brought in a big surprise~”

“I mean... They just happened to be gifted to us. But I guess that’s exactly why there were so many amazing things mixed in there.”

I had a feeling this wasn’t the time to look smug about them, so I downplayed it.

Wizly also came over to me. That’s right—I had to give her a proper hello considering she was Wynona’s teacher.

“It is so great to see you. I heard you also minded Wynona, another slime spirit... Thank you. I’m apparently her stepmother, so I thank you.”

“Oh, of course. Wynona is quite the strange girl, but she is motivated, if anything.”

“So you think she’s a weird one, too...”

Was this what it was like to talk about your kids to their teachers at school? This was awkward.

“She is strange, yes, but she works very hard. I know her personality makes it easy for her to make enemies, but the adventuring world is a competitive one. If anything, that might be the perfect fit for her.”

“Yeah... I’d be happier if she had a few more friends, though.”

I was talking about her like I was her mother now. She would definitely scold me for it if she was here.

Next, I talked to Sorya the naga, which would be our first conversation. She was eating a lot of hard-boiled eggs.

“Goodness, I cannot say there is no precedent for our Appraisal Roadshow in the human lands taking place on Saint Madqua’s Day, but I could not have imagined coming across such a find. You never know what will happen.” Sorya still seemed to be reeling from it all. “I thought I might molt in shock.”

“I’ve never been a naga... Is that a thing?”

It sounded like the snake part of her experienced some unfamiliar physiological responses.

“Oh, so you’ve come to the human lands before, right?” I said.

Humans were more accepting of demons on Saint Madqua’s Day.

“Yes. The demon king herself made suggestions as to where I could go, so I did.”

Pecora’s shadow sure looms over lots of things!

“The Appraisal Knights are perfunctory servants of the demon king. That said, we are not sought out for our skills in arms, but in management—so that we may accomplish our job of minding Her Majesty’s treasures.”

“I see, so you’re employed by the royal family, then.”

That made sense.

Royalty from all across space and time often had magnificent collections, but it wasn't like the rulers themselves knew of every single article in them. That's where the specialized employees came into play.

That's what the Appraisal Knights were. Considering how they were directly employed by the demon king, that made their knightly title a little less weird.

"But this year, we were ordered to come to such a small village called Flatta, and to be honest, I was wondering why."

This was all Pecora's doing! But I guess that was obvious the second I heard she was in charge.

And she definitely knew I'd gotten all this treasure from Nintan. Either Beelzebub or Fatla must have reported it. We really were just dancing in the palm of Pecora's hand...

"According to Her Majesty, she had thrown a dart at the map, and it landed here on Flatta. She told me to complain to the darts if I was unhappy," Sorya said, but I knew Pecora had certainly not thrown any dart. She hadn't made any bets. She'd picked this place out herself.

"And then to find such treasures hidden here! Goodness, thank you for such a beautiful showing. I am glad we came."

"I'm delighted to hear you're so happy. I'm not really sure how much of any of it is on my own merit, though."

"If you had a one-of-a-kind article, I would only ask you to take good care of it. However..." Sorya's eyes glinted. "You have such a fantastic collection that I ask you take good, good care of it, so it survives into the next generations. Please, take care to protect these precious cultural assets."

"I thought you might say that..."

These treasures weren't for any individual to keep; these were better suited to a whole country—or even the world.

It'd be a lot of trouble, but we still had to do something about them.

"I have some ideas regarding that," a voice cut in.

It was Halkara.

But when I looked at her, I noticed something unusual.

“This is a party...but you’re not drunk!”

Was...this even possible? I couldn’t believe it. Was I hallucinating?

“I am fully aware of the gravity of the situation. So I am abstaining, as heartbreaking as it is.”

“Wow, Halkara, you are really serious about it...”

“But I plan on making up for it once we settle the matter.”

Right, so she’d be vomiting later tonight. Actually, she was going to be extra sick if her drinking was more concentrated later.

After that, Halkara had a serious conversation with Sorya, so I was sure that the storage problem would be fine. Halkara was reliable when she was working.

But when she was done, she drank and drank and eventually threw up. Called it.

Never trust anything Halkara says when she starts drinking. This time, she deployed a new technique: insisting she was okay *while* she was vomiting—
“It’ll be *fiiibleeeuuugh!*”

“C-could this be a curse from one of the items...?” she asked later.

“No, that would be the alcohol,” Wizly snapped back with a smile. I guess I wasn’t the only one who wanted to say something.

Shalsha was listening intently to Sorya and Wizly as they talked about cultural assets. I guess there weren’t many opportunities to talk to an expert.

“You have such a good child. I am excited for her future,” Sorya said to me later.

“Right? I’m so proud of her. Hee-hee-hee.”

I was delighted to get compliments for my daughter! It made me much happier than personal compliments.

Overall, the Appraisal Knights’ celebration went very well.



Afterward, Halkara asked Laika if she would build something for her in Nascúte.

Laika wasn't the only one, though; Flatorte was quarrying rocks somewhere and bringing them over.

I didn't ask for details, but it was okay to trust Halkara when she looked that serious. Laika would probably stop her if there was some kind of problem.

And three weeks passed.

"It's finally done, Madam Teacher!"

"Right, weren't you building something in Nascúte?"

I had a general idea as to what it might be—storage to keep all the treasures we got from Nintan.

"The Halkara Pharmaceuticals Museum is complete!"

"This is even better than I imagined!"

I wish she'd said something about a project *this* big...

Laika approached us. "Allow me to take you to the museum, Lady Azusa."

"Oh, sure... I'm certainly allowed to see it, so I'll take a good look..."

"I am delighted to have a museum so close by now!" Laika beamed.

This seemed like the type of museum that would take the whole day to go through, so I was sure this was the best thing she could have asked for.

We came to the museum, which stood on the outskirts of Nascúte.

I asked Halkara about it while we were flying on Laika, and she said that she was only able to secure land outside the town. I guess that made sense.

The Halkara Pharmaceuticals Museum was exactly the kind of museum I expected to see.

It was a large building, like a chalk-white temple, and the entasis of the pillars gave them a holy look.

But I spotted some writing carved into the tops of the pillars.

CARVED BY THE GREAT FLATORTE

Your builder left her mark... But it wasn't *too* easy to see, at least, so it was probably fine.

When we stepped inside, I found the treasures were all lined in rows.

There were even panels that denoted the items on display.

“Our opening will not be for a while yet, but I think this is a perfectly good space for storage. There is also a basement, and I am thinking about using that as a repository,” Halkara explained.

“Yeah, just do you what you want. I'll leave it all in your han—”

“I also have a separate exhibit over there. I'd like you to come have a look, Madam Teacher.”

I had no choice but to go when she told me, so I followed her.

She had a company corner!

Halkara Pharmaceuticals History

This exhibit describes Halkara Pharmaceuticals, the company that built this museum.

There was even a portrait of a very serious Halkara there. I'm surprised she got something like this done...

“What do you think? Isn't it a nice depiction? I look so imposing.”

“Yeah... I agree...”

If it was something her company paid for, then I wasn't going to say anything. It wasn't like it was hurting anyone.

But when Falfa saw the portrait, she tilted her head.

"Is something wrong with it, little Falfa?"

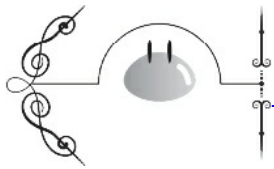
"Miss Halkara, this portrait...makes you look like a dead person..."

"Impossible! I sometimes pass out from drinking too much, but I am happily alive!"

"If you know the risks, then you should hold back on the drinks a bit! That can't be good for your health!"

It'd been a long time since I scolded her as her teacher.

Anyway, the price of admission for the Halkara Pharmaceuticals Museum was five hundred gold.



WE WENT TO HAUNTED SPOTS WITH

GHOSTS



That day, I was walking through a southern city I'd never been to before.

We were relatively close to the renowned (at least, to me and the people around me) Thursa Thursa Kingdom, since I saw some of the ghosts there. Incidentally, Laika was the one who had brought me here; apparently, she had some other business to attend to and flew off to another mountain.

I was walking with the ghosts; a little ahead of me was Rosalie and Muu. Although, regular people couldn't see Rosalie, so it looked like Muu was walking alone to them.

"I think Muu's movements look much smoother than they used to."

Muu apparently had a really hard time moving her body with her own power, but it was reportedly much easier for her to use ancient magic to control herself.

I thought she should have just done that to begin with, but maybe she felt like she had to use her own strength to move. This was such a unique issue that I found it hard to empathize.

"Indeed. In the past, she would lift her back foot before her front had even contacted the ground, so she has improved greatly in that regard," said Nahna Nahna, who floated beside me. Regular people couldn't see her, either.

"That'd put both feet off the ground..."

"And considering how much of a hassle it was to fine-tune that magic, Her Majesty insisted on walking with her own strength. That is why she powered through, despite her exhaustion. But she has gotten better at the fine-tuning as

of late, so now it looks as natural as if she were walking.”

It was like deciding to handwrite a letter because it was too difficult to figure out how to type...

By the way—what were the two up there talking about? I turned my attention toward them.

“There aren’t a lotta ghosts out here,” Rosalie was saying.

“Peaceful place, innit? Not a lot’a gruesome happenin’s out ’ere, so’s not easy to make ’em. It’d be more fun with more ghoulies, though!”

Don’t ask for horrible accidents to happen!

“But, Muu, ‘ghosts’ cover all kinds of phantoms. There’s the bad kind who do awful stuff to anyone and everyone, and there’s the wimpy ones who can’t make up their mind what to do.”

I see... It sounded like some ghosts were genuinely bad, and some had a hard time adjusting to community life.

“And there’s some people who had deep grudges long ago but kinda gave up on them and turned to a life of mischief in the past. In a broad sense, that’s kinda where I fall.”

Rosalie did have a slightly rough manner of speech, so I got that.

That meant there were all kinds of ghosts.

I was still a scaredy-cat, though, so I wanted to avoid all ghosts and frightening experiences...

And yes, I know you’re going to point out that I live with Rosalie, and that I was taking a little walk with the queen of a ghost kingdom and her minister right now, but I know them. It stops being scary when I can communicate with them and learn how they are.

“This town is quite serene,” Nahna Nahna said.

“That’s right; didn’t you say you hadn’t been to a human settlement in a long time?”

“Indeed. Most ghosts cannot move from their spot.” She nodded. “At the

moment, I am also using some ancient magic to make myself move. I learned a thing or two from the demons' spells."

"Hey, demon magic's also helping your ancient magic evolve!"

I'd seen the demons use ancient magic plenty of times to act like YouTubers and stream videos, so I was surprised to see the opposite effect happening.

"We are still in the testing phases, but if this proves to be a success, then the lost spirits will be able to move across the land."

"That sounds terrifying if it becomes real..."

Should ghosts be riding the globalization trend like this?

"Still, cities of the living are terribly interesting." Nahna Nahna's face was as neutral as ever, but her thoughts were apparently very vivid. Maybe she actually wanted to travel the world.

"It's heartwarming to see them innocently running about, having forgotten that they will one day return to the earth."

"They may not be able to hear you, but that doesn't mean you should say that!" I interjected in a whisper. I had to keep my voice down, otherwise I'd look like I was talking to nobody.

"Civilization has not progressed much, has it? We could wipe this place out."

"Miss Nahna Nahna, that would cause an international incident, so please don't do that..."

Her facial expression never changed, so it made it hard to tell if she was joking. Yikes. And a minister probably shouldn't be making jokes like that anyway.

Yeah, it was much more relaxing to listen to Rosalie and Muu chat. I turned my attention back to them.

"Oi, take a gander at this place... Livin' person, livin' person, livin' person... Everyone's way too livin'. Need more dead 'ere!"

That was ominous commentary!

"Oh, that old man over there's almost dead. I can see the death on his face."

This isn't relaxing at all! I don't want to hear any of this!

Then Muu came to a stop.

It was so sudden that she almost toppled forward—less like she'd stopped walking and more like she'd stopped driving.

"What is it, Muu? A ghost?"

"Nah. There's a buildin' 'ere that wasn't there when we was alive."

The town's Adventurers Guild.

There hadn't been any guild in the kingdom of the dead, so she was probably wondering what kind of building it was.

Now that I thought about it, when were Adventurers Guilds even made...? They fit in well with the world, but I wasn't sure how they worked.

"I'll explain. Time is money, and time is limited. Let's go in."

"Yeah, cheers, luv. Let's go!"

The two in front of me stepped into the guild. I had a feeling trouble was looming...so Nahna Nahna and I followed in after.

Inside, there were a lot of burly adventurers.

There weren't a lot of women, so I stood out... Well, magic users weren't all that rare, so whatever.

"Cor, everyone really is livin'!"

"They might look lively, but they're quick to fight. Most of 'em are gonna die soon."

As always, the ghosts' conversation was interesting...

"Oi, bunch of 'em've brought in some gems."

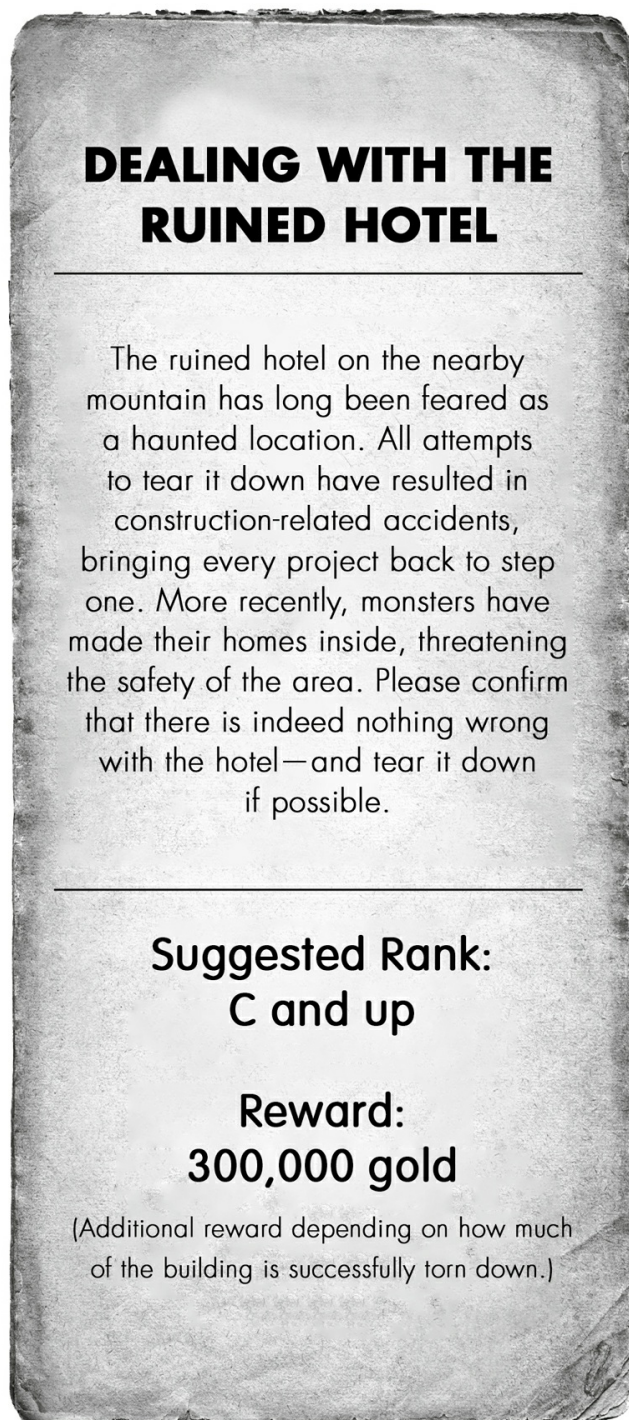
"Magic stones from killing monsters. They're here to exchange 'em."

"Huh. Livin' fings killin' each ovvah? We all die 'ventually, though."

I guess they didn't understand the logic of the living...

"What's that board ovah there?"

“Right, that’s where people put fliers for their requests, asking for people to kill bad monsters or find lost puppies and stuff.” Rosalie was totally in tune with the goings-on in guilds by now.



I had a feeling she had matured a bit now that she was hanging out with Muu more. It was a wonderful thing.

“Oi, come take a gander.”

One request had caught Muu’s attention.

What was it? What would interest a ghost?

Ghosts definitely seem involved in this! Of course, another ghost would be

interested.

But it was a surprisingly respectable request to find in an Adventurers Guild.

Considering the location, it was possible that there were monsters living there, and that meant it was reasonable to leave it to adventurers.

Just then, a couple of them passed by, discussing that very request.

“That ruined hotel one is still up. You should go.”

“No, dude... I freakin’ hate ghosts...”

I guess even some adventurers hated scary stories, too. I completely understood.

But then, it didn’t seem like they were even aware there was a whole group of ghosts here right now, so maybe they were stuck with only five senses.

Then one of them passed through Nahna Nahna.

“Agh! I just got super cold!” He wrapped his arms around himself.

“C’mon, don’t tell me you think you’ve been cursed just talking about that request?”

“No, there’s something weird about this spot... It’s really cold if you walk through there...”

Yeah, ‘cause Nahna Nahna’s standing there...

Then the other adventurer passed through her.

“Huh... I just got really cold, too...”

“See? I told you something’s weird here. This is creepy. Let’s get outta here...”

They scuttled away. They didn’t seem all that strong, so it was probably a good thing that they didn’t force themselves to get to the ruined hotel.

Meanwhile, Nahna Nahna was nodding vigorously.

“I see—I can cause cold shivers when overlapping with a human. This will come in handy.”

“Please don’t use it for evil...”

Her words and actions trended toward the dark rather than the light, so I wanted to be careful.

Rosalie and Muu were staring at the request.

“Hmm. Could be somefin’.”

Guess ghosts were intrigued by haunted spots, too. Maybe they were especially interested, in fact.

But Muu wanted to do more than contemplate the activities of her fellow spirits.

“Righty-ho, let’s ’ead to the ’otel to kill some time!”

What? We’re going?!

“Let’s do it. If there’s a ghost there causing trouble, least we can do is tell ’em to stop.” Rosalie seemed fully on board, too.

She had been a spirit bound to a place once, too, so it made sense that she was interested.

“There’s truth in the rule about not messing with peaceful areas, so if this guy’s causing real trouble, then we should stop ’im. I’m sure we can figure something out if we chat.”

Yeah, I understood the intent. Sometimes former bad kids helped current bad kids turn over a new leaf.

But...I didn’t feel great about leaving it all to them.

Anything could happen, and as her guardian, I felt like I should go... And there was no guarantee that it was a ghost causing all this.

But I was still scared. I really didn’t want to go to this ruined hotel.

—Then a terrible cold settled on my shoulder!

“Eep!”

Nahna Nahna had placed a hand there. “Oh, you are quite sensitive,” she commented.

“You don’t need to do any of that! And don’t call me sensitive!”

Even though she was invisible to everyone else, I couldn't keep from shouting at her. And that caused some people to give me a strange look. *I'm the victim here, okay?!*

"Miss Azusa, I hate to trouble you in this manner, but it seems Her Majesty is eager to go to the ruined hotel. Will you accompany her as protection? I believe we may be subject to unforeseen circumstances if I were to go alone."

I really wished she hadn't prefaced this nice request with a scare like that, but it was hard to say no.

"Fine. I'll go..."

Also, we met up with Laika afterward and asked if she wanted to come to the ruined hotel with us.

"Oh, I am not sure..."

She turned us down. I guess physical strength had nothing to do with spooky business.

If her opponent in a spar started telling scary stories, it'd probably put her at a disadvantage.

They would probably be in danger of getting doused by her fire breath before they could even go into detail, though...



Then it was the hour of the night when even the plants slumbered.

According to Sandra, most plants were asleep at this time, so the expression wasn't wrong.

All four of us—the three ghosts and I—came to stand before the Mount Basad Sightseeing hotel.

"—Why'd we have to come in the middle of the night?!"

We could've come during the day! We didn't have to come at the most terrifying hour!!

"Because things come out in the night." Nahna Nahna stood in front of me, her face the only part of her eerily illuminated.

“Gah! What are you doing?!”

“Using ancient magic. Isn’t it nice to have a bit of light at night?”

Yeah, this was 100 percent malicious.

“Yo, Big Sis, if there really are any ghosts, they’ll usually come out at night. That’s why we had to come now.” Now Rosalie—I knew *she* meant well, so I chose to believe her.

“Lots ov the ghost-y types tend t’ come out at night. Livin’ a night owl’s life makes ya more likely to stick ’round in this world. Stayin’ up too late’s bad for ya, y’see. People like that are usually un’appy ’bout somefin’ or ovvah.”

Are you sure a ghost’s schedule depends on whether they were a morning person or a night person...?

“Fine, I get that night is better. But I feel like I’m the only one here being forced into visiting these haunted places.”

Everyone else was a ghost, after all...

The ruined hotel, being in ruins, had lost its bottom hinge, and the door hung precariously by the top one. It was like a trespassing free-for-all.

“Wait, we didn’t officially take up the guild’s request. We just came on our own, so does that make this illegal...?” I asked, standing in front of the tattered door. Entering a ruin without permission in Japan in my past life was not legal.

“Should be fine, Big Sis. The owner’s dead, so anyone can come in,” Rosalie answered right away.

“Oh, phew. I’m surprised you knew about that, though.”

“Oh, the owner was right here, so I just asked.”

“What? I thought you just said the owner was dead...” Rosalie pointed to the wall next to the door.

On one spot on the wall was a faint stain.

The hotel had been closed for a long time, and so no one had cleaned it for just as long; a little stain wasn’t something to blink at, but...

Do you see where this is going?

THE STAIN LOOKED LIKE A FACE!

“The hotel closed down after years in debt, and so the owner became a ghost after dying in poverty. Can you see him?”

“Aaaah! I *knew* it looked like a face!! It’s a ghost!!”

“Oh, Big Sis, that’s just a stain. The owner’s a bit to the side of that.”

“Oh, that’s not him. —Wait, that means there *is* a ghost! He’s still there! I’m not relieved at all!”

I was being scared even before we stepped into the hotel, and I didn’t understand. They were coming out too quickly. It was like reaching the climax of a movie three minutes in.

Personally, I’d be happy if this *was* the worst it was gonna get...

“Oi, nice one, nice one.” Muu started clapping for some reason. “Azusa, you’re becomin’ a bit of a laugh now. Much be’ah than before. Propah comedian.”

“Don’t compliment me for complaining about this haunted hotel!”

This was not the place for that.

“I am glad to see you all are having fun,” said Nahna Nahna. “Stupid fun.”

Ouch.

“Big Sis, the owner says the ghosts attached to the hotel are bothering him.”

“I see. Wait... Isn’t that kind of weird...?” I was getting confused. “If anyone has a strong attachment to this ruined hotel, it’d be the owner’s spirit. You mean there’s something else tied to this place?”

“I’ll ask.” Rosalie turned to look into space, as if the owner’s ghost really was there. “Ah. Yeah, that sucks... That’s terrible... He’s got no sense of responsibility or human decency, huh? You really can’t get a break... I know you’re tired of crying. But you gotta keep your chin up. I’ll take care of this. C’moon, my body might be rotted out, but my heart sure isn’t.”

She really sounded like a city girl.

Muu and Nahna Nahna could apparently hear what the owner was saying,

and they were nodding along.

I know it was a bit late for this, but was there even any point in me being here? I was like their chaperone, though, so I guess they needed me. For something.

“Big Sis, the hotel’s been well-known as a haunted building ever since it went bankrupt.”

“Yeah, I got that. The owner’s ghost is here.”

“But some humans apparently came to look around one time and died in an unexpected accident. They had this one single-minded thought—*I shouldn’t have come to this haunted hotel... Never...*—and then became ghosts themselves, so now they’re not letting anyone tear it down.”

“And a truth comes out of the lie!”

So this was all because some idiots came to have a look around.

“The owner apparently accepted it all ages ago, but he started wondering why the hotel was still around. Now he can’t leave. That’s why he’s asking us to turn it into a vacant lot again as soon as possible.”

I didn’t think I’d ever have a trapped ghost ask me to tear down a building.

“By the by, why’d this ’otel go outta business anyway?” Muu asked the owner.

All our questions were getting answered right at the entrance.

Actually, yeah, I did want to know the specifics. Maybe there had been a problem at the time...?

“Ahhh, high land rent, few cust’mers, an’ ya went right outta business ’cause ya weren’t the bee’s knees.”

That was his own fault!

“Punters weren’t comin’ so ya jacked up the prices to make it profi’able, lowered ya staff’s pay, which meant the ’otel was now extremely expensive for awful service, then it fell to ruin when punters stopped comin’. A vicious cycle, that.”

“Anyone would hate themselves after failing so miserably at one’s own business. The only word for it is *imbecilic*. No wonder he became a ghost.”

Nahna Nahna was right, her rudeness aside.

“I wish he’d thought a little more about the future when he was running his business,” I said.

“Then this haunted hotel never would’ve come to be!”

“Miss Azusa, people who think about the future come up with plans to make things better without ending their lives. Death does not cure a fool.”

“I’m scared for you, Miss Nahna Nahna. I feel like an evil spirit might curse you.”

“The details are tricky, but we will learn when we go in. Come now, it’s about time.”

Nahna Nahna’s face went in through the door, and I really wished the rest of her would follow. It looked like the rest of her body had been chopped off.

“Yeah, in we go, then! Wot kinda ghosts they got?!” Muu flung open the door and walked in.

Fine! I’ll go, too!

But the moment we entered—

“Gah! Wot the ’eck is this?!” Muu screamed.

Only one step in, and we were experiencing the haunting for ourselves!

“Muu! What’s wrong?!”

“So many cobwebs stuck on me boat!”

“Wrong genre of spooky!”

There were, indeed, spiderwebs stuck to Muu’s face.

“Serves you right, Your Majesty. Are you all right, Your Majesty?”

“Don’t say *both* your inner and outer thoughts! Just say your outer thoughts!”

Nahna Nahna was always super rude, so I sometimes felt like I was going to forget that Muu was a queen.

“A body sure is a handful, no? Something so pitiful as a spiderweb is causing you much trouble. Come now, Miss Azusa, guide her forward so she does not collide with anymore spiderwebs.”

“Fine! I get it, stop takin’ the mick!” Muu grabbed a piece of rubble and started walking forward, swiping spiderwebs out of the way as she did. I had a feeling she wasn’t exactly moving it with her hands but instead using magic to keep it up and making it take down the webs.

Rosalie and I walked together behind them.

“I’m not as scared anymore...”

Thank you, ghost queen and her minister.

It was already weird the moment I showed up to this haunted hotel with a handful of ghosts in tow, but I was going to ignore that part.

“It might not be as scary now, Big Sis, but genuinely bad people come here. I can tell.”

“Right, I guess this is a real haunted spot...”

Hopefully we could chat with them, like with the owner’s ghost, and they would understand...

The first floor was creepy, but we somehow found our way to the back stairs.

“I’ve gotta feelin’ they’re all up the apples. Wa’evah, dunna, innit.”

That “dunna, innit,” really made it hard to tell if I should trust what she said, so I wish she wouldn’t say it.

“Yeah, I’m getting the chills...”

I looked up the stairs only to see a bit of moonlight streaming through the broken windows. It was terribly frightening.

“Indeed. I hear what sounds like the ghosts saying ‘Stay away, stay away.’”

“Sounds like there’s a lot more than we thought. Did that many people really die here?”

Nahna Nahna and Rosalie seemed to sense something ahead, and if the ghosts were saying it, it had to be true.

My legs were shaking.

“I hate this... I don’t want to go...”

Maybe I should have followed Laika’s lead and stayed out. Maybe sent in Flatorte or something instead. Ghosts didn’t even make Flatorte blink.

Or maybe I should have had Beelzebub come in and conquer the place, although she’d probably complain to me afterward. Ghosts were just dead people to her anyway.

“For how strong y’are, Azusa, you sure scare easy.”

“I can’t help it, can I? Strength and fear are different things.”

I wasn’t in any danger if a boar or a wolf jumped me in the forest, but I hated ghosts.

“Right, I got this, then! Wa’evah, innit!”

“Sounds like you’re immediately throwing away your responsibility to me!”

Regardless, Muu marched up the steps.

And then—a strong gust of wind blew in from the broken windows!

That had to be the spirits—They didn’t want us to come in any farther.

But that wasn’t all.

When Muu came up to the landing...

...the chandelier above fell on her!

Craaash!

“Gaaaah! Nooo!” I covered my eyes.

Even though I knew that wasn’t enough to kill her (she was dead already anyway), it was still extremely unsettling.

“It’s not a big deal, Big Sis. The ghosts just made a gust of wind, that’s all.”

“Yeah, a *scary* gust of wind! That doesn’t help me!”

I wish she’d told me it was nothing—or that it was just natural.

“Still, I am not impressed that they would attack us physically. It is against the

rules to put others in genuine danger.” That was a very specific worry Nahna Nahna had, but I got what she was trying to say.

“None of us here would die in a physical attack, so we are unharmed. Are you all right, Miss Azusa? Your head is harder than diamonds, is it not? You are a stone-headed monster, no?”

“Not at all. I’m glad we’re uninjured, but this isn’t fun... We’re being attacked!”

This was a unique party, so it felt kind of silly despite my terror. Meanwhile, Nahna Nahna was really saying whatever she wanted, and that was pissing me off.

“Muu, you okay in there? That was a direct hit,” Rosalie called out to Muu. Ah, right—she was still collapsed on the landing.

“I’m dandy, but the sudden attack really damaged me body. Honestly can’t believe they’ve done this. I’ll shove a curse up their arse and make their teeth rattle!”

Muu finally stood up—but she was a lot shorter than usual.

Something was off here...

“Let’s ’ead down the apples an’ regroup,” she said, approaching us.

It was like she was making a bridge; her face was toward us, but both her hands were on the ground...

She was scuttling on the floor like a giant spider...

“Eeeeeeeek! No, no, no! Walk on your feet!”

She was crawling out of a nightmare and right toward me!

“That is disgusting, Your Majesty. Absolutely disgusting. Put your body back to the way it was before and don’t come over here until you do.”

If Nahna Nahna had a problem with it, then it was definitely outrageous.

“Huh? Yeah, you’re right. Thought I were walkin’ wiv me plates, but I’m usin’ my ’ands instead... I glitched out when the chandelier landed on me,” Muu said, cool as you please while she continued down the stairs toward us.

“Stop! Stay there! Fix yourself right there before you come here! You’re giving me the creeps just by existing!”

“Cor! Rude, Azusa! I got all tarted up today since I knew we was comin’ t’ town! Aren’t I cuter than usual?”

“This isn’t about being cute, okay?! You look like a monster!”

“Oi! There’s banter, then there’s insults! That one ’urt me, y’know!”

Sure, yes, okay, but this is going to scar me for life!

“Hey, Muu,” Rosalie spoke calmly. “There’s a mirror in the hall over there. Take a look.”

“Wot, is it really that bad?”

Muu and Rosalie went back into one of the first-floor halls.

A few seconds later...

“Rank!!!”

I heard a scream.

Terrifying, isn’t it? Just downright eerie.

“I’m all mangled an’ twisted! Wot am I, an octopus?!”

Her accent was having a mitigating effect on the horror, at least. Bless.

After a little while, Muu returned with all her body parts in their right places.

“Sorry ’bout that, Azusa. That was honestly mingin’. I’d never seen anyfin’ so ’orrendous before.”

“Yeah, I’m glad you understand.”

“But I’ll take more care in the future. Wa’evah, innit.”

“It’s not ‘whatever,’ seriously.”

I felt like I’d gotten the biggest scare so far from one of my own party members.



We finally made it up to the second floor.

We were in danger of physical attacks, like getting a chandelier dropped on us, so we made sure to be wary of all the walls and ceilings, but nothing really happened.

—Until we arrived at the second floor, when an even greater anxiety settled over me.

“I guess you’d call this a premonition, right? It feels like something terrible will happen to us if we keep going forward...”

“You can sense it, too, Big Sis? I feel a fairly powerful grudge coming from over there. More than one, in fact.”

Dungeons had nothing on haunted houses.

The second floor was in way worse shape than the first.

There were holes everywhere; it kind of seemed like someone had kicked them in.

“These weren’t made by wild animals or monsters after they moved in. These look deliberately man-made...”

Muu and Nahna Nahna were walking ahead very carefully, so I slowed down, too.

Muu was opening every room and checking inside. “Nofin’ in here, neither. But it’s filthy.”

I naturally followed behind Rosalie, sticking close to her. I couldn’t understand how anyone liked coming to these places. I don’t think I’d ever understand.

I slowly looked across the room. Yep, it was just a ruined mess. No bloodied bodies or anything. That would just make it a regular accident, though.

“No, Your Majesty. Something is here,” Nahna Nahna said—the worst thing she could say.

“Huh? Nah. If a ghost bovered comin’ in the room, I doubt it’d go so far as to hide.”

“No, this is not a supernatural being. I can hear breathing.”

Which meant it was probably a monster. And I didn’t care what monster it

would be at this point.

“I can hear it coming from underneath the bed.”

Something was hiding in the worst possible place!

“What? Oh no... What if there’s a murderer under there...?” I tried to cling to Rosalie, but I slipped through her.

The only person I could hold on to was Muu, who was in front of me, so that didn’t really help alleviate my fear. I would have come with a pillow to hug or something if I had known this would happen...

“An ax murderer sure would ’ide in a dusty place like this, ey?”

The ghosts were realistic when it came to these things.

Still, what was hiding under the bed...?

The next thing I knew, something dashed out from underneath!

It was small—was it a mini monster?

“Meeeoow, meeeoow~”

A wildcat?! I didn’t really know the species types, but I think it was a bit bigger than the cats I’d seen around Flatta.

This catlike animal rubbed up against Muu.

“Oh, hey. You’re a cute one. You’ll grow up to be a spiffin’ tiger one day.” Muu took to the catlike animal and started petting it.

The tension in the air immediately dissipated. When I studied the animal, my face naturally broke into a smile. Nothing could beat an animal’s healing powers.

“Is it really a tiger, though? Its fur doesn’t make it seem like one...”

“Her Majesty loves tigers.”

Maybe her kingdom really did have a connection to Osaka...

Anyway, I started petting the catlike animal, too.

It looked like the space under the bed served as its house. It probably even had blankets made from wool it got from the beds and chairs.

It could avoid the elements and protect itself from predators here, so this ruined hotel was a great place for it. The toughest part was probably having to leave the hotel to get food, though.

It meowed as it climbed up onto my lap.

“Aww, look how cute you are! I think I just want to turn back and take you home. 🎵”

“Ya tryin’ to take it ’ome right now anyway.”

Busted.

But I’d have to say good-bye to the cat and keep walking around this haunted hotel regardless.

Everyone else, however, seemed eager to keep going, so I had no choice but to tag along. It was scarier being left alone. I wanted to bring the cat, too, but I didn’t want another chandelier incident, so I left it behind.

“This hotel is not all that large, so I believe we should be entering the enemy’s base soon,” Nahna Nahna remarked.

“I’m not so eager to do that, myself...”

As we pressed farther in, my chills were getting worse.

I didn’t have a sixth sense or anything, so that meant we’d come to a place so terrifying that even a regular person like me could tell.

Muu pointed to a room. “That’s where it’s thickest. Somefin’s there.”

“Hey, you’re right. There’s some dead people that way,” Rosalie breezily agreed.

“Huh? You can tell?”

“Can you not, Big Sis? There’s someone dead in there with a deep-seated grudge.”

That was 100 percent a spot with an interesting history.

“Uh, I think I’ll stick around in this hallway and wait—”

“Okay, openin’ up. Pardon us! If we’re a bovvah, we’ll leave. Nope? Then I’m

comin' in!"

Muu totally ignored me and opened the door.

Aaagh, fine! I can't come this far and not look, can I?!

I peeked into the room from the hallway.

This room was completely different from all the others we'd seen so far.

The walls and floors were covered in writing.

There was no doubt about it. This place was...

"A delinquent hangout spot!"

Definitely done by rough kids. They might be a bit different from the Japanese types, but it was basically the same. I guess punks are punks no matter where they were from.

But this wasn't just any delinquent hangout spot.

**THE BLACK
KNIGHTS
WUZ HERE!**

**THE BADDEST DUDES
IN BOARD COUNTY!**

**7TH-GEN BOSS
SYZON THE CUDGEL
SUICIDE CARRIAGE I
CRAZEWOLF UNION**

Several misty black forms entered my field of view, and that darkness wasn't just the night.

Were these the ghosts?

"LEAVE...GET OUT OF HERE..."

Oh, I heard a voice. This was it. We had found the ghosts.

I need to get out of here! I'm losing it!!

"Hey, you gotta be shittin' me!"

One of these bad ghosts was talking really loudly...but it turned out to be Rosalie.

"I don't care who this place belongs to— You've gone too far! This hotel ain't yours! No one gives a shit if you hang around here, but you need to let it go when the people try to tear it down! No one thinks your clown act is funny!"

Wow, she was really picking a fight with them.

This was supposed to be a ghost vs ghost throwdown, but it was starting to feel like a gangster kid fight.

"Yeah, fine! Let's take this outside! What? You can't leave the room? Piss off! I'll see you outside! Huh? You're a bound spirit, so you can't leave? Do you think this is a game?!"

"No, I think they actually can't leave!"

Now things were getting hairy.

This thing between Rosalie and the ghosts was starting to look like a real brawl (?).

I didn't think they'd harm a fellow phantom if they found themselves in a fight with one, but I didn't know what was going to happen...

"How terrifying. Not the ghosts, I mean. Her language," Nahna Nahna remarked. "I wish they would use more courteous language in this confrontation. 'I will humbly kick your rear into the next life,' or some sort."

"That just sounds more like a taunt, though."

I'd never heard anyone use the phrase "humbly kick your rear."

"That so? Plastered royals would argue in the divine parlance like that."

"That is why they say royalty is so terrifying."

"It's a cinch to communicate in the divine parlance, so it caused lotsa fights. 'You startin', mate?!' 'You wanna go, ey?!' An' scraps would break out immediately."

I feel like the ancient civilization would have been wiped out anyway, even without an outside cause...

"Hey, Muu, is Rosalie okay...?"

We'd be in a bind if we ran into a priest here to exorcise the ghosts, and well, I was here. But I couldn't read the situation with one of my translators getting involved in the conflict.

Muu put her hands out to hold me back.

"It's nofin'. They're just regular ghosties. All they're capable of is cursin' normal people."

"You say that like it's harmless..."

"*We're* not gonna be in any danger, Azusa. We jus' need t' tell 'em not t' curse normal people."

In a majestic manner, a broad, generous smile crossed her face. She didn't seem particularly bothered, even when faced with an enemy.

But when I thought more about it, I realized we'd just come here to see what was going on with this haunted hotel, and Muu wasn't really personally interested in this quarrel...

Rosalie, however, had been glaring at a spot where the troublemakers must have been standing.

"You wanna go, huh?! You shameless bastard! You knew this would happen!"

She was starting to sound like a real gangster!

But I guess she might not be able to maintain that fighting spirit if she politely said to them, *I would like to fight with you. Please, let us begin.* If she wanted to

stay riled up, it was perfectly effective.

“Oraoraora! Oraaa, oraoraora! Oraoraoraora!”

Rosalie started shouting. Yeah, it was good to be sure that your opponent didn't underestimate you.

I couldn't hear very well, but the ghosts she was fighting against were definitely doing the same thing.

“Oraoraoraoraora! Oraorara, raoraoraorao!”

“Rosalie, you started saying ‘rao’!”

It didn't really make much of a difference either way, but it just didn't sound right!

Rosalie then seemed to realize something, and she whipped around. “Muu! One of them's going to you!”

What?!

We'd probably given them too many openings. This whole ruined hotel was the ghost punks' base, so of course we'd be surrounded.

But the moment I turned around—

Nahna Nahna stomped her foot onto something semitransparent.

“What a sluggish and sloppy attack. Go back to life, die, and try again.” Nahna Nahna rolled her eyes and scoffed.

I could see a punk with a mohawk, but he was transparent.

“Relax, Rosalie. Fellas like these'll bite the dust soon enough.”

A hazy man-shape floated before Muu—I guess they were partially visible after taking some hits.

“They attacked, so I gave 'em a small bish bosh on the spirit. Then they just conked out.”

“You should be glad you are dead. Any attempt on Her Majesty's life would mean the gallows if you were alive.” Nahna Nahna ground her foot into one of the ghost's faces, arms crossed.

I had a feeling she might be a sadist, and now I'm certain...

“Hey, does this mean you guys are super strong compared to other ghosts?”

I couldn't see what ghost fights were like, but I was starting to get the sense they were on another level.

“We been dead for yonks, y'see. We've got our ghost-bustin' skills down,” Muu replied, confident. I guess power balance was a thing everywhere. “Ghosts these days are nofin', really. Rosalie, show me what you got.”

Despite Muu's apparent confidence, Rosalie was a normal person—er, ghost—so she probably couldn't take down these guys.

And considering how she was actually yelling “oraora” or “raorao,” I didn't think she could win against them.

But the fight came to a sudden end.

“Mraaaooow, meeeooow.”

One of the catlike creatures came into the room.

I was extremely worried that one of our foes was going to possess the animal, but I was wrong. Instead, the creepy feeling over my skin suddenly vanished.

“Hey, so you guys like animals, too. Hah? Ah, right. Uh-huh, that makes sense. Uh-huh, okay.” Rosalie must have figured something out. “Big Sis, these guys've been working hard to protect this creature's house. They want to be good ghosts.”

And so came the twist ending!

Rosalie listened to what they had to say afterward and promptly broke into tears. “I see... You guys moved all the broken boards and doors out of the way for this little guy to make sure he got shelter from the rain...”

They were like delinquent kids who took in stray cats!

I noticed then that Muu's eyes had gone red, too.

Even Nahna Nahna's face had softened with compassion.

“Wot a nice story... You saw someone separa'ed from the pack an' just couldn't leave 'im all alone. Just like us...”

“You are no simple ruffians—you feel kindness. How lovely to awaken to your own goodness, even after death. How heartwarming.”

“Um... As the only living person here, I’m starting to feel left out. Can someone explain?”

The ghosts were getting excited about this whole thing.

“Big Sis, they’re saying they want to take us to the wildcat room.”

“The wildcat room?”

We entered a room we hadn’t yet checked, and inside was a whole swarm of catlike creatures (wildcats, probably).

There were even other animals, too. Some looked like foxes or raccoons.

“So this is their home...”

One of the fox kits came up to me, so I picked it up.

This haunted house had suddenly turned into a house of healing...

“They don’t mind people at all, do they? Can’t believe they’re wild.”

“Big Sis, the ghosts here take care of these animals, so they’re not very skittish.”

“It’s not unusual for animals t’ see ghosts. You’re all the same t’ them.”

I was a bit surprised to find a trait I shared with spirits, but this was much better than the critters running away at the sight of me.

“Aww, Laika should have come along! I’ll have to bring her next time.”

Coming to this haunted spot had been worth it in the end.

But even though I now knew that the ghosts were trying to protect the animals, I still didn’t know what things were like before then.

They obviously hadn’t come together for that purpose alone. Ghosts typically couldn’t leave the dark places they were tied to. They must have had some deep-seated grudge or hatred for this hotel.

So why were they here in this ruined hotel in the first place?

According to the owner’s ghost, deaths had occurred here only after it

became the rumored “haunted house,” but the place sure was crowded for that...

Fortunately, since the ghosts were actually here, the mystery got solved right away. I didn’t even need to guess.

“See, Big Sis? Punk kids or kids in gangs usually go to haunted places to test their nerve, right?”

“Er, I’ve always been a good kid, so I don’t really understand that line of thought...”

But it did make sense. When I thought more about it, there would be a lot of graffiti on the walls of haunted locations on travel shows.

“They came here and found another gang, and it led straight to a huge fight. One of the groups was completely wiped out, and a number of them died.”

“Mmm... I knew something horrible had happened the second I heard this place was haunted, but that’s heavy stuff.”

“I can understand, yes. Children always want to build secret bases for themselves.”

“That’s not something to smile about, Miss Nahna Nahna!”

People died here, you know!

“But is it not ultimately a fight over who gets to keep the secret base? A good majority of human wars are due to territorial disputes, are they not? It is not much different.”

“I don’t...really have a reply for that, now that you put it that way...”

Everything after that was all stuff I’d assumed. The punks who’d died in the ruined hotel became bound to the place and remained ever since. And since there were now ghosts in the ruined hotel, the gang that ended up winning quickly drove out everyone else.

That was when the ruined hotel became a bona fide ghost spot, but...

When the spirits realized there were wild animals seeking shelter in the building, they also realized they loved animals.

They would always chase out any trespassers so they could protect their furry friends and their home.

And now here we were.

“Sigh. Well, this is no good!”

Muu was lying sprawled on the floor. A raccoon (or something like this world’s equivalent) stepped over her. She looked pleased, all in all.

“No good for what? We’ve solved the mystery, and the ghosts love these animals. All the scary stuff they’ve done has been to protect them.”

“I know it’s like animal ’eaven in ’ere, but this ruined ’otel is still a ’azard. Even if these ghosties weren’t tryin’ to ’arm intruders, kids might get ’urt if they come to play ’ere, or bandits might even use it as a ’ideout.”

“You’re right. It might be put to evil use...”

There were people out there who were drawn to ruins for bad reasons. That was why the request to have it taken down had come to the guild.

“An’ the owner’s ghost was ’round, ’member? So long’s this ’otel’s standin’, so’s he.”

“I guess he can’t rest in peace since he has to keep looking at his unlucky assets...”

“Both humans and ghoulies ’ave their own problems, no ma’er the era, ey? Nofin’ changes, don’t ma’er if ya ’eart’s goin’ or stopped.” Muu looked refreshed, but I got the clear impression she was just trying to smooth things over.

Maybe she had wanted to come to the ruined hotel because she knew the ghosts here were suffering.

Spirits who don’t pass on always have regrets, after all.

Now, as the living person here, it was my turn to do work. Ghosts alone could only do so much to negotiate with human society.

“Hey, Rosalie? Who’s the leader here?” I asked.

If they could understand speech, then we could work something out. My stats

made me the strongest human alive, but that didn't mean I had to solve everything with brute force.

“Hold on a sec.”

Rosalie started talking about something with the ghosts, but a troubled look crossed her face partway through the conversation.

“They said they're going to decide who's in charge—and then suddenly started fighting!”

“There's not enough room for all these fiery tempers!”

Afterward, I gave my idea to the ghostly representative who won the fight.

“—That's basically the gist of it. What do you think?”

I managed to get their agreement.

Then, once dawn came, we had one more job to do.



A few days later, the ruined hotel was safely taken down.

I needed a top-class adventurer to be present for the event to prove that the ghosts wouldn't try anything, so I asked Wynona to do that for me. If an S-rank adventurer said it was going to be okay, then everyone felt safer. And of course, nothing happened while the building was being taken down.

But next to where the ruined hotel once stood was a small hut.

Well, maybe “hut” was a little generous—the ceiling was low, and it was too small for people to fit inside.

This was the new home for all the furry former inhabitants of the hotel.

Rosalie, Laika, and I had come to visit the hut.

“Oh goodness! They're all so cute!” Laika was crouched down, her eyes sparkling at the sight of the huddled creatures. I knew she was a fan of this stuff.

The foxes, raccoons, and wildcats were eager to meet her, too, and they wouldn't leave her side. Aww, so warm and fuzzy.

Although, something seemed to be wrong—her right hand was hugging her left hand close to her.

“Lady Azusa? Is something...here...?”

“Yeah, there are people we can’t see taking care of the animals. The hut’s security is airtight.”

That’s right—the spirits bound to the hotel had decided to stay and watch after the animals. When they had agreed to that, we successfully managed to get the ruined hotel torn down.

They didn’t really have any reason to stick with the hotel so long as they could maintain a spot where the critters could live in peace.

Now that the hotel was gone, so was the owner’s spirit...is what I initially thought, but he was apparently also taking care of the animals with the rest of the punks...

Later, I heard he was delighted to look after animals for the rest of eternity. And he was welcome to do as he liked.

“Incredible, Lady Azusa! You solved quite the difficult problem!”

“Aww, well, all I did was act as the human representative. Rosalie and Muu did all the work.”

Had Muu not been interested in the requests to the guild, then this never would have happened. And I was perfectly content to have played a small role in it all.

“And I’m glad to have learned about different kinds of ghosts. They’re my people, y’know.” Rosalie was now living as a member of my family, but you could really say it started with a small coincidence.

Had she lived a happy life, she wouldn’t have become a ghost. And she would not have been in the building that Halkara wanted to buy for her factory.

It was kind of weird, but we only got to meet her because of the unhappy way her life ended.

And because I’d been worked to death, I was now a witch in this world...

Our paths in life were so complicated. I wanted to treasure all ones that led to everyone I knew.

“Misfortune does sometimes bring us to great people. That doesn’t mean we should deliberately seek out misfortune, though.”

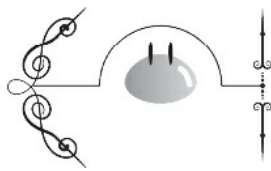
“Exactly. That’s what I think makes life and death so interesting!”

Boy, you really never know what will happen.

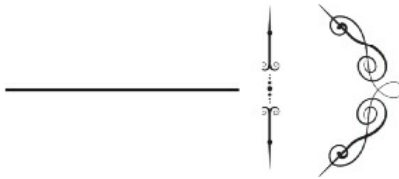
“And so, this makes me want to visit other haunted locations. Will you come with me, Big Sis?” Rosalie asked, her eyes glittering. “There are still so many more across the world! We should visit them all!”

I replied with a strained smile. “That’s a very firm *no, thank you*. I’m not keen on getting scared like that again.”

I definitely had not built up a resistance to haunted houses this time around!



THEY MADE CD-LIKE THINGS



As I was putting up the laundry to dry, I saw something big flying toward us.

“That’s a wyvern.”

We had a lot of connections to the demons, so we had plenty of wyverns coming our way. Sometimes they brought packages and letters, and sometimes they brought demons.

The locals also seemed to be used to it by now, so they weren’t shocked.

I mean, they occasionally get to see leviathans... And they see dragons practically every day... Hard to think they’d freak out at a wyvern...

I wondered what was up this time.

The answer was that it had brought guests—two of them, in fact. I could recognize them by their unique ears right away.

The one with bunny ears was Kuku, and the one with cat ears was Pondeli.

“It’s unusual for you two to drop by,” I said as they climbed off the wyvern. They both had brought a lot of things with them. I wondered what they had this time.

“It’s been so long since we last saw each other, Miss Azusa. Oh... Maybe it wasn’t all that long ago.”

She was right—because she had sung the official theme song, “Life of a Substitute,” for the Post Town Relay Race.

“On that note, Pondeli, I last saw you with the Appraisal Knights, and that was even more recent.”

At the end of the day, we saw the people who lived in the town around Vanzeld Castle a whole lot. The demons visited so often at this point that I'd forgotten how far away they actually were.

"Right~? I didn't think I would end up coming here again. I haven't been able to hole up in my room at all lately."

"I'll take that as a joke from a former shut-in."

For the longest time, Pondeli would laze around and play games. Now she made a living by making games for demons.

"I'm just here as a plus-one today, by the way. There is something Miss Kuku has been dying to show you."

"Are you here to perform a new song for us? I'd be delighted to listen—sorry for making you come all this way."

Although, if that was the case, then I didn't really understand why Pondeli was here.

"Who knows? Stay tuned for the answer!" she said.

Was she plotting something again?

"Sure, fine. Come inside, regardless," I said.

After putting up the last piece of clothing to dry, I took the two to the dining room.

Luckily, Flatorte was already sitting in the dining room when we got there.

It was perfect timing, because Flatorte was the most knowledgeable when it came to music.

"Well, if it isn't Kuku. I've been hearing you've been doing well lately."

"I have, Miss Flatorte! It's thanks to you that I've managed to make a living." Kuku politely bowed her head. This was pretty rare; Flatorte wasn't usually someone you'd think of as a mentor. When Kuku raised her head again, her expression was focused and serious. "Flatorte! I've come today to ask you something!" she exclaimed, her shoulders drawn up and tense.

Wow, she really was like a pupil who'd come to ask her master a question.

But then, she turned to look at me.

“There is some advice I’d like from you as well, Miss Azusa!”

“What? Why me?!”

I didn’t know all that much about music. Maybe she specifically needed an inexpert opinion, but then she didn’t need to come all this way. She could have found someone back in the demon lands.

“Remember, Miss Azusa, when I built an arcade? You gave me such precise feedback. That’s what she’s after,” Pondeli interjected. Well, I guess I could just accept that they trusted me...

“I just so happened to have memories and experiences that could help. That’s all,” I replied.

I’d barely mentioned that it resembled the Japanese arcades from my past life. They probably wouldn’t understand, even if I did.

“No, I have a feeling that you’ll be very helpful this time around, too. Call it the undead intuition.”

Was that something she could rely on?

“I don’t know what’s going on, but if you need my thoughts on your music, then I, the great Flatorte, will tell you.”

Flatorte didn’t hold back in situations like this. She could be well suited to being a big-sister figure. Maybe I’d just let Flatorte take the lead on this, then.

“Great!” said Kuku. “I would like you to listen to my new song.”

“Good, get out your lute.”

“I do not need my lute this time.”

What did that mean? Was she going to be singing a cappella? Maybe she wasn’t going to be singing and playing at the same time? But then who’d be playing the lute?

“I will get it all ready, so please wait a moment.”

She produced something from her bag.

It looked like a very thin, donut-shaped talisman—possibly made of cloth? But it reminded me of something from my past life...

“My new song is inside this artifact!”

I knew it—it was like a CD!

A CD made out of cloth somehow, but I was right.

“Allow me to explain,” Pondeli said, taking over. “Among the new magitech we received from a certain channel was one that allows us to save sound and moving images.”

That “certain channel” was almost 100 percent the ancient kingdom of the dead...

“And since we can save music, I reckoned we could listen to that piece of music over and over again! Isn’t this an incredible invention?!”

“Sure, I won’t deny that...”

If I had to say, CDs felt way more low-tech than the streaming services they’d already cooked up over here, but they had technically invented something new.

“And this is the artifact that will play saved sounds!”

Next, Pondeli produced a square black box.

It looked like a game console...but I decided not to dig any deeper on that.

“We plan on selling this sound-playing artifact and this disc-form artifact that contains my songs at the same time.”

“Yes! My sound-playing artifact is worthless without the disc-form artifact, you see. That is why Miss Kuku and I have partnered up!”

“...Uh-huh. I think it’s a novel experiment.” I had a terrible sense of déjà vu, but I opted not to say anything.

CDs were finally going to be making the rounds in this world. Even though it would probably just be among the demons for the time being.

“These are my new songs.” Kuku produced three disc-form artifacts.

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Each of them had *One, Two, or Three* scrawled into the fabric.

Flatorte leaned over the table, because it was finally time to talk about music. “Right, so you need my opinion about which version you want to release first.”

“I see; so all of these you have here are samples,” I commented,

Indeed, it wasn’t unusual to have multiple takes for the same songs. Pros were particular about those minor differences.

But Kuku looked a bit embarrassed.

Wait, did Flatorte and I get the wrong idea?

“As the one who developed the sound-playing artifact, I’ll explain! All of Miss Kuku’s discs have eleven songs on them, but the last song is different on each.”

“Greedy move for your first printing!” I cried. “You know your fans want to hear all your songs, so your business strategy is to get them to buy multiple versions, right? It might be profitable for you, but their opinions of you will get worse, Kuku, so don’t do it!”

A lot of people were ruthless when it came to making money.

I thought of Fighsly off the top of my head, but Eno, the “Witch of the Grotto,” could be calculating sometimes, too. This felt a lot like that...

But both Kuku and Pondeli were nodding, fascinated.

“I knew getting your opinion would be invaluable, Miss Azusa! We hadn’t considered what the fans might think. We won’t do this, then.”

Pondeli took out a notebook and wrote, *Changing the last song is too petty. Nope.*

Well, at least they didn’t fight me on it.

Kuku put her disc-form artifacts back into her bag, too.

Instead, she took out three other disc-form artifacts. They were labeled, *Normal, Limited 1, and Limited 2.*

“And um, these three here—”

“Oh, it’s okay, Kuku. I get it.” I raised my hand to cut Kuku off. “The ones that

say *Limited* will have some sort of moving image or something saved on it, but the *Normal* one will have a song or two more than what's included in the *Limited*, right?"

Both Pondeli and Kuku oohed, impressed.

Pondeli was even clapping. "I knew you'd understand, Miss Azusa! I'm really glad we came here! You're such a big help!"

"Oh... Well, I...just had a guess, really..."

"These disc-form artifacts don't just record music, but they can also record moving images! It's truly revolutionary!"

They sold CDs like this back in Japan, too.

Essentially, they wanted to sell different kinds of CDs at the same time. I guess they could do what they wanted.

But we still hadn't heard any of the music in question, and Flatorte was getting bored. Time to move on to the main event!

"So could you play...er, activate? Those CD—I mean, the disc-form artifacts?"

The words were just slightly different enough to be confusing. Could we not just call it a CD?

"Of course! I would now like to hear Flatorte's thoughts." Kuku inserted the artifact that read *Normal* into the activating box.

It was the first time I was going to hear a CD (or something like it) in this world.

That itself was an exciting experience.

"I wonder what it'll sound like."

The player just looked like a box, so I wasn't sure how it acted like a speaker; I was interested, though. Maybe it would sound surprisingly clear and lifelike.

I thought back to when I bought my first CD in my previous life. They were kind of expensive for a kid's allowance.

"....."

Nothing was happening.

Maybe it had to build up over time, then produce all the sound at once in an explosion?

“.....”

Maybe the volume was set too low? ...Nope, guess not. It didn't seem like there was anything like that on the box. We'd just have to wait a little longer.

“.....”

“When is this thing going to start?!”

I finally cried. Nothing was happening!

“How strange. I doubt it would be broken, but...”

With a puzzled look, Pondeli took out the disc-form artifact from the box.

“Oh! I know! We had it activated till the end last time, so we need to turn it back to the beginning!”

Why was it like a cassette tape?! Why was the system older than a CD?!

“You turn it back to the beginning by pressing here and here with your left hand, then pressing here with your right, yes?”

It sounded complicated to operate. It was like forcing a computer to shut down.

Kshk, kshk, kshk, whrrrr...

“Oh, there it goes. Please, wait a moment!”

How come they managed to figure out something like video streaming but then came up with cassette tapes later?

“I can't hear anything. This is boring.” Flatorte's eyes were glazed over.

She wasn't the only one; this was taking forever.

There finally came a *click* from the box artifact. I knew that sound—it was the same one our old component cassette player used to make at my parents' house.

“It should start now. This is Miss Kuku's first song!”

Finally, the music began, and I could hear what sounded like Kuku's lute.

"Hey! That's cool!"

Flatorte immediately brightened up. I wonder if that was how it felt to hear a CD or cassette for the first time.

But...this first song sure was dark.

Song 1

"The Book My Parents Threw Out While I Wasn't Looking"

Words & Music: Kuku 4:35

Kuku's grief—"Everyone takes what's mine, takes what's mine and throws me away~ 🎵"—was coming from inside the artifact.

The song selection was way too dark for our first CD (-ish) experience...

The somber lyrics filled the dining room for a while, while the four of us quietly listened.

Well, this feels terrible...

When it was finally over, Pondeli said "Let me stop it for a second" and pressed on a spot. I couldn't see any buttons on it, so it was hard to tell where anyone was supposed to press.

"Um, what do you think, Flatorte...?" Kuku asked, a meek look on her face.

Flatorte, at some point, had crossed her arms. "That's a solid song. It was good."

Huh? That answer came quick. Still, Kuku looked relieved to hear it; they really were like master and pupil.

"Let me hear the rest. Song order is just as important on this artifact thing as it is in a concert."

"Oh, of course! Thank you!"

Flatorte was starting to act like a famous producer.

Song 2

"Life of a Substitute"

Words & Music: Kuku 4:05

That was what we heard at the Post Town Relay Race! She even had it at the single spot in her song order!

We heard one song, then another afterward.

Song 3

“I Only Forgot, But Now You Call Me a Liar”

Words & Music: Kuku 4:27

Song 4

“Mold on Bread”

Words & Music: Kuku 5:02

Song 5

“The Person Behind Me in Line Is Mad Because I Can’t Get the Coins Out of My Purse”

Words & Music: Kuku 3:43

Song 6

“Someone Said Someone Was Bad-Mouthing Me”

Words & Music: Kuku 4:27

Song 7

“It Always Sounds Like People Are Laughing at Me”

Words & Music: Kuku 4:50

“Why are all these song titles so dark?!”

The darkness was starting to weigh on me.

“This is my first experiment, so I decided to save the best sounds I could produce. I will not compromise,” Kuku said, her eyes crystal clear.

And that would lead to the explosive birth of a very dark album...

Flatorte, meanwhile, barely spoke, and she just sat there with her arms folded. Her eyes remained closed most of the time, but it didn’t seem like she

was asleep. She still appeared to have control of her face.

“Um, what do you think, Flatorte?” Kuku asked uneasily after several minutes of no feedback.

“Nothing to worry about. I’m listening to the end.”

“Very well. The normal disc has two songs that are not on the limited disc, so there are thirteen songs in total.”

Six more depressing ballads we hadn’t heard yet...

But once again, no sound came from the disc.

“Hmm? Is your casset—I mean, your artifact broken?”

We’d only heard over half the songs, so it was weird that it would stop playing now.

“Your artifact is crap.” Flatorte opened her eyes and glared at Pondeli.

She was trying to sit and listen to the music, so maybe she was getting annoyed with all the interruptions.

“You can’t cut off music over and over like this. Even if you make a mistake, you keep playing. I can name plenty of concerts where the singer got the lyrics wrong and still had a fantastic performance.”

“I completely understand! Please hold on a moment! I’m going to investigate the problem! This shouldn’t be happening!” Pondeli opened the box artifact and began fiddling with it.

“You’ve gotten good with machines, haven’t you?”

Back when she was a shut-in, all she had with her were board games and card games; I didn’t think she had access to any genuine machinery.

“After spending so much time with the ancient civilization, I suddenly realized I knew quite a lot about gadgets for games.”

Mark my words, she was going to invent a computer before long.

Not only that, but since the undead could live indefinitely (and yes, I don’t think they’re strictly *alive* per se, but it’s weird to say that they could stay dead indefinitely), I knew she would collect knowledge well into the future.

“The artifact seems to be operating normally. Hmm... Is there something wrong with the disc?”

“That can’t be, Miss Pondeli. I only brought ones I myself have listened to the end.”

Oh no. I couldn’t help if there was something wrong with the machinery. And these weren’t even technically machines, which made me doubly useless.

“Oh, I figured it out. I figured it out! 🎵” Kuku exclaimed. I guess she had a breakthrough.

She extracted the disc, flipped it over, then put it back in.

“The front side was finished, and now we have to insert it with the back side up.”

Literally a cassette tape!

Either way, the music started playing.

Song 8

“You Judge Others, But You Never Talk About Your Own Mistakes”

Words & Music: Kuku 5:28

The lute felt heavier on this song than in all the others. Maybe she should be including songs that acted as a break sometimes...?

But maybe I ought to keep my mouth shut as someone who didn’t know anything about music. I’d leave this to Flatorte.

But Flatorte was shaking her head very slightly, concentrating on the rhythm.

Then Sandra entered. “Lots of bugs out today. I’m getting some repellant.”

As she shuffled past the machine, which had been sitting on the floor, a horrible *vweeeeeeen* came from it!

“Gah! What is that noise?! It hurts my ears!”

It was a dreadful sound, and the song stopped playing, too.

“Ugh, you broke it, Sandra.” Flatorte stared coolly at Sandra.

“What a scandalous thing to say! Why did you make it so it’d break whenever

a plant passes by! *Woof-woof-woof-woof!*”

It’d been a while since I heard Sandra’s animal noises.

“By the way, Pondeli, what on earth happened now...?”

“Hold on a moment. I will check!” Pondeli started her investigation. “Ah, I see. If there is any sort of vibration near the artifact while it’s using magic, it stops.”

“That sure is a delicate instrument you have there.”

“It can’t handle any kind of shaking very well while you’re using it, so you should be careful with pets. It’ll stop like this if a cat touches it or whatnot.”

Now it was reminding me of really old game consoles, but no one else would understand that reference.

“Right, let’s continue. Activate!” Pondeli pressed a spot on the box to turn it on.

...But nothing happened again.

Flatorte then sprang from her chair...

...and spewed her cold breath onto the wall!

Now the wall was covered in ice. At least it would melt soon enough.

“Aaaaaaargh! I can’t stand this! It keeps breaking, and it’s stressing me out! Come on, really?!”

She pressed both her hands to her head and ruffled her own hair. Wow, she was really holding it in!

“Flatorte, I know how you feel, but calm down! These things happen with machines!”

“I don’t need any artifact if it’s going to piss me off this much! It’d be quicker just to have Kuku play for me! And it’s weird listening to music out of a box! I can’t even pretend I’d rather listen to this than a live performance!”

“That might be right, but...Kuku isn’t usually close by... With this, you could listen to her songs anywhere in the world!”

Both Kuku and Pondeli looked troubled, though, Kuku especially. “She’s

right...," she whispered.

As the artist, she was starting to agree that listening to music live was better.

"Well... Miss Flatorte, you can listen to the same song over and over again with this artifact... It's an incredible thing..."

"You keep saying that, Undead, but right now I'm not listening to anything."

"Hrrgh... I know... Why does it keep stopping...?"

I felt like I was witnessing the trials a gadget had to go through before the rest of the world caught the wave of new technology.

I bet all the inventors of the tools and gizmos in this world and the complicated machinery from my past life had to fight the battle of "This would make life easier!" versus "We don't really need this, though." But in the end, convenience won out and took over the globe.

Even when smart phones came out, there were some people who stubbornly stuck to flip phones; and even back when cell phones were coming out, I knew some people insisted they could live without one and never attempted to get one.

I bet this cassette player (it was basically a cassette player to me anyway) would catch on once it overcame those trials.

Right, it was time to help the inventor.

I placed a hand on Flatorte's shoulder.

"In, out. In, out. In, out..."

"Oh... Are you telling me to wait a little longer, Mistress?"

When I held her in place, her agitation seemed to cool down a bit.

"I am. All new things go through a lot of trouble at first. You've improved some of your own techniques through trial and error, right?"

"Not that I can think of."

At least play along!

"Look, once this artifact goes on sale, there will be so many more people who

will know about Kuku's music. Isn't that a good thing?"

Flatorte blinked.

She then glanced over at Kuku, who looked a little embarrassed.

"It's not a bad thing at all...I guess..."

Yes! I knew Flatorte supported Kuku anyway. I didn't think she was going to complain anymore after this.

Meanwhile, Pondeli had taken the disc out of the box.

"Oh no, contact failure. Hmm, that means I should—"

It sounded like she knew what to do.

"Fooo, fooo!"

She started blowing on the disc.

"What is that supposed to do?!"

It really was like an old game console! And wasn't the blowing-on-the-cartridge thing a myth?! It was more likely that any spit that got on it would cause it to break!

No, this wasn't electronics, so maybe that wasn't the problem... Civilization in this world was extreme in all departments.

"Oh, you're right. This won't do anything." Pondeli stopped blowing on it. I knew it wouldn't work. "I'm dead, so I can't actually exhale anything. Can someone else give it a try?"

"That's the problem?!"

"I always try to blow on it, even though I don't breathe. Boy, old habits sure die hard! Well, they do say old habits never die."

Never was a long time.

Well, I had no reason to refuse the request, so I blew into the box.

"Fooo, fooo!"

"Keep going, Miss Azusa! The arcane circuits should activate more easily under the breath of life!"

Why was that the only part of this that sounded magical?!

The artifact finally started working. I guess the breath of life helped.

“Ah, there we go. This is the second half of ‘You Judge Others, But You Never Talk About Your Own Mistakes.’”

“Hey, Kuku? You’re talented, I’ll give you that, but do you really think you’ll get any more popular with all these depressing songs...?”

“I get many fan letters thanking me for putting their pain into words.”

“...I see. I guess some people don’t get much out of upbeat music.”

Demons generally seemed to live whim by whim, but anyone can have a bad day.

“The next song, number nine, is ‘Rent, Three Months Overdue.’ I am rather pleased with this one.”

“No pop star would sing a song with that name!”

It did sound cool, though; Kuku herself said she was proud of it. And surprisingly, it was a bit on the brighter side.

I loved the chorus, especially the line, “I’m breaking out of my chains; this room’s too small and constricted~ 🎵 Although, if I’m being honest, I’m just getting evicted~”

“It is surprisingly up-tempo, considering your other songs. I see you’re playing on the feeling of leaving a cramped house and breaking free from restraints.” Flatorte gave an excellent interpretation.

“Oh, I wrote this one reflecting on my failed career as Schifanoia and constantly delaying my rent payments.”

The songwriter completely shut down the nice interpretation.

There were some problems, but the disc-form artifact managed to play to the last song.

“That was great, that was great!” I applauded.

Meanwhile, Kuku looked much more nervous now that all the songs were over. She was watching Flatorte intently.

She, of course, was worried about the dragon's verdict.

I could sense she was filled with half eager expectation, and half unease.

Flatorte, meanwhile, had a rather pensive look on her face. I would've guessed she was decades older, if I didn't know better.

Pondeli and I were both watching, too.

What kind of response was she going to give?

"I think nothing beats listening to a live performance," she said with utter earnestness.

It was a harsh verdict, but an honest one.

There had never been any CDs or cassettes in this world (well, they were in the process of being born now). It was common sense that music was something to be listened to live.

It wouldn't be easy to compete with the presence and holistic experience of live music.

Kuku seemed to already understand that; she was smiling somewhat sadly. She was a pro, so she could take the feedback. This was a good master-pupil relationship.

But then, Flatorte's mouth eased into a smile. "But every song on this disc was good. I can tell you thought about song order, too."

"Thank you!" Kuku lowered her head; her ears seemed to jump forward.

"I bet this will give a different experience to listening live. You'll have to create a complete work of art in one disc. And I can sense that you were very mindful of that."

"You can tell!" Kuku's eyes went wide.

"If it felt exactly the same as going to a concert, then I would have told you to reconsider. Otherwise, you'd just have a lackluster concert. If you're going to be selling these discs, then you need to think about what makes them special and consider it as its own work."

Suddenly, Flatorte seemed to be operating several standard deviations

above normal.

People could be so different when they were in their element.

I started clapping again, and Pondeli joined me.

Flatorte really was suited to education. I doubted she could teach math or languages, but she'd be great when it came to her specialty. She'd be a teacher her students would trust.

"Kuku, the most important things are coming next. When you put songs on the disc, people will start comparing your next discs with the previous ones. You don't want people thinking the previous ones were better."

"You're right. I will surpass myself every time!"

What Flatorte was saying was honestly on point.

And now, our work for the morning was done.

"I'm about to make lunch," I said. "Kuku, Pondeli, would you like some? Oh, Pondeli's undead, so I guess you don't eat..."

"It's okay! I brought a game that will entertain your children!"

Hey, Falfa and Shalsha will be happy about that.

I made a salad for Kuku with plenty of extra veggies, just as she liked.

It was a lively lunch with more people around than usual.

After we finished eating, the conversation led to Flatorte borrowing Kuku's lute to sing something. Falfa was practically begging her to give us a song.

"I haven't prepared anything, so I might mess up. I can only do the basics," Flatorte said, but I doubted it would be bad at all. And it wasn't like she hated performing anyway.

"I will assess your performance as well, Flatorte. I believe I have a natural sense of rhythm."

"I don't want your assessment, Laika. Compliments from you feel weird." Flatorte was softer than usual in her response to Laika, too.

The girls were applauding before she even began, and Rosalie and Sandra

were watching with interest.

“Right, here I go.”

To be honest, Flatorte’s playing and singing were excellent.

Her music was nothing like Kuku’s; her songs were bright and positive.

It was danceable, if you could say that, but not the kind to make you lose your mind or anything. Kids would cheer up listening to it, too.

Our dining room had been turned into a music club today.

Falfa, especially, was hopping up and down in place in glee.

I could tell Flatorte was having fun, too. Her tail was tapping against the floor. That was probably how she was keeping rhythm.

Life was better with music.

“Maaargaret, Maaargaret, Maargaret~” Ahhh. All right, that’s three songs, so I’m done now!”

We broke into applause.

It really stuck with me how Kuku was listening with such joy. I bet she learned a lot, even though it was a different musicality from hers.

“Oh! That was so inspiring!”

Pondeli rushed over to her bags and took out a notebook.

She grabbed a few note cards and quickly began jotting something down.

“What is it? Thought of a way to improve your artifact?”

“No—but I realized that if I set my music-playing artifact in my arcade, then I could create an entirely new game.”

Pondeli was quickly sketching out her artifact and people playing with it.

I didn’t really understand, but it seemed to involve some hitting.

“As the music plays, the musical notes will appear in a display window. Then, you and a friend hit the artifact along with the rhythm of the song and see who does better! I think it would be so much fun if I manage to pull it off!”

Wait—doesn't that kind of game already exist?

"You need rhythm for music, you see. Rhythm is basically timing, and timing is a key element in games! It will be a hit; I know it! A big hit!"

Pondeli had to have known arcades in her past life. My suspicions were growing...

It sounded like the three variants of Kuku's music artifact, *Life Is Death*, would be releasing a normal edition and two limited editions at the same time.

Several days later, a wyvern came to deliver a sample and the artifact to play it.

People who weren't massive fans and didn't want to watch the videos of her performing could just buy the normal edition—the song count was greatest there, so it was perfect.

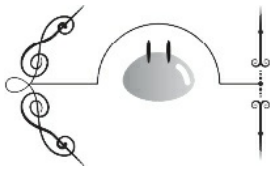
The CDs—er, cassettes would finally be spread throughout the world.

But I got a sudden and terrible feeling.

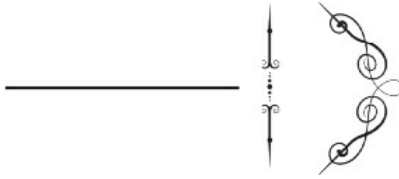
Pecora had been working as an idol, right? I wondered if she was going to start selling music artifacts that came with tickets that let fans shake her hand...

I decided to play *Life Is Death* without thinking about the future looming on the horizon.

"...All these songs are ominous, so it's not really the breath of fresh air I was hoping for..."



WE SAW WHAT LOOKED LIKE A UFO



It started off as a wonderful day, so the kids—Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra—and I went on a picnic.

Well, the house sat in the perfect spot for a picnic in the highlands already, so we just walked for a little bit to get there.

“Falfa thinks the air is much crisper than usual!” My oldest daughter was energetically frolicking across the fields.

The rest of us three walked behind her. Despite the event, the only one who felt like running around was Falfa. Apparently, photosynthesis didn’t give Sandra a lot of energy for running, so she didn’t do that much.

And Shalsha was reading as she was walking; it wasn’t something you did during a picnic.

“You need to watch where you’re going, Shalsha,” Sandra commented.

“Shalsha would, if we were in a crowd in the middle of a city. But there is nothing to run into here. Just a slime, at worst. Nothing to worry about.”

“Mmm, okay—but, Azusa, are you going to let her get away with that? You’re her mother. You need to raise her correctly.”

Now I was taking the blame...

“Well, I can’t really encourage her to keep doing it, but she’s right that there’s nothing to bump into, so... Not much I can do...”

I didn’t think I could out-logic Shalsha. And it was true it wasn’t really going to cause problems.

“But does it make for a good picnic?” Sandra asked sharply.

I’d been thinking the same thing.

“Well... If she thinks this is a picnic, then that’s enough to make it a picnic...”

“There is no need to worry. Indulging in nature and the pages of a book together is a perfectly enjoyable activity. A desk does not always make for good reading. Going on a walk is especially refreshing.”

No good mom shuts down everything her kid does, so I decided to let her do as she pleased.

“By the way, Shalsha, what are you reading now?”

“It’s called *In the Shadow of Death*.”

“That doesn’t sound refreshing at all!”

Well, considering her mental age, I wasn’t exactly expecting *John the Puppy’s Big Adventure*. And she did seem to be having a good time.

As we chatted, Falfa’s gallivanting came to a halt ahead of us.

“Mommy? What’s that?” She pointed to the sky, where something was flying in a straight horizontal line.

It looked small, but that was most likely because it was far away.

“Probably a bird. Dragons or wyverns would look much bigger than that.”

“But, Mommy, birds don’t move like that. It’s going *zwoom, zwoom* straight sideways.”

Her sound effects were rather apropos.

Whatever it was seemed to be floating rather than flying, and every once in a while, it would move, then stop, then move, then stop.

Falfa was right—it didn’t seem like a bird at all.

When I peered closely, the shape was rather ball-like.

At some point, Shalsha had closed her book and was staring into the sky with us.

“Hey! I think it’s coming toward us!” Sandra yelled. Now that she mentioned

it, it did appear a bit bigger than before...

“It’s going away again!” Falfa called. “That way!”

Just as she said, the thing slipped behind one of the distant mountains and out of sight.

“I wonder what that was. I don’t think I’ve ever seen an animal like that in my three hundred years living here,” I said.

Falfa trotted back to us. “Is it a new type of bird?”

“It might be. Maybe we should ask an ornithologist sometime.”

“That wasn’t a bird, Sis. That did not match any of the birds that live in this area.” Shalsha looked angry for some reason—except no, that wasn’t anger. If anything, she was overcome with shock. Her body was even shaking a little.

She then declared in a loud voice:

“That was...without a doubt, an unidentified flying creature... A UFC!”

It was like a UFO!

“What? I’ve never heard of that.”

Sandra didn’t know what it was, either, so I hoped Shalsha would explain it to us.

Shalsha nodded. “Unidentified flying creatures...are flying creatures that have yet to be identified.”

“Exactly what it says on the tin!”

“Long ago, people learned of beings that flew in odd patterns, different from anything in the known world. An ornithologist five hundred years ago named them ‘unidentified flying creatures.’ People came to abbreviate it as UFC afterward. They say we still know nothing about them. That is what Shalsha thinks, at least.”

She was speaking faster than usual—a UFC encounter must have been very exciting for her.

“I see. Then I’m glad you got to see one.”

“Mom, there is nothing happy or sad about seeing one!” Shalsha was strangely angry with me. “There are some researchers who believe UFCs are intelligent life-forms that come from distant celestial bodies! We cannot ignore this!”

We really were in the realm of UFOs and aliens now!

“Don’t worry about it, Mommy. Shalsha just likes UFCs.” Falfa seemed annoyed. “Strange intelligent life from other planets doesn’t exist. Nothing like that *can* exist, and even if it did, then why would it move so erratically?”

Oh? It sounded like Falfa was a nonbeliever. It was unusual for sisters to be so divided on a subject.

“That’s absurd, Sis. If we assume everything we don’t understand doesn’t exist, how can we ever move forward as a society?”

“And you attaching UFCs to intelligent life-forms is a massive leap in logic. That doesn’t follow scientific thought.”

The two of them stood facing one another as they argued.

Uh-oh. I don’t want this to turn into a fight.

I stepped between them. “Okay, then why don’t you gather evidence to convince each other and use this opportunity to get a solid perspective on UFCs?”

Both of them were scholarly, so I decided to turn this into a study opportunity. Hopefully, a buffer of studiousness would keep this confrontation from getting too heated.

“Fine! I want to settle this in a public symposium!”

“Falfa accepts your challenge! Come at me!”

“Why don’t we hold the symposium in ten days?”

“Fine. I can collect all the data I need in that time!”

So much for softening the friction...

Now that I thought about it, Falfa had been focusing on the hard sciences, and Shalsha had been more focused on the humanities thus far. They had never had

a real academic confrontation.

But for some reason, both of them were interested when it came to UFCs, and now they were butting heads on the matter.

“What are you going to do about them, Azusa?” Sandra, the outsider, was astonished.

“I don’t know... It’s not a terrible thing for scholars to criticize other scholars’ arguments, so let’s keep an eye on them for now.”

And maybe it was a good thing if Falfa and Shalsha had a real academic confrontation from time to time. What a wasted opportunity if the sciences and humanities stayed completely separate forever.

That was the conclusion I came to as their mother.



Falfa and Shalsha then flew around to various libraries and scholars’ offices across the land.

We had two dragons in the family, luckily, so their movement and ability to collect documents was fair.

They also asked Beelzebub to let them see some papers that the demons had.

And now, as we ate, they were reading books.

...No, this is bad manners.

“Girls, you can’t read while you eat.”

Both Falfa and Shalsha closed their books.

“Okay, Mommy.”

“Shalsha wants to have good table manners.”

Their spoons were moving at lightning speed; they probably didn’t want to waste any time that could be spent studying.

“This is so funny, Madam Teacher. Oh, maybe calling this funny is imprudent.” Halkara, who wasn’t involved in any of this, gave her impartial opinion.

“Well, it’s good to be serious about something. Their theories might even

diverge after doing all that research, too.”

If anything, I had to thank the family for willingly going along with the girls without any complaint.

“It must be hard on you dragons. You flew all over the place yesterday, didn’t you?”

“It’s all right; everyone gets absorbed in their studies at some point in their lives. I am proud to have been able to help.”

Huh? Did I ever get “absorbed” in my own studies...?

“And I, Flatorte, am having fun helping in this competition! It gets me fired up!”

Battle-oriented as ever!

“Have you ever concentrated on your studies, Flatorte?”

“Never.”

“I’m sorry; ‘everyone’ was a bit of an exaggeration,” Laika corrected herself. Well, it wasn’t like her work ethic was the standard.

Meanwhile, there was another person in the family who was getting wrapped up in all this.

“Sorry and thank you, Rosalie, for watching the sky for hours on end every day.”

Rosalie the ghost would go outside to check if there was anything unusual going on. She was now floating near the ceiling.

“Oh, it’s really no different from just hanging around here and there. Even ghosts want to help some people out every once in a while.”

“Have you seen anything strange?”

“Yeah, I caught a glimpse of something jerking around out there once. I didn’t know what it was.”

Considering it came back, that probably meant the strange animal had come to live here. Or maybe the aliens were doing recon.

“Tomorrow’s the day of the symposium. I know this is the last stretch for you two, but take this easy. No all-nighters.”

Both Falfa and Shalsha nodded.

They were on the same page when it came to things like that.



Then came the day of the symposium.

We had a little temporary auditorium set up outside the house in the highlands. There was a stage and seats lined up in front for guests. Fatla in her leviathan form had apparently brought those over.

Falfa and Shalsha had asked Beelzebub to set this all up, and she had obliged. Beelzebub would never say no to them, so she had reportedly been enthusiastic about it.

There were chairs for the speakers on the stage and a sign behind them.

If the Ministry of Agriculture was helping out, then that meant the demon taxpayers’ money was going toward this... Well, Beelzebub knew what she was doing, so I wasn’t worried. I wouldn’t be held responsible if they complained about government spending habits...

PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM

**In-depth Discussion:
What are UFCs?**

In Collaboration with the Demon Ministry of Agriculture

There weren’t any people left standing, of course, but many of the seats were filled—they must have heard about it somewhere. There sure were a lot of people interested in UFCs...

The time to start came, and Vania stepped onto the stage.

“Thank you for coming today. I am Vania the leviathan, and I’ll be your

moderator today. I will also provide brief commentary on the proceedings. Now, let's have our speakers come to the stage!"

It was finally starting.

Falfa stepped out from the wings.

"First, we have Falfa, one of the first people to spot the UFC. She disagrees with the stance that UFCs are intelligent life coming from other celestial bodies," Vania explained as Falfa bowed. "Next, we have Shalsha, who was also there to see the UFC. She is of the opinion that UFCs are evidence of intelligent life from other planets."

Shalsha slowly marched across the stage. She sure was determined.

After that, Beelzebub came up onstage. I thought she would say a thing or two as agricultural minister, or maybe she was an expert on crop circles or something, but she instead held something in her arms.

It was a slime, but it was ink black... I didn't think many of those existed at all...

"Next, we have the demon minister of agriculture, Beelze—er, the Smart Slime, carried in by the minister of agriculture."

The black slime was Smarsly, who lived beneath Vanzeld Castle!

A long time ago, when Falfa slept funny and got stuck as a slime, we'd gone to Smarsly for answers. After that, we'd gone to talk to the Wizard Slime (Wizly) and then the Fighter Slime (Fighsly).

I had no idea I'd be seeing it again here. Fate was a funny thing.

"I am Beelzebub, agricultural minister. This slime seems to know quite a lot, so I brought it along. I do not know much about UFCs, but I do think of myself as the girls' caretaker."

"I'm their caretaker!" I yelled to Beelzebub.

"Please save all questions and comments for the Q and A phases," Vania the moderator stopped me.

Grrr... Beelzebub had no right to say that, but I couldn't argue against her...

“Next, we have Miss Muum Muum, self-proclaimed queen of an ancient civilization.”

I was shocked to see Muu step onstage.

I thought she was trying not to attract undue attention?! But I guess no one would believe she actually came from an ancient civilization...

“I’ll speak me mind from me old civ’s perspective. Cheers.”

I had a feeling she was going to say whatever she wanted, which kind of scared me.

“Next, we have Miss Canimeow the fortune-teller and self-proclaimed moon spirit.”

Then came Canimeow, hunched over and poised to escape at any moment.

“Um, just because I’m the moon spirit doesn’t mean I know anything about aliens, okay? This is all a mistake, okay? Please don’t be disappointed by me, okay?”

She was super apologetic...

“And finally, we have one who calls herself Godly Godness.”

I almost fell out of my chair when I heard the announcement. They even got a goddess to come in!

“Please come to me after the symposium if you would like a virtue stamp card~”

She was easygoing, as always, and waved at the audience.

In a way, you could say that this was a quite an impressive panel, considering none of them were exactly “normal.” I doubted anyone in the audience knew how amazing this all was.

“So this may be a bit of a naive question coming from your moderator, but is there intelligent life on other planets? What do you think, as a goddess?”

It was a naive question, but I felt like it was getting very close to the meat of the matter. I mean, she was posing it to the divine.

“Oh~ Who knows? But I can say there are other worlds out there besides this.

I would not be surprised if there was something out there on the moon or something~ It isn't as though I made them, though, so I can't say for sure."

Was that something she could say so lightly?!

"Which means that one of your tenets is that there *is* something out there."

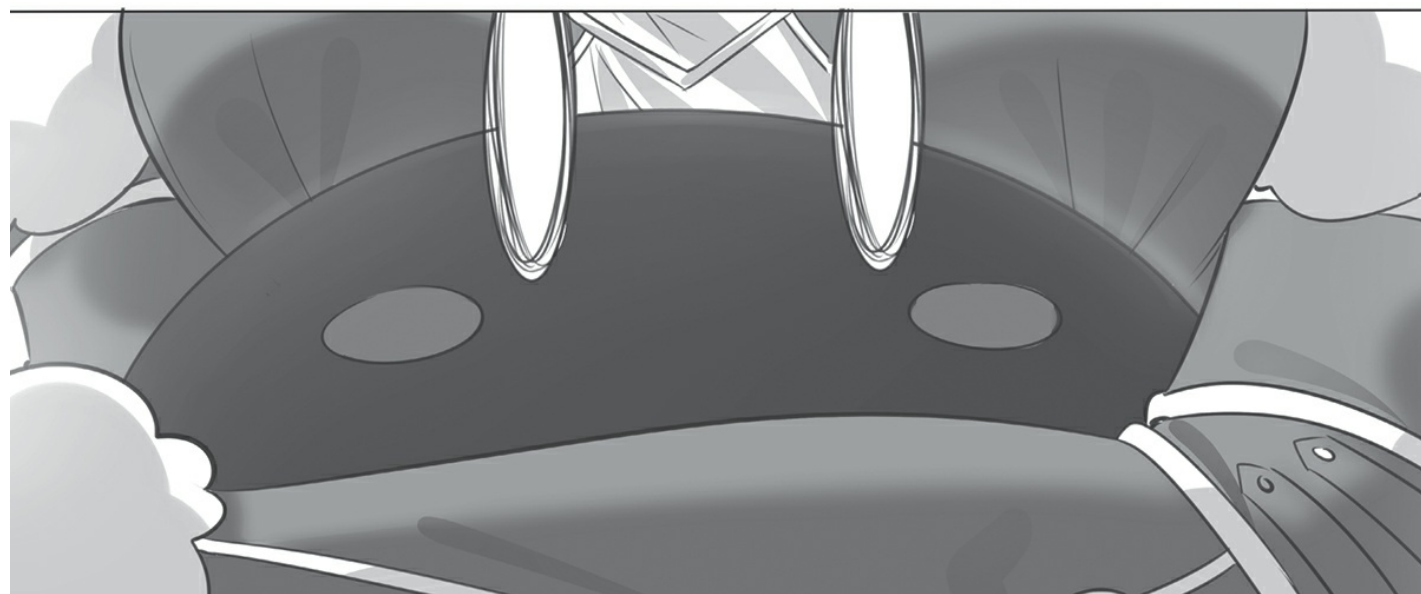
"That there *might* be, to be specific. And whether they exist tells us nothing about whether they are actually here visiting us~"

That was true. Canimeow had wanted to leave the planet and go to the moon, but she couldn't. Leaving the planet was basically impossible right now, as far as we knew.

So it was bordering on impossible for intelligent life to visit this planet from space.

But that was the whole theme of this symposium. It was time to listen.

"First, we will have Shalsha's presentation: 'Special Messages from the Beyond: How Do We Answer?' The presenter has thirty minutes."



Special Messages from the Beyond

How Do We Answer?

Introduction

1. Examining this most recent UFC
2. Commonalities with past eyewitness testimony
3. Differences from past testimonies & peculiarities

Conclusion

Shalsha slowly came to stand at the podium.

Then a silent image with writing on it displayed behind her at the back of the stage.

It was like a PowerPoint!

“Oh, a quick comment from your moderator. These moving images use magic that has been recently developed by the demons. It is quite useful!”

It was a lot more like a symposium than I was expecting...

“Now, if everyone would kindly look at your handouts.”

Shalsha started speaking. Our seats already had thick stacks of handouts from all the speakers. If I'd still been in college, then I definitely would've fallen asleep...

When the thought crossed my mind, I spotted Flatorte sleeping already.

"Zzz... Boar and venison and intestine all together... Weird-tasting meat..."

She was having some kind of strange dream. Well, I guess this wasn't very interesting to her.

I bet if a friendly alien showed up, Flatorte would immediately ask for a spar, and then we'd find ourselves in an interplanetary war...

Right, time to listen to Shalsha.

Shalsha delivered her arguments deliberately and carefully; her conscientious personality shone through.

"—In conclusion, the creature we saw recently did not move like any bird or dragon—or indeed any other species with powers of flight. It is also difficult to think that any creature we know could possibly move in such a manner. That said, it is hard to believe that an entirely new kind of organism has come to live here."

Shalsha was insisting it was *some* kind of being from another planet.

But the biggest difference between here and arguments about UFOs I heard about in my past life was that these are unidentified flying *creatures*. They didn't have to just be *objects*.

The slide behind her changed.

"Therefore, we can imagine the extraplanetary beings would look like this."

It was a picture of a circular UFO, the kind that might carry some aliens inside it...

...With a smiley face on it!

"I believe this kind of creature came to pay us a visit. Its mode of life is unknown, but it is thought that it lives a life completely different from ours."

Hmm... Sure, just because something was supposed to have high intelligence,

that didn't mean it was going to take on a human form... That was a bias we had from assuming our bodies were the standard.

But would a creature with such a weird shape be intelligent...?

"This concludes my presentation. Thank you for listening." Shalsha briefly bowed and returned to her seat.

While I wasn't sure if any of it was true, it was still a very interesting topic.

Oh yeah—Laika was sitting next to me, so I decided to ask.

"Hey, have you ever come across any weird flying objects before, Laika?"

Dragons spent a lot of time in the sky, so they probably spotted UFCs once in a while.

"No... I have never encountered such an odd creature... I would surely remember if I had..."

"Then you haven't, either, huh."

I kind of got the feeling that these mysterious creatures didn't actually exist.

But it was plausible that they would be nearly impossible to find if they wanted to stay hidden. No one approached a dragon without good reason.

"All right. Next, we will be listening to Falfa. We will be taking all questions after the talk, okay? Her report is titled 'UFCs Are Unique Clouds Formed in the Atmosphere.'"

There came an excited *ooh* from some members of the audience.

The idea of "unique clouds" was already making waves.

Her nose in the air, Falfa came to stand at the podium.

"Hello, I am Falfa! Falfa was so surprised to see the mysterious flying object! I knew what we had spotted was more interesting than a bird. But it is not logical to assert that it is an extraterrestrial creature right away. After collecting and testing various bits of scientific data, Falfa came to the conclusion that it was a cloud!"

It felt like I was seeing my own daughter in her hour of triumph.

Falfa had all kinds of data on her PowerPoint.

But Falfa was more of the science type, so hers had a lot more mathematical formulas than Shalsha's did. It was too complicated for me to understand...

Flatorte had fallen out of her seat, fast asleep. A bit rude to the presenters, but at least they're family...

"Falfa's presentation is now finished!"

There came the applause. I clapped, too.

I could hear even some of the pro-alien people saying, "I hate to say it, but that was a good presentation!" She did so well even people on the opposing side admired her work.

I shouldn't be picking out who was doing better between my twin daughters, but Falfa's presentation had gone over much better in this battle—I think.

"Now we will start our question and answer session. If anyone in the audience has questions, please raise your hand."

Vania was old hat at emceeing...for some reason.

The arguments themselves were animated, but the information was too specialized for me to follow. This was getting a little tedious, honestly.

All I understood was that neither camp had any intention of adjusting their own theory.

It's clear that a unique life-form has come to us!

No! She proved that it was a cloud!

And so on and so forth.

"Lady Azusa, this will go in circles forever... Neither side will step down because none of them will accept that they are wrong," Laika said. Wisdom from a neutral party.

"Yeah. All of them have done their research, so I don't think any of them will accept defeat easily."

"That's all the time we have for now," Vania said to wrap things up, "so it's time for a break! In the latter half, we will hear what our panelists have to say."

Great, I'm glad she stopped things before they got too unfriendl—

“There are no bathrooms in this area, so please feel free to use the ones in the house in the highlands.”

“Hey, Vania! You should at least ask me beforehand!”

This wasn't just a few friends coming over to visit!

Meanwhile, one member of the family had seen an opportunity and taken it.

“Edible UFCs! Delicious edible UFCs! Take some home to family and friends!”

Halkara was selling sweets!

She had a tray hung from her neck and was walking down the aisles.

“You never miss an opportunity for business, do you?! You sure you won't go in the red making a new product just for this event?”

“It's not a new product. We simply changed up the packaging a bit, that's all.”

Wondering what she meant, I looked at these “edible UFCs.”

They looked exactly like my own invention.

“These are just edible slimes without the faces!”

“Madam Teacher! Please don't speak so loudly! I decided to give it a go because they looked exactly like UFCs.”

I doubted her for a bit, but they sold relatively well, either because they were perfect souvenirs or because topical merch got people to open their wallets more easily.

Break time was over, and the second half of the symposium started.

“Now then, it is time for us to hear what our four panelists have to say. First, we have Miss Muum Muum, self-proclaimed queen of an ancient civilization. Please, take it away.”

“Right, name's Muum Muum of the Thursa Thursa Kin'dom. Know a lot 'bout ancient stuff, I do. Ask me anyfin'.”

Of all the regular people who were here, I doubted any of them believed she

was actually the queen of the Thursa Thursa Kingdom. She sure was up-front about it...

“Ah, well, as the moderator today, I must ask you what everyone’s thinking, Miss Muum Muum. Were there any unidentified flying creatures back in your era?”

“Nah. We studied all flyin’ fings extensively. Dunna, wha’eva, innit.”

“Then what do you think about the hypothesis that it was only a cloud moving erratically?”

“Didn’t get to see it meself, but that unidentified flyin’ wotsit moved horizontally, yeah? Do clouds move in straight lines like that? Sounds like it’d gone against the direction of the wind, so can’t be sure. Dunna, wha’eva, innit.”

Her “I don’t know, whatever” tag at the end was damaging the credibility of her statements.

“I see. Shall we end this here, then, Miss Muum Muum?”

“Yeah, go on, then. Dunna, wha’eva, innit.”

Just say yes!!

“Our next panelist is Goodly Godly Godness, self-proclaimed deity. From a divine perspective, what do you think of UFCs?”

“Let’s see~ I believe that life is more interesting with more unknowns.”

She was dodging the question with fluffy platitudes. Even if she knew the truth about aliens and UFCs, then she probably couldn’t just make that known to everyone else from her position.

“Do you have anything else to add?”

“Believers will be saved!” Goodly Godly Godness gave her evasive answer with a wink.

“Hmm, we got two completely useless opinions in a row.”

On the other hand, Vania was being a little too honest.

“Our third is Miss Canimeow, who claims to be the moon spirit. She runs a fortune-telling house that is often praised for its accuracy. Can we have some

comments from the moon spirit regarding aliens?”

All eyes fell on Canimeow.

“...I—I wish we had the technology to go to other planets!” she shouted. “I’m the moon spirit—so I would love to visit the moon myself! But I can’t! It’s impossible! If there’s someone here from another planet, then I want a ride!”

“So do you affirm the existence of aliens?”

“I hope they do exist! And they don’t have to be aliens. I just want *someone* out there who has the technology to travel the cosmos!”

This was all personal!

I could hear some people in the audience saying, “All these panelists sure are sticking to their themes, huh?”

“This symposium was put together really quickly, so I suppose they had to fill the time with character actors.”

Sorry, they aren’t character actors. That was a real queen and a real spirit and a real goddess...

They probably picked out the wrong people. But it’d only been ten days since they saw the UFC buzzing around, so it was plausible that they could only find people they knew.

“All right, and our last panelist is the Smart Slime, also known as Smarsly. I doubt any slime, no matter how smart, would know anything about aliens, but do you have anything to say?”

Vania was getting a bit irresponsible about this.

“I am Beelzebub, agricultural minister. Smarsly cannot speak, so I shall speak for it. First, change the background to the appropriate image.”

The slide changed to an image of a keyboard.

Smarsly sat on the table, then hopped over to the keyboard.

Oh, right—it spoke the same way before.

Smarsly slammed itself into the letters.

That was how it made words—it couldn't speak, after all.

"I shall interpret. Hello—I—am—Smart—Slime—Those—were—good—presentations. Those panelists were tedious, though."

That last part was Beelzebub's personal opinion.

Smarsly continued to slam itself into the letters.

"I—am—fascinated—by—people—from—other—planets—But—I—gleaned—something—from—the—UFC's—movements. Oh-ho, it seems Smarsly knows something."

A murmur rippled throughout the audience.

Were we going to make a new discovery?

Shalsha sat frozen, and Falfa had both hands to her mouth.

Smarsly continued to throw itself against the image to spell words.

I was holding my breath now, staring intently at what it was spelling out. The whole audience was concentrating on its every slightest move.

"If—I—may—make—a—guess—it—is—in—fact—"

What was it?!

No one was speaking. The squishes and slaps of Smarsly bouncing were oddly loud.

"—a—flying—slime. It seems our mysterious flying creature was a flying slime."

Who was expecting a *slime*?!

"That's weird, Miss Beelzebub! Shalsha has never heard of flying slimes!" Shalsha stood up and argued.

I got why she wanted to say that. I'd never seen a slime in the air, either. Wasn't jumping how they got around?

Some people in the audience were even shouting, "Slimes don't fly!"

But Smarsly paid no mind to that reaction and continued to do its slam typing. It was probably the most levelheaded...thing out here.

“I—see—you—are—not—satisfied—I—understand—And—so—I—have—brought—proof. Ah, I brought along this slime after speaking with Smarsly earlier.”

Beelzebub then pulled out a single slime from her bag—but it looked perfectly normal to me.

It wasn’t an ink-black color like Smarsly was.

“Go on, then. Move about as you like.”

She threw the slime into the air—and as a top-ranking demon, that meant she threw it well over a couple stories high. *Good thing that wasn’t a baby.*

Common sense dictated that gravity should eventually bring it back down, but—it was hovering!

“Aaaaah!” “Something’s happening!” “Is this magic?!”

Chaos rippled throughout the symposium. The slime hung perfectly still in midair.

And then—

It started darting from side to side. *Zzoom, zzoom!*

Like it was gliding along a floor none of us could see!

“That’s what Falfa saw! That’s how it was moving!”

Falfa stood from her seat. She couldn’t keep herself sitting still.



*

“That is exactly...what Shalsha saw...”

Shalsha’s face was going pale.

While this was all going on, Smarsly was slamming itself against the image. It was probably used to all this... It didn’t make any facial expressions or complaints, but I knew it was a hard worker.

“A—rare—subset—of—slimes—can—fly—They—are—not—generally—known—so—are—mistaken—as—new—species. So a flying slime seen from afar is often mistaken for an unidentified flying creature. There are not many of them, so I suppose they would be difficult to find.”

Beelzebub flew upward and caught the slime again.

“We found this one in the demon lands. I suppose a similarly spontaneous mutant has appeared in the area.”

Oh yeah—I guess the obvious shape of a UFO and slimes were somewhat similar. If I saw one of those from afar, I might mistake it for a UFO. It certainly wasn’t a bird or a dragon anyway.

Shalsha meekly raised her hand.

“Shalsha would like to concede that the UFC I saw was indeed a flying slime... I withdraw my argument.”

Then Falfa stood up.

“Falfa will also rescind her theory that it was a cloud anomaly...”

Both of them seemed a little disappointed, but I thought they both had done an outstanding job.

“You’re amazing, Falfa and Shalsha!” I clapped.

The speeches were basically all over, so I was going to speak freely now.

“You need courage to acknowledge that you were wrong! It’s so much more difficult than arguing your own point. And you both have done that. Outstanding, both of you!”

Laika and Halkara would understand that. They were applauding, too.

And then the applause eventually spread throughout the audience.

“And it leaves the possibility that aliens are involved with UFCs—and that some UFCs are clouds,” added Beelzebub. “All this does is prove that the recently sighted UFC was a slime. Be proud of what you do, girls. Very well done!”

“Hey, Beelzebub, don’t take the best parts away from me!”

“I am a panelist, so I may do as I please! Raise your hand if you have something to say!”

Dammit... I knew she would use her position as speaker to claim parenthood of my girls...



And so the UFC symposium came to an end.

The UFC experts, who had come all this way for this event, started back to their lodgings. It seemed like a good number of them would be staying in Flatta inns, so hopefully it would boost the economy a bit.

We broke down the chairs and the set and efficiently put them away on Vania, who was in her leviathan form.

As the girls’ mother, I had to keep an eye on them—but there hadn’t been any need for it.

Falfa and Shalsha were facing each other.

“Sis, Shalsha was wrong to say it was an alien without sufficient evidence. I won’t do it again...”

“Falfa was completely in the wrong, too, so we’re even. Science is about finding the truth, not about winners and losers—but we ended up competing anyway.”

They both reached out to one another and shook hands. Good; they’d made up.

They say that rain only hardens the ground—a small fight like this would only

strengthen the love they had for each other.

That was when Halkara gleefully approached me. “Madam Teacher, Madam Teacher! I was right!”

“What? Right? You hadn’t made any arguments— Oh.”

My eyes dropped to the packaging she was holding, and that’s when it hit me.

It said: EDIBLE UFCs! WHETHER YOU BELIEVE IN ALIENS OR NOT, YOU WILL ENJOY THIS TREAT!

“I was right to change the packaging and sell them as edible UFCs!”

When it comes to this stuff, it’s always the one who makes a joke who gets it right in the end.

Of course, it wouldn’t get scientific recognition without strict study, but reality did sometimes coincide with a random spark of inspiration.

“And I am surprised to hear about flying slimes... There is more to them than meets the eye!”

That was when I realized something.

“Maybe there are even more slimes out there that have even rarer qualities...”

There were so many slimes all across the world.

Considering how many there were, it was possible that something miraculously unlikely might happen.

“Maybe I should keep an eye out when I go out to kill slimes.”

Maybe there was one kind of slime out there that was super valuable.

Meanwhile, the slime hopped over toward me.

“Hard to kill you at a time like this... But it’s also my thing...”

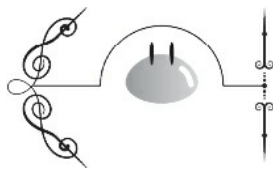
Falfa came rushing toward me. “It’s an evil slime! Kill it!” With a single punch, the slime became a magic stone.

She then looked up at me curiously. “Mommy, it’s okay to kill the evil ones. The other slimes will be upset if you leave it be.”

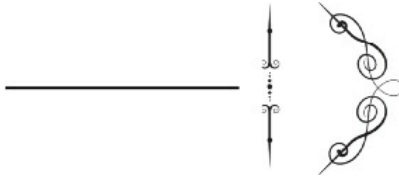
“I still can’t tell them apart!”

They were apparently darker in color, but I could hardly tell the difference.

If Falfa, the slime spirit, was going to dispatch them, then maybe I should take this as permission to keep killing slimes...



WE TRIED TO VISIT THE WORLD'S THIRD-MOST-INACCESSIBLE SAGE



Even after the UFC symposium came to a close, Beelzebub remained in the house in the highlands and had dinner.

Incidentally, Muu and Rosalie were chatting in another room. Goodly Godly Godness was listening to Canimeow vent in an establishment somewhere in Nascúte.

“Falfa and Shalsha should indeed study at a university. They should apply to Vanzeld.”

“Don’t make them go to a demon university just so you can have them lodge at your place.”

“Hmph. I said nothing of the sort, Azusa. I was just about to bring that up.”

So that was her intention anyway.

Well, I understood the feeling of wanting to shower Falfa and Shalsha in praise after all their hard work; I’d allow that, but I wouldn’t let her take them away to the demon lands.

There was no need to move them from an invigorating environment perfect for raising children into a crowded city. And now that I was thinking about it, I wondered if my life would have been any different had I been raised in an unpolluted highland. *Well, not much use thinking about it now...*

“Are you all done? Then I’ll bring the sweets out.” I slowly stood from my seat at the table.

“You aren’t fooling anyone.”

Beelzebub, you didn’t need to point that out.

I placed some edible slimes in front of Falfa and Shalsha, although they were bigger than the normal portions.

“Wow! Falfa didn’t know they could get so big!”

“This must be four times bigger than normal... This could satisfy any big eater...”

They were both shocked. *Surprise, success!*

“Heh-heh. I got the inspiration from Halkara’s edible UFCs. There’s enough for everyone, okay?”

“Lady Azusa, I know this is a bit brazen of me, but...could I have five if there are enough?”

“I, Flatorte, want five, too.”

But they were still too small to fill the hungry dragons...

“I’ll manage extras somehow, so sit tight, okay? We’ll have one each for now.”

For a second, I thought I saw an ink-black edible slime—but no, that was just Smarsly. It was sitting on the corner of the table.

Right—Beelzebub had brought it along, so it was still around.

“Smarsly... We didn’t think about you bringing these out. Sorry if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Smarsly slowly turned its body side to side. That probably meant no.

“Ah yes. I believe Smarsly has something to tell you. Give it a quick look, please.”

Beelzebub spoke up and stuck a cloth to the wall—it had squares with letters lined up in a grid. I guess that was the simplified keyboard for it. Like a laptop...

“I shall explain. I—invited—by—third—sage—Outofreach—Island—take—me... Mm-hmm, ah, I will explain later, so, Azusa? Get those edible slimes

ready.”

Beelzebub was being rather blasé about this, but I wasn’t exactly being the most professional, either. I brought out the edible slimes.

Smarsly seemed somewhat tired after slamming itself against the wall so many times... The poor thing seemed a bit limper than it had when it arrived at the symposium.

“Hey, are you okay? I can cast a recovery spell on you.”

Smarsly then slammed against the wall again. “It is trying to write out *Yes, please.*”

“I’m trying to make it better, but it’s only making itself more tired!”

I cast the recovery spell, and Smarsly perked right up. Good, one less thing to worry about.

“So, Beelzebub, what did it want to say, then? I kind of put it together, though. The world’s third-greatest sage invited it over, and it wants us to take it to where the sage is, in Outofreach Island?”

“You said it all. That is correct!”

Smarsly leaped up and sat on Beelzebub’s lap. Like her pet.

“I shall tell you the details, however. From what I heard previously from Smarsly, there are reportedly three great sages throughout the world. One is Smarsly, and one of the other two has invited it to visit.”

“I had no idea it was such a great person...” Laika placed a hand to her mouth in shock. I was surprised, too.

“Hey, Shalsha, do you know of the three great sages?”

Shalsha nodded. “The three great sages Shalsha knows of are Sanali in the village of Ansel, Hins the Old, and the great Kinnins.”

“Hmm, I don’t know any of them... Wait, Smarsly wasn’t one of them!”

Now it was Falfa’s turn to raise her hand. “The three great sages Falfa knows are Atern the Fast Reader, Coboorn the Peruser, and Toltorn the Sleep Learner.”

“All these people have epithets. And Smarsly still isn’t one of them!”

Y'know how sometimes people know they'll never be the best at anything, so they come up with a random category to be a "top three" of? Is that what this was?

"And Falfa knows there are many different ways to choose the top three sages, so it's not defined. Some people still count sages that others don't, so there are over three hundred of them."

"So...it's not the top three anymore..."

If we narrowed it down to the top sage in the world, a bunch of people might try to claim the title for themselves, but broadening the range to three would make it harder for those people to insist they belonged.

Then Smarsly started slamming against the keyboard on the wall again.

"Oh, what's this? Additionally—I—am—one—of—the—three—most—difficult—sages—to—meet—I—am—not—easy—to—find. That is what it said."

The three most difficult sages to meet!

That was an extremely specific category.

"Smarsly is very difficult to see, if I recall correctly. First one must go to the demon castle, then find the underground entrance...", Laika mused.

Smarsly was basically like an Easter egg.

"Allow me to continue. Outofreach Island, similarly, is one of the three most difficult islands to visit. The currents in that area are most unique, and no ship can get close to it. Smarsly received contact from a sage living there."

Ah yes, I knew that currents could make navigating to certain islands very difficult.

"I, the great Flatorte, can get there from the sky!"

"There is a barrier surrounding the island, so one cannot enter from the sky. A small clan of pirates once used the place as their base, you see."

It sounded mega fishy to me, but Beelzebub's explanation did make sense.

Pirates knew the tides and currents well, so it made sense to pick a place their enemies couldn't get nearby.

“So one of the three most difficult sages to meet lives on Outofreach Island, and Smarsly wants us to take it there?”

Smarsly rammed the YES symbol on its keyboard. I needed to give it more yes-and-no questions if I could... I felt bad making it do all that slamming.

“Indeed. But as I told you before, you cannot fly there on a dragon. The only way is on a boat.”

“A voyage, huh?” I commented. “Now that you mention it, I don’t think I’ve ever been on a boat.”

Nanterre Province was landlocked, so that was a given. I’ve been to seaside towns before, but our usual method of transport was dragon.

“I’m really interested, and I want to lend a hand since Smarsly helped us once, but...if the currents are as bad as you say, then it’s dangerous. Worst case, we could get in a wreck or capsize. I don’t really want to bring the entire family into that.”

Falfa and Shalsha looked disappointed, but this was no sightseeing cruise. They needed to think of their safety first.

“The ship will most definitely capsize if I’m on it, so I’ll stay home!” Halkara declared.

“Well, we can’t say anything for certain, but I applaud you for distancing yourself from any danger!”

I would be terrified for her if she got on the ship.

Even if we didn’t capsize, she’d probably throw up at some point on the voyage. If not from seasickness, then definitely from alcohol.

“My, this is turning out to be a strange trip. We cannot bring too many people. I shall be Smarsly’s caretaker; things will work out if we bring you along, Azusa.”

“You decided I was coming along without telling me...”

It felt like Smarsly was looking at me. It wanted me here, didn’t it...?

“Fine, fine! I get it; I’m going! Just let me gather some people who know the

ocean better than I do, okay?”

“Aye, I do not mind. I shall ready the boat. Demons do not know much about them, so I will do a bit of research.”

And so, it was settled—I was sailing to Outofreach Island.

But a question suddenly came to me.

“By the way, how did the sage from Outofreach Island contact you?”

Had they communicated via magic?

“A bottle containing this letter drifted to shore.”

Dear Smart Slime, ♥



HEYYY—I'm one of the
three most-difficult-to-meet sages
in the world, and i live on
Outofreach Island!

i'd love to meet you!



i look, like, twenty-five

years old or smth! ~☆

The seagulls say i look SUPER cute!!!

(*'' ω ''*)

See Ya!



“How the heck is this person a sage?!”

My desire to go had dropped by about 40 percent.

“And the date on the back says it’s from over ten years ago...”

“Aye. It has been all over, finally reaching Smarsly. A miracle, essentially.”

“Uh, this isn’t going to turn out to be a prank or something, is it...?”

Maybe it was a joke and learning the truth would only hurt Smarsly.

“This paper is made from plants native to the region around Outofreach Island, though. No one would go through that much trouble for a joke. And any prankster would attempt to write in a more sagely manner. This dunderheaded writing style only makes this more credible,” Beelzebub explained.

“You’re right!”

To be honest, I wasn’t so interested in meeting someone who genuinely wrote like this, but that was ultimately Smarsly’s decision.

I’d made a living off slimes for a long time, and now I was going to travel for one.



I hopped on Laika and came to the port town of Hiralinar, where I was meeting Beelzebub and the others.

Laika herself wasn’t coming along for the rest of the trip this time. “The southern weather is so nice out here.” She seemed ready for a resort vacation; that’s how warm it was.

“It is. I bet a place that feels this wonderful has few suicides!” Rosalie commented, shattering any resort vibes immediately.

“Oh, but there’s a murdered ghost on the street over there. I see, those sailors had an argument over love. One of them forgot himself here on the island and had an affair.”

“I didn’t really need to hear any of that, Rosalie...”

I had Rosalie come along this time because I thought she’d be a hearty companion to have on a seafaring trip. She was the only one from the family to come along. She wasn’t at any risk of dying anyway.

“I’ve got you, Big Sis! If I find any ghosts who died in wrecks, then I’ll be sure to listen to what they have to say!”

That’s right—I figured there would be lots of ghost sailors about, so I decided to have Rosalie act as our go-between.

Also, if we ended up finding the spirits of any pirates who made their base at Outofreach Island, then we could ask them for directions.

“I wonder if the others are going to show up soon.”

“Oh, Lady Azusa, isn’t that Miss Curalina? The jellyfish spirit?” Laika was pointing.

I followed her finger to see Curalina, lying faceup on the wharf. I had invited her this time, too.

“What are you doing, Curalina?”

“Fine art. Jellyfi-fi-fi-fi-fi-fine art.”

Was she making fun of artists?

“Lying down helps me envision death and inspire my creativity. Jellyfish-fish-fish...”

“All right. Do as you like, then. But please don’t deliberately try to sink the ship for the sake of your art...”

I invited Curalina because she herself lived on an island and because she was the spirit for a marine animal.

And she’s apparently lived for a really long time, so there was a chance she knew a lot about Outofreach Island. If not, well...we’d get to that later.

As I sat absentmindedly with Curalina, Beelzebub flapped in, carrying Smarsly.

“Ah, you are all here. I have the boat ready.”

“Did you find a good one?”

“Indeed, a perfect choice. I hired one most suitable for our journey today.”

Beelzebub gave me a thumbs-up, so I decided to trust her.

And then, when we went to where the ship was anchored...

We found a ship shrouded in black mist, its mast broken and full of holes...

“It’s a ghost ship!”

“I’m surprised you could tell, Big Sis. That is indeed a ghost ship. It’s swarming with spirits!”

I didn't need to know that!

"Ghost ships will not sink after running aground. A spectacular idea, no? This is the *Specter No. 7*, by the way."

I was really glad I didn't bring along the rest of the family for sightseeing...

"Lady Azusa, Miss Rosalie, I give you my best wishes... I cannot handle this, so I am relieved I am not coming with you..." Laika smiled with a pale face. I really had picked the right people...

"Yeah, I'll try to bring back some gifts for you if I can..." I stepped onto the ghost ship, wondering if I would be okay.

Sailors working on the boat were rushing around, except—

"Talk about a skeleton crew..."

And I mean that literally—they were skeletons, walking around and wearing uniforms. This was a genuine ghost ship, it seemed.

"Wow, Big Sis! They're so animated!"

"Oh god, don't call them that... Oh, what do you think, Curalina? I want your honest opinion."

Inviting someone along only to put them on a ghost ship was kind of a terrible thing to do, so I wouldn't be surprised if she was upset. I'd be furious. Even without the skeletons, this whole ship was in awful shape.

"It's so...good..."

A broad smile crossed her face. I'm not sure I'd ever seen her make that expression—or any expression at all, in fact.

"This place feels like the embodiment of negative emotion... I have such a strong urge to create right now that I can hardly contain it... I need to paint..."

She was fine!

Guess I hit a home run with party selection this time around.

"Well, now that we're here, we may as well say hello to the captain."

We all followed Beelzebub. She showed no signs of fear toward anything on

the ghost ship, probably because she was a demon.

“I bet the captain’s a skeleton.”

“No, absolutely not. Skeletons cannot get boat licenses.”

“It’s a legal problem?!”

“Yes, but ’tis very important. The human lands do not allow skeletons to get boat licenses. Our captain will be someone else.”

Maybe it was discrimination against skeletons, but I wouldn’t be so keen on taking a boat if I saw a skeleton driving it...

“So, Sis Beelzebub, does that mean this ship is fully licensed under the human kingdom?” Rosalie asked.

“Of course. If not, then it would be illegal simply to dock here. Why would we cause trouble among the humans over such a thing?”

I’d never heard of a law-abiding ghost ship...

It felt contradictory, like a gang that obeyed traffic laws to the letter.

As we chatted, we came to stand before the captain’s office.

Beelzebub knocked. “Captain? We are all here, so we came to say hello.”

“...All riiight, very weeell.” That was quite a drawl.

For a brief moment, I thought the one who emerged from the room was a human woman with brightly colored hair, but I could immediately tell I was wrong.

Her lower half was that of a fish. She was a mermaid.

“Hellooo, everyooone, I’m your caaaptaaain, Imremico. I turn fooour hundred and twenty-threeeee this year. I will drive saaafely to your destinaaation.”

The merpeople in this world were long-lived, too. It made me think of the myth of Yao Bikuni in Japan, too—although, that was more about a girl eating mermaid meat and then living to eight hundred years old herself... But I guess if that power was in their flesh, then of course the merpeople would live long, too.

We all introduced ourselves. Well, when you really thought about it, we had a ghost, a spirit, and even a Smart Slime with us, which made our party kind of unique. Maybe a mermaid captain was the perfect thing for us.

“Captain Imremico has been in charge of *Specter No. 7* for many years.”

“Ah, I muuust mention, I changed the name because of bad luck; now we aaare the *SS Heavenbound*.”

That also kinda sounded like we were going to capsize and die. That had to be bad luck, too.

“Anyway, what made you want to be the captain of a ghost ship?” Might as well ask.

There was a brief pause.

The captain had a very laid-back kinda vibe, so it took a bit of time for her to start talking.

“I am a meeermaid, so even if we capsiiize, I wouldn’t diiie.”

“That just means the passengers are at risk of dying. I wish you hadn’t told me that...”

Were we going to be okay on this ship? Beelzebub had said that a ghost ship wouldn’t sink, but could I trust her?

“Aaand I’m a bit slooow, so I don’t really fit iin with the fast-paced liiifestyle of seaaaafolk. I am peeerfectly content with my skeeeleton crew.”

“Oh, I can definitely tell.”

People who worked out on the sea would probably hate someone this easygoing. Even though that was just a question of individual sensibilities, I didn’t think she was suited at all for this career.

“Nooow then, since you’re all heeere, I have something veeery important to tell you, so pleeease listen.”

What was it? Maybe ghost ships really did have their own problems...

Captain Imremico then handed us a little booklet.

How to Safely Ride This Ship Read Before Departure!

Table of Contents

Page 2. In Case of Capsizing:
Lifeboat Location & Use

Page 4. In Case of Flooding:
Emergency Exits

Page 6. The Dangers of Leaning
Out Over the Deck

Page 7. Breaking the Skeletons'
Bones Is a Danger to Us All

Page 8. Why Live Flames Are
Prohibited

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Was it a waiver? Was she telling us she didn't care if we died?

It was like a real boat!

"I'm a ghost; do I have to read this?" Rosalie asked.

“Ohhh, I am ooobligated to run through all this with my passengers, so I would appreciate it if you liiistened.”

After that, we sat in chairs and listened to Captain Imremico’s leisurely lecture; Curalina and Beelzebub fell asleep.

They really needed to listen, but I could understand why they got sleepy.

“That’s aaall. I’m dooone.”

It was finally over...

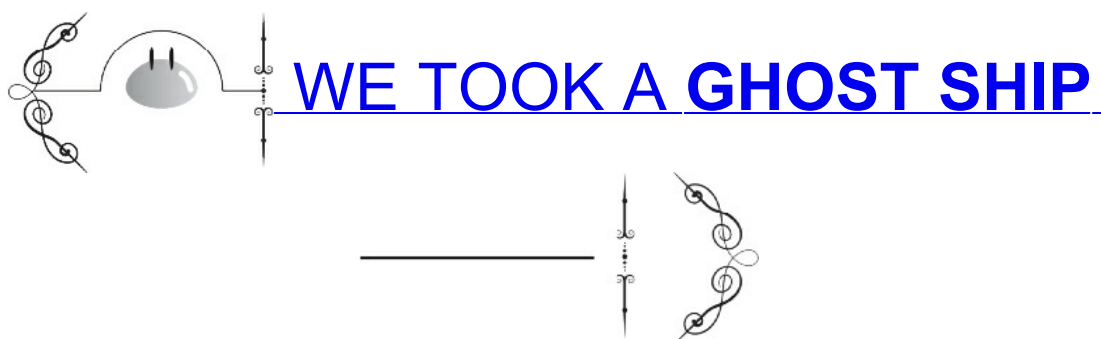
“And nooow, let me tell you about the shooops...”

“This ghost ship has shops?!”

“It is a looong journey, so we sell driiinks, sweets, craaab, and other things behind here. But we charge ship prices, so they are mooore expeeensive than on land.”

It was feeling less and less like a dangerous journey by sea that I needed to mentally steel myself for.

But this sure was one heck of a first boat journey...



The ghost ship finally started moving and slowly drifted away from the shore.

"Hey, Beelzebub? How is this ship moving?"

All the sails had holes in them, so I didn't think they were catching much wind.

"I am not certain of the details myself, but I have heard that it is propelled by the emotions of evil spirits. It is the captain who controls them."

"You said it like it was no big deal, but that's insane!"

"And a few of the skeletons seem to be rowing with oars. As dark as it may be, this is still the best way for us to reach Outofreach Island. 'Twill be a long journey."

"Right—I never asked you how long the journey will actually take. How many days is it?"

There weren't any regular ships out there, so I hadn't gotten any word on that front.

"We should be overnighing for two days on this ship one way."

"That's super long! We're staying the night?!"

"'Tis all right. There are private rooms and showers. Sleep when you have the time. I shall wake you when it is time to eat."

There was no turning back now, so I may as well enjoy the cruise.

"I guess I'll check out the view on the deck."

I went up the stairs to the deck.

It sucked. There was so much fog I could barely see a few feet in front of me.

“Oh, right! It’s only dark around the ship!”

Well, what did I expect from a ghost ship? So much for taking in the view...

I sensed someone approaching.

There was Smarsly, in the arms of a skeleton.

The other skeletons on the deck spread out a paper that looked like a keyboard. Fortunately, it was compatible with the human language I knew.

Smarsly hopped around across it.

“What’s up? Life—is—like—a—boat—without—rudders—or—oars—Where—are—we—headed—It—is—a—mystery.”

This was one of the three most difficult sages to meet in the world, after all. Maybe I should’ve expected the theatrics.

“I know what you mean. Only a small portion of people make real plans for the future, but most people can manage without drowning, even with half-hearted plans. I guess life is like a boat, huh?”

Smarsly started hopping around on the keyboard paper again.

To summarize: It had lived underground for a long time, so it was shocked to see just how much information there was in the outside world. Since then, it had made many discoveries.

“Yeah. I’ve been to way more places than you, but I can only say I know about a very small portion of the world. It’s so big out there that you can never get bored.”

At some point, I’d sat down on the deck for a proper conversation with Smarsly.

The view outside still sucked, but this wasn’t so bad. Constant sun would get boring, too.

Smarsly taught me about geography.

“Huh, so this sea is well-known for how rough it is. Maybe a ghost ship was the right choice, after all.”

“It iis. A ship that relies on the wiiind is much too daaangerous.”

“I get that, which means we were really particular about planning—wait, are you allowed to be out and about, Captain?!”

The next thing I knew, Imremico was standing next to me.

Merpeople could apparently stand and move around on their fish tails.

“The skeletons are keeping an eye on thiiings, but this ship can baaasically drive itself.”

Maybe ghost ships were actually super high-tech.

“I’ll do my beeest as caaaptain once we get closer to Outofreach liisland, but until theeen, I’ve got nothing to dooo. Oh, crab roll?”

The captain showed me a bread roll in the shape of a crab.

“Sure... Thanks.”

Despite the gimmicky shape, it tasted just like a regular bread roll.

“So slooow, right?”

I found it hard to suss out whether I should reply, “Yes, you are!” But maybe the captain herself knew that. A yes to a question like that was asking for trouble...

“This ship is so gentle and relaaaxing.”

Oh, she was talking about the ship...

“Time chaaanges on the sea. It’s sooo different compared to life on laaand or in the merpeople villages; sooo slow. I reeeally like this.”

I nodded. I honestly didn’t think I’d gotten to experience anything this slow and relaxing before.

“It is niice just to be present with nooo thoughts.”

“Yeah. They say that, even if you’re studying hard, you do need to space out for a little while so your knowledge will stick. I think it’s really important to have moments like those.”

Maybe just hanging out on the waves like this would be good for me once in a

while.

And as we relaxed—

The captain fell asleep...

“Captain! You probably shouldn’t be asleep, right? Should you?!”

I was scared, so I woke her up just in case.

“Oh, whoooops... Sooorry...”

She apparently did end up falling asleep when she wasn’t supposed to. I wished she would be a little more responsible.

Afterward, I decided to explore the ship.

Rosalie was chatting with the skeletons the whole time.

She seemed to be having a lot of fun, so I thought I’d done right to bring her along.

Curalina sat on the opposite end of the deck, quietly painting.

We probably wouldn’t need her help as the jellyfish spirit this time around, but I also felt like I’d made the right choice inviting her, too.

Beelzebub was sitting down, checking some documents...

“What you’re doing is almost too boring, Beelzebub... You’re like some bureaucrat...”

“Silence, you! Why must you open your mouth and comment whilst I do my work? And I *am* a bureaucrat!”

Everyone was making the most effective use of their time on board. Even just sitting around and spacing out was a perfectly good way to use this time. No need to worry about productivity.

And so, our first day on board passed.

It would be dinnertime soon.

Hmm, I’m getting worried again...

What would dinner on a ghost ship be like...? I sure hoped there would be food on board; not all of us were skeletons, after all.

When dinnertime arrived, we went to the dining hall.

The skeleton crew brought us our food. The captain was sitting at the table, too. I was a little worried about the navigation and such, but we would probably be okay.

“Our food todaaay is a full-course craaab dinner.”

The first thing they brought out was a huge platter of boiled crab! There was also crab omelets, crab soup—everything had crab in it.

“Wow, this is fancy for a ghost ship!”

“Oh-ho. One cannot often eat these things out in the demon lands. In fact, I never have.” Beelzebub seemed excited about this, too.

I was a little worried about how it would taste—I mean, if skeletons were cooking it, how could they taste test?

“Oh, they’re perfectly delicious,” I said. “The ingredients themselves are fantastic from the get-go.”

Beelzebub sipped on her wine and offered her compliments to the ghost chefs. This service was great.

Curalina, the jellyfish spirit, was ominously murmuring “A pretentious feast...” as she sat sketching something, but it wasn’t like she needed to keep good manners at the moment. I paid her no mind.

“This shiip catches craaabs. They are then processed and soold. I heear this used to be a craaab fishing ship, after all.”

“Do fishing ships come with dining halls like these? Oh, I guess it’s been remodeled in the past, though.”

Rosalie then approached with a skeleton.

“Big Sis! I heard that this ship used to be a crab fishing galley!”

A crab galley!

Oof, just hearing that sounds like a harsh labor environment...

“It was rough, so there were a good handful of people who died on board. The skeletons working here now are part of those who did.”

“Um... Uh-huh...”

I didn't want to hear that while I was eating.

“And then there was mutiny among the crew, which resulted in those holes in the hull. That's how it sank. After that, the ghost ship sailed the seas aimlessly, and then the mermaid captain here purchased it, and the rest is history— At least, that's what they told me!”

The skeleton nodded, so that was probably the truth.

“Hold on. I want to know if something happened after it became a ghost ship. There's clearly some drama waiting for us... I mean, this isn't a regular ghost ship.”

How on earth could it have been available for a mermaid to purchase?

Rosalie asked the skeleton again. The skeleton couldn't speak, so I had the ghost interpret for me.

“Ghost ships are at risk of getting attacked by other boats, so they apparently decided to become a legal, registered ship. They would often be targeted for takedown requests in adventurers guilds, and seafarers would try to get on board as a test of will, he says.”

“It's just a haunted house on the water, then!”

People weren't that afraid of ghost ships, in the end...

“And even though grudges and stuff keep the boat moving, it was still hard on the skeletons to keep it afloat when it was basically ready to sink, so they wanted to repair it. And they needed money for that, of course, so they decided to go legal for the convenience. Underground ship repair sounds super expensive.”

“This is a lot to take in!”

“Hmm... I do not know much of matters of the sea... I am fascinated to hear such things...”

Even the demon minister was surprised. There were still so many things in this world that we didn't know about.

“Well, this ship doooes have a history. If you waaant, I could show you the old torture chamber and galley facilities. Some of us heeere lived through those days, so they can give a veeery vivid description.”

“That...sounds terrifying, Captain, so I think I’ll pass...”

“Okaaay. Well, feel freeeee to speak up if you ever start losing your mind with boredom. There are looots of spooooooky stories. Skeletons I don’t recogniize popping up on board and such,” the usually cheerful Captain Imremico said. I probably would have said no anyway.

After dinner, I took a shower and went into my room.

“The room is like a regular hotel room.”

Rosalie was right beside me, too. “Looks like we’re in the same room, Big Sis.”

“I know you don’t really have much use for the concept of rooms, but I’m glad to be paired with you.”

“Our first boat trip is getting interesting, isn’t it?!” Rosalie buzzed around the room. She was in high spirits.

“Yeah, I completely agree. I kind of wish I’d brought along more of the family, too. But I probably would have opted for a normal ship and a normal route instead...”

We could make plenty of other opportunities for us anyway, so a boat trip with the family was something I could put on the list.

“All the skeletons have such funny stories, Big Sis. Like a galley with a crew of a hundred reaching its destination with only ten left—”

“Rosalie! That’s a *scary* story!”

History really was full of terrifying truths if you did a little digging.

“Then I’ll tell you about the crab fishing. You pull them up with a net, right? This one time, they found a guy with the net wrapped around his neck, and when they pulled it, his head—”

“Stop making this scary! These are all horror stories!”

“Okay... I don’t mean to upset you, Big Sis, so I’ll try not to talk too much to

you...” Rosalie shrunk a little.

“Oh—you know I’m not telling you not to talk to me at all, right?”

“No, it’s nighttime now anyway. You should get some rest.”

“That’s also true,” I replied. “Right, early to bed and early to rise for me, then.”

Rosalie turned to face the wall. “Hey, she’s going to sleep, so don’t talk to her right now!”

“There’s something there?!”

Now she was scaring me through implication!

“There’s a seal attached to the back of the picture frame on the wall, and it’s starting to come off. The ghost there is about to come free.”

“That’s the last thing I wanted to hear!”

Laika and Halkara, who absolutely could not handle anything scary, would not be able to ride this ship...

I filled my head with as many happy thoughts as I could and went to bed.

Luckily, the ship didn’t rock that much, so falling asleep wasn’t difficult.

I dreamed of riding on Laika as she soared through the sky. The gentle rocking of the ship was a lot like Laika’s, actually.



The next day, I ran into Beelzebub in the dining hall.

“I dreamed of riding on Vania in her leviathan form last night,” she said.

“Hey, that’s like my dream. I was riding on Laika.”

“I was surprised at how smooth the flight was, but it turned out to be a dream.”

Was riding on Vania really that bad...?

Smarsly was also in Beelzebub’s arms.

“How is Smarsly doing? Is the traveling wearing it out?” I decided to ask Beelzebub instead of Smarsly. Smarsly couldn’t talk.

“It seems no different than usual. And perhaps it is not so much tired as it is intrigued by all the new stimulations.”

I could see Smarsly blobbing up and down slightly. I think that’s a nod.

“We’ll be getting to Outofreach Island tomorrow. That’s perfect, then. I bet it’s turning out to be a good break for you, huh?”

“One that would have been better if the children were here.”

That was all this demon could think about...

“Fine. Then I’ll bring them onto the ship next time.”

“Oh, no need for you to come.” I was getting annoyed.

That was when Curalina appeared. “I finished my sketch.”

I remembered her drawing during dinner the night before.

It was a picture of the skeletons wolfing down food at a feast.

Food that the skeletons had already eaten was poking out of their bones...

“That’s dark! I mean, I know it’s your style, but still!”

“You really get the sense that nothing satisfies them; oh, I like it. Jellyfish-fish-fish...”

Well, if the artist liked it, then that was good enough.

More importantly, I wanted to know what was for breakfast today.

“I wonder what we’ll have! I hope it’s like a fancy breakfast buffet at an expensive restaurant!”

When we came to the dining hall, the skeletons were bringing out food that looked very familiar.

“Our breeeakfast is a full-course crab meal, too,” Captain Imremico drawled with delight.

“Um... Isn’t this the same as what we had for dinner?”

“The skeletons oonly catch crab on this ship, sooo it’s aalways going to be crab.”

I'll get tired of that quick! Wait, there's a crab-shaped bread roll sitting on the captain's table.

"Um, Captain? Is that...?"

"Feel free to buy breead from the shop if you're bored of crab."

So that's what the shop was for!

"I believe I may go to the shop..."

"A crab course is too much for breakfast. Fish-fish-fish..."

We all went to the shop for bread. The crabless crab roll was a welcome reprieve from seafood.

I guess ghost ships had their own problems.

...Although, this one seemed very solvable.

I thought our three-day voyage would pass by in a blink, but I found myself bored already by day two.

"Spacing out for too long is actually kind of painful..."

I was lying down on the deck.

And since the ship was shrouded in a black mist, I didn't really know what it looked like outside. All I knew was that we were bobbing along the ocean.

Then Smarsly approached me. The cloth keyboard was still laid out from the day before.

"Hey, Smarsly. What's up?"

It typed out a question.

""What is god?' Sheesh, that's a sudden question..."

I saw Godly Godness's mild smile in my mind's eye.

That's right—Smarsly had seen a god with its own eyes at the UFC symposium.

Any sage would be intrigued if they saw her.

But...I wasn't sure if she should be the baseline for the divine. It was rude to

the whole concept. Nintan should be more of the standard...

“I’m sure Godly Godness would give you a quick answer if you asked her, but I’ll just speak from my own experience.”

I gave it a quick rundown of my thoughts on deities.

But there was no end to Smarsly’s inquiries.

It even asked me about spirits (I thought it’d be better if it asked Curalina herself, but she would probably only say spirits were meaningless or something).

It also asked me about time (and I answered honestly that I didn’t understand such philosophical ideas).

...And at some point, I ended up talking about my past life.

“I don’t really tell other people this, but you’re Smarsly, so I guess it’s okay.”

Smarsly was more the type to deepen its inquiries in its own mind; I doubted it would share any of this with others.

Now that I was talking about it, I realized I remembered a surprising amount of things from my past life.

And the more I talked, the more regrets I found I had.

If only I had done this thing or the other back then; if only I hadn’t done this or that; if only I had approached that problem another way.

And as those might-have-beens bubbled to the surface, I started to truly understand that I was living more in this world than I ever had back then.

Things were going well overall.

Creating a family was something I had never expected, but I was taking care of us well, if I do say so myself. No one would be able to find a better family than the one in the house in the highlands.

In that sense, all my failures had led to now. It hadn’t been a waste at all.

I was giving my life story to a slime after killing its kind all these years—life was a funny thing.

Smarsly would occasionally hop up and down, as though acknowledging me and telling me it was still listening.

“—I guess that’s it, though.”

Smarsly used the keyboard to tell me something: “Thank you.”

Just writing that out on the keyboard was tough for Smarsly, which is why it touched me so deeply.

“I think I understand why you’re a sage, Smarsly. You’re so earnest.”

It then wrote out, “I could do better.”

And humble, too. “But you know, it’s okay to rest. I don’t know if slimes can die of overwork, but you must be exhausted.”

I smiled as I gave Smarsly a pat.

What a good slime.

And even though I came to dinner that night in high spirits—

“I knew it, full-course crab dinner again!”

The lineup on the table was exactly the same as the night before.

“There are secooonds,” the captain said leisurely. She was eating the bread. “This ship only catches craaab, you see. If only they caught mooore seafood, though.”



I really wished they had another option...

I would probably lose my mind if this trip lasted a whole week...



Day three at sea.

We came to the dining hall for breakfast to find the tables filled with crab again...

“I don’t want crab this early. I’ll get bread...”

“As will I...”

“Jellyfish-fish-fish... I will skip breakfast.”

Beelzebub and I bought bread at the store without issue. Curalina was apparently not going to have anything, but I doubted it would do too much to hurt such a long-lived spirit.

“We’ll finally be getting to Outofreach Island today,” I said to Beelzebub as I munched on my crab-shaped bread.

“Or so we are scheduled. We must first cross these currents in order to approach Outofreach Island safely. We will need to do that to see.”

“Yeees, leave that to meee.”

Captain Imremico and her extended vowels approached us.

“You have some bread crumbs on your mouth, Captain...”

She wiped her mouth, but all that did was move them to the side.

I couldn’t really say it out loud, but I didn’t trust her... I didn’t want my captain to constantly panic, but one who was way too relaxed was a bit scary.

But I’m sure she felt completely confident.

“It will be smoooooth sailing. I do, after all, have a boooating license!” Captain Imremico held her license before us with a triumphant look.

“Oh, well that makes me feel bett— Wait, that’s the bare minimum! You can’t even drive this thing without one!”

“Azusaaa, getting close to Outofreach Island is truuuly an ordeal. But IIII have

a winning strategy. Does thaaat make sense?”

“I want to know what it is. Also, you still have bread crumbs on your face.”

Captain Imremico wiped her mouth once more, again failing to actually get the crumbs off her face. She was so graceless!

“It iiis...keep tryyying until we wiiin!”

The captain ever so slowly raised her hand.

Right. I could understand that logic.

“No matter hooow many times we hit ground, no matter hooow many times we sink, if we keeeeeeep trying, we wiiill reach Outofreach Island!”

“Uh-huh, trial and error is really importa— Hey, you can’t go running this ship aground or sinking it! You won’t get a second try!”

“I failed my license exam sooo many times, but I eventually got it. Weee can get there!”

“Don’t announce that to your passengers!”

Suddenly, I didn’t feel so great about this. Was this ship going to make it...? As of now, all the information I was getting was telling me we were screwed...

“Azusa, you can use levitation magic, no? We will manage somehow.”

“Do you not see the problem with that, Beelzebub?”

I didn’t want to reenact survival missions drifting at sea like a Japanese envoy to China.

“Well, there were no ships that went in Outofreach Island’s direction... Even the foolhardiest of sailors flinched at the thought... And that is how I ended up choosing *Specter No. 7*.”

“Oh, I’ve aaalready changed the name to *SS Heavenbound*.”

The name of this ship wasn’t sounding very lucky anymore. I wanted to arrive at my destination, not heaven, thanks.

The captain patted me on the shoulder. “Azusaaa, we merpeople always say thaaat there are times in life when you float—and times when you siiink. There

is nooo point in worrying before the fact.”

“Okay, I appreciate the positive mindset, but this ship? Should not sink! If it was going to be this risky, then maybe we should have thought a little bit about it beforehand!”

I was starting to get a very specific grip on the captain’s personality.

Her life was very much driven by winds and whims and a let-it-be attitude, along with a heaping helping of positivity.

And honestly, that’s great for her. But she had no safety net for any of the risks!

Closing your eyes and diving in headfirst, and hopping in after careful examination, should be entirely different approaches, but they were a total mishmash to her.

Like, constant pessimism won’t get you far in life, but this kind of personality was problematic...

Smarsly was fidgeting a lot in Beelzebub’s arms, so we laid down the keyboard fabric.

As it hopped around, Beelzebub translated.

“Oh-ho, it says...fools do occasionally open their own doors.”

And by *fool*, it meant the captain.

The captain ignored Smarsly and stuffed another bite of bread into her mouth. There were even more crumbs on her cheek now.

“Weeeell then, we’ll be coming up to a spot with diiiifficult currents. It is tiime to show you what Ill can do.” She rolled up her sleeves.

Oooh, she was getting serious.

“Please remember wheeere the lifeboats are.”

“Please don’t say that while you’re rolling up your sleeves!”

“It should only take thiiiirty tries or so.”

Should she really have a license?

To be honest, we were so distrustful of her that we all went into her office and found the wheel. We could turn this ship around right now.

“All riiight, everyone, can you see the white surges aheaaad?”

Ahead of us were several rushes from the current. Some of them were even whirling in circles.

“We must slip our way through those in ooorder to reach Outofreach Island. Fiiirst, we’ll squeeze through the two surges ahead.”

“Listening to her explain, I almost believe she truly is a professional, despite... everything else,” Beelzebub said.

I wished she’d hired a professional without the “everything else.”

“First, we spin the wheel to the riiight, then we quickly spin it to the leeeft. There is then anooother sudden curve to the right. Does thaaat make sense?”

The gaps between the billows were starting to look like a road.

That was the only way we could proceed forward, so maybe this choice was right, after all.

“All right, I’m going through the fiiirst one!”

The ship leaned to one side, then way over in the other direction.

Were we going to make it?

“Oh, we hit a current, so we faaailed.”

“That was fast!”

“Azusa, a mistake does not mean much here. We will simply be returned to where we started.”

Just as Beelzebub said, we were brought back to the beginning of the complicated route of currents. It was a lot like a video game in this respect.

I now had a clearer understanding of what the captain meant when she said we would try as many times as we needed. Just because we’d failed at getting to Outofreach Island, that didn’t mean we were in danger.

“All right, nooow we will try a second time! ...And we faaailed.”

“You could at least stick with it a little longer!”

As the ship leaned to the left and right, a thought came to me.

I am definitely going to get seasick...

In fact, Beelzebub had opted to hover in the air with her wings.

I also decided to deal with this by using my own levitation magic.

The current-dodging challenge continued for a while afterward, and eventually, we made some progress.

“Oooh, we cleared the fiiiifth spot! The tight tuuurn!”

“Keep at it, keep at it! Go straight there!” I called.

“No, I believe we should keep going like this!” Beelzebub argued.

“She’ll lose control if she does that, Beelzebub. She needs to be thinking two, three steps ahead.”

“Returning to a neutral position does not guarantee our safety. *You* trust in the status quo more than you ought! If it ruins her timing, the effort is wasted!”

As we argued, the ship once again collided with a current and was pushed back.

“Aaagh! So close! I can almost see Outofreach Island!” Beelzebub cried.

“It’s okay, it’s okay! Captain’s getting better and better at this!”

This was more like a game than I was expecting.

Then Rosalie floated over to us.

“The ship sure is rocking a lot today. Many of the skeletons have fallen over.”

“This is our test to get onto Outofreach Island,” I said.

“And the jellyfish spirit is too seasick to move now.”

I didn’t know a jellyfish spirit could get seasick...

Captain Imremico tried over and over after that, but she just couldn’t get through the currents.

And it seemed like the more she tried, the worse her concentration got.

“Oooh, this is so haaard. But I wiiiill succeed, even if it means success tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that, or the day after thaaat. I will succeeeeed one day, which means I have baaasically succeeded now.”

I wished she'd consider taking an extra day to be a failure...

“Captain, can you not steer this thing a little more smoothly? You have a boating license, no?”

“I was giiven my license out of piiity; the goddess of fate will suuurely pity me enough one day.”

Again, not what I wanted to hear!



*

“Very well, then I shall take over!”

Beelzebub pushed the captain out of the way and gripped the ship’s wheel!

“What? Is this legal...? You don’t have a boating license, do you?”

“It matters not—we are in no danger of encountering other ships! The only problem here is one’s skill with the wheel!”

“Oh, yeees. So long as you haven’t had any aaalcohol, you should be all riiight.”

Even if she wasn’t drinking and driving, I still didn’t think she should sail without a license. But it was true that there weren’t any other ships we could collide with and cause trouble for. Not like there were many people trying to get to Outofreach Island anyway.

“Hah, hah!”

“Beelzebub, you need to lean with the wheel, too.”

Now she sounds like a driving instructor.

“Leave me be. It matters not if I succeed— Aaah! I struck a current...”
Beelzebub seemed really disappointed in herself.

“No amateur can maaake it. You need a veeery delicate steering technique.”
The captain looked a little smug, but she hadn’t been successful either...

Beelzebub gave a few tries, but she failed partway through each time.

“Drat! That fourth curve is sneaky! You cannot even reach it if you do not pass through the very middle of the third curve!”

This was like the Dark Souls of boating!

But y’know, I’d played a few games in my past life.

“All riiight, it’s my turn!”

...But Beelzebub wouldn’t let me have the steering wheel.

“I will keep at it for a while yet. I feel I am about to get the hang of this!”

“That’s not fair! It’s time for me to try now!”

“We made no such decision! And we have a greater chance of success of bypassing the currents if the same individual is the one doing the trial and error!”

It was like we were fighting over the same game in the arcade...

Eventually, I somehow managed to get Beelzebub to step away, and it was my turn to take the wheel.

“H-here we go right, and then immediately to the left...and then right again...”

“Should you not be leaning with the turns, too?”

“Shut up! I need to concentrate! Hey, I made it through!”

“Fool. Turning that way will not get you through the next curve. Were you not paying attention to my technique?”

“I told you to shut up! ...Look, you were annoying me so much that I hit the current!”

“Impossible. You had already failed. You cannot concentrate on getting through one obstacle at a time; you must make it all the way to the end, lest you be brought back after getting through the first. Do not blame me.”

I was totally engrossed in this game (?), too.

“Hey, Big Sis? Can I give it a shot?” Rosalie was showing interest, too.

“Sure. Go on.”

I mean, she probably wasn’t going to be as good as I was, considering how I had gaming experience from my past life.

But...when Rosalie gripped the wheel (or to be more precise, when she started moving the wheel with her ghostly powers), the color in her eyes changed.

“Yeeaaaah! I’m gonna get this! Watch me fly! Oraoraoraora! Oraoraoraora!”

She was getting violent!

I didn’t know she would change completely when she took the wheel. She

really was a punk kid...

And strangely adept at steering. She'd avoided the currents by a hair.

"Yesss! Got through! Let's get the next one!"

"Hey! Well done! We're still leaning way to the side, but we're making it through!" I cheered.

"I have a good feeling about this! I can see Outofreach Island straight ahead of us!" Beelzebub joined in.

Just two more curves she needed to get through, and then we'd reach our goal.

But there was a difficult spot ahead of us.

She would need to successfully make turns at practically right angles through very narrow curves in order to get through!

"Whoa, hey! How am I supposed to navigate this?! ...Crap, I hit a current!"

"So close! I'm starting to wonder if we can actually steer through this."

"We are better leaving it to fate..."

As Beelzebub and I leaned forward in anticipation, the captain sat beside us, munching on bread. Smarsly sat in her arms. Apparently, it wanted to see the action, too.

Afterward, Rosalie gave us a brilliant display of her technique, which might otherwise have been described as reckless...

But she just couldn't get through those tight turns!

"She so much as touches the wheel, and she hits a current, but if she waits too long to turn, then she won't make it in time. This is tricky."

"This is quite difficult without some sort of way to cheat..."

Beelzebub, this wasn't a real game, so there weren't going to be any cheats. But I understood why she would start wondering. That was how hard this was.

I sensed someone else enter the room.

"I've been so sick, but I'm used to it now..." Curalina seemed to be curious

about what we were doing.

“Oh, would you like to play, too, Curalina? We’re so close to reaching the island.” I told her what was going on.

“I see. Can you wait half an hour? If you give me that time, we’ll be fine. We’ll get there,” Curalina declared with a calm expression.

“Okaaaay. We will wait thiiirty minutes,” the captain agreed. After all, she was still technically in charge.

Meanwhile, Beelzebub and I were super into this whole thing, so we ended up getting in a few more runs...

After thirty minutes had passed, Curalina came back.

“It’s ready. You should be all right now.”

I didn’t know what was “ready,” but if she said so...

“Then you should try this game now, jellyfish spirit.” Beelzebub was also calling it a game...

“Oh, I’m not interested in games, so I will let someone else try.” Curalina stared blankly and waved her hand.

What?! Then what was that half an hour for?

In the absence of any other takers, Captain Imremico took the wheel in both hands. I’m pretty sure the captain was the only person who was allowed to steer this thing anyway...

“All riiight, it is time to show what a captain can dooo!”

We were going right back into the currents.

The first curve.

“Oooooops, I turned tooooo fast.”

“You messed up right at the beginning!”

Early do-overs were less of a big deal, but it did make me uneasy. That said...

“I can keeeeeeep going!”

She adjusted the wheel and got through!

After that, the captain managed to navigate the currents with rather impressive timing.

“Hey! You’re doing really well, Captain!”

“I only sat in the baaack watching you try over and over again, so I leeeearned juuuust when I neeeeed to turn.”

Should a captain be learning from amateurs...? Well, this was a pretty unique case, so it was probably fine. We were making progress anyway.

We eventually got to the part with two consecutive ninety-degree turns. It’d be difficult to do this with a car, even.

“I do not know the right answer heeere, so I’m not sure of the tiiming.”

That’s where her watch-and-learn technique fell apart!

But a miracle happened.

Just before the ship was about to get caught in the current, a wave suddenly came from the opposite direction and pushed the ship forward.

“This is a miracle, Big Sis! We can keep going!”

“Yeah, if it keeps happening, we’ll be in luck. But it’s really narrow here...so a sudden turn like this means we’ll hit the current on the opposite side.”

It was so difficult that we honestly needed a perfect run to survive it.

But...

Another conveniently timed wave came from the other direction, putting the ship in precisely the right spot.

“Ooooooh, we should be able to make it throoough now.”

“Yes! We are past those hellish turns!”

“That is the skill of a captain, you seeeee.”

I was pretty sure that was all luck, so maybe she shouldn’t crow quite so much.

But that didn’t matter anymore. Outofreach Island wasn’t so out of reach anymore!

“We sure have been lucky... I guess we have been at this for a long time, though...”

“I had the wave spirit make good waves for us.”

It was Curalina who whispered.

Oh... Now that she said that, a similar thing had happened in the past when we needed to move some jellyfish out of the way.

“I told you we would be fine. Jellyfish-fish-fish.”

Indeed, waves came from either side of the ship, almost as though protecting it during the double ninety-degree turns, forcibly changing the angle of the steering.

We finally got to use our cheats.

I was so, so, so glad I picked Curalina to come along. Otherwise, we would have been eating crab for days...



With nothing else in our way, the ship sailed straight to Outofreach Island.

The beach was right in front of us, and in a deeper spot along the shore were what looked like the remains of a stone harbor. Those were probably from when the pirates used the place.

At the same time, when I peered inland, I could see a few ruined buildings standing quietly among the trees.

The sage was somewhere in here.

“My captain’s power was explooding!”

“’Twas specifically the wave spirit’s power...,” Beelzebub remarked, and I agreed.

But Smarsly was hopping in delight, so I guess it was all fine in the end.

Cheats or no, the most important thing was that we got here.

But in that moment, something strange happened with my stomach.

Grrrrrrroooooooooooooooooawwwwwww...

“That was quite a stomach growl,” Beelzebub teased. It *was* long...

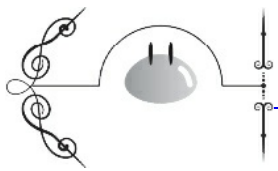
“It’s already past noon, Big Sis. Living people need their sustenance.”

I had been so engrossed in this game that I’d forgotten to eat. It was like I was child again.

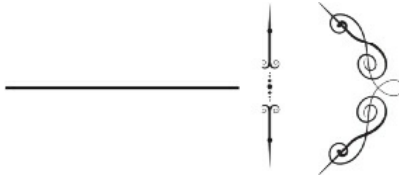
“You’re riiight. Then let us dock at the island and have luuunch,” Captain Imremico suggested. I could eat an entire animal. “We have pleeenty of crab left.”

In the end, that’s all they had...

I was so hungry that I was delighted to chow down on the crab.



WE MET A VALLEY GIRL SAGE



We made landfall at Outofreach Island and moored very carefully. This ship was not getting swept away on our watch.

“At last, land!”

Just as I was about to take the first step forward, Smarsly leaped out in front of me.

“You must be thrilled to meet the sage.”

Smarsly was certainly in high spirits.

The skeleton crew then began plodding onto the island. I wondered what they were going to do—and the answer was sunbathing, apparently.

“They’re really gonna make the most of this, huh?”

“Ah, if the skeletons stay tooooo long on the boat, then they might get moooldy, so it’s veeery important for them to take some time in the suuun,” said Captain Imremico, who stepped out wearing a swimsuit. She was even holding a beach ball. “The skeeeletons and I will keeeeeeep watch over the ship, so do what you must with the saaage.”

I was sure they were just using the ship as an excuse, but they were indeed done with their job now that we’d come to the island.

All we had to do next was find the sage.

I wanted to thank Curalina again for getting help from the wave spirit, but she was already preparing to paint the ruins. That was most certainly subject matter I thought she would like. She was free to paint all she wanted here.

And so Smarsly's escorts would be me, Beelzebub, and Rosalie.

"By the way, does this extremely out-of-the-way sage have a name? And where on the island are they?"

"Do not ask so many questions at once. I do not know. All I know is that this is a very strange individual."

I remembered the letter that came in the bottle.

"...Yeah, can't argue with that."

"Well, now that we are here on the island, we may do as we please. We will find them if we look."

"Kay, then I'll take a peek around the forest." Rosalie slipped into the forest, where the trees and ruins lived in harmony.

A ghost scout—now that was the ideal for an adventuring party.

Beelzebub and I waited for a bit.

"Would be nice if there were any edible fruits here on the island."

"Ooh, look, a crab." The one walking in front of us was quite small. It collided with Smarsly and quickly scuttled out of the way.

"I tire of crab. I want something else! No crabs of any species!"

"I know, I know! Yeah, I really want something that isn't crab, too..."

I saw some hermit crabs running around, but those were still unacceptable.

"We will see a lot of the forest, I believe. We will need to find something to eat before we find the s—"

"Big Sis, people!" Rosalie rushed out from the forest. That was fast!

Smarsly was jumping really high, too; it could barely contain its excitement. I wondered where all its springy power came from.

I guess, to the slime sage, this was like getting invited to meet some internet friends in real life.

"That was quick. Are they hiding out in the ruins somewhere or something?"

In a way, this place was kind of perfect for a hermit lifestyle.

“No, there are almost thirty of them. So I’m not sure which one would be the sage, but there are definitely people here.”

“That’s a lot!” I couldn’t believe there would be so many in such a secluded place. My mental picture of the lonely sage on a remote island was crumbling.

Thirty people was like an entire classroom. Was the leader of this community the sage?

“Well, in the demon world, there is also a myth of seven sages living together—the Seven Sages of the Lost Wood. Perhaps a community of thirty would have produced new knowledge.”

“Sounds like there are stories of sages in every kind of world, huh?”

“There were some who wanted to become the eighth, but they were all hindered by the Lost Wood.”

More sages who were hard to meet!

“But they do say that two heads are better than one—three makes for Manjushri. Imagine what thirty people could do!”

“Manjushri?”

She didn’t get it, obviously, but I basically told her that it was a sage’s name.

“And Rosalie. Did you speak with them?” Beelzebub asked cautiously. “On the off chance, were they saying nothing but ‘naa, naa, naa’?”

She was worried they were part of the Masco Tribe!

When I came to (what I thought was) a deserted island, I encountered a tribe whose only method of communication was saying “naa, naa.”

I called them the Masco Tribe for a while, but I found out later that they were demons—yetis—pretending to be islanders. All the “naa, naa” stuff was also just made up for the bit, and they could speak a language I knew.

Which means there was a chance this was a group of people pretending to be a small community...

“No, not at all. I told them about us, and they asked that I take you to them.”

It was also possible that they were wary of us as uninvited guests. I’d be a bit

scared if I were a normal person, but I wouldn't be in any danger in battle.

"Then I suppose we shall go." Beelzebub scooped up Smarsly.

"Yes. Let's meet this top-three (hardest-to-meet) sage!"



So as we pushed deeper into the forest...

...the sound of conversation got louder.

There were people sitting at wooden tables, chattering away. They even had wooden cups, filled with some kind of drink.

Was this just a café...?

"This is not what I expected!"

After watching them more closely, I realized that none of them were human.

In fact, they all reminded me of Sandra. There were flowers and leaves sticking out of their heads.

There were things coming off their lower backs, too, but I couldn't tell if they were roots or stems.

And almost all of them—wait, maybe *all* of them—were girls. They were loud in both appearance and volume. Whatever they were, they weren't human.

They noticed us, too.

"Omigosh, this is, like, nuts!"

"Look, that demon looks like she's wearing a costume! I'm laughing sooo hard right now?"

"This is no costume! I am a bona fide demon minister!"

One of them made fun of Beelzebub's clothes, so Beelzebub bit back. I wondered what was wrong with her clothes.

"And you all...appear to be dryads." Ah, so Beelzebub was familiar with them.

"Oh yeah, dryads are a plant spirit race or something like that."

I guess that was why they reminded me of Sandra.

“Yaaah.”

“We are for sure, like, dryads.”

“Sooo, why are you here?”

Beelzebub held up Smarsly and held it out toward the dryads.

“Someone sent a letter to the Smart Slime. Is there anyone here who claims to be among the three most difficult sages to meet?”

There was a girl near the back who raised her hand with an “Oh, that’s me!”

“I’m Miyu, one of the world’s three most difficult sages to meet! Is that the Smart Slime? No frickin’ way. Miyu cannot believe I get to meet it! It’s, like, a miracle!”

All these dryads were ditzy valley girls!

“Omigod, is that your friend, Miyu?”

“They, like, came from far away or something.”

“For real?!”

“Quite a curious group.”

“A demon and a ghost and a witch?”

I could hear all the dryads sitting at that same table react.

Most of them had that valley girl vibe, but one in particular had a fancy way of speaking.

“Big Sis? I dunno if I can handle this...” Rosalie hid behind me.

“You...don’t need to hide from them...”

Was this a punks-versus-preps thing?

“We’ve got seats open, so come sit down. Oh, and you can order your stuff over there.”

I spotted what looked like an order counter. It really was like a café.



“What do you have?” I asked the dryad at the counter. She seemed very prim and put together.

“Like, juice and sap,” she replied.

It sure was a menu for dryads...

“I’d prefer juice over sap... I guess you’d want juice, too, Beelzebub? Then two small juices, please.”

Beelzebub nodded.

“Two small juices it is. I can serve these without ice; what do you prefer?”

“No ice, Beelzebub?”

Beelzebub nodded again.

“Yeah, no ice for her, either, please.”

“Got it. Would you like sweetener?”

“For both, yes. How do we pay?”

“Non-dryads are free. Your drinks will be served on the side, so just wait a sec, okay?”

“May as well wait until they’re done.” I moved over toward the serving counter.

“You dealt with that quite handily!” Beelzebub remarked.

And that was when I first realized how smoothly that had gone.

“You’re right... I think I got the general gist of it, though...”

Beelzebub and I took our wooden cups filled with juice and brought them to our table.

The dryad sage and Smarsly were already chatting.

But Smarsly couldn’t talk, so the dryad was really just talking at it.

The conversation, such as it was, went thusly:

“Yaaaaah, exaaactly! Isn’t it craaazy? Crazy, right? Sooo crazy!”

It was like *crazy* was the only word she knew!

“Um, dryad sage, would you mind if we introduced ourselves to you? I’m Azusa, the ‘Witch of the Highlands,’ and this ghost girl is Rosalie. She lives with me. And this demon is Beelzebub.”

Quick and to the point.

“Okay, cool, cool. I’m Miyu-miyu Kuzzoco.”

Her full name was unique, to say the least!

“Um, that’s...an interesting name.”

“Not for dryads! We’re the only people living on this island. We just chill here like this. Like, I still am one of the three most difficult sages to meet, but I just learn things by, like, talking with everyone else, so I guess you could say that, like, everyone here is a crazy-smart sage. Omigosh, isn’t an island full of sages just, like, the wildest thing you’ve ever heard of?”

That was similar to the Seven Sages of the Lost Wood that I had heard about earlier. And it sounded like this Miyu-miyu Kuzzoco was also less of an individual sage than a part of a group.

Beelzebub was staring at this Miyu-miyu Kuzzoco with obvious doubt in her eyes.

“While ’tis the same for the Smart Slime, you do not look much like a sage to me.”

She was right—all I could sense was her valley girl-ness. Were valley girls a thing in this world?

“Well, like, yah? Wouldn’t it be kinda, like, crazy if someone was just, like, ‘I’m a sage’? They’re definitely not a sage. Like, if you’re a sage, you gotta walk the walk, right?”

She laughed Beelzebub’s concerns away.

I did kind of get what she meant, but her “crazy” had so broad of a definition that it was confusing me.

Beelzebub, still disgruntled, spread out the cloth keyboard for Smarsly.

Smarsly typed out on the keyboard, “How fascinating this is.”

“Oh, so that’s how you communicate! That’s crazy. Omigosh, it’s wild! That’s so funny!”

Miyu-miyu Kuzzoco burst out laughing. It was too much of a mouthful to keep calling her that, so I decided I’d just call her Miyu...

“Kuzzoco finds it sooo easy being a sage.”

“Wait, that’s how you refer to yourself?!”

If she absolutely had to talk about herself in the third person, she should at least use Miyu! That was cuter! And wait, didn’t she just refer to herself like that earlier anyway?!

“Omigosh, you guys are sooo funny. Don’t mind if I do!”

We were letting her have...something. Whatever it was, she could have it.

Afterward, we asked her a few questions about Outofreach Island.

The only ones really living here were the dryads, and they led a very relaxing life.

“By the way, do any of the dryads go out anywhere? I don’t think I’ve really seen any before.”

“Well, obviously!”

Miyu suddenly shot out from her chair. And then she was gone.

What on earth?! Was there something she had to run away from?

Then the cord-like object that came out of Miyu’s back stretched and held taught like a line.

“See? Dryads get their nutrients from the trees with these vines. That’s why we honestly can’t go very far. Isn’t that wild?”

“So that’s what’s keeping you here!”

That was probably why I’d never seen one before. I’d never come across any if I didn’t go out of my way to visit in the future.

“Must be tough not being able to get around. I was a spirit bound to one place for a long time, so I get it,” Rosalie said with sympathy.

The mood was turning dark, and Miyu panicked.

“Omigosh, please don’t think I’m, like, a bound spirit or something! I can go cordless!”

What? Cordless?

That was not a word I was expecting to hear.

Just then, a couple of other dryads passed the front of the establishment. These ones didn’t have any vines coming off of them.

“Hey, we can recharge our mana at these seats!”

“Woo! Score! Let’s sit here!”

Then they pulled on some leaves atop their head, producing something that looked like a cord.

They plugged it in to what looked like a socket in the table.

“Ahhh, charging super calms me down!”

“Doesn’t it feel good to charge after walking around cordless everywhere? I get sooo tired.”

“I totally get it! 🎵 I think it’d be good for a diet! 🎵”

What the hell, were they phones?!

“Is it really that weird? I heard that dryads couldn’t move from their trees a long time ago, but wouldn’t that just make it, like, ridiculously inconvenient for everything? That’s why everything evolved so crazy fast.”

I guess nature finds a way...or something.

“And I use a battery when I go far away!”

Miyu took out an object that looked like a potato—no, it *was* a potato—from her bag.

From the looks of it, I was guessing it was a sweet potato. She probably used it like a sweet snack.

“Huh? Do you eat it...?”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Eat it? No! Duh? This is how you use it!”

Miyu pulled on the part of the potato that was either its root or its stem, I wasn't sure. It got longer and longer.

She then plugged the end of that potato cord into her back.

"I'll be fine with this, even when I'm away from the trees. It'll charge my mana right up!"

It was a mobile battery!

"Hmmm... I never thought that the dryads would have evolved in such a unique manner... Not even the demons were entirely aware of this..."

Beelzebub was overwhelmed, too. These isolated regions like the Galápagos Islands were a hotbed for these kinds of changes, I suppose. I mean, it was called Outofreach Island for a reason.

Smarsly also hopped around on its keyboard to write, "Fascinating."

"Right? Isn't it crazy?"

In her world, everything was "crazy."

But even though I knew it had been worth it to come all this way, I still had one question bouncing around in my brain.

Was this dryad Miyu really a sage?

The category of "top-three-hardest-to-meet sages in the world" was honestly a bit too niche, but she also didn't seem very smart.

No, I wasn't trying to discriminate; just because she talked that way didn't mean she wasn't intelligent.

But I wasn't really sensing any true wisdom from her. Certainly nothing sagely.

I wasn't exactly driven to meet any sages, so I wasn't too bothered if she didn't really act the part, but I didn't want Smarsly to be disappointed after coming all this way.

Sometimes you met an internet friend off-line, and their vibes were completely different in person...

Then Beelzebub patted me on the back and said quietly, "Well, now that they

are set up, why don't we leave the sages to chat? We can have a quick look around the island. We can bring along the captain or the others, if you like."

There was also the fact that we couldn't contribute much to the sages' conversation. I did want to see more of the island, and we still hadn't told the captain that we'd met the dryads yet, so maybe it was a good idea to head back and report. But— I replied quietly, "It's a good idea, but...can we really leave this Miyu girl with Smarsly? I don't know if they'll get along..."

"They may cross that bridge when they come to it. Conflict is a valuable experience. And I believe such experiences are necessary for Smarsly, considering how rarely it gets to see others."

"Hey, that's a really good point, Beelzebub."

"Why do you sound so surprised? How rude!"

In the end, Beelzebub had her way; we left Miyu and Smarsly to themselves and exited the shop.



Afterward, along with Captain Imremico, we got a tour of the dryads' island.

I wondered if the captain, a merperson, could actually walk, but she could slither and jump easily enough.

"The fish part of me is sooo muscular. This is eeeasy for me. It haaas to be, otherwise I won't be able to staaand."

"You do seem to have a lot of energy, Captain."

The dryads' island left a big impression, too.

As we proceeded farther into the forest, we found some more clothing shops and other stores selling miscellaneous goods. They all seemed to have been made from plant fiber. The dryads were fashionable, just like preppy girls would be.

Although to be specific, these establishments weren't stores.

"How much is this?" I asked the dryad who was leading us around.

"That's free!" she said.

“What? Free? That’s not very economical... But I guess an island this small wouldn’t have an economy...”

“Everyone makes whatever they like, and then people come and take what they want. And it totally works out. Sometimes someone will trade for sap and stuff, though.”

“Sounds as though these dryads do not have any notion of paper money or coins. Perhaps that stems from how small this island is.”

Beelzebub was taking some serious notes as we walked. It was like the minister was here for inspection.

After that, we spent a good three hours sightseeing around Outofreach Island.

It was a lot of fun getting to experience a different culture. The dryad showing us around even gave us a tour of her room. It was decorated with lots of pink flowers—it was honestly adorable.

Now the sun was setting, and the ocean on the horizon was turning red.

“I think it’s time we head back to the café.”

“Indeed. We must collect Smarsly.”

I was kind of scared. Hopefully it wasn’t bored...or disappointed with meeting Miyu...

How upsetting would it be if we found it sitting (?) by its lonesome at a café table.

There was something strange going on in the café, though.

The table where Smarsly and Miyu had been sitting was now surrounded by a bunch of dryads! Wow, it was lively in there; the place was much more crowded than before.

What was going on?

Smarsly was smoothly jumping across its keyboard.

“No, Smarsly, that’s suuuch ideational solipsism that it’s, like, insta-oblivion crazy.”

Miyu was saying a lot of really difficult words.

She wasn't the only one—I could hear similarly difficult words coming from the gallery around them.

Smarsly jumped around again.

“No, I'm telling you. You're taking language as so much of an absolute that it's kind of crazy, honestly? Like, say I go up to the counter and say 'Juice.' The implied meaning is that I'm saying 'Juice, please.' But you're not gonna, like, find that 'please' in the definition of 'juice' anywhere, right? I'm saying that words can only express so much. It's how you *use* them that gives them, like, all that juicy meaning.”

Smarsly jumped—rather, zipped around its keyboard at an incredible speed. It was like a professional sidestepper...

I asked one of the onlookers, “Excuse me? Could you tell me what's happening here?”

“There has been a difference in opinion, so they are presently debating.”

Oh, this was the fancy dryad.

“We dryads are not subject to common misfortunes such as wealth disparities and disease. That is why it is routine for us to gather here in the café to debate when we have free time.”

They were like ancient Greek philosophers!

I called out to Smarsly next. “Hey, Smarsly? How's it going? Do you think you'll need more time?”

Smarsly raced across its keyboard with great speed.

“It says it will need a few more days...,” Beelzebub murmured, somewhat perplexed.

Miyu looked up, too. “Oh, Azusa, Beelzebub! You're back! So I don't think we're gonna finish this, so we're probably gonna run late. I'll let you know when we're done. We're getting sooo crazy into this! Sorry, babes!”

They've said it many times, but I needed to hear it again: Don't judge a book by its cover.

Despite her scatterbrained demeanor, she sure knew her way around philosophy.

“What shall we do, Azusa...?” Beelzebub peered at me, trying to gauge how I felt.

“...Well, this is a rare opportunity for Smarsly, and it took so much effort to get here, so maybe we should stick around until they finish their debate...”

We left Smarsly alone and went back to our crab dinner on the ghost ship.

I would have been fed up with this whole thing if there was nothing but crab, but the skeletons had gathered some fruits and vegetables on the island for a nice variety.

I wondered how dryads felt about eating fruits and vegetables, but they just gave us veggie smoothies that they personally recommended. I was grateful for that.

“Azusa! This is delicious!”

“Isn’t it? It kind of looks like a tropical resort out here, so this might be kind of like a vacation for us in a way.”

We were going to enjoy this vacation enough to be worth all the hardship getting here.

The next day, Beelzebub and I joined the skeletons on the beach for a round of sunbathing.

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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SURPASSING WYRMSPEED



“Isn’t that Laika?”

“Even the way she walks is refined, though I’m not surprised.”

“Her back is so straight.”

I’d quickly grown used to the embarrassment that came with walking down the corridors.

That still did not mean I was happy about any of this, and I wished they’d stop...but I knew it would only get worse if I expressed as much.

I did try, once. “I would appreciate it if you would at least refrain from talking about me where I can hear,” I said.

But my gossiping schoolmate had only been delighted. “Ahhh! It’s such an honor to speak with you, Laika!” she said, although I could not tell you why.

If my telling them to stop spreading rumors made them happy, then I could only expect more. My only choice was to give up.

I heard someone jogging up behind me, and Hialis fell into step at my side. She was cradling her language arts textbook and notebook in her arms.

“Hialis, you mustn’t jog in the halls. The school rules say you either must walk or determine the safety of your surroundings before running at full speed. There is no beauty in a lack of commitment.”

Running at full speed was a beautiful act, so it was permitted. I have heard that humans do not share our values. It’s also possible that non-red dragons also do not share our values, however. Our cultures vary widely.

“I’m sorry, but there were quite a lot of people walking in the halls, so this was the only way I could catch up to you, Sister. It was the result of my meticulous consideration for you.”

“You are clever, Hialis. I sometimes feel I am more awkward and impractical than I should be.”

“That could be it. I heard from my homeroom teacher before that the teachers are trying not to berate students for smaller faults of late. Once the current student council president took over, she suggested they try to bring out the best in us instead of sticking to the hard-and-fast rules.”

Oh... We were talking about my sister again.

She also attended the academy, which meant there was no escape from talk about her.

There were six grades in the academy—I was a first-year, and the oldest were the sixth-years. But despite the name, that did not mean we were only at the academy for six years.

One academic year constituted ten calendar years, so new students only joined the school once every decade.

There were far fewer dragons than there were humans, and dragons were much more long-lived, so it felt a bit silly to have an entrance ceremony every year. And so, new students joined once every ten years. Every grade had a variety of ages.

Additionally, when each dragon takes the entrance exam for the academy depends on the individual. Even when my elder sister reached the age of eligibility, she had spent thirty years traveling the world instead.

I believed that may have been why she was so sophisticated. No, perhaps this was a chicken-and-the-egg dilemma—someone with a stiff personality would not have spent thirty years neglecting their studies to travel.

In truth, she had seen and heard so many things before she progressed in her academics, so she knew well how others saw her; she did a perfect job working as the student council president, and yet she always adopted policies that earned her favor with the students.

Suddenly, I realized Hialis was peering at me.

“Is there something on my face?”

“You always look so gloomy whenever we talk about the student council president. Pardon me for the meddling question, but has your relationship gotten worse?”

I sighed. “Not at all. She is so soft on me. She has bought me clothes and gifts on more than one occasion—and often uses my hair to experiment. She is a good sister, I believe.”

“I see. I suppose that means your sister is too good, and it’s weighing on you.”

Hialis was coaxing the answer out of me, so I obliged.

“I suppose so. I was hoping that no one would compare us, but now I find myself doing it anyway...”

There was no fault at all with my sister; we simply were not compatible.

I had keenly desired to be an outstanding dragon ever since I was young, and so it was painful for me to see her stand in my way like some kind of boss monster.

The soothing yet warm spring breeze of Mount Rokko’s sixth checkpoint filtered in through the window.

The seasons had come round yet again, and it was now time for spring.

This was our fifth spring since entering the academy.

Almost five years had passed in the blink of an eye since the opening ceremony.

Thanks to my own diligence, I was not subject to any teasing that I was simply benefitting from my elder sister’s hard work. I was showing spectacular grades in both the military and literary arts compared to the other first-years, after all. I was even the last one standing in the one-hundred-dragon paired sparring that the first-and second-years did together.

But even when other first-years expressed admiration for me, it always ultimately came with the caveat that I was the president’s successor, the

president's little sister.

How was I to face these labels?

I was the only one in the academy to be burdened with such a problem, and I had a feeling it would bother me for a while yet.

Then Hialis turned toward the bulletin board.

“What kind of announcements did you find, Hialis? I believe it's a bit too soon for exams.”

“It's almost time for the student council elections, Sister.”

On the board was the following announcement, accompanied by an illustration of a dragon on the poster:



**Looking for
new and
powerful strength!**

**Submit
candidates
by 4/20!!**

.....

**President / Vice President /
Secretary / Treasurer /
General Affairs**

.....

Election Administration Committee

“Ahhh... An election for the student council. My sister has been in charge ever since she was a first-year.”

Even without a mirror, I could tell I had an indescribable look on my face, so I spoke up first.

“So you’re...not interested in running, Sister?”

“You know me well. I already know that if I did join, all I would hear about is how my sister handled this or that.”

“I thought you would love to run, at least just for the election. But I know this is the one thing I can’t force you to do. I won’t try.”

Hialis was starting to understand me better and better.

But then, an abnormality occurred within my stomach.

Grrrwwwl...

It rumbled quite loudly, probably all the way to the ends of the corridor...

Hialis whipped out a pastry from her bag. “Here, Sister.”

I graciously accepted it. “Thank you. But this will not be enough, so once our next class is over, we should go straight to the cafeteria.”

“I agree. I could eat three whole portions by myself today.”

Hialis and I faced each other and nodded.

“Then I will get two portions’ worth of ham, sausage, and soup.”

“And I’ll get two portions’ worth of mutton, venison, beef, and pork dishes.”

Teamwork was crucial at the cafeteria.



The cafeteria was lively, as always.

But I did not panic. I had the ham and sausage on my plate.

At the academy, our meals were a part of our education. In order to learn manners, our meals were a singular set of food in an all-you-can-eat buffet course, modeled after those in high-class hotels, and we were not able to order anything extra.

And since dragons ate a lot, it would be less effective to prepare food for each person individually; it was likely much cheaper to cook a big batch of food for a buffet. That was the more realistic reason. It would certainly be inconvenient for both the guest and the cook if one ordered every item on the school lunch menu. Making it a buffet to simplify the accounting side of things was the right strategy.

When I returned to the seats Hialis and I had nabbed, I saw she had already gotten dessert for us.

“Sister, they had new walnut cookies, so I got some ahead of time.”

“Fantastic, Hialis. The sweets tend to go very quickly.”

Now it was time to gingerly dig into this juicy steak.

The proper way to eat this so that none of the juice would get on my clothes was to devour the whole thing with one big chomp. Cutting it into smaller pieces would ultimately allow the juices to escape.

“Laika devoured that big steak in one bite.”

“And yet she doesn’t seem to be choking at all. Stunning.”

“There is so much food on her plate, yet none of it is mixing and contaminating one another. I see she’s thought very carefully about where she puts her food.”

I could hear them talking about me again, but at least they didn’t see me as slovenly.

“It’s just like the saying, Sister: Food over flowers.”

Hialis had also eaten her large steak—although, she swallowed it all before speaking. It was improper to speak with one’s mouth full, after all.

“Indeed. We accomplish nothing by neglecting our meals.”

But that day in homeroom, we received a shocking notification.



“Some of you might be disappointed to hear this, but the buffet will be shutting down.”

That is what our teacher told us that day.

My classmates erupted.

“No!”

“The academy’s in danger!”

“The gods have forsaken the dragons!”

I could not remain silent on the matter, either.

I did not want to stand out, but I raised my hand to get the teacher’s attention.

“Yes, Laika. What is it?”

“Could you tell us why the school is considering removing the buffet? For example, if the costs of the cafeteria are putting pressure on the costs of running the school, then I want to be ready for a tuition hike.”

Some of my other classmates chimed in: “Exactly!” “I’ll take up a part-time job if tuition goes up!”

“This is not an administrative problem,” our teacher replied. “According to certain members of the student council, some have been partaking in obscene amounts of food that push the bounds of decency. Observers from a human academy who visited once before were shocked to see how we ate.”

It was not unusual for us to receive objections in such a manner.

We knew that, from a human perspective, dragons ate a formidable amount of food. But our true forms were massive. We needed that much energy to keep our bodies going.

One of my classmates said, “Yes, but I’m sure the president and the others will dismiss them, right?”

Indeed—a minority opinion would not become policy.

But our teacher shook her head. “The president wants to acknowledge the other officers’ autonomy, so she has said that she will not unilaterally reject them. And since the election is coming up, she wants to respect your self-governance by allowing everyone else to debate these opinions and quash

them in the election.”

I knew my sister would say something like that. Though she was the president, she would never rule with an iron fist.

If her subordinates wanted to do something, she would let them do so.

But the ending of the buffet in the cafeteria was a matter of life and death for the academy!

Many of the students’ feelings of discontent would vanish after a big, hearty meal and never manifest.

But without it, animosity would only grow, and discipline at the academy could suffer...

I posed another question to our homeroom teacher.

“If I may... This might be a difficult question, but who proposed the buffet be done away with...?”

“I’m about to hand out a notice from the student council, so give it a read over.”

Ah, so that was why the teacher decided to have this talk during homeroom.

The notice read:

No More Improper Buffets

*A Commentary by Ricuen, Student
Council Secretary*

In a survey that asked, “What do you talk about between classes in the morning?” the overwhelming majority of you answered “lunch.” The numbers were abnormally high compared to other girls’ academies of other species around the country. Our school aims to raise dragons that will soar from the dragon world into the wider outside world, and so we cannot overlook this problem. Additionally, one cannot learn table manners in order to grow into a gentlewoman through a buffet. As a result, we should introduce a course meal system.

I thought the name Ricuen sounded familiar, and that was when I recalled that she was one whose speed I had been unable to keep up with right after school started. I remembered that she was on the smaller side for a dragon.

There was some truth to her point...

Constant buffets did not contribute to proper manners, yes. Or perhaps it was better said that our manners had evolved to adapt to the academy cafeteria environment, not society at large.

But reasons could be overturned with better arguments!

That evening, I came to the front door when my sister got home.

“Elder Sister, I need to ta—”

“Awww! You’re coming out to greet me? You’re the best little sister ever, Laika!”

She was already squeezing me before I could begin the conversation...

...and whispered something even more shocking into my ear.

“Ricuen the secretary is just as fast, you know.”

That meant she already knew what I was planning on telling her.

“If I were to join the student council, do you think I could save the buffet—or at least make Miss Ricuen reconsider her opinion?”

“If you want your own views to prevail, then make the buffet your platform and win. That’s how the election battle is supposed to happen anyway. Oh, and you’re still super adorable, even after you’ve changed from your uniform into your comfy clothes! I have to thank Mom for giving me such an adorable little sister!”

I wished she did not combine serious and banal topics in such a manner.

But I knew what I had to do now.

I would stand up to the **challenge** of the election and prove **victorious**. And that would be **growth**.

...However, I had a feeling I would win in a landslide if I ran on the platform of keeping the buffet alive...



“I knew it, Sister! You’ll be a well-respected secretary!”

During break the following day, I told Hialis of my intention to enter the election, and she spoke very highly of me.

I was speaking while doing armless push-ups, by the way.

“Thank you. If possible, could you help me with my election campaign?”

“I’ll help, of course; anything for you. But I don’t know if anything I could do would actually help. I don’t believe anyone has ever fallen out of the race due to a lack of votes in the past.”

“What...? My apologies, I do not know how the election battle works here at the academy very well; could you tell me?”

Now that I thought about it, I realized I should have asked for more detailed information from my sister.

“Anyone who wants to join the academy’s student council will be subject to a

vote of confidence by the rest of the student body. Receiving at least one vote gives you the right to join the student council, so no one ever fails at that stage.”

“...Hold on. What is the point of the election, then?”

The system sounded so much more foolish than I had been expecting...

“That’s when the real election battle starts, though. The candidates duke it out with their fists until a set number remain. The number of secretaries every year is always four, and since everyone will have passed the vote of confidence...you will need to defeat Wyrmspeed Ricuen in order to be officially involved.”

And so that was where strength was needed... It was very easy to understand, though.

Was my opinion going to survive? Or that of the incumbent upperclassman?

No matter who made it through in the end, I was going to give it my best shot.



Luckily, an opportunity to watch Ricuen battle came soon afterward.

After school, as I was leaving the building to go home, I spotted someone proposing to fight Ricuen in a mock battle.

“Ricuen! I cannot allow you to shut down the buffet! If you lose to me, you have to retract your pledge!”

Judging from the color of the student’s tie, she was a third-year. Conversely, Ricuen was a fourth-year. The wind teased her ponytail as she sat on a bench in the garden between the school building and school gates, reading a book.

“How loud can one person be? How boorish are you to interrupt me during my reading time?”

Ricuen slowly placed a bookmark into her book.

She herself was calm, but her two lackeys on either side were growing excited. They likely could not sit still as their big-sister figure was being challenged to battle. They were ready to take on their dragon forms and fly off then and there.

Classes had just ended for the day, so other students started gathering around. I was one of them. I could hear some of the others in the crowd saying, “We should take a stand against the abolition of the buffet.”

The situation made it clear that Ricuen was at a disadvantage.

“You might have a small appetite, but I go hungry every day. I don’t act all high-and-mighty like you, reading poetry in the park.”

“*Poetry?* I was reading *Strategy and Resolution: Revised Edition*.”

That sounded quite stiff.

Ricuen stood, pressing her hands to her skirt so it would not flap in the wind.

Now that I had a good look at her, she was truly small and slender. She did not seem like a fourth-year student; she almost looked like she was a prospective student. Was she truly a heavyweight in the student council?



Physique-wise, the third-year student who proposed the challenge had the advantage.

And so her confidence came as no surprise. She flew straight at Ricuen after a nearby student declared herself referee and started the match— In the next moment...Ricuen closed in on the third-year student.

When did that happen?!

Ricuen shoved her hands into her opponent's chest.

“Gah! Ghack!”

The third-year student crumpled to the ground, short of breath, and sat there, still.

The girl's younger lackeys in second year rushed over to help her, and that was when the match came to its conclusion.

Ricuen was victorious.

“Do not mistake great physical power as true strength. You were out of breath before we even began our match. How unbecoming. And I have no intention of taking someone so insignificant under my wing.”

The fight was over so quickly that all the students who had come to watch stood in silence.

That was what the student council was capable of.

They secured victory without allowing their opponents to even blink.

“It would be quite the spectacle if I stayed here, wouldn't it? I'm going to the council room,” Ricuen told her younger-sister figure and left; when she did, the heavy atmosphere seemed to lighten a bit.

“The student council is terrifying...”

“Did you see just how powerful Secretary Wyrmspeed Ricuen is...?”

“We can say good-bye to our buffet, then.”

The audience dispersed with sadness. Everyone there had gotten a taste of their own powerlessness.

But I had to defeat her.

“The biggest issue in the election battle will be her unusual speed.”

Even when I returned home, I would meditate in my room or in the dining room to engage in visualization training whenever I had free time.

Ricuen was my enemy. Though I only saw it for a brief moment, her fighting style had been burned into my memory. I could battle her in my mind.

But...I could not lay a finger on her, not even in my own meditations.

Whenever I tried to attack her, she would get close and establish her victory over me.

“I can see you’re trying visualization training, but it’s not going to work.”

As I sat quietly in the dining room, my elder sister entered, wearing her loungewear.

“Maybe if you’re going to battle someone who’s on or near the same skill level as you—but not her. You can try all you want, but you’ll never be able to win against a single one of our four secretaries.”

“Indeed... Actually, do you need four secretaries?”

“If there is a student who wants to do it, and the student has the power, we don’t turn them down. We have three treasurers, too—we call them the Three Great Treasurers. It’s the president who decides how many people are at each post, after all. And that’s me.”

I had a feeling she should trim their numbers a bit... And I was surprised to learn that it was the president who decided how many people were at each post. That was a lot of power.

“Well, I hope this proves difficult for you. They say that the sweetest fruits grow in the harshest environments, after all. And I think you could stand to be a bit sweeter!”

She rested her hand on my head.

Oooh! I was going to surpass her one day!

However, it seemed I could not rely on visualization alone.

“I will need another approach...”

“Apologies for having you come out all this way.”

“Oh, it’s fine. It’s an honor that you trust in me, Sister!”

I had called Hialis to meet me at a nearby park for practical training.

I will do whatever it takes to break Wyrmspeed!

“I’m a lot stronger than I used to be, too. I am confident I will not put my name of Bodybreaker Hialis to shame.”

“Are you better at tearing others’ muscles now?”

“I can cause my opponents a terrible onset of muscle pain the day after the match.”

Was there any use to that in battle, then...? I had a slight feeling that was not much more than a nuisance...

No, now was not the time to find fault with these things. I had a wall to surmount!

Indeed, Hialis’s moves were much more decisive than they were in the past.

I believe she might have been able to claim easy victory over me if she were at this level in our first battle. In the academy, we learned the quintessential dragon tactics in battle before soaring into society.

But I had also grown since then!

I swiftly kicked her legs away.

“Ah! Cra—”

Hialis’s lower half was easy to hit. She fell faceup onto the ground.

I quickly straddled her and struck my hand onto the spot beside her head.

“Match.”

Now closer, I looked into her eyes.

“Oh... Ah—”

She did not acknowledge her defeat and instead firmly shut her eyes.

Did she mean to keep going...? But I already was straddling her; how could she possibly turn this around—?

Wait.

This was odd.

Her body seemed...completely ready for me.

What was going on...?

It was like...she was telling me there was no going back if I chose to continue...

Fear crept throughout my body.

But she simply lay beneath my hips, her eyes closed, cheeks flushed...

Why did I hesitate? She couldn't suddenly gain the upper hand from this position...could she?

Regardless, I decided to step back from Hialis.

I sensed that continuing this battle could lead somewhere I did not want to go. And a dragon must trust her instincts. That is what we learned in class.

Hialis sat up. "Oh... I was shocked when I saw you so close to me, Sister... My heart is still pounding..."

"I'm sorry; I believe I'd gotten much too invested into it."

Hialis placed a hand to her chest, looking at me reproachfully. "I was holding my breath, waiting, but you stepped back anyway..."

Then—

A light snapped on in my head.

"...What? What did you say...?"

"Y-you're making me say it again? I was holding my breath. I was waiting for you! You are utterly helpless when it comes to anything besides fighting and studying!"

Yes, but I did have mastery over the literary and military arts, which was perfectly fine and acceptable. But now was not the time for that.

“Thank you for assisting me in my training, Hialis.”

“Oh, are we done already?”

“Yes.” I nodded slowly. “I believe I may be able to defeat Wyrmspeed.”



Voting day for the student council elections finally arrived. Whether the day ended in tears or in joy, this was it.

I passed the first screening, the vote of confidence, with flying colors, and earned the position as eligible candidate for the student council secretaryship.

All I needed to do next was defeat Ricuen during the election battle. This, as well as the vote, would take place in the gymnasium.

Ricuen was already there, waiting for me with her arms folded.

“If I win as the provisional secretary, then you must rescind your declaration that the buffet will be eliminated,” I said.

“Of course. If you win, then that means you have stronger feelings on the matter. I will stand down right away.”

We stared hard at each other.

There were many people here to watch, but they all seemed to be expecting the same outcome.

Considering the situation logically, it was hard to imagine that a first-year student would win against a member of the student council.

The one who stepped out to referee was my very own sister.

She ended up remaining at the seat of student council president again this year. No one considered themselves tough enough to defeat her and take that place from her.

“This battle will decide who gets to remain as secretary. Is that all right with both of you?”

We both nodded.

“Then, begin. Show us a battle worthy of the student council!”

The president lowered her arms, signaling a start ...

But I remained still, glaring at Ricuen.

Ricuen was also on guard, but she did not move.

We both stood still, allowing time to rush past us.

I noticed her expression twitch slightly.

“This first-year... Does she know the wyrmspeed secret...?”

Yes, I have seen through you.

Wyrmspeed was a technique that subdued an enemy with overwhelming speed. At its essence...

...it was an attack that struck as the opponent inhaled!

When animals breathed, they unknowingly opened themselves up for attack.

And breathing was an unavoidable activity, if one wanted to stay alive.

The greatest heroes and even the demon king himself were no exceptions to this rule.

Wyrmspeed, the technique she created, involved seizing on that minuscule window...and cutting her opponent down!

But I would fight without breathing!

That was the answer I found when I had the training session with Hialis.

Hialis should have been defenseless, but I hesitated in my attack against her.

That was because she lacked the natural opening all creatures had.

“—So what? So you can wait without breathing, but you can’t engage in intense activity. Your body will want air when it moves to attack me. I’m too far away for you to hold your breath.”

Ricuen stared deeper into my eyes, a dubious look on her face.

“The moment you move to attack, taking advantage of you will be child’s play. That is when Wyrmspeed strikes!” she declared loudly.

Yes, she was likely correct.

I did not think I would be able to fight against a member of the student council for an extended period without breathing.

On top of that, my concentration would slip as I gasped for breath. At best, I would be simply staving off my defeat for as long as I could just as the battle began.

But could she wait?

Could she wait as I *stood still* and inhaled?

That is right—I breathed while I was not attacking.

In that moment...

...I felt a sudden gush of wind overcome me.

Ricuen was approaching me at wyrmspeed!

She'd made her move!

And so, all I had to do was respond in kind!

"Haaaaaaaaa!"

I thrust out the palm of my hand with all my strength!

My attack was purely instinctive; my mind was clear and empty!

The palm of my hand struck Ricuen's chest.

"Once I knew when you would come, I could train through visualization."

I had thoroughly trained in my counterattack to her, at least.

"M-my...impatience...was the end...of me..." Ricuen crumpled to the ground on the spot.

Indeed—impatience. Had she absolute faith in her wyrmspeed, then she simply needed to wait. Had I attacked first, then she would have had plenty of opportunity to counter me. I would have no way to block it.

However, she was terrified that an enemy who knew the principles of wyrmspeed would attack first. That was why she panicked and took the initiative.

I had decided to end the match before I even moved.

Once I knew when she would attack, I could make an attack of my own, even if I could not visually follow her.

“Once the fight begins, you must continue to believe in your own abilities. You doubted yourself, and so you lose.”

In that moment, my arm was lifted into the air.

My sister, the referee, was raising it up high.

“Laika, first-year, is the winner! You will be our secretary.”

A thunderous cheer broke out around me. I heard people saying, “The buffet is saved!”

But my elder sister always went overboard, and she immediately pulled me into a tight embrace.

“Congrats, Laika. Welcome to the student council!”

“U-um... Why are you...?”

I heard cheers and some cries again, but they sounded different than last time...

“This is my own personal heaven.”

“Stop this at once!” I cried.

“Whyyy? I hug you at home sometimes, too!”

“Yes, but this is school!”

And she humiliated me in front of quite a lot of people...

O-oh, it's no bother... So long as the buffet remains safe...



Incidentally, after her defeat to me, Ricuen remained in the student council.

Leila created a new post, subsecretary, and offered Ricuen the position on the condition that she would not again propose that the buffet be abolished. In practice, there were five secretaries now. The council president's power was quite fearsome, considering she could even establish new posts...

When I first entered the student council room after the match, Ricuen

appeared just inches away from the tip of my nose.

“Y-you’re quite close...”

“I will be doing my best to support you as subsecretary, newbie. And be ready, because I will be teaching you all I know about your secretary duties.”

She was certainly a hard worker.

“I understand, but...please, could you step back a bit?”

“But this way, you must concentrate on what I’m saying, whether you like it or not.”

No, there was an acceptable range for all things. I could smell her, and it was making me anxious...

But then, an idea came to me.

I seem to recall that I had closed in at a similar distance when I was training with Hialis...

I see. It is difficult to remain calm when another person is within a certain proximity.

I will be more careful to practice restraint, I promised myself.

“Here, the secretary’s guidebook. Read this first.”

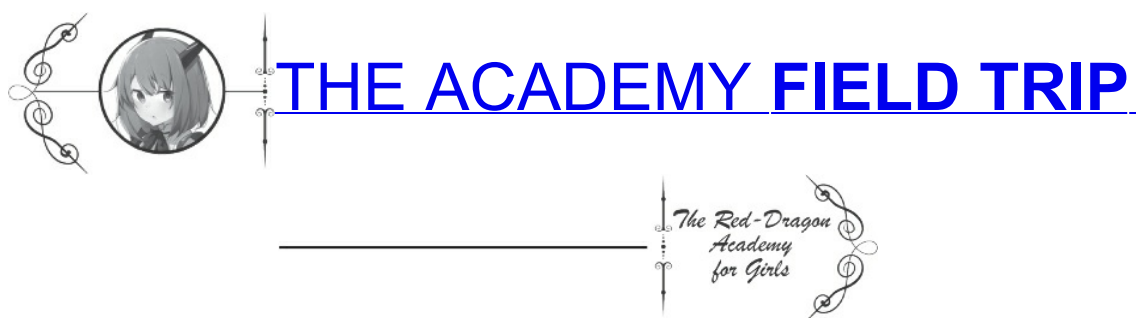
A booklet covered my view.

“I will make sure you do your job well. I will not allow you to quit simply because you saved the buffet. How unbecoming would that be?”

I stared at Ricuen’s unsmiling face, and a thought occurred to me.

Was I being forced to work in the student council just for our all-you-can-eat buffet?

I suppose winning the battle didn’t guarantee that all would end well...



A cup of tea and a plate of macarons were placed before me on the table.

“You’re slowing down, Miss Secretary.” Ricuen was gazing at me coolly. I believe that was her natural affect, but even setting that aside, it made me uneasy.

“My apologies, I’m not yet used to clerical work... And you did not need to serve me any tea. You are the older one here.”

“I am a subsecretary. I am being kept in the student council on the pretext that I am to assist the secretaries. I must do what I have to do,” she said, her expression unchanging.

Was this some sort of elaborate hazing ritual...?

We were in the student council room.

The heart, one could say, of the entire academy for girls.

I was the only first-year student in here. Even though I was here as a result of my victory to preserve the buffet we had in the cafeteria, the weight sat heavy on my shoulders, and I felt very small.

“You must be having a rough time, Laika. It reminds me of when I first became president.”

A voice came from the president’s chair.

It was my elder sister, Leila—boss of this room, boss of the entire academy.

“Is that so? I was under the impression that you took on the position with great dignity the moment you got it back in first year,” Airshock Temiyainu, the

Vice President of the West and another fourth-year student in the same grade as my sister, pointed out.

She wore her hair in braids long enough to touch the floor.

“Well, right when I became student council president, I literally didn’t know anything at all. Everyone else was older; it was terrifying. I felt so small. I still dream about it sometimes.”

“Your seniors had ten times as many nightmares about you back then, Leila,” Temiyainu quipped, and the other members of the council chuckled.

There were two vice presidents: one of the west and one of the east. The Vice President of the East was another fourth-year student, Rubiaflash Sadie. There were quite a lot of people in this council...

Then entered Direwolf Etigra of general affairs, carrying a crate filled to the brim with fruit.

“Everyone, my family sent over some high-quality apples and grapes. You’re welcome to have some if you like!”

A few members delightedly accepted this while others discussed accompanying drinks.

“We must put the tea on!”

“Why not make it apple tea?”

I continued my work after that, but Temiyainu snatched up all my papers.

“Come, newbie, you mustn’t cut into teatime. You need to nourish your heart, otherwise you will not be able to do good work.”

“Oh, all right... I will join you, if I may... Since I’m the only first-year here, I will prepare the—”

“No, that is Paulownia Tokinen’s job. She’s a treasurer. Relax.”

I then heard some very elegant giggles.

This social atmosphere was so difficult to deal with!

My work was going rather slowly, both because I had not quite gotten the hang of it yet and also because this environment was not suited for clerical

work at all.

And on top of that, as everyone graciously spent their teatime...

They were all prickling with bloodlust!

Temiyainu, who had invited me to tea, was said to demolish her opponents by using her long braid as a morning star. Even if she were surrounded by a force of dozens, I could imagine her mowing them all down single-handedly.

The others had started to call her Airshock Temiyainu because of how her braid seemed to dance in the air.

Tokinen the treasurer, the one who was preparing our tea, fought with a sword made from paulownia wood, but it was so big that it required two full arms to hold it. And that is how she became known as Paulownia Tokinen.

Everyone in here was a battle specialist.

I shivered, feeling a sudden chill. I was like an elf trying to do work in the cage of a fearsome beast.

No, I should take this as a positive. There was no better place for me to grow and mature. By forging myself here, I will become an exemplary dragon.

I partook in the tea and fruit as those thoughts ran through my head.

But once teatime was over...

“Now it’s time for your next job, Miss Secretary.” Ricuen brought over some documents.

“But I’m not finished with my current work...”

“You will sometimes have multiple projects. Get used to it.”

If she said so. First, I would see what this was all about and then confirm if I could leave it for later.

It struck me as strange when I first looked at the documents.

They were written in rather bubbly writing, you see. Almost as though it was deliberately trying to mimic a child’s writing.

And it read:

“Field...trip?”

“Yes, a field trip. The first project you will have is taking the first-years on a safe and successful field trip. Here are all the plans from the other field trips in the past. Use them as reference to create a plan and submit it to the president.”

“Is this not something the teachers decide?”

Leila spoke up from her president’s chair. “Our school gives us a lot of independence, Laika.”

Work was work, but I quietly steeled myself.

This field trip problem was my enemy now.

And if an enemy stood before me, I had no choice but to face it and strike it down!



On the ground, I could see the humans running around in panic over something.

Ah, let them be. I know we sent notices to all the human offices.

Right now, all the red-dragon first-year students, including myself, were in our original dragon form and soaring across the sky.

We were headed for Lake Gujo, a wide lake in the lowlands.

Not only did it sit in a place where humans did not typically venture, but it had lovely scenery and was a different climate to the one red dragons lived in, so it was the perfect spot.

But...it was not the first place I chose. My elder sister had vetoed idea after idea of mine until she finally approved this spot...

No, she had not been purposefully hard on me or anything of the sort. She gave me good reasons for her rejections, such as, “A human council is in charge of this area, so they won’t approve” or “This coincides with a festival the dwarves are throwing.” But I did sometimes get upset knowing my sister would shoot my ideas down.

Regardless, I was glad to see the first-year students having fun.

Everyone was darting freely through the skies in their dragon forms. I was hoping the high energy would not lead to any fire-breathing, however.

Lake Gujo was truly beautiful, but it was empty.

Perhaps it was a given, though, considering that we couldn't take field trips to inhabited areas.

When we landed at the shore of Lake Gujo, we took on our human forms.

It was a large lake, but it would not be enough for all of us in dragon form. More importantly, we might ruin the landscape. If my trip dealt a blow to the academy's reputation, then my sister would give me a good scolding.

When the teachers saw that we had safely reached Lake Gujo, they returned to the academy. I would be the one in charge for the rest of the trip. The students had a great amount of autonomy. Perhaps, strictly speaking, it was my sister in the student council who had all the power.

I had to stand in front of everyone and give out pointers, as well.

I hated all the attention on me, but...thinking of it as work made it easier to get through.

"Good morning, everyone. I am Laika, student council secretary. I have some things to talk to you about."

I could hear some students talking. "It's Laika! The only first-year councilmember!"

"She really is handsome."

"No matter how long I look at her, she's still beautiful."

"This gives me hope for our futures."

"Excuse me! Please refrain from talking! This is a part of our learning environment, so please exercise moderation and do not topple any trees or burn down the forest," I said, but the students kept talking. It felt like whenever I said something, it only added fuel to the fires of conversation...

Ooh, what should I do? I did not want to start this field trip off by yelling at them and dampening the mood...

Then Hialis rushed up to my side. “If we cause problems, then Laika will be the one to take the heat for us. You don’t want to get Laika in trouble, do you? So we need to keep the horseplay and the jokes to a minimum, okay? Does that make sense?”

Then I heard people saying “I’ll do it for Laika” and “I don’t want Laika to be upset.”

The noise was not getting any quieter, but it seemed my intentions had reached them.

“Be especially careful of your fire, okay? The punishment for starting fires in this province is hefty. Understand?”

Everyone nodded.

Hialis then glanced over at me and whispered, “Tell them we’re done here, Sister.”

“Oh, ah... Th-that’s all! Please be sure to be back on time!”

Everyone scattered. My first job was finished.

I bowed my head to Hialis. “Thank you. It was you who kept them together.”

“It’s my job to do your work for you, Sister,” she announced confidently—but then her demeanor shifted to that of a mother scolding her child. “You’re so bad at asking for help. You’re a part of the student council now, so you need to start learning how to use others so you can get things done. This is different from visualizing things on your own.”

“Ah... I understand what you’re saying, but I am hesitant to use someone else...”

“Well, you can’t be the errand girl for other people now. This is a trial for you to overcome! Think of it as a part of your growth!”

“Oh, are you...mad at me?”

“I am. You are helpless in certain situations, after all. I’ll just have to look after you all the way until graduation! Come now, let’s go!” Hialis tugged on my hand.

“What? Where are we going?”

“You haven’t even thought about your plans for fun, have you?”

“You...are correct.”

I’d had my hands full with planning the logistics of the field trip, and I was not sure what exactly I should do to relax.

“So I’ll figure them out for you. First, they have a boat rental over there, so let’s do laps around the lake!”

Hialis’s face was full of life.

Her expressions changed so quickly and easily, much like the other students at the academy, I mused as I allowed Hialis to pull me along.

When Hialis and I boarded the boat, we gracefully rowed ourselves around the lake about fifteen times.

We had gone at a bit of a faster pace, but this was normal for a dragon.

“You’re doing great, Sister. Leisurely enjoying the scenery instead of flying around isn’t so bad.”

“Indeed. I’m thankful we have such great weather.”

“I think it’s because you’re such a hard worker, Sister.”

“Which means that it would have been my fault if it were raining. That’s quite the scare.”

“Aw, come on! You’re so mean! You never take my compliments earnestly!”

In a dramatic display, Hialis puffed out her cheeks with a smile.

This was a wonderful way to spend the time.

Our rowboat glided along the lake surface, ripples trailing behind us, but the scenery around us did not change one bit. Birds gathered at the lake’s edge, cawing with delight.

“When we’re done with the boat, we should rent some fishing gear and go fishing, Sister.”

“I don’t think I could put the worm on the hook... I have never liked slimy,

wriggly things...”

“Then I’ll do it for you. It’s not too bad once you get used to it. Worms are dwarfish, powerless creatures. There is nothing to be afraid of. Dragons can easily topple worms the size of a tree, after all.”

“No, I do not like them because I do not think I can win against them.”

At the boat rental hut, we also rented some fishing tackle. It seemed as though this little shop took on all things related to tourism in this area single-handedly.

It was the first time I had ever fished in my life, but I managed to catch a trout whose scales shone like a rainbow.

“Ah, I caught one! Isn’t it rather big?”

“That’s beginner’s luck for you, Sister. Congratulations!”

“But...how am I supposed to get it off the hook...?”

Though I had managed to reel it onto land, I felt no desire to try and catch a flopping fish.

“Do you not like fish, either?” Hialis had both her hands on her hips in astonishment.

“Yes, fish appear quite slimy, you see... And that means there is no good place to hold on to it...”

“That’s a bit of a stretch. You can just say you’re viscerally repulsed by them.” With a wry smile, she dexterously removed the trout from the hook. “There are a surprising number of things you can’t handle, Sister.”

“I have never claimed otherwise.”

I vaguely remembered my elder sister toying with me when I was young. She was much more dynamic than I had been. This was a bad example, but she could slither her way into a circle of people like a slimy fish and immediately open up to all of them.

“That is true. And I’m glad that you’re still sticking around with me, Sister.”

That was a strange thing for Hialis to say.

“I don’t think it’s a question of will. We see each other every day at the academy.”

“But people in the student council are special.”

A sad smile crossed Hialis’s face.

I wanted to tell her I did not want to be special, but I had a feeling that I couldn’t convince her that I was no different from anyone else.

And when I looked at Hialis, she seemed to believe she had done something wrong.

“I...I’ll always be your sister!”

I declared.

“...Okay. I’ll never forget that.”

Hialis nodded, her face flushed.

Her sad demeanor was gone now, so I considered it mission accomplished.

Our fishing was over in a blink of an eye, and it was time for lunch.

Hialis and I set out our lunch on a shoreside patch of grass.

The boat rental house grilled the trout for us, and it sat on a plate.

“I brought a five-stack lunch box,” Hialis said.

“What? Five stacks? Will that be enough? Are you on a diet?”

The lunch box I was using was seven stacks, the one my mother used when she was a girl. Though one part of it had once broken and was repaired, it was still sturdy and made of bamboo.

“This is enough for me, so long as you’re around. I know I can always get a tiny share of yours.”

“What share?”

I soon came to understand what she meant.

“Please have my fried egg, Laika.” “I have extra sausages for you.”

The students began to approach me and offer me parts of their lunch.

“Um, I appreciate it, but...I don’t like being the sole recipient, so please take something from my lunch...”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that.”

“I fried this all myself, though!”

They did not accept this; bit by bit, food began to fill the empty spaces in my lunch box.

It was not people from my own class, either; those from other classes had even formed a line to give me food.

As I sat bewildered, Hialis was chuckling beside me. As though she had no part in this herself.

“You’re like a tax collector, Sister.”

“That’s a horrible example.”

“But they’re all giving you things out of respect. Turning them down would be rude.”

As she said, everyone did seem delighted to be giving me things.

“Everyone sees how hard you work. This whole field trip today was your plan, wasn’t it?”

“I have not announced that I was the one who planned all this, yet it seems everyone knows.”

“They want to show their appreciation. You shouldn’t feel bad about accepting that.”

I suppose I should be happy that I was being thanked in such a manner.

“I understand. I will take what I can.”

A cheer came from the line of people.

The line to give me food lasted for a little while afterward.

The last girl said to me, “The people in the student council always seemed so distant, but you’re so friendly and approachable.”

I must be doing something right, then—the members of my grade did not

think of me as a burden, and in fact, they found me amicable.

The student gave me a piece of meat that had been cut into a cube.

The long line had finally cleared; no one else was waiting for me.

“What should we do for the afternoon, Sister? We could take a nap once we’re done eating. The weather is perfect for that.”

“It’s not a bad idea, but what if I sleep too long and miss the time we’re supposed to meet? I do not want to neglect my duties.”

“Then you can rest your head on my lap. I’ll wake you up so you can rest easy.”

“Will you? My elder sister used to let me rest my head on her lap, too.”

“You made the president be your pillow? You are the most powerful person in the world, Sister.”

“Oh, stop. If anything, it was my sister who insisted I—”

That moment, the bright and sunny sky suddenly darkened.

Had clouds come to cover the sun? No, we had not seen any clouds that could have drifted this way when we were flying over.

Was that a flock of roc birds in the sky?

No—those were dragons.

And their scales were pale blue ...

This was the worst-case scenario—blue dragons!

Blue dragons were the natural opposite of the red dragons; they had come to attack us a number of times in the past.

The dragons landed nearby, took on their human forms, and approached us.

The one leading the pack was familiar to me—Flatorte, their commander.

She was, in a way, my elder sister’s rival; I had seen the two fighting on a number of occasions.

Put another way, she was a contender on my sister’s level. I could not defeat her in battle...

“Heard some red dragons found their way into blue-dragon territory, but look at all of you. Weak. Too weak to even be any fun.”

I see... So this was a place the blue dragons frequented.

Perhaps that was why this place had been so empty.

All the red dragons were shaking.

“Flatorte, beating these kids in a fight won’t make for a good story. Let’s go back.”

“All we did was show up, and now they’re about to cry.”

“Aww, look at their sad faces.”

As shameful as it would be, I honestly wished they would do just that. Then this incident would only be a brief unpleasant moment.

But things never went as smoothly as they should.

Flatorte found me. “Hey, you’re Leila’s little sister. And that uniform’s the same as the one Leila wears to school. So if we capture you, then Leila might show up. It’ll be a huge battle!”

“You’re right!”

“You’re so smart, Flatorte!”

“I didn’t know that was an option!”

This was bad! I couldn’t let the others get dragged into this!

“Wait!” I stepped forward to stand before Flatorte. “If your aim is to summon Leila, then face me, her younger sister. Consider the match finished if you manage to catch me. Do not lay a hand on any of the other students. We red dragons will place our pride on the line and accept any challenge proposed to us. But we do not engage in barbaric squabbles. Do not involve us in this!” I stated, placing a hand to my chest.

Though I was a newcomer, I knew I had to play my part as a member of the student council and protect everyone else!

I stared hard into Flatorte’s eyes, hoping I had convinced her.

“...”

Perhaps Flatorte’s silence meant she was examining whether what I said was true.

“...What you said was too complicated for me to understand, but a fight’s a fight, right?”

She did not understand!

“If we’ve got a reason to go all out, then that’s what we do. That’s all. C’mon, guys, you’re fighting with me!”

The blue dragons’ wild cheers and my classmates’ screams filled the air.

Flatorte was still staring at me; she could not move carelessly because of that.

“You’re the strongest one here. I could tell right away.”

“Did you think I was strong simply because I’m Leila’s little sister?”

This dragon has been desperately trying to keep up with Leila as well; I doubted she saw me as anything more than her little sister.

Though it bothered me, I suppose it was natural from the perspective of skill.

“Nah, instinct.”

“Your instinct?!”

“I, the great Flatorte, have sharp intuition. If there’s a fork in the road, and I don’t know if I’m supposed to go left or right, I’ll let my instincts decide. I’m usually right fifty percent of the time.”

“That is a rather pedestrian probability...”

“Details! I’ll show you the best battle you’ve ever had!” Flatorte rushed at me.

Though she called it a battle, she was wasting so much energy on her movements. She was like a drunken ruffian.

But she attacked much faster than I could, and she sent kick after kick in my direction. Her movements were terribly inefficient, but they were also quite quick.

I stuck out my knee to guard; I thought I had successfully blocked the blow.

But...

I staggered.

Flatorte's tail had whipped out to entangle my other leg.

That's right! Unlike red dragons, blue dragons kept their tails when they took on human form... I needed to keep that in mind as I fought!

Will she step in after I've fallen to deal a punch?

I could use both hands still, so I would not be hit so easily.

But as the possibility entered my mind, Flatorte opened her mouth.

A midwinter blizzard blasted my whole being! A cold breath attack at point-blank range!

This was the unique skill of the blue dragons, who lived in frigid regions!

Oh dear... My body went numb with cold, and my movements slowed.

"Oh, what's wrong? What's wrong, huh? Make it interesting; attack me more!" She then kicked me several times in rapid succession.

I managed to put some distance between us...but she had the upper hand right from the start.

"Ha, you red dragons always have to come up with stupid reasons to fight. You sure you're not weaker 'cause you've decided to adopt culture from those dumb humans? A fight's a fight. You make too much of it, your instinct goes dull. See? You couldn't dodge my tail or my cold breath."

"Rgh... You waste so much energy, yet I let my guard down."

"I don't waste anything. I, the great Flatorte, only make the attacks I think are best. That's how I climbed to the top of the blue dragons."

What she said was strangely convincing.

If she was so used to squabbling in this manner that the path she believed in had become the most effective choice...then maybe she was an outstanding warrior in her own right!

My opponent had outmatched her enemies by honing her instincts!

But if the enemy had her own form, then this became a true competition.

This was no ordinary squabble but a match against the art of battle that was street fighting!

I would accept this challenge and grow.

“Hey, your eyes changed. That’s how Leila used to look at me.”

“The distractions will hold you back if you think of my sister too much,” I said.

For some reason, Flatorte snickered. “I, the great Flatorte, can only think of the enemy in front of me. Don’t worry. I won’t spend our fight thinking about the next dragon I’m gonna beat up.”

“Then you have no excuses if you lose against me!”

It was my turn to rush forward.

Now I would be getting a fresh start!

If her strategy was rough-and-tumble battle...then I would pour all the battle tactics I had cultivated thus far into our fight!

We had fought to what was essentially a stalemate.

Several of my hits had connected. Flatorte’s defense was sloppy; it was hard to call her blocks perfect by any means.

But perhaps saying we were on equal footing was a bit much... She had the upper hand. She paid no mind to any of my hits that connected with her and moved to attack me.

The biggest nuisance was her tail.

Red dragons did not have them; though this was a one-on-one fight, it would move independently of her arms and legs and attack me when I got close, so I felt as if I was fighting two on one anyway.

If this were to drag on too long, I would be the first to wipe out...

“Oh yeah, you said something about distractions, right?” Flatorte sneered. “I’m going to shoot that right back at you.”

“What do you mean?”

“All you can think about is your red-dragon friends. And that distraction is making your reactions slower!”

She saw right through me.

She was right. I could hear my classmates’ voices all around me, so I could not fight with an empty mind.

Not only that, but I was the only first-year student in the student council. I was responsible for protecting everyone else...

“Heh, hard to understand what you think you’re doing if all that weight is just making you weaker.” She sneered again. “A free Flatorte is stronger than a weakling and her obligations!”

Flatorte rushed at me again. Was she going to use her cold breath? Or was it going to be a physical attack?

She attacked with both her tail and her fist at the same time!

“Double strike! Doing whatever you want, whenever you want, is the style of the great Flatorte!”

And so, she darted right into my personal space, inhaling for another breath attack.

This was the closest I’d been to the source of the blizzard thus far!

I quickly lost feeling in my hands. *Oh no... If the rest of my body goes numb, she will flatten me...*

“You underestimate us, Sister!”

A cry reached my ears.

It was Hialis.

Though we were in the middle of a fight, there was a plea in her eyes.

“We’re academy students, too. Proud red dragons! We will get over this small hurdle! You have to use all your strength and win, too!”

“Exactly!”

“We won’t lose!”

“We’re red dragons; we’ll hang in there!”

I could hear the voices coming from all around me.

Ah, I’m sorry, everyone.

I had turned you all into burdens to be carried.

But you are all proud classmates of mine.

And I had to manage my own situation first before I could take on others’ weight. It was time to concentrate on the enemy before me.

“We will win, Sister, I swear it! You don’t need to worry about us at all! Don’t insult us! I’ll give you very sore muscles if you do!”

Hialis’s voice calmed me.

“I have so many people on my side that I cannot lose.”

And...I dove right into her breath!

“What?!” Flatorte exclaimed in amazement, cutting off the frigid flow.

She never expected I would walk right into it.

I trusted my instincts, too.

I would choose the best method of attack! Even if it was illogical, I would trust in it!

And I breathed fire on her at point-blank range! *How do you like that?!*

“Dammit! That’s hot! That’s so hot!”

Such a simple idea left Flatorte wide open.

My hands did not stop—I moved straight into a punch.

Her tail whipped toward me to attack...but I paid it no mind and sent my fist flying!

This was a fight. I did not care if I got injured.

It didn’t matter, so long as I wounded my enemy more!

It did hurt, but I felt the tides had turned in my favor. Something in the air had changed. There was a gust of wind pushing me forward.

This was a battle among multiple people, an entanglement of all their hopes and intentions.

If all of us red dragons believed we had the upper hand; if all the blue dragons believed they were losing...

Then that would truly turn the tides of this fight!

I fought freely, with fire and kicks together.

The fire blocked my vision and made me less effective. Not even the youngest of red dragons fought like this.

But Flatorte was unable to predict I would attack in such a way, and she could not block me!

“Dammit! You’re all over the place! *Grr*, come on!” she complained.

All I had to do was keep pushing!

“I’ll freeze you to the bone!” she shouted.

Now she was going to use her cold breath—but I kicked at the ground first.

Clumps of black earth got into her mouth.

“Peh! Bleh! What are you doing?!”

“There are no rules in a tussle!” I let my fist fly as Flatorte’s fighting spirit withered away.

I grabbed her arm with my left hand and punched with my right. This was my own way of brawling!

“Dammit! Stop, stop!”

“How can I?!”

Everyone else could tell I was on the offensive now.

“You can do this!” they called.

“We’d never lose to you!”

“I’m right here if you need any help!”

The tide was indeed turning in our favor! I could also tell that everyone else

was putting up a good fight.

At last, several of the blue dragons began suggesting they retreat.

In some places, my classmates were teaming up to face the enemy in two-on-ones or three-on-twos. This was a full-on brawl, so there was no strict need to go one-on-one.

“Crap! This shit sucks! I’m going home! C’mon, guys!”

The blue dragons took on their dragon forms and left, with Flatorte at the helm.

The red dragons were victorious.

“We made it through...” I sat down on the grass and sighed.

I had breathed so many flames that the inside of my mouth felt hot.

The rest of my classmates formed a circle around me.

Due to the fight, some of their uniforms were dirtied or even torn; we would be scolded for poorly representing the academy.

But everyone looked proud.

Hialis stepped forward. “We’ve gotten a lot stronger, Sister. You see that clearly now, right?”

“Of course. I will need your aid in the future.”

“But we only won because of you.”

Hialis pulled tightly on my hand, and I staggered to my feet. “It’s time to celebrate!”

The rest of my classmates closed in around me.

“Huh? What are you doing? Will you tell me...?”

“I just came up with it now, so of course not!”

“You rule, Laika!”

“Hip, hip, hurray!”

“You’re the star of the first-years, Laika!”

And for some reason, all my classmates lifted me up and started tossing me into the air. And since they were all dragons, I was thrown to the height of the tallest tree.

I believe that was the first time in a long while that I had been up so high in my human form.

My heart suddenly felt free of its chains.

“Ah, and the weather today was perfect,” I murmured as I reached the apex.

The End



AFTERWORD

It's good to see you again! This is Kisetu Morita!

Volume 12—that's a dozen. My house is full of my books.

I believe those who have also purchased these books (physically, not as e-books) will have their houses full of them as well. I am truly thankful you are dedicating space to my humble self.

Now, we have lots of things to talk about this time.

First: The anime is currently in production!

Well, I suppose that's a given considering the anime adaptation was announced around the time the previous volume was published. Lots of things are taking shape! I can't talk to you about scheduling or specifically what kind of work is taking place now in detail, but to put it abstractly, there are some jokes that only work in the medium of anime.

That really *is* abstract... I know I'll be able to talk about it one day, so please be patient! Lots of things are happening either way!

This volume was also sold alongside a special edition that contained the fourth drama CD.

In this drama CD, we hear, for the first time, Riho Sugiyama as Rosalie and Azumi Waki as Flatorte!

You'll be able to hear these two in the anime, of course, but if you purchased the standard version and can't wait until then, then please get the next one!

You know what that means... You're correct! We will be making a fifth drama CD!

The fifth volume will go on sale alongside Volume 14 in October 2020!

The demon king, Pecora, will be making her appearance in that one! Well, she

will be plotting something, at least!

I believe those who are good at reading between the lines have figured out where this is going by now.

That's right—Pecora's voice actress hasn't been announced yet.

Who could it be?! Those who are dying to know should get the fifth drama CD!

Next, I'd like to talk about the comic adaptation.

Yusuke Shiba has presently sold six volumes of the manga!

Meishi Murakami's adaptation of the spin-off *I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1,500 Years, and the Demon King Made Me a Minister* has also sold its second volume! I know I always say this, but that's such a long title! Thank you so much for your hard work!

And—and—and—

We will be adapting another spin-off into manga form!

The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls is getting a comic! Ta-daa!

Hitsujibako will be drawing! It should begin serialization in spring/early summer of 2020!

The world of *Slimes* continues to expand! Your support on this project would be sincerely appreciated!

Next is something I am mostly personally happy about.

The tenth volume of the *Slimes* novels is going into its second printing!

This is the first time in my life that a novel of mine in the double digits is getting another run. I am so, so thankful.

The number of books printed is calculated on a balance between supply and demand, reprints aside. And Volumes 1 and 2 of a series can sometimes sell way more than estimated, so it's often that they get reprints.

But the more volumes a series has, the more the hard numbers and estimations of readers who purchase the volumes tend to drop off. There aren't a lot of people who think, *I'm going to start this series at Volume 7!* you see.

Which means that the more volumes, the less chance they have of getting reprints.

So...it is honestly amazing and delightful that Volume 10 is getting a second run. That explanation was a little long, but just know that the creator is beyond happy!

And now, thanks for this volume.

Benio, thank you so much for the absolutely wonderful cover illustration! The stories are generally slow and relaxing, but the cover makes it seem like there's an emotional climax somewhere in here, so I feel like we're fooling people with our covers. But it'd be a huge problem if we suddenly lost our gentle and chill world, so I'd like to keep going as I have been. And I'm so sorry to make you work extra hard, considering how many new characters there were... There will probably be more in the future, though... I can't wait to see what you do with them!

I would also like to thank all my readers! Truly, no words can express how thankful I am that you have followed me for twelve volumes. We have more comic adaptations now, and the range of expression for *Slimes* continues to widen, so I hope to introduce more kinds of scenes, like the ghost ship in this volume, in the novels.

See you in the thirteenth volume!

Kisetsu Morita



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