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Kisetsu Morita

Illustration by Benio



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

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I've Been Killing SLIMES for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level
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16
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Come along, an' we'll take the world by storm wiv comedy!
Her Majesty is getting carried away again...


Elven Apothecary
Halkara
Demon King
Pecora
Ghost Girl
Rosalie
High-ranking Demon
Beelzebub
©Benio


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GODDESS
CHRONICLES
II
HERO
AZUSA

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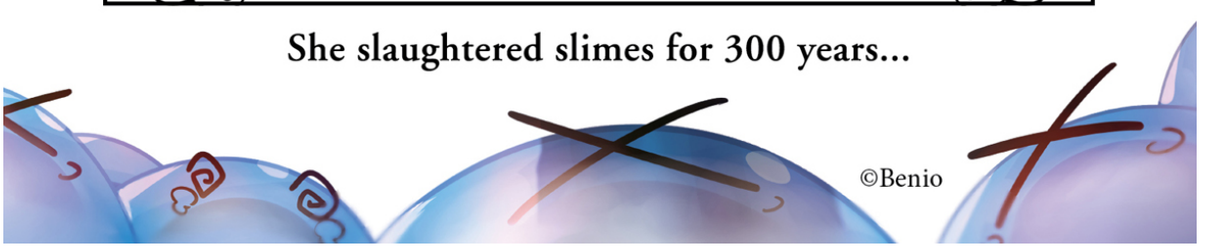
SPIN-OFF

The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls

The **Trials** of a New Student Council

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 16



Kisetsu Morita

Illustration by Benio

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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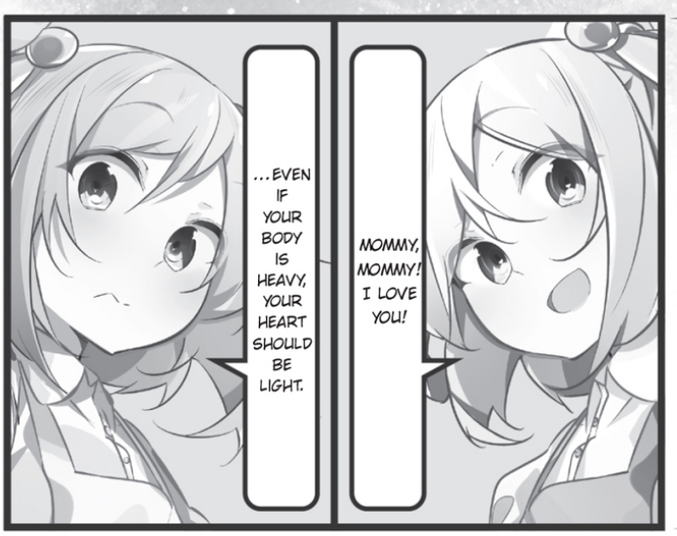
AZUSA AIZAWA

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.





BEELZEBUB

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.

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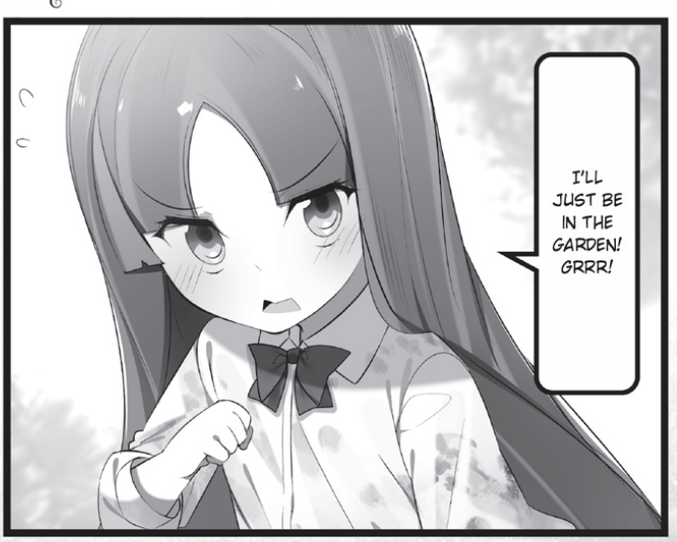
FLATORTE

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

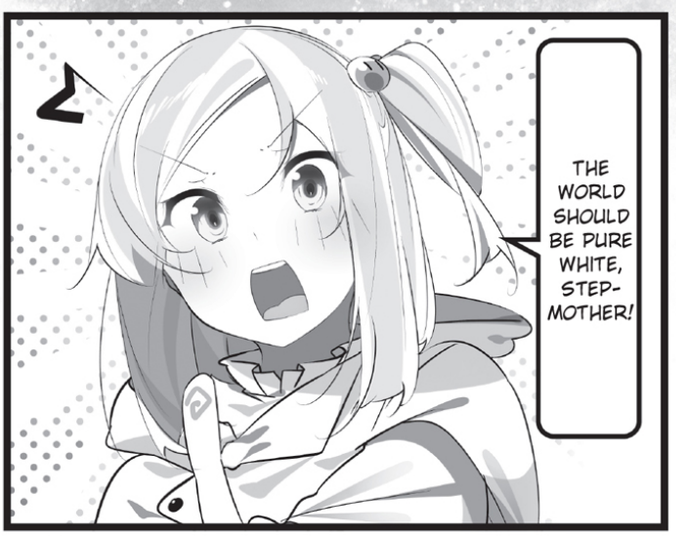
A ghost girl and resident of the house in the highlands. She's devoted to Azusa, who didn't shy away from her as a ghost and instead reached out to her. She can go through walls but can't touch people. She can also possess others.





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.



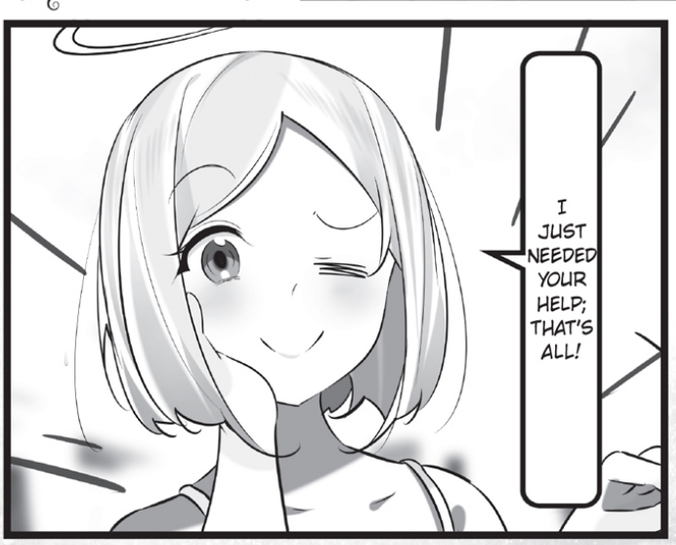
WYNONA

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

PECORA
(PROVATO PECORA ARIÉS)

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





GOODLY GODLY GODNESS

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

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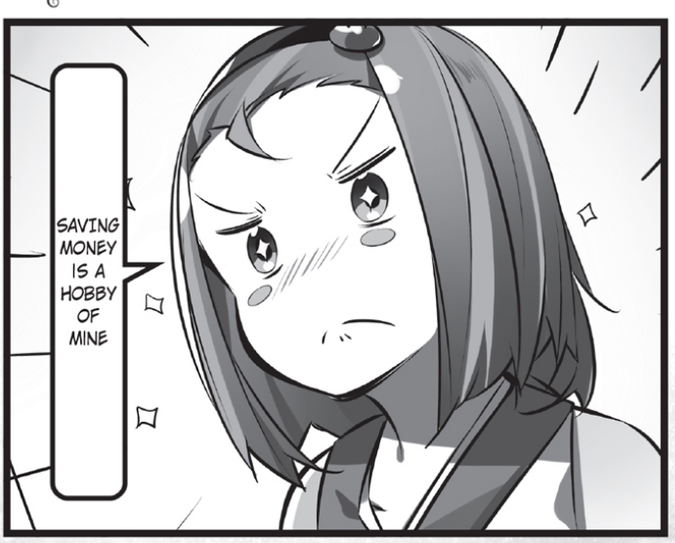
MUUM MUUM

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.

ENO

The immortal Witch of the Grotto, who reveres Azusa as her senior. Though she has superior potion-making skills, she was making little progress since she didn't like other people seeing her put in effort, but then Azusa reasoned with her, and she changed her ways. She's active, but she sometimes butts heads with Halkara, who's in the same industry.



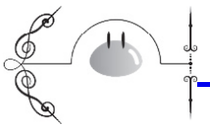


FIGHSLY

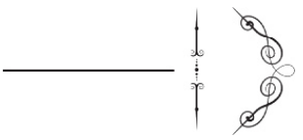
A Fighter Slime who took the form of a human to master martial arts. She wants to become the strongest martial artist ever with her Fighsly-style slime fist, but she has a less-noble love of money. Currently training as Beelzebub's apprentice.

©Benio





WE ENTERED A **COMEDY CONTEST**



Thanks to a recent excursion with Pecora, I had (to my chagrin) started watching magic streams on a regular basis. Dinnertime in particular had turned into magic streaming time, with Falfa and Shalsha spending most of our mealtimes glued to the screen.

“Aaall right! We’ve tried a lot of different foods today. It looks like the human standard for ultra-hot barely has any kick at all by demon standards! We’re still second to none when it comes to spicy food!” said Pecora. An image of her sitting before a plate of some bright-red cuisine was being beamed onto our dining room wall.

Falfa and Shalsha, meanwhile, were watching with keen interest, occasionally throwing in an “Oh?” or a “Huh,” but otherwise staying totally silent. I was almost impressed by how focused the two of them were. Even Sandra, who didn’t eat, had come inside to join us and watch along.

Hmm… Is this the part where I should tell them it’s rude to watch TV while you eat?

It was tempting, but on the other hand, I used to watch anime while I was eating all the time when I was a kid, and that was barely any different. Plus, I knew the magic streamers my daughters watched were putting a ton of work into making content that would captivate their viewers. Maybe instead of treating them like a nuisance, it would be better for me to praise them for the remarkable effort they put into their work?

There was just one thing that made my daughters’ new habit different from my own childhood proclivities, though: They’d stopped eating. Eating with a TV on nearby wasn’t strange by

any means—plenty of restaurants back in my old world kept TVs or radios on at lunchtime, after all—but I'd certainly never focused so intently on a show that I couldn't keep eating.

There was an easy explanation for that difference. People of my generation had spent their whole lives developing the skill to remain somewhat focused on our food despite the distraction, so doing that was like second nature to us. My daughters, on the other hand, had spent a minimum of fifty years never having had the chance to eat with a show on in the background at all. In short: They hadn't developed the skills to keep eating while a magic stream was on!

Maybe even a Japanese person would have a hard time watching and eating at the same time if they suddenly got a TV in their dining room for the first time in their fifties?

…Or so I wondered for a moment, but the counterexample of Laika and Flatorte was staring me in the face. They seemed to have no trouble keeping their focus on their meal with the stream on, still scooping with their spoons and munching on their bread without pausing for a moment.

Maybe it's just a personal thing? One way or another, it's definitely not good to completely stop eating mid-meal.

The one problem was that I had no idea how to go about telling that to my daughters.

Hmm. This is a tough one… Telling them it's rude probably isn't a good idea. Magic streaming's a super-recent innovation in this world, so "no TV at dinner" definitely hasn't made its way into established manners yet. Maybe I should say watching streams is fine, but if they do it during our mealtimes, they have to make sure not to let their food get cold?

While I was mulling over my options, however…

"Watch out, Falfa and Shalsha! If you don't eat up, your food's going to get cold, you know? Don't forget to keep eating so you can enjoy it!"

…Halkara swooped in to point out the issue in a very tactful sort of way.

"Okaaay, Big Sis Halkara," said Falfa.

"Excuse me. I was too absorbed in the stream," said Shalsha.

Ooh, look at that! Those two are so cooperative. Maybe I

should've let myself be more casual about pointing it out? I might be a little too fixated on educating them when it comes to these things.

"Thanks, Halkara," I said.

"Oh, it was nothing! And I know how hard it is to eat and watch when you're not used to it," Halkara replied.

"Huh? Does that mean you've done this before?" *That's weird—last time I checked, this world doesn't have TVs or radios!*

"Well, I'm the president of a company, so I have to listen to reports from my subordinates during my lunch all the time! I don't even know how many meals I ate like that before I moved here."

"I get it now!"

I guess that'd be more like the president of a huge company eating a sandwich while working on their computer?

Sure, company presidents probably ate out with clients at fancy restaurants sometimes, but not for every meal. Grabbing a simple sandwich to eat while they worked was probably closer to a typical meal for those people.

Halkara's behavior struck me as similar. She seemed like the type who'd casually eat while listening to her subordinates' reports, professionalism be damned. In fact, I had a hard time imagining her putting in any real effort to keep up appearances.

Anyway, although Falfa and Shalsha hadn't quite mastered the technique, they were at least trying to eat now. It seemed watching magic streams during dinnertime wouldn't be a problem in the long run.

Huh? Come to think of it, Pecora just had the last of the spicy dishes she was going to eat, right? Shouldn't her stream be wrapping up by now?

As it turned out, the answer was no. Pecora was still chatting away even though her main event had wrapped up.

"You know, getting all this food ready was a lot harder than you might think! We had it brought in by wyvern, and most of the stews spilled en route!"

I guess being able to take your time and talk about whatever you feel like is a strength of magic streaming. You can tack an extra fifteen minutes onto an hour-long broadcast, no problem.

“By the way, the day after tomorrow, I’ll be pulling a *great* prank on my minister of finance, who never watches my streams! ♪ And the day after that, I’ll be streaming again just to chat with all of you! ♪ Oh, and last but not least—I have an event to announce that’ll be taking place in the demon territories!”

Another event? They sure do have a lot of those.

“We’ll be hosting a comedy competition, and the winner—or winners—will be declared the comedy champions of the demon lands!”

C-comedy, huh…?

“You don’t have to be a pro to show off your comedy chops on this stage, though. Anyone is free to enter! We’ll be having preliminary rounds in many different locations, and the winners will be invited to perform at the theater in Vanzeld, where they’ll all battle it out to see who’s the ultimate comedian!”

A secondary image of two demon comedians appeared in the corner of the screen, and the two of them struck up a dialogue.

“You know, I went over to your house the other day, and this horrible monster scared me half to death! What was that, a guard dog?”

“A guard dog? Nah—that was my wife!”

“C’mon, do I look stupid? I know what your wife looks like! You’re not gonna get me with that!”

“Sorry, sorry! Guess I shouldn’t go talking about my wife that way, either.”

“Tell me about it! That monster couldn’t hold a candle to *her* ugly mug!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Why do I get the feeling I’ve heard that joke a million times before…?

“Even non-demons are free to participate!” Pecora continued. “In fact, I’d love to unearth some talented comedians living in the human lands, so if you’re interested, come on over and give it a try! ♪ That’s all from me tonight—demon king Pecora, signing off! See you next time! ♪”

With that, the stream came to an end.

I guess pretty much every culture has the concept of comedy in some form, huh? I'm pretty sure the ancient Greeks back in my world had it, too, after all. Demon civilization's been around for at least a couple thousand years, so of course they'd have developed something along those lines eventually.

Most of us seemed content not to be involved in the contest ourselves…but two members of my family latched on in an instant.

"Oh wow, that sounds like so much fun!" said Falfa.

"Shalsha is unfamiliar with the concept of comedians. How intriguing," Shalsha agreed.

Oh no. Do my daughters want in on this?!

"Let's do it, Shalsha! We'll aim for first place!"

"Lend me your power, Sister."

Huh? Why do they sound so confident about winning?

"We're twins, which means we can tell all sorts of jokes the other teams won't be able to!"

"A sound point. Our relationship gives us an unmistakable advantage."

Wow, I guess they're taking a pretty analytical approach to this!

"Not to mention…"

"Of course. Shalsha understands."

For some reason, the two of them turned to look at me.

"Mommy's incredible at playing the straight man!"

"Her advice would be invaluable. She could even write us a script," Shalsha added.

Now they're pulling me into the equation!

"Me, writing a script? No, there's no way! I'm a total amateur when it comes to comedy! You wouldn't be satisfied with anything I came up with," I protested.

I spent my last life as a white-collar office worker until I worked myself to death, and I hadn't even been all that into comedy. I hadn't gone to many shows, and I didn't know the

first thing about how young comedians performed. My old world had radio shows and online programs anyone could submit jokes to, and I'd never bothered with those, either. In short, I wasn't any more interested in or enthusiastic about comedy than the average person. I didn't hate it, but it had never occurred to me to get involved with it.

"You don't have to be so modest, Mommy! Your straight-man comebacks are always really, really funny!" said Falfa.

"You have a quick wit that's difficult to imitate. Your quips are as sharp as a knife's edge," added Shalsha.

Well, this sure isn't a compliment I would have expected to get! I wish they'd pick something a little more motherly to praise me about…

"They're right, Azusa. Falfa and Shalsha will be able to put up a much better fight if they have you on their side," said Sandra. Apparently, she thought I had a knack for comedy as well.

"But no, honestly, I'm a total amateur—"

"Everyone starts out as an amateur!" Sandra snapped. "And besides, she said amateurs are allowed to enter, so it's not a problem!"

She's right, but why's she getting so heated about this?!

"Plus, I'm positive Falfa and Shalsha would love to have their mother supporting their ambitions. They want to make this into a multigenerational effort."

I looked at Falfa and Shalsha. They returned my gaze, their eyes full of hope and expectations.

O-oh no. Seriously? Am I really getting roped into this?

I mean, at least they're not asking me to be part of the performance itself. That makes this a little less daunting, but still…

"Let's give it a try, Mommy! Why not?"

"Shalsha wants to see how far your material can carry us through the world of comedy. The question is intriguing."

Argh, it's no use! I can't turn them down after a request like that!

"All right, fine… You just want me to write a script, right? I can do that—but for the record, I've never tried this before, so I

can’t promise it’ll be funny! Keep that in mind, okay…?”

That’s normal, right? I think most people go through their whole lives without ever writing a comedy script.

Falfa and Shalsha nodded vigorously, and with that, my fate was sealed. Even if I screwed up and wrote something awful, this wasn’t the sort of project with major consequences, so I decided I’d give it a shot and see what happened.

“Do I really play the straight man that often, though…? That doesn’t ring a bell. They’re imagining it, right, Laika?” I asked.

Laika gave me a faint smile…then silently broke eye contact.

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?! At least say something!” *You’re making it really obvious that you have an opinion you’re not sharing!*

“Lady Azusa…you are not a comedian by trade, needless to say. That being the case, I can’t predict how well the material you write will perform, especially considering the demonic sense of humor is probably a little different from humanity’s. All that being said…”

Laika paused for a moment after that excessively long preamble to take a breath.

“I can’t deny you come across as if you’re playing the straight man in a comedic dialogue far more frequently than the average individual…”

“So it’s true, after all…?” I sighed.

Laika had been very careful to phrase her response tactfully, as always, but the gist of what she was trying to communicate seemed to be “It seems worth giving it a try, at least.”

“Okay, okay! I’m in! I’ll do it! I’ll start thinking up some jokes, and in the meantime, you two can look into the details of the contest—like where the preliminaries are going to be held and all that. Okay, Falfa and Shalsha?”

My daughters agreed without a second thought. We could’ve just asked Beelzebub for all that info, honestly—she would’ve almost definitely told us everything we needed to know—but I was afraid if she learned my daughters were entering, she’d start plotting to fix the contest in their favor, or something along those lines. *Maybe I should drill it into her we want to play fair before it comes to that…*

That wasn’t quite the whole story, though. Falfa and Shalsha

weren't the only members of my family who wanted to participate.

"A comedy contest? I, the great Flatorte, will rise to any challenge!"

Flatorte stood up and shouted at the top of her lungs.

Oh, right. If there's a competition on the table, then she'll *participate regardless of what it's actually about…*

"There would be no point in you entering, Flatorte," said Laika. "This competition's subject is far too specialized. Please take some time to consider the nature of the contests you learn about before you decide to participate in them."

Now, that's a reasonable reaction!

Flatorte's drive to compete, however, wouldn't be swayed by something as petty as reason. She stepped over to Laika and clapped a hand onto her shoulder.

"Laika! The two of us will enter as a team! We'll dominate the competition!"

"E-excuse me? I could never participate in an event like this! We'd practically be begging to get eliminated in the preliminary round!" Laika stammered in a fluster.

I know, right? I think that's how anyone would react to getting invited to join a comedy contest out of nowhere.

"Oh? You're already convinced you'd lose in the first round, Laika? I guess all that boasting you do every day really *is* all just talk, then!" Flatorte taunted.

"Wh-what?! How dare you!"

"Well, it's true, isn't it? You haven't even tried, and you're acting like you've already lost! You'll never get stronger with an attitude like that. Could you ever respect someone who gives up without even putting in an effort?"

"Ugh… N-no, but that's not…," Laika began, but she fell silent without finishing her sentence.

Um… Laika? For the record, I don't think aspiring to be a powerful dragon and aspiring to win a comedy contest have anything to do with each other. Wouldn't this same logic mean you'd have to participate in goldfish catching contests, complaining contests, and any other stupid contest you could think up, too…?

“Fine, then! I’ll participate in the competition as well!”

Never mind! She took the bait!

“Now that’s the sort of motivation I expect from a dragon! Just this once, I, the great Flatorte, will do you the favor of fighting by your side!”

“Very well. I will do my utmost. Oh, and Lady Azusa?” Laika said as she turned to face me, an almost worryingly spirited look in her eyes. “I apologize, but being as this is a contest, I’ll be opposing you to the best of my ability. I do not intend to hold back, even against Falfa and Shalsha. I hope you, and they, will do the same for me.”

“Uh, right. If that’s what you want, then go for it…”

For the first time in recent memory, it struck me just how free spirited the residents of my home were.

Just then, Rosalie floated into the room through a nearby wall. “This sure turned into a big deal in a hurry, didn’t it?” she said. “I guess you never know what life will throw at you next!”

“I think you’re all the proof we need that *life* isn’t a requirement for that,” I noted.

“Here’s some ghost trivia for you: A lot of us are pretty good at telling scary stories or gross, gory ones, but there aren’t many of us who can tell a decent joke. This contest sounds like a nice change of pace. Another of life’s little pleasures, I guess.”

Yeah, it’d be pretty weird if lingering souls had a knack for making people laugh! Maybe a comedian who died before they could put on a good show would end up regretting it and come back as a comic ghost? That’s the most believable scenario I can think of, though…

Or rather, that was all I could think of until a certain ancient kingdom of the dead crossed my mind.

……

……

Nope. If I say even a word about them out loud, this could really spiral out of control, so I’m keeping my lips sealed.

And so two groups within my family—well, two for now, anyway—decided to form teams and compete in the demons’ comedy contest.

◇

A few days later, Beelzebub arrived at my house. I assumed Falfa and Shalsha had probably called her over, since she'd brought all sorts of documents related to the comedy contest with her.

"There will be preliminary qualifying rounds held in six locations throughout the human lands, and those who emerge victorious will go on to compete in a second round of qualifiers held across three venues. A third and final qualifier will be held after that, and the winning teams will be invited to compete in the finals, which will be held in demon territory," Beelzebub explained.

"So you have to win your way through a bunch of rounds, huh? Do you really think there'll be enough participants from the human lands to make that all work?" I asked.

Beelzebub cocked her head. I had a feeling that wasn't a question she'd put much thought into.

"In the olden days, hardly any humans participated at all on account of the contest being unknown in their lands. Now, however, magic streaming has entered the picture," Beelzebub replied.

"Now that you mention it, I remember hearing a bunch of adventurers have gotten pretty into watching those streams."

"Their reach has spread even farther since then, I assure you. 'Tis not at all rare for those who work in the field of entertainment to keep a watchful eye on the streams, even in the human lands. I'd think at least some of them would take an interest and choose to participate, no?"

I had no clue what sort of lifestyles human entertainers lived, but given how these things usually turned out, I had an image in my mind of a very small proportion of them being outrageously wealthy and in demand while the majority were just barely scraping by. If this contest had the potential to take someone from obscurity to stardom, it was easy to imagine a fair number of people deciding to give it a try.

"Okay, yeah, I could see it. It's not like there's any real reason for anyone not to at least take a shot at it," I said.

Falfa and Shalsha were with us, by the way, and hanging onto Beelzebub's every word. I was glad to see that—in fact, I

would've scolded them if they'd tuned her out instead. They were the ones who'd decided to tackle this contest, and I expected them to follow through, especially now that they'd pulled Beelzebub into the affair.

"You may participate as individuals, as a pair, or even as a larger group," Beelzebub continued. "That said, a majority of demon comedians work in pairs, and you can expect to see most entrants abiding by that format."

Falfa noted down every word Beelzebub said.

"Moreover, although acts are limited in length, a fair variety of comedic styles are typically represented. Some groups tell big, bombastic jokes that reduce the whole audience to howling laughter, while others tell more subtle, surreal jokes that elicit knowing chuckles. That said, the finals attract a large crowd. Acts that inspire loud, spirited laughter are at an advantage, as it proves that you are successfully entertaining your audience."

Falfa quickly wrote that down as well.

"I would caution against dabbling in material that's too niche, as well. That can work in a solo performance attended by a comedian's dedicated fans, but it will serve you far less well in this competition."

That's gotta be something Beelzebub went out of her way to research after the girls asked her for information, right? There was no way that the event's official documentation talked about which acts were more or less advantageous, after all. I was starting to think asking her for help had been a great decision.

"Some performers choose surprising and unconventional acts—we call them shock artists—and manage to win a few rounds that way, but most of those performers end up losing in the finals. That's not to downplay the skill it takes to make it to the finals at all, of course. 'Tis most impressive, win or lose."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Just making it that far sounds like it can take a miracle," I said. Falfa and Shalsha were too busy writing notes to be active listeners, so I stepped into that role to help keep the conversation flowing… Or at least, that was the idea, until Beelzebub's next casual comment threw me for a loop.

"Knowing your capabilities? If you apply yourself, 'twould hardly be a surprise to see you reach the finals."

…Huh? I mean… What? Was that her own version of a joke?

I checked Beelzebub's expression, then rubbed my eyes and gave her another look just to be sure, but still couldn't pick out any sign she was kidding around.

"I have no idea why you have so much faith in my abilities, here! Seriously, where is this confidence coming from?!" I shouted. *You know I've spent my whole life taking it easy in the highlands, right? I've never been any sort of performer!*

"I may not know the petty details of the life you've lived, but I know that when you look upon the world around you, you have the ability to do so from an outsider's perspective. 'Tis simply a facet of your natural personality, I would think, but nevertheless, it could prove to be a powerful weapon if you learn to wield it properly," said Beelzebub.

I had to wonder, did the "outsider's perspective" Beelzebub saw in me have something to do with the fact that I came from a different world? Maybe it was easier for me to look at this world through an objective lens than it would be for someone who didn't have memories of another world to compare it to? Of course, that was assuming that everyone who had an objective and critical perspective on the world had a gift for comedy—which I, for one, was taking with a huge grain of salt.

"In any case," Beelzebub continued, "the fact that Falfa and Shalsha live together means they'll be very in tune with each other, which gives them an inherent advantage. So long as their script is high quality, I have ample reason to believe they shall survive the preliminaries."

Is it really that simple? Considering how she is with those two, I don't think she'd tell them anything discouraging no matter how hopeless the situation was, so I'll go ahead and take that with a grain of salt, as well.

One way or another, we'd learned the basics of how the contest was going to operate.

"Thanks, Beelzebub," I said. "Now we just have to make sure the dragons get all that info, too."

"Oh, yes—those two were participating as well, weren't they? Where are they now?"

"…Practicing in the woods, apparently."

Flatorte was utterly uncompromising when it came to aiming for first place, and Laika was just as steadfast when it came to self-improvement. As a result, the two of them had

decided to take their preparations for the comedy contest incredibly seriously. I had a feeling that Laika had just maybe lost track of what sort of self-improvement she was actually aspiring for, but considering how long dragons' lifespans were, I didn't think there was any harm in her getting a bit off track for the time being. This wasn't the sort of mistake that would get anyone hurt, after all—physically or emotionally.

I guess it's time for me to buckle down too, huh…? I've got a script to write, and the longer I spend working on it, the less time Falfa and Shalsha will have to practice. This is actually a pretty hefty responsibility.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I noticed a wyvern off in the distance flying toward us.

"What's this? Was someone else scheduled to pay you a visit today?" asked Beelzebub.

"No, not that I know of," I replied. "Who could that be?"

Looks like I'll have to step outside and find out for myself.

When the wyvern touched down and its passengers climbed off, I realized they were a pair of familiar faces: Muu and Nahna Nahna. I wasn't surprised to see them—in fact, my first thought was, *So they really did show up.*

"Been a while, ev'ryone! We've got a bit o' business 'ere, so we swung on by for a visit. You're up, Nahna Nahna," said Muu.

Nahna Nahna quickly stepped past me, strolling into the house in the highlands and emerging again a moment later with Rosalie in tow.

"Hey!" Rosalie shouted. "What's this all about?! Where're you taking me?! Whatever you're bringing me in for, I'm innocent, I swear!"

"'Ey there, Rosalie! Sorry 'bout this, but we'll be 'avin you stay in the Thursa Thursa Kingdom for a bit, fanks," said Muu.

"You want Rosalie to stay with you?" I asked. "What for?"

"An intensive comedy brainstormin' session, innit? We're aimin' to take first place at the contest!"

So they really are planning to enter!

"Wait, that makes no sense! I don't know squat about comedy!" Rosalie protested.

"Yer better off'n everyone in Thursa Thursa! I'm s'pposed to be their queen, so none of 'em'll talk back to me at all. They end

up bowin' and scrapin' on instinct, see. No way any o' that lot would smack me upside the head for a joke!"

Well, yeah! I think anyone would be scared of smacking a queen in the head…

"That ain't gonna cut it for comedy, an' that's why I need your 'elp instead! Come wiv me, Rosalie! We'll take the contest by storm!"

"I don't want to take the contest by storm or any other way!"

"But I wanna put on the show o' a lifetime wiv ya! Please!"

That line, it seemed, finally managed to pull on Rosalie's heartstrings. A somewhat put-upon look came across her face, and she scratched her head awkwardly.

"…Tch! Why'd you have to get so excited about this? Fine, I'll do it. If you want me to perform with you, I'll make it happen!"

It's like a teen drama's playing out before my eyes, only both the teens have been dead for centuries!

"All right! We'll make the whole audience laugh 'emselves to death, just ya wait!"

Unless you want people to start thinking of you as a terrifying pair of evil spirits, I'd really recommend against it!

Throughout that whole exchange, Nahna Nahna—who, by the way, was still holding Rosalie in place—seemed incredibly irritated. "There are few things more infuriating than having to make your superiors' whims into a reality. I really wish you'd spare me all this," she muttered. I got the sense that she was genuinely pretty fed up this time, and honestly, I could understand where she was coming from.

"All right, Rosalie! You'll be stayin' wiv us in Thursa Thursa for the time bein'!" said Muu.

"Okay! I don't know how helpful I'll be, but I'll do what I can!" Rosalie agreed.

With that, Rosalie and Muu set off to the kingdom of the dead to practice their comedy sketch. Nahna Nahna, on the other hand, inexplicably stayed behind at the house in the highlands.

“I’ve taken a period of paid leave, and I am planning on spending some time in this area to relax and refresh myself. I’m sure that Rosalie will do a perfectly adequate job serving as Her Majesty’s plaything in my absence,” she explained.

“When you put it that way, I can only imagine how rough it must be to get messed with by the same superior for a literal eternity…”

I took a moment to reflect on how grateful I was that I hadn’t had a difficult boss of my own get reincarnated along with me.

◇

All our basic preparations were complete, and that meant it was time for me to get to work in earnest. I wouldn’t be working on my usual witchy medicine-making, though. This time, I’d be learning about comedy!

To start, I traveled to one of the larger cities in the human lands. I knew I’d be able to find a theater in a place like that, and when I did, I took some time watching all the comedy performances and sketches I could. I also took some time to wander the main streets afterward and stopped to watch all the street performers I came across—making sure to leave a tip after they finished, of course! A good performance deserved compensation, after all.

Beelzebub and my family’s reactions had made it clear that to them, it seemed like I made a habit of looking at this world from an outsider’s perspective. That wasn’t exactly hard to believe. I’d started my life in a totally different world, so it made sense that I’d unconsciously compare the two from time to time.

If I could learn to control that impulse and shift my observations in a comedic direction, I could cheat my way along the path of the comedian at a record-breaking pace!

That was just one possibility, but now that I’d had one of my strengths pointed out to me, it was natural to try and make use of it.

I wasn’t under the impression that it would be a total walk in the park, of course. I hadn’t so much as touched on the world of comedy throughout all the three hundred years I’d spent killing

slimes, and I knew virtually nothing about this world's sense of humor. The only people who'd praised me for my comedic sensibilities were my family and maybe a random acquaintance or two (though I could practically hear Beelzebub grumbling, *Who are you calling a random acquaintance?!* the moment that thought crossed my mind). It wasn't like I'd ever been praised by a professional comedian, so I had no idea how reliable their opinions were.

That said, my daughters had faith in me, and the rest of my family believed in me, as well. I had to live up to their expectations! If there's one thing I had in spades, it was motivation, and I let that propel me onward as I watched one performance after another.

"You were certainly paying careful attention to the act, weren't you, Lady Azusa…?" Laika observed after a performance as the two comedians I'd been watching departed from the stage. I could only travel so far on my own, practically speaking, so I'd had her carry me to my destination.

"Oh, yeah, I was," I replied. "I'm trying to take this kinda seriously, I guess…"

"You sure didn't look like you were here for a quick laugh. You were watching the act like a professional scouting out reference material. I could tell just from sitting next to you," observed Flatorte, who was sitting on the opposite side of me from Laika. She and Laika would be participating in the competition, and I felt bad about taking up their practice time by having Laika fly me around, so I'd invited Flatorte to come along as well.

"Nah, I'm a far cry from the professional level…but I guess I can't go using the fact that I'm an amateur as an excuse to do shoddy work, can I?" I mused.

In this competition, it wouldn't make any difference who was an amateur and who was a pro. The only rule that mattered was that whoever had the funniest sketch would come out on top.

"You really have seemed more motivated to me recently, Lady Azusa," said Laika.

"I can tell, too! You're fired up for a real battle, Mistress!" Flatorte agreed.

I'm not so sure how I feel about them thinking that I'm super fired up for comedy, of all things, but I guess I'll try and see it in a

positive light…

It always seemed to be easier for people to put their all into their hobbies than their day jobs. In that sense, I figured it wasn't too weird for me to get worked up over the script.

There was still some time left before the next act was scheduled to begin, in any case, and in the meantime, I had a question that I'd been meaning to ask the two dragons.

"So have you two decided what sort of act you're putting on?" I asked.

"Naturally! The choice was so obvious, it wasn't a choice at all!" Flatorte declared with an odd degree of confidence.

"Oh? Are you okay with talking about it?"

"I should keep it secret, but since you're the one asking, Mistress, I'll spill the beans. I'll be playing the lute!"

Oh, right. Flatorte really was great at playing lutes (which were so close to being guitars in this world, they might as well have been the same thing).

"The plan's for me to play the lute partway through the performance. I'm thinking of going with the title 'Lute Stand-up #1.'"

A stand-up routine with a number in its name where the performer plays a stringed instrument while they talk? Isn't that almost identical to an old form of Japanese comedy?!

"You should know, Lady Azusa, that the act Flatorte is describing is specifically our plan for the first round," Laika said, closing her eyes as she explained herself. "A performance involving an instrument will likely make a strong impression but is unlikely to get much in the way of laughs. The goal is to display her skill with the lute, meaning we'll be deviating from the contest's intended subject. If we want our audience to laugh, then in the long term, we'll have to divert our focus in that direction."

"Now that's the sort of analysis I'd expect from someone as levelheaded as you are!"

It did kind of feel like Flatorte's act would be taking elements of a musical performance and mixing them with elements of a comedy show, rather than going pure comedy. I didn't think that Laika would know the first thing about comedy, but she was still doing a pretty good job of thinking all this through. She'd always been a clever person, and breaking things down was one of her specialties.

“Laika’s talking a big game, but just so you know, it was I, the great Flatorte, who thought up all our material! She’s a real critic, but when it comes to actually making something herself, she’s hopeless,” Flatorte grumbled.

“And yet you won’t deny that you found my criticism worthwhile, will you? You certainly took it into consideration. I don’t appreciate the implication I haven’t pulled my weight,” Laika jabbed back.

Interesting… I guess Laika’s analysis isn’t enough on its own—you need the sort of drive and initiative that Flatorte has, too.

“Let me explain our material for the second round, Mistress! We have a really good trick planned for that one,” said Flatorte.

“A trick…?” I repeated apprehensively. She’d sounded so proud, it was actually making me a little nervous.

“In the second round, we’re gonna pull the audience into the act. Though really, since we’ll probably only have the judges watching us in those early stages, we’ll be getting them in on the action.”

“Yep, that’s another tricky stunt, all right!”

The concepts for the two acts she’d told me about could hardly have been more different from each other, but they were each remarkably off-the-wall in their own right. In a sense, it was just like Flatorte to come up with plans like those. If I wanted to put it nicely, I’d say it showed how flexible she was.

“That plan, of course, is another that won’t carry us any farther than the first round we use it in. Breaking down the established roles of viewer and performer is amusing, but only by virtue of novelty. Once you’ve done it once, it ceases to have the same effect,” Laika noted, jumping in to explain things in detail once again. “Moreover, when it comes to the simple task of earning prolonged laughter from the audience, it’s not particularly effective. As such, we will be using it exclusively as our tactic to clear the second round.”

“R-right… I’ll have to keep that in mind. Like, seriously, this stuff’s all good to know.”

It turns out that Laika and Flatorte have thought all this through way more deeply than I have!

“Laika’s always bringing up all this conceptual mumbo-jumbo,” Flatorte grumbled. “As if going on and on about all that theory junk could ever make anyone laugh! She’s such a bore.”

“You simply can’t expect to come out on top of this sort of

competition by making up acts at random and performing them with no sense of purpose," Laika countered. "The world of comedy is full of performers who've learned and improved through mutual competition. When stepping into such a world, it's of grave importance to pay the respect that is due to those who came before you."

I could see both of their points, but there was one thing that Flatorte was definitely wrong about: The little speeches that Laika went off on every once in a while weren't boring at all. If anything, they were interesting enough to be a show in their own right…

A few people sitting behind us, by the way, had started muttering about how "a group of pros came to watch" and how "those dragons must be performers!"

No, really, we're just amateurs! Honest!

After watching a variety of shows in the human lands, Laika, Flatorte, and I flew out to the demon territories to do the same there. Once we were finished, we stopped at an inn, and I got right to work putting together a script.

We'd stopped in Vanzeld to visit a few different venues, and I'd considered asking Pecora to let us stay with her, but something about telling her we'd stopped by to study comedy and needed a room just felt really awkward to me, so I'd decided to go with an inn instead. That environment felt more appropriate for the job I had on my plate, too—it was a lot easier to think clearly in a simple environment like an inn than it was when you were a house guest.

- I had to make use of Falfa's and Shalsha's distinctive traits, taking care to ensure that what I wrote would actually make their audience laugh as well.
- That said, I had to be careful not to lean too heavily on jokes about them being twins, since that was the sort of gimmick that could get old quickly.
- They'd be performing under a strict time limit, so I had to make sure that bits that would make the audience laugh—the punchlines, if you will—would come fast and frequently.
- I also had to give the girls plenty of time to rehearse, so I needed to hash the script out as soon as possible.

- I didn’t know what sort of jokes Falfa and Shalsha would be best at selling, so for the time being, I wanted to work with as wide a variety of material as I could.

There was an awful lot that I had to keep in mind as I got to work writing the script. I was starting to think that Laika and Flatorte had a point: I really was taking this pretty seriously. It was all for the sake of my daughters, of course, so that wasn’t much of a surprise.

Part of me even wanted to pull an all-nighter, but I resisted the urge and went to bed at my usual time instead. That was one personal rule I wasn’t going to compromise on, especially since I knew that sometimes, resting up and coming back to your work the next day was a great way to prompt new ideas. Something about taking a bit of time off had a way of helping half-formed concepts mature, and I knew that if I tried to write the whole thing in one sitting, it wouldn’t turn out as well as it would’ve if I’d taken my time.

Scripts were like living creatures. Sometimes a line you wrote would give you a flash of inspiration that’d last the rest of the day, and sometimes a part that had been a roadblock the day before would come back to trip you up all over again. Even if you kept the broad concept of a script consistent all throughout the process, there were a countless number of little ways in which it could grow and change as you wrote.

Finally, I brought my study of comedy in the human and demon lands to a close and returned to the house in the highlands.

◇

The moment Laika, Flatorte, and I arrived back at the house in the highlands, Falfa and Shalsha rushed out to welcome us home.

“Falfa, Shalsha! Here’s your script!” I said, presenting the girls with a notebook. That notebook contained the fruit of my labors: a comedy script full of sketches and material that I’d done my absolute best on.

“Thank you, Mommy!” said Falfa.

“We’ll strive to do your manuscript justice,” added Shalsha.

That's kind of a stiff way to say thank you, isn't it? Though I guess that's just like Shalsha, really.

"You should give it a read before you thank me. There's always a chance that you won't like it enough to want to use it, after all. No point in thanking me then," I cautioned.

I didn't think that the effort I put into the script would be rendered pointless, no matter what they thought of it, and if it turned out my best efforts had produced something low-quality, I certainly didn't expect them to force themselves to use it. The whole point of the script, after all, was to make people laugh. Whether or not my efforts bore fruit had nothing whatsoever to do with the audience's experience—all that mattered was whether they enjoyed it.

To make matters even more complicated, I knew there were all sorts of different ways to go about performing comedy. Whether or not my material was good and whether it would suit Falfa and Shalsha's style were two totally different questions. If my script couldn't make it past all those potential stumbling points, it would be totally useless to my daughters when the time came for them to perform.

Falfa and Shalsha opened up the script and started reading on the spot.

Oh wow, this is a little embarrassing… And it's embarrassing in a sort of way I've never felt before. I've hugged and kissed my daughters in the open plenty of times, and the embarrassment of that was nothing compared to having them read my work!

"Um, could you maybe read that in your room, or something…?" I muttered hopefully.

"You know your script's funny, right, Mommy? In that case, it'll be just fine!" said Falfa.

"But we can't ease our standards just because you're our mom," Shalsha countered. "Rest assured that we will be earnest and thorough in our assessment of your script."

I mean, I wouldn't mind if you cut me a little *slack, but that's definitely not something that I can come out and request.*

Meanwhile, Laika and Flatorte walked right past the three of us and headed straight into the house in the highlands. I could've followed along after them and gone inside as well, but that would've made it look like I was running away from my daughters while they read my script, so I resisted the urge and just kept waiting.

Falfa and Shalsha were focused intently on the script, poring over page after page. They barely said a word as they read. It made for a pretty odd atmosphere all around, and I noticed that Sandra was giving us a weird look from over in the garden. No wonder she was curious, really—I would've stared, too, if I was in her position.

My script was, well, a script, so even though I'd written down a few different routines for Falfa and Shalsha, it didn't take them that long to read through it all. Reading a script and reading a novel were two very different things. Still, to me, it felt like they'd been reading for an eternity.

I wish they'd hurry and tell me what they think. I wouldn't even mind if they say it's bad, as long as it means we can move on…

Finally, the two of them closed the notebook. They must have finished reading the last page. Falfa and Shalsha paused for a moment to give each other a look, then exchanged nods. They'd seemingly come to an immediate understanding.

"Mommy."

"Mom."

"Y-yes?!" I yelped. I felt like I was about to get feedback from my faculty advisor on my graduation thesis.

My daughters stepped forward and threw their arms around me.

"It's great! All the jokes are really funny! You're amazing, Mommy!"

"We'll be making some slight adjustments, but Shalsha thinks this will serve as an excellent starting point to direct the course of our performance."

Oh, thank goodness! I passed!

I felt weirdly accomplished. I wasn't moved to tears or anything, but I did feel just a little choked up, so it probably would've only taken one more push to get me there. Was this the sort of satisfaction that overcoming a moderately difficult task brought? It wasn't something I'd ever felt from just killing slimes, that was for sure.

On the other hand, it'd be super tiring to do this sort of work every day. Better to save it for special occasions…

Of course, this wasn't the end of this project. If anything, it was just the beginning. Falfa and Shalsha had only just reached their starting line, and now that they had their script, they could get practicing and preparing for their appearance in the comedy competition.

I wouldn't be directly involved in the process from this point onward, so all I could do was sit back and pray that they'd manage to win. All that waiting felt like it was going to give me a heart attack in a whole different way than writing the script had. I found myself wishing that I could just skip all the way from the present moment to the moment when the competition's results would be announced, sparing me from all the fretting and worrying that was sure to come in between.

I briefly considered making a spell that would let me do just that, actually—but I realized how terrible an idea that would be before I even started. Even if I did manage to design a spell that could jump me ahead in time, I knew it would be way too advanced for someone like me to actually use…

In any case, Falfa, Shalsha, Laika, Flatorte, and—I assumed—Rosalie were all hard at work practicing their sketches.

Do your best, everyone!

After I handed off my script, everyone who'd be entering the contest seemed to buckle down and practice as hard as they could. Well, everyone in the house in the highlands, anyway—I couldn't be sure how things were going on Rosalie's end.

I, meanwhile, figured that watching them practice would be too much of a distraction, and I did my best not to directly involve myself in the process. From what little I did see, however, I got the distinct impression that both pairs of soon-to-be comedians were quite confident in the acts they were putting together.

Before long, the preliminaries arrived.

To be completely honest, I didn't think that either group from our household had much of a chance to make it to the finals. It just didn't seem reasonable to expect them to win their way through the sort of fierce competition I was sure they'd be facing, so I wouldn't have been at all surprised if they'd

dropped out somewhere along the way. That's what I figured, anyway…so imagine my surprise when both of the groups from our household made it into the finals.

The news arrived while I was busy making dinner. Falfa and Laika had arrived at home around the same time as each other, and both came to tell me that they'd be going to Vanzeld for the finals. I was so dumbstruck by the news that I didn't even think to congratulate them at first. In fact, the first words out of my mouth were, "S-seriously?"

Is it just me, or is this household moving up in the world in the weirdest trajectory possible…?

It's definitely too late to change course now, though, isn't it…?

"We were given tickets to let our family attend the finals, Mom. Please come and watch us achieve great things," Shalsha said as she handed a ticket over.

"Sure. I'll come watch," I replied. "I feel a little responsible for all this, anyway, since I'm the one who wrote your script and all."

I sure didn't believe it would turn into this big of a deal while I was writing, though…

◇

Our whole family headed out to Vanzeld Castle together, just like usual. We weren't riding our pair of dragons this time, though—instead, Fatla was giving us a lift.

When we were all aboard (which is to say, once Fatla had transformed into her full leviathan form and we'd climbed onto her back), Vania gave us an explanation for why we'd been sent an escort.

"It goes without saying that the finalists would be invited to the capital, and seeing as two groups of finalists came from your family in particular, it's hardly surprising that a leviathan would be dispatched to provide you transport."

"Right, yeah. That does make sense, when you put it that way," I said with a nod. "Don't you two work for the government, though? I didn't think that this comedy competition was a state-sponsored event."

Vania winced. “Ugh… You have an eye for details. In short, the government has offered the event its aid…and Her Majesty has joined in as a judge, as well…”

Now there’s something we didn’t know earlier! “Oh, so Pecora’s one of the judges?” I said. “I guess she really does like sticking her nose into all sorts of places…”

Just then, Fatla’s voice rang out, almost like it was being broadcast through a PA system.

“Wait a minute—the judges haven’t been announced yet! You’re not supposed to tell anyone until they’re formally revealed!”

“Ahhh! I didn’t mean to say that… It was a slip of the tongue! Not my fault! I mean, well, I guess it was, really… Okay, so it was totally my fault, but please let me off the hook!” Vania babbled. I had to wonder if that ever worked out for her.

“I mean, it’s not like any of us know what sort of comedy Pecora’s into, so what’s the harm?” I said. “But then again, if anyone did happen to know one of the judges’ tastes, they probably could use that to their advantage. I can see why they keep their identities secret.”

“Right, exactly! It wouldn’t be fair anymore!” said Vania.

Not sure if the person who let the info slip should be so quick to jump in and explain that.

“Oh! Come to think of it,” Vania said before pausing to give each of us a long, appraising look. “Your ghost isn’t with you today, is she?”

“Oh, Rosalie’s coming in from the Thursa Thursa Kingdom this time,” I explained.

“Now that you mention it, I do remember hearing that a ghostly performer had entered the competition.”

Something about the phrase “ghostly performer” sounds weirdly powerful, huh…?

Rosalie and Muu had apparently also won their way into the finals, by the way. I hadn’t seen any of their material, but I had a funny feeling it was going to lean heavily into the fact that they were ghosts.

My daughters and the dragon duo both went off right away to find unoccupied rooms to rehearse in. It seemed that none of them felt like they had any time to relax, what with the competition looming on the horizon. It sort of felt like we were members of a high school sports club, doing what we could to

cope with our nerves en route to a tournament venue.

Later that night, while we were having dinner—specifically, right after Vania brought out the main dish for the evening—I stood up to address everyone.

"Excuse me! Would everyone who's going to be in the competition mind listening for a minute?" I said. All the members of my family, non-participants included, turned to look at me. "I think all four of you have done really incredibly this time! I could never pull off what you've accomplished, that's for sure, so I don't think that I have any real advice I can give you, but, um… The point is, you're amazing! Seriously, you did great!"

Maybe I should've planned this speech out a bit better in advance? Well, too late now!

I resorted to clapping my hands, giving each of them a round of applause, then spoke up once more.

"This is a competition, and that means you're going to get compared and scored, for better or worse. Only one team can win the finals, after all. Still, the fact that you made it this far is incredible in its own right, and I want all of you to be proud of that, and to be proud of how funny you are!"

"Okay, Mommy!" said Falfa.

"I shall strive to do my utmost!" Laika declared.

"I'm taking first place no matter what!" Flatorte shouted.

"The fates will smile upon the victor!" Shalsha concluded.

I'd been planning on getting this point across to everyone when we were all gathered together, but I'd really messed up the timing and ended up having to do it mid-meal. It wasn't the cleanest delivery, and I'd have to think about how I could improve on that in the future, but for the time being, I could call this one task accomplished.

When we arrived in Vanzeld, we split into two groups: the competition participants, and everyone else. I wasn't putting on an act myself, so needless to say, I was part of the latter category.

"It's weird—I'm not even part of the contest, but I'm nervous anyway," said Sandra. And she did seem a little fidgety.

“I’m feeling restless, too, so why don’t we go try to find a place where we can have a celebratory drink after it’s all over?” Halkara suggested.

Are you sure you don’t just want to have a drink yourself, right now…? Though, then again, we have plenty of time until the finals start, so I guess that would be fine in its own right.

Before we could make it to a pub, however, Halkara spoke up again. “I just had an incredible idea!” she shouted.

“What is it?” I asked. “I’m worried your idea’s going to get us in trouble, like usual, so how about you explain yourself first this time…?”

“I think it’s a given that the team that wins the comedy competition will experience a sudden rise in fame, right? So I was thinking I could use that chance to get them to advertise for Halkara Pharmaceuticals!”

Oh, huh. That’s a more sensible idea than I expected.

“This competition’s taking place in the demon lands, so it seems like the perfect chance to spread the Halkara Pharmaceuticals name throughout this region! I’d better make an offer the moment the winning team’s announced!” said Halkara.

As I watched her get worked up over her new plan, I thought, *Looks like winning a contest like this really is a way for an unpopular comedian to go from rags to riches.*

After that, Halkara started peppering me with questions about what sort of material I thought would work well as an in-act advertisement for her products.

I’m not exactly a comedy consultant, for your information! If you’re going to ask me for input on anything, at least let it be medicine making!

“Um, Halkara…?” I said. “I don’t think this is the right time to come up with advertising material like that. After all, you won’t know who’s going to win the competition until it’s already over, and at that point you won’t be able to use any of the jokes you think up, anyway.”

“Ah!” Halkara gasped. “See, this is exactly why I go to you for advice, Madame Teacher! You’re absolutely right. This goes to show that you always have to consult with a specialist about this sort of thing! Amateurs always make some sort of fundamental mistake in the planning stage!”

I thrust out a hand before me, striking a “wait just a second”

sort of pose to cut Halkara off.

"I'm an amateur, too! Do *not* group me with the specialists on this one!"

Apparently, I need to make a really clear point of emphasizing the fact that I'm a witch. I don't know what I'll do if even my family starts forgetting that!

◇

The comedy contest finals were scheduled for the very same day as our arrival in Vanzeld. That evening, we headed for a theater in the castle town where the event would take place. We'd already had seats assigned to us, so I settled in and waited for the performances to begin.

First, a demon who seemed to be the announcer stepped onto the stage.

"Comedy fans from all across the world, thank you for coming to our show tonight! Before we begin, let's take a moment to meet the judges of our contest!"

The first judge to step onto stage was none other than Pecora. We'd already been told she'd be judging, so no surprises there.

"Hello, everyone! As I'm sure many of you are aware, I am the demon king! I hope you all have a barrel of laughs today, and as your reigning sovereign, I swear to judge the performances with honesty and impartiality!"

I had a feeling, in Pecora's eyes, the competition would be a success as long as the crowd enjoyed it. Personally, though, I was just as invested in seeing one of the many members of my family who were participating claim victory and all the glory associated with it.

The other judges—who the audience's reactions suggested were pretty big names in the demon lands' comedy world—were introduced next. It wasn't just demons on the panel, though; two of them seemed to be popular entertainers from the human territories, as well. I could hear the demons around us whispering stuff like "Who's that?" and "Probably some celebrity from the human capital."

Once all the judges has been introduced, Pecora stepped up to give one final explanation.

"Last but not least, I'd like to go over the rules by which we'll

be judging the contest! After every act finishes, each judge will assign it a personal score. Those scores won't be revealed until the end of the contest, and the judges won't know each other's scores up until the end, either. That means until every act has reached its conclusion, no one will know who is winning! Do your best to figure out who'll take the number one spot before the show is over!"

Oh, I get it. They must be trying to keep things exciting up until the very end. That seems like a good system… Or so I thought, but a moment later, I heard a shout ring out from somewhere in the hall.

"Anyone who can guess the top three acts in order will win a fabulous prize! Get'cher tickets here, folks!"

A way to keep things exciting, and also a way to let people gamble on the outcome, apparently…

"Anyone who wants that prize for themselves, be sure to think your guess through carefully! And that's all for me—I'll hand things back to the announcer for now, if that's all right," said Pecora.

"I, um…was actually supposed to explain the rules myself, actually," the announcer awkwardly muttered. The demon king's unconventional attitude had struck yet again, and there was nothing the contest's staff could do about it.

With that, it was finally time for the performances to begin.

"Now then, let's welcome our first act onto the stage!" said the announcer. "First up, we have a pair that'll make you laugh yourselves to death! Give it up for A Couple of Corpses!"

Ah-ha! I have a feeling I know who that might be, I thought. A moment later, I was proven correct as Rosalie and Muu stepped onto the stage.

©Benio
A Couple of Corpses

"'Ello 'ello, ev'ryone! I'm Muu, one of the Couple of Corpses, an' I've been dead fer longer 'n I was ever alive!"

"And I'm Rosalie—just had my two hundredth deathiversary the other day, over here! I've gotta say, though, I'm taking a nice, close look at all of you out in the audience, and…"

And what? This is a pretty long pause.

"…aren't you all a little too lively out there?"

"Nah, we're just too deathly up 'ere!"

Muu gave Rosalie a comically exaggerated slap upside the head.

Okay, I think I see what sort of act this is going to be… I can't let myself miss a moment of my family's performances, though, so I'd better pay attention!

"So y'know, earlier today, a ghost friend of mine came to ask for some advice."

"Oh? What about? I've been dead fer a right age, eh? I'll have that problem worked out 'n no time flat!"

"Apparently, their family's started feuding over their inheritance, and they want to find a peaceful, legal resolution. They asked if I could introduce them to a good lawyer ghost."

"I can't help wiv that! That's a specialist problem for a specialist ghost to solve, innit?!"

All of a sudden, it feels like I'm watching a really boilerplate pair comedy sketch from back in Japan…

"Anyway, it sounds like they need to get things settled quick, before it all gets even worse."

"Sure, but why? Not like your ghost friend put a curse on 'em, right? Why the big 'assle?"

"Well, the problem's that their family gathered up in a

secluded manor to sort out the will, got snowed in, and now three of them have died under mysterious circumstances. All in one day."

"That's a bit bigger'n an inheritance dispute! And why'd they group up in a place that just screams 'murder house,' anyway? Who'd go to a secluded manor in a snowstorm?!"

"And now it sounds like they're blaming the serial murders on a curse from a malevolent spirit."

"Talk about jumpin' to conclusions! I bet the actual spirit watchin' over 'em's mad as 'ell! Whenever a crime like that crops up, it's always 'cause some nut with a pulse is makin' it look like a ghost curse! It's never actually a real spirit!"

"Right, and that's why my ghost friend wants to resolve the inheritance dispute as soon as possible."

"'Ate to say it, but if three of 'em already died, your friend's got bigger problems! They're playin' a diff'rent game now! Murder in an isolated manor means if ya get out alive, ya win!"

"Well, at the rate things are going, everyone who could inherit my friend's estate will be dead before it even gets split up. How do you think they can resolve the issue peacefully?"

"That ship's sailed! Sailed an' sunk!"

"It'd be a shame if this caused a permanent rift in the family, wouldn't it?"

"This stopped bein' a rift ages ago! Now they'd better be workin' together if they wanna live!"

"So who do you think the killer is?"

"This conversation's gone off the rails!"

How to put this…? It sure feels like I've seen this act somewhere before!

I hadn't, to be clear—this was definitely the first time I'd heard their material—but it just felt so weirdly safe and familiar, I almost could've sworn I'd heard it a million times already.

In any case, A Couple of Corpses carried on in much the same manner, and ended their set without incident.

Hmm… They put on a solid, stable performance all around, but I don't think that's going to be good enough to win them first place.

Pecora was asked to give a comment on behalf of the judges, and said, "It really is tough being up first, isn't it?" That struck me as a tactful way of saying the act hadn't ranked highly in her book, and the look on her face supported that conclusion.

I guess playing it safe and staying by the book means you're doomed to run up against a wall eventually. I wonder how this is going to turn out…? Also, I wonder who's up next?

Just then, the announcer's voice rang out again. "Next up, we have a solo performer: Fighsly!"

Another familiar face!

Fighsly strode confidently into view. She looked the part, anyway—something about the way she was carrying herself really made her seem like a proper stand-up comedian.

"Hey, everyone! I'm Fighsly…," Fighsly said as she walked to the center of the stage. "And *these* are my graceful, extra-toned muscles!" she added as she struck a bizarre pose.

"Now then—today, I'd like to sing to you a song I think you all know very well: 'The Ode to Muscles!'"

Can't say I've ever heard of it.

"Muscles never let you down, muscles are your friend! ♪ Muscles and money never let you down, muscles and money are your friends! ♪ Money never lets you down, money is your friend! ♪"

More like the "Ode to Money," at this point!

"People always let you down, people disappoint! ♪ People are selfish misers who'll backstab you for a buck! ♪"

Now that's a wild turn for this song to take!

"But money never lets you down, money is your friend! ♪ If people let you down for money, the money's not to blame! ♪"

This song is the worst! Talk about depressing!

“Muscles are the best! Now, I’m not the sort of martial artist who’s all about bulking up, when all’s said and done, but that’s why I know that even people with no muscles at all can learn to fight with the best of ’em! If you want in on that, Fighsly’s training gym is always looking for new students! Thanks, and see you there!”

With that, Fighsly—who, by the way, had kept striking weird body-builder poses all throughout her money-glorifying song—stepped off the stage.

Was that act okay on a basic level…?

It certainly didn’t seem like the sort of performance the owner of a training gym would want to put on. *She did get a modest but respectful number of laughs in the end, though, so what do I know, I guess…* Or so I thought, until the announcer returned to the stage.

“Pardon me—just to clarify, that was an advertisement, not an act! No need to include it in your evaluations.”

So even the ads are comedy sketches?! I have a feeling this is going to be one chaotic event…

The next few groups were made up of demons I’d never heard of before. Some of them did skits and sketches, while others put on what I could only describe as street performances. The contest operated off an anything-goes principle, apparently, though I didn’t get the sense that the street performers got very high scores. The reason for that was obvious: Street performances were all about showing off your skills, not getting people to laugh.

Eventually, Sandra actually ended up nodding off for a moment, jolting awake, and letting out a big yawn. “Staying focused on all these performances is so tiring,” she grumbled.

It looked like we were reaching the limits of her ability to focus—no surprise, considering she was still a kid. It really did seem like acts that would engage the audience and get us to laugh had a distinct advantage, in that respect. Even I could feel my ability to concentrate slipping away from me, little by little. As best as I could tell, we were somewhere around the middle or the latter half of the contest, and part of me wished I could get up and wash my face with cold water just to make sure I stayed awake.

I sat bolt upright and was wide awake in a second, however, when I heard the announcer say, “Next up, we have a pair called the Slimes!”

Falfa and Shalsha stepped onto the stage. They seemed really confident, somehow, and for a moment I saw them as a pair of performers who’d won their way into the finals, rather than as the daughters I was so proud of.

No time for commentary now, though! I have to give them my full attention!


©Benio
SLIME

“Hello, everyone! We’re Falfa…”

“…And Shalsha, in the flesh.”

“We’re twins, so it might be hard to tell us apart!”

“You can tell who’s who by our hair color.”

“So the other day, Falfa got lost.”

“No need to worry. To live is to be lost. Losing your way is nothing to fear.”

“Falfa didn’t mean it in a big and profound way! See, the other night, I was in my room, reading a book. It was about trying to prove the existence of the world through mathematical proofs.”

“Shalsha is surprised you’d read a book like that, but I won’t question it. What did it say?”

“Well, it said if you imagine we’re living in World A, it only takes the slightest of changes to turn it into World B or C instead. That means even just a little misstep could land you in a totally different world!”

“What a strange book.”

“Then, when Falfa stopped reading, I noticed it was a little dark in my room. The lamp was on, but it was dark anyway! Even the lamp’s light was gray—everything was dark! So Falfa got scared, ran out of the room, and went over to Mommy’s instead…but when I knocked on her door, she didn’t answer. Falfa didn’t know what to do, so I slowly opened the door myself.”

“Shalsha doesn’t like where this is going.”

“Falfa saw a shadowy figure inside that looked like Mommy. It was really just like her, but something was strange. Her face looked gloomy and sickly, and she didn’t say a word. That’s when Falfa realized…Mommy was dead. And in fact, everyone was dead!”

“How terrifying.”

“It seemed Falfa had ended up in World B where all living things were dead! Reading the proof that World A could become World B was all it took to transport Falfa there!”

“Your very existence became untethered from reality.”

“Falfa was scared and didn’t know what to do, but then all the zombie-like people of World B started chasing me! Falfa ran away, but I knew I had to do something to get back to my old

world before something terrible happened. That's when Falfa had a revelation: If I just read that book again and found the page with the proof on it, I might be able to go back to World A!"

"And so that's what you did to get back to World A? Shalsha hopes you'll be careful not to get lost between worlds again."

"No, Falfa hasn't read the book again yet. This is still World B."

"Huh?"

Falfa and Shalsha turned to look directly at the audience.

"All of you are residents of World B. And that means you're all dead!"

"Everyone's dead?"
"Everyone's dead!"
"Everyone's dead."
""Everyone's dead!""

That last "everyone's dead" was Falfa and Shalsha speaking together in perfect harmony, by the way.

A very weird atmosphere descended over the venue. This was the big moment in Falfa and Shalsha's act. It wasn't the sort of performance that would get a ton of laughs, necessarily, but hopefully it would enhance the impact of this twist.

"By the way, Sister..."
"Huh? What? Falfa wanted to keep chanting about how everyone's dead!"
"We should really go back to World A. You know, the world where everyone's alive? Where did you put that book?"
"...Okay, but why? Everyone being dead makes this world so nice to live in!"

“Come back to your senses, Sister.”

Shalsha stage-slapped Falfa upside the head.

“Ow! Shalsha, just because everyone’s dead in this world doesn’t mean you can just hit people!”

“You said ‘ow.’ You heard it, right? You said ‘ow’ just now.”

“S-so what? Stop creeping toward me… Falfa may be dead, but that doesn’t mean I’m totally defenseless!”

“If you feel pain, then that means your body and soul both aren’t completely dead yet!”

“Ah! You’re right!”

Falfa did an exaggerated “I understand now!” sort of gesture.

“Okay, then, let’s both go back together! We should find the book that’ll take us back to World A!”

“Shalsha happens to have it right here.”

“Wow! You’re so prepared for this! But at least we can go home now. Let’s open it on three!”

“As in, ‘one, two, three’?”

“No, no, you have to pause a little longer before the three! The rhythm’s very important.”

Falfa and Shalsha mimed as if they were opening a book.

“Phew—we’re back. That’s one problem settled. Shalsha thinks we’ve learned a lesson about appreciating our daily lives today.”

“Oh, are you sure about that? He-he-he-he-he-he!”

“What do you mean, Sister?”

“Surprise! This is World C!”

“…Thanks for watching!”

Falfa and Shalsha bowed as they delivered their last line in unison, and a moment later, the audience broke out in applause. I would've liked to think they got the biggest round of applause so far…but considering they were my own daughters performing a script I'd written myself, I wasn't exactly the most objective judge. Still, the "everyone's dead" part had gotten a good reaction from the crowd.

To be totally honest, when I thought about it with a clear head, part of me couldn't believe we'd brought a super-surreal sketch like that to an actual contest. The thing about surreal humor is while certain types of people will love it, that demographic isn't big enough to give you a real shot at victory. I'd known that, but I'd also wanted to give my daughters as many options as I could, so I'd included one of those in the script I wrote for them anyway.

Why had they chosen to bring out the surreal one for the finals? I wasn't positive…but most likely, they'd just already used up all the easier material in order to get this far. A seasoned comedian with absolute faith in their abilities could probably breeze through the preliminaries while saving their best for last, but my daughters had had to treat each and every round as if it might be their last. They hadn't had the option to go in with anything but their absolute best, and they'd used up all the sketches with a high likelihood of winning. So all they had left was an act that was hard to sell.

In short, they'd had no choice but to go into the finals with a surreal sketch as their material. We wouldn't know for sure how that'd turn out for them until all the performances were done and the scores were announced…but I could tell just by looking at their faces that Falfa and Shalsha felt they'd done their best. There was no mistaking that, at least.

Just then, Halkara tapped my thigh to get my attention. "That was great!" she said. "They might have a shot at winning first place!"

"I think it's still a bit early to say that. Our dragons still haven't had their turn yet, after all," I replied, though at the same time, I had to admit seeing Halkara have such a positive reaction was really satisfying. I didn't get the sense she was flattering me, either. The announcer chose that moment to give feedback for the skit, as well, and I didn't get a bad sense from that report at all.

Please, just let them get a good score!

"Did you write that sketch, Azusa?" asked Sandra.

"I wrote the rough draft. Those two modified it a lot, though. Especially Shalsha's lines—they were almost nothing like how I wrote them." *I guess it's easier for the person who's actually going to be playing the role to decide the best wording for themselves.* "So really, you might as well say Falfa and Shalsha made it up."

A wide variety of other acts came and went, and finally, it was time for the last sketch of the day. The announcer introduced the final group by shouting, "And our next performance will be by a pair called Double Dragon!"

All right—time to get in the mindset of an audience member and judge them as objectively as I can!

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“Good day to you. This is Laika of Double Dragon speaking.”

“And I am the great Flatorte! Watch carefully as I freeze every one of you solid with my cold breath!”

“This is a comedy venue! The last thing we want is for our audience to think our act is frigid!”

“Now then, Laika. To tell the truth, I, the great Flatorte, have an enormous problem on my hands.”

“What would that be? I’d be more than happy to provide you with advice.”

“I’ve forgotten all my lines for this sketch!”

“You made it sound like this was your problem, but that’s just as big of an issue for me!”

“And that’s why I won’t be setting up any gags tonight. You’ll have to take care of those on your own.”

“I most certainly will not! How am I supposed to perform a pair comedy sketch single-handedly?!”

“No need to worry. I, the great Flatorte, will be standing off to the side with my arms crossed, watching over you all the while.”

“Why are you acting like you’re judging me?! You’re the one who forgot her lines! You can’t just silently loom over the rest of the performance!”

“Oh, you’ll be fine. Just waste a few minutes telling them how good the beef skewers we had earlier were, or something.”

“This is a comedy sketch, not a food review! What sort of punchline am I supposed to pull out of beef skewers?!”

“In that case, I, the great Flatorte, will stall for time by reciting the five best phrases to say if you want to annoy someone. Think up something else to talk about in the meantime.”

“That’s an aggressively unhelpful subject for a mini-lecture!”

“Number five: ‘It’s not that you’re a bad person, but…’”

“Yes, that makes it abundantly clear you think they are not, in fact, a very good person, after all!”

“Number four: ‘Looks like the era of something-or-

other's over.'"

"That does typically say more about the speaker than the era—they just want it to be over, more often than not. So then? What's number three?"

"...I forgot."

"Really?! Really?! We went off on this tangent to buy time after you forgot the script, and now you're forgetting your way off topic again?!"

"All right, then—I, the great Flatorte, will list the top three presents I'd like to receive."

"Oh, so you're changing the ranking halfway through the list? I suppose I should be happy you're finishing any list at all."

"I'll list them off from three to one: land, money, and power."

"All that tells me is you're an incredibly unpleasant person to be around! Also, a top-three list is already short enough without you rushing through it! Do I need to remind you that you forgot our actual script? This might be the single least appropriate time to abridge a speech you've ever encountered in your whole life!"

"Oh! I remembered the sixth most annoying phrase!"

"What about the third item on the list?! The sixth most annoying phrase would be something that wasn't good enough to make the cut! If you've already heard items five and four, there's no need whatsoever to bother with six! I'm sure item six must be embarrassed at the thought of being presented, too!"

"Oh! I remembered more! Actually, I remembered everything!"

"Well, thank goodness for that. In that case, shall we change course and get back to our actual material?"

"I remembered that I never bothered reading the script in the first place!"

"Your irresponsibility knows no bounds. Thank you very much, everyone!"

"Huh? What're you thanking them for? I'm not thanking anyone!"

"It means our performance is over! Why would you drag this out even longer if you don't even know our material?!"

“Because I don’t think I have anyone to thank for anything! I’m not grateful toward anyone! I’m a self-made dragon!”

“Stop making yourself look even more unpleasant! And stop crossing your arms and posing like that, already! You are insufferable!”

“The sixth most irritating phrase you can say to someone is, ‘Do you know why I’m mad at you?’”

“Do you know why I’m mad at you?! It’s because you’ve failed to take this performance even the slightest bit seriously!”

“Yeah, I’m not into this anymore. I’m going home.”

“My thoughts exactly! Thank you for watching, everyone!”

With that, Laika and Flatorte left the stage—although Flatorte kept shouting about how she was not, in fact, grateful to the audience at all, until she was gone.

Honestly, that was way better than I expected it to be!

I had no idea which of them had been the driving force behind planning their sketch, but it had certainly had an unpredictability that worked in its favor. In fact, it seemed pretty high-level on the whole, at least from my perspective. I wasn't alone in that, as it turned out—one of the judges commented their performance had given an impression of being "stable and consistent from start to finish."

The only question, then, was what basis the judges would be assessing all the performances on. Some people enjoyed surreal, shock-value sketches, while others loathed them, and the score for a performance like that could easily swing in either direction depending on what side of that line the judges fell on. I had a feeling the dragon duo's performance—which had gotten a ton of laughs while being just a little unconventional—had hit the perfect balance for this sort of event, but it really would all come down to a matter of the judges' personal preferences.

I sure am curious how they're going to rate everyone…but really, it doesn't matter in the end.

Flatorte and Laika looked as satisfied as could be with their performance. In fact, the smile on Flatorte's face told me in her mind, she might as well have won already. They, at least, were clearly under the impression their sketch had gone over well.

I'll have to ask which of them came up with the idea for that bit after this is all over.

At long last, the moment arrived for the judges to announce the winners. Pecora took to the stage, acting as the judges' representative—or, really, acting as the demon king, which gave her more authority than anyone else present.

"Okay, everyone! The margin between the top three acts was very slim, so I'll be announcing all of them at once, one after the other!"

All right, it's time! How's it going to turn out?

The lights in the venue dimmed, and a drumroll-like noise began to play. I clasped my hands before my chest as I anxiously awaited the results.

“In third place: Slimes! In second place: Honey & Sugar! And, in first place: Double Dragon!”

The spotlights came to rest on Laika and Flatorte. Laika spent a moment just standing there in dumbfounded silence, but then Flatorte grabbed her hand and raised it into the air.

“We did it! Come on, let’s go!” said Flatorte.

“R-right!” Laika stammered.

The venue’s lights came on once more, and the other contestants offered a mixture of applause and mildly disappointed glances as Laika and Flatorte took to the front of the stage, where Pecora hung medals around their necks.

“Congratulations!” said Pecora. “You both did wonderfully!”

“This is an honor, truly! It feels like all our hard work has been rewarded!”

“It always feels great to come out on top in a contest of might, no matter what field it’s in!”

Yep! They really do deserve this, I thought as I looked over at Falfa and Shalsha…and found Shalsha was in tears, while Falfa was patting her on the back to comfort her. *Yeah, I understand. It’s frustrating to lose, right? I was part of the process, so trust me, I’m frustrated, too.*


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I knew, however, this would be a good experience for both of them in the long term. The frustration they were feeling proved that on its own. I'll admit I shed a couple tears myself watching the two of them, but that was just because I was moved, for the record! It was one of those times when I just got a little overcome with emotion.

Just then, Halkara placed something on my lap.

"Here," she said. "Halkara Pharmaceuticals' signature eye drops."

"I…don't know whether that was considerate of you, or just plain weird."

Most people would offer a handkerchief, right?

◇

After we returned to the house in the highlands, I finally got to ask the question that had been in the back of my mind ever since the contest.

"So which of you wrote your sketch?"

"I did!" Flatorte declared as she threw her hand into the air.

Laika, however, looked a little chagrined. *What does that reaction mean, I wonder?*

"I suppose you might say the sketch was written, in a sense, but the truth is, the particulars of our lines weren't set in stone at all," Laika explained. "The overall flow of the performance was planned in advance, but everything else was improvised on the spot. There was a very real danger Flatorte might not come up with anything to say at all, and I spent the whole performance on pins and needles worrying it would fall apart."

"You guys went for a really risky tactic, huh?!"

It became quickly apparent, however, Flatorte hadn't had any sort of malicious intent behind her choice to set up the skit that way.

"When you're doing a live show, putting yourself up against the wall is what makes your performance feel authentic!" Flatorte asserted. "The most important thing at times like those is momentum. There's no way amateurs like us could win against professional comedians when it comes to polish and

technique, and since we were working with such a big audience in the finals, our only choice was to throw caution to the wind and make it up as we go!"

Huh. You know, maybe Flatorte thinks about comedy in more or less the same way she thinks about music? They're both performing arts, I guess.

"That, and also I, the great Flatorte, would never fail to come up with material on the spot. It was a piece of cake."

You'd think the only way to interpret that was melodramatic boasting, but Flatorte had said it so offhandedly, I actually got the impression she was being sincere. She hadn't intended to brag at all, for once.

Is she just such a brilliant performance artist that she doesn't think it's anything worth bragging about…?

Laika had a very conflicted look on her face as she stared at Flatorte. I was coming to understand all over again why someone like her, who valued effort and diligence above all else, would clash with Flatorte so consistently. They just weren't on the same wavelength.

In any case, there was no question they'd really outdone themselves this time. That didn't just go for the dragons—I was impressed with my daughters as well, of course. When I peeked into their room, by the way, I found they'd put their third-place medals on display.

It really is nice to have something physical to symbolize your accomplishments, I reflected.



THE SCARIEST THING ABOUT THIS STORY…IS IT REALLY HAPPENED TO ME!

Once, I found myself in a museum in the demon lands dedicated to the magical history of demonkind. I'd made my way there at Falfa and Shalsha's request, and since Laika was just as interested in museums as the girls were, she was all too happy to carry us over to our destination. Beelzebub, on the other hand, was busy with work and couldn't accompany us, though we'd made plans to meet up with her later.

Falfa and Shalsha took their time reading the explanatory plaques set up beside every exhibit. I had a feeling the two of them could probably read at least a little of the demons' written language, but since the plaques included a human translation, that wasn't even necessary here.

Supposedly, Pecora had made it a point of policy that all the major museums and tourist attractions should have signage in multiple languages. We weren't the only ones who'd been visiting the demon lands a lot lately, after all. All sorts of visitors—like spirits, for instance—had been showing up in greater and greater numbers. The signs were a way to accommodate those visitors. The one slight problem was that their translations seemed to be a little off sometimes, possibly thanks to how quickly they'd been rushed out.

That started out really casual, then shifted to formal—I have no clue what it's actually supposed to read like! It must be pretty hard to get all the detailed nuances through when you're translating this stuff…

As a side note, this was a museum of magical history…

REALLY GREAT STAFF

See this staff? They used it 3,300 years ago! It's got a pointy tip and is capable of inflicting grievous stab wounds.

Ingredients: **Beast Fang**

...but since most of the items on display were magical tomes and grimoires, from a visual perspective, the whole place was really boring!

Sure, some of those grimoires were probably historically significant, but they just didn't have the same sort of impact that seeing an actual mummy on display did, for instance. It was just book after book after book. They all had explanations written out about them, of course, but that just led to another problem: Those explanations were so complicated, I could barely even begin to understand them.

I could *use* magic, sure, but analyzing grimoires was a field of study in its own right, and a very specialized one. Just being able to cast a few spells didn't prepare you to understand the complicated nuances of grimoire-craft at all. To put it in Japanese terms, it was like how being a fan of Sengoku-era samurai stories didn't necessarily mean you'd be capable of reading historical documents that were actually written in that era. You needed a different, much more specialized set of knowledge to make that possible.

To make matters worse, this whole exhibit felt more like a mage thing than a witch thing. Witches specialized in brewing medicines from herbs, using crystals for magic, and stuff like

that, not leafing through grimoires. In other words, nothing that was on display at the museum inspired any sort of professional interest in me.

Laika, on the other hand, was making a point of reading the explanations for each and every display, which meant it was taking her even longer to walk through the museum than it otherwise would have.

“Hmm, hmm… This is all very complicated, isn’t it…?” Laika muttered.

She can’t even use magic, so she must be even more out of her comfort zone than I am… She sure does take her studies seriously, no matter the circumstances.

I didn’t have it in me to be quite that zealous, so I figured I might as well make the experience a little easier on myself. I decided to look for a shortcut through the museum. As I looked around for one, however, my gaze fell on something entirely different that grabbed my attention: a part of the museum labeled HANDS-ON DISPLAY.

The display turned out to be exactly what it said on the sign: an area where you were allowed to pick up and handle a variety of artifacts and grimoires. That, I figured, was something even I’d be able to appreciate, so I decided to kill some time there.

To start, I took a look at a staff that had one distinctly pointy end. I thought it was a weapon at first, but according to the nearby explanatory plaque, the idea was that the point allowed you jab it into the ground easily. I picked the staff up and thrust it into a mound of dirt that had been piled up nearby for that purpose. Lo and behold, it stuck in place with barely any effort at all.

“Okay, I get it now. That does seem kinda handy, if you needed to free up your hands for whatever reason.”

Next up was a grimoire that, apparently, was about as heavy as they came. It wasn’t that the materials were exceptionally heavy so much as that the book itself was just plain big, making it really hard to carry in a single hand.

“Oh! Two-handing this makes it pretty easy, though,” I said to myself as I lifted the book. That was with my physical strength, which didn’t say much about how the average person would experience it. In fact, an average person might not have been able to lift the tome at all.

Next, I took a look at a very conspicuously old box. If I wanted to describe it in more specific terms, I might have called it a coffer? Its explanatory plaque read THIS BOX'LL DO SOME MAGIC STUFF IF YOU OPEN IT UP! OUR HONORABLE PATRONS ARE SURE TO BE ASTONISHED.

Again, I really can't tell if these plaques are trying to be casual, or polite, or what. Guess I should open it and see what happens, anyway.

I didn't think they'd put a unique, irreplaceable treasure in a hands-on exhibit, but the box did also look very old, so I slowly and carefully cracked it open using both hands.

The next thing I knew, a cloud of white smoke began wafting out of the box!

It was almost like it was filled with dry ice or something.

"Oh? I guess it makes a magic smokescreen, then," I said to myself.

The smoke vanished in no time at all, but it still struck me as a fun little trick. It seemed like something a bored kid in a museum would get a kick out of. *Not that I have any right to criticize, since I'm the one who got bored in a museum and got a kick out of it just moments ago…*

Anyway, I knew the others would make their way here eventually, but since I'd found something sort of fun, I figured I might as well go tell them about it. I knew museums weren't a place for people to run around having a blast, but it still seemed like I was the only one who felt out of place here, and I wanted to be at least a little more involved with the others. As I turned away from the hands-on section, however…

…a very strange sensation came over me.

What is this? Why do I feel so stiff all of a sudden…?

That box didn't put some sort of petrification curse on me, did it? On second thought, maybe I should actually warn everyone not to open it. But then again, there's no way they'd put something with that dangerous of a magical effect in a hands-on section, would they…?

Thankfully, the stiffness wasn't bad enough to keep me from

moving around. I was relieved to realize it probably hadn't petrified me after all, though that raised the question of just what it *had* done to me. If there was a curse that made its target feel vaguely out of shape, I'd certainly never heard of it.

"Hey, Falfa, Shalsha! I found something interesting over there," I said, only to be surprised by my own voice. It sounded weirdly strained and quiet.

Am I talking quietly on reflex since this is a museum? I'm not sure my voice would change quite that much if that's all there was to it, though.

Just then, Falfa and Shalsha turned to face me.

"Aaaaaahhhhhhhhh!" Falfa screamed at a volume that was most definitely not museum-appropriate. Shalsha didn't say a word, but she did take an immediate step backward away from me. A distinct shade of unease crept across her expression.

Okay, that's not the reaction I was expecting!

"Huh? What…? Is there something weird about me?" I asked.

This is starting to really freak me out…

"You mean you can't tell, Mommy?" asked Falfa.

"Can't tell what? Did something happen to me? Don't tell me I grew horns or something…?"

I patted my head, but nothing seemed out of place up there. The worst I could say is my hair felt a little dry…maybe? There wasn't a good way to get around that when you rode Laika somewhere, though, thanks to all the wind.

Falfa and Shalsha took a moment to confer with each other, then reached some sort of decision and exchanged a nod. Shalsha turned around and went off somewhere, while Falfa took my hand.

"Let's go out to the museum garden, okay, Mommy?"

Falfa pulled me outside. The garden spanned the circumference of a large lake, and she led me straight toward it.

"What's going on? Do you think water would help? I'd really rather not take a bath in a lake, honestly…"

I remembered this one comic I'd read in my past life that featured a character who changed sexes when doused in hot or cold water. I didn't think that was what was going on with me, though, and even if it was, I wouldn't have wanted to jump in that lake. I hadn't even brought a change of clothes with me!

“No, that’s not it,” said Falfa. “You’ll understand when we’re a little closer. Just look in the lake, Mommy!”

I did what Falfa asked me to, but it looked like a perfectly ordinary lake to me—no different than the ones you’d see in any other garden. Its most notable feature was a turtle swimming around a ways farther in.

“It looks like a normal lake to me,” I said. “Is there something special about the water in the demon lands, maybe?”

“No, Mommy! Look at the surface!”

Once again, I followed Falfa’s lead, gazing at the surface of the lake.

Is something right beneath the water, maybe? No, that doesn’t make sense—it’d have nothing to do with me. So maybe she wants me to use the water’s surface like a mirror, and look at my own— Ah!

STARING UP AT ME WAS AN ELDERLY VERSION OF MYSELF!

“Gaaaaaaaaah! What the heck happened to me?!”

My hair’s gone gray! I’m not quite wrinkly enough that I can’t tell it’s me anymore, but I definitely look old enough to be a proper witch now! I can still see traces of my seventeen-year-old base form through it, though—which makes me look like a sixty-year-old using rejuvenating makeup in a really uncanny sort of way!

Apparently, the box in the museum had been like a treasure chest straight out of old Japanese legends: It aged whoever opened it in an instant.

That’s sure to astonish, all right… What am I supposed to do about this?

I had to do something to fix myself, that was for sure, but as I inspected my reflection in the water’s surface, a wave of lethargy washed over me. I really didn’t feel like moving around anymore if I could help it. It was like I’d come to the subconscious conclusion that if *that’s* what I looked like now, of course I didn’t have much energy.

“Not to mention the shock factor…,” I muttered to myself.

While I gaped at my aged reflection, Shalsha joined back up with us.

“Shalsha spoke with the museum’s curator, who said the

chest Mom opened makes smoke that temporarily turns anyone it touches into an old person."

"Why would you put something like that in a hands-on section?! Well…at least it's temporary, I guess."

Thinking things through again, I realized that even if there was a spell that could permanently age someone that dramatically, it wouldn't be a simple enough incantation to be activated by just opening a box. A spell like that would be incredibly advanced magic, after all. Plus, it would make the box in question into the sort of incredibly valuable artifact you'd never even consider letting people touch freely. I figured its effects would wear off within a half hour to an hour at most.

"Did they say anything about how long this would last, Shalsha?" I asked.

"Approximately one week."

"That's kind of a long time, isn't it?!"

I guess a week's just a drop in the bucket from a demon's perspective. Still, though, you'd think having to take a week off from work because you checked out the wrong exhibit at a museum would be a huge pain, even for a demon. It's a massive pain for me, that's for sure! If I'm stuck like this for the next several days, then I've got no choice but to go back to the house in the highlands! I don't even want to think about all the ways everyone will end up teasing me!

"The curator said nobody had expected anyone who'd be affected this dramatically would ever come visit the museum," Shalsha added.

"Oh, so it wouldn't do this to most demons? I guess it'd just be harmless smoke to them, then."

I figured it was probably put on display to show off the smoke, with the aging effect being considered a non-factor. It sure was a big factor for humans, though! Apparently, I'd had the misfortune of deciding to visit after they put up the new signs, but before they'd thought to rework the exhibits for the safety of human visitors.

"In the curator's words, 'I understand now that simply providing translations is not always enough on its own. This was a very valuable learning experience, and I intend to make this a museum that human guests will be able to safely enjoy and appreciate in the future. Thank you for teaching me this lesson.'"

“I’d prefer a solution for this mess over a thank-you, personally!” *I don’t wanna be stuck like this for a whole week!*

“‘The box’s effects are temporary and cannot be dispelled through magical means. Furthermore, those subjected to the box’s effects will find themselves unable to magically transform until the spell runs its course. There’s no choice but to wait it out for a week,’ according to the curator.”

“So much for solving this quickly…”

“Shalsha did receive something helpful, though.”

Now that she mentioned it, I realized Shalsha was indeed holding something.

Oh, good. Maybe this will be the solution I need!

“They gave us free tickets as an apology. The next time we come here, we won’t have to pay for entry.”

“That’s not even a little bit helpful!”

I think I’ll let the museum fans in the family use those tickets.

For lack of any other option, I decided to fill Laika in on what had happened. Seeing my old-lady transformation would probably shock her, so I sent Falfa ahead to explain the situation, then met up with her after she’d been adequately forewarned.

Laika took a moment to study my new appearance, then paused, seemingly not quite sure how to express herself. “Lady Azusa, you look…dignified,” she finally said.

Well, that sure was a tactful way of saying I look old now…

“No need to worry, though. You may look elderly, but you look like an elderly person who appears quite young for her age!”

“I know you’re trying to make me feel better, but it’s not working!”

I really am young! I’m three hundred years old, sure, but my body’s still just seventeen!

◇

We ended up making our way to Beelzebub’s house after that. I really didn’t want to see her like this, honestly, but it would have looked unnatural for us to suddenly head back home without warning, and there was always a slight chance

Beelzebub would have some relevant information about how to fix this. My hand was forced.

"Haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I see the Witch of the Highlands has become the Witch of the Nursing Home!"

And then she laughed her head off about it.

"Well, that's just plain rude!" *Laika's tactfulness was pretty conflicting in its own sort of way, but there's nothing quite as irritating as just getting laughed at!*

"T'would seem you have shrunk since I last saw you! A walking stick would suit this new look of yours," said Beelzebub.

"Look, I just want to know if you can do anything to fix this, okay?" I asked. I was planning on asking everyone I met if they knew how to put me back to normal, actually. I had no interest in giving up and resigning myself to a week of old age!

"Nay, I do not. It's only due to last a week, isn't it? Just grin and bear it. Perhaps spending some time in that form shall lead you to sympathize more keenly with the plight of the elderly in the future. Consider it a learning experience."

"It feels kinda weird to hear that from someone who's technically way more elderly than I am." *All the 't'woulds' and 'shalls' certainly aren't helping with that, either.*

"Well, I guess if I'm stuck like this, I should just go home. I feel pretty stiff, but it's not like I can't move at all," I said. If I were to compare my body to a bicycle, then it felt like my gears were in desperate need of a good oiling without being broken in any particular way.

"Very well, then… Ah, no, wait. Wait just a moment!" Beelzebub exclaimed.

Oh, did she think of some way to fix me after all? Now that I *think about it, I climbed up the World Tree to buy medicine that one time I got turned into a kid. Maybe they'd have something that could take care of this as well?*

"Seeing as we have this opportunity, shall we spar? I have a feeling I'll be able to defeat you soundly in your current state."

"Well, I guess I know where your priorities are now!"

I feel like an idiot for hoping she'd help for even a second.

"Look—you realize if we did fight and I managed to win, people would start talking about how you're so weak you got beat up by an old lady? Do you really think trying to take me on when I look like I'm old and sickly's a great idea?"

"You didn't let me finish," said Beelzebub. "What I meant was, it would be better—and safer—for you to know how capable you are of defending yourself in your current state. Are you able to muster eighty percent of your usual might? Or perhaps only fifty percent? Better to learn now than in the midst of a crisis."

"Oh. Okay, you might have a point there, actually." *Being way weaker than usual and not realizing it sounds like a recipe for disaster.*

And so, Beelzebub and I ended up going out into her house's garden to have a match. We squared off against each other.

"Okay, then—come at me any time," I said.

"…"

"I'm ready whenever you are!"

"…"

Beelzebub, for some reason, just wasn't attacking.

"'Tis incredibly hard to attack you right now!" she finally exclaimed. "It feels like an act of senseless brutality!"

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?!" *It's not like I wanted to end up an old lady!*

"My apologies, but you'll have to be the one to take the offensive," Beelzebub said. "At least then I can claim I'm just defending myself."

"Well, I don't want to move that much right now! Feels like I might throw out my back."

If at all possible, I was really hoping to win the match without moving much at all.

"Hell's bells, this is a nuisance! Fine—here I come!"

In the end, Beelzebub came charging straight at me. That's exactly what I wanted, and I prepared to receive her charge without taking so much as a single step…because, honestly, I just really didn't want to! I was more motivated than I'd ever been to end this fight while expending as little energy as possible. Not to be melodramatic or anything, but my spirit

really felt like it was taking a back seat to my body this time!

Beelzebub closed in on me, and the moment she was close enough, I threw a punch at her forehead.

"Fumnaaah!"

I'm sure I could've thrown a much stronger punch if I'd stepped into the blow, really putting my weight behind it…but at that particular moment, not moving was a higher priority to me. Still, my punch landed exactly as I was hoping it would.

Oh, hey! Guess that's all it takes to hit her after all!

And, the next thing I knew…

"Agh, that *really* hurt!"

…the force of my attack had sent Beelzebub flying.

"That was amazing, Mommy!"

"It appears your raw strength hasn't been reduced in the least."

Always nice to hear my daughters cheering me on… Though somehow, it feels more like my grand*daughters are cheering for me this time.*

I looked over at Laika. "So what did you think?" I asked her.

"Frankly speaking, Lady Azusa, I'm currently feeling an impulse to call you my venerable master rather than my teacher."

Now that's a weird perspective to take!

"It's clear to me that even as your body has withered, your spirit remains as hearty and focused as ever! You are truly worthy of the title of master, Lady Azusa!"

"No thanks! You can keep it!" *I never asked for it in the first place!*

Around that time, Beelzebub made her way back to us from wherever I'd punched her to. She looked less than happy.

"What *was* that?! 'Fumnaaah'?! At least have the decency to shout 'hiyah,' or something to that effect! That nonsensical war cry made me put my guard down! And you're just as powerful as you've ever been!"

"Now that you mention it, my voice did sound kinda feeble there, huh…?"

Shouting when you exert yourself was just a natural human instinct, and apparently, even those shouts had been affected by

the current state of my body.

"Well, I'm just glad to know I'm not any weaker than I used to be. Guess the spell wasn't powerful enough to do quite that much damage," I said.

If I was still capable enough to beat Beelzebub, then it seemed safe to assume I wouldn't be in any danger just living out my day-to-day life.

"So it would seem," said Beelzebub. "However…losing to you in that state has dealt a terrible, humiliating blow to my self-esteem…"

"You're the one who decided to ask for a fight, so that's all on you."

That's the downside to picking on people who seem weak at a glance: You end up looking really pathetic if you somehow lose to them!

◇

I really, really didn't want to go home like this, to be honest, but in the end, I found myself making my way back to the house in the highlands anyway.

"Hmm? You look like an elderly cedar," Sandra observed, kicking things off by judging me by plant standards. Cedars *did* live for quite a long time, so it was a fair enough comparison.

"Oh, are you…my teacher's grandmother? You look just like her," said Halkara, who'd misunderstood what was going on at a basic level.

"Nah, you've got it all wrong. That's my Big Sis herself! Look at her soul, see? It's the same as ever," said Rosalie. In her eyes, apparently, I'd barely changed at all.

Wait, does that mean she looks at my soul instead of my body sometimes? I'm not sure I'm totally comfortable with that!

"You've sort of aged, huh, Mistress? I wanna see how I measure up to an old version of you now!" said Flatorte.

"I know you didn't mean it in a bad way, Flatorte, but calling me 'old' is banned," I replied. *It's not that I'm actually old! My age has nothing to do with this!*

Three days had passed since my sudden transformation. Over the course of that time, a few other changes had occurred (or technically speaking, I noticed a few other consequences of the one big change, I guess).

"I have less of an appetite now. I still get hungry, but it takes less food to make me full, and I don't have a taste for meat or fried foods anymore," I muttered as I sat in the dining room one morning after breakfast. My body, apparently, was telling me I didn't need all that many calories these days.

"Are you all right, Lady Azusa? You'll wither away if you don't eat more meat, you know?" said Laika, who was sitting across from me. The two of us had been chatting, and she looked rather concerned about my well-being.

"I think we can chalk that up to the spell for sure," I said. "Seems like my metabolism's slower now, and it just doesn't feel like my body wants me eating very much."

"The fact that you simply haven't been exercising recently may also play a factor," Laika noted. "You spent the bulk of yesterday sitting in the dining room."

"Yeah, you might have a point…"

I just couldn't work up the willpower to do anything physical. It wasn't that I actively wanted to shut myself up inside—I just found myself wanting to be as economical with my movements as possible.

"Well, if anything feels unusual, please let me know right away."

"I don't think we need to worry that much, honestly. We know I've got just as strong of an offense as ever, thanks to Beelzebub, and I'm not in pain or anything. I'm not even sick! I'm as healthy as ever, basically, so I'll be just fine."

I did, however, agree that just sitting still all the time was bad for me, so I decided to stand up…

"Hruumph!"

…and, the moment I did so, I was hit with a shocking revelation. I'd just let out a sort of strained grunt as I stood up from a chair!

That's something a young person would never, ever do!

"Are you truly certain your body isn't failing you, Lady

Azusa…?”

“It’s fine! Don’t worry about it! Actually, just forget you heard that, please!”

I didn’t exactly think of myself as a teenager anymore, considering I had daughters and all, but I certainly didn’t think of myself as elderly, either. As such, this transformation had me pretty on edge.

I’ll have to make sure I don’t start making even louder, more conspicuously elderly grunts in the future.

“All right, I think it’s my turn to make lunch today! Wonder what I should make?” I said.

“Are you certain it’s a good idea for you to be using a kitchen knife right now, Lady Azusa?” asked Laika.

“Yeah, it should be fine. My reflexes are as good as ever, so I don’t think I’ll have any nasty accidents.”

I wouldn’t have been able to take Beelzebub on if that weren’t the case, presumably. If I’d been too slow to react in time and actually hit her, then all the power in the world wouldn’t have helped me in that battle. If I could land a hit on a demon like her, then I figured it was safe to assume my limbs were just as dexterous as ever. And, in the end, I was right—I managed to make a meal, no problem.

Well, one slight problem: how that meal was received.

“Our lunch is really **brown** today, isn’t it, Mommy?”

Falfa pointed the issue out first.

“Huh? I know I didn’t serve a salad this time, but it’s not that bad, is it…?”

“This stewed daikon, the stewed mushrooms, and the stewed mountain vegetables are all brown. Also, the ratio of stewed foods is disproportionate,” said Shalsha.

I hadn’t realized until it was pointed out to me, but she was right. I really *had* put together a meal full of plain, simple dishes!

“Your cooking doesn’t have any impact today, Mistress. This is the sort of food a priest would make! It’s barely even worth eating…,” said Flatorte, joining in on the complaints.

I guess I didn't make any crowd-pleasing dishes at all, yeah. I probably should've fried some chicken or something.

"Well, um… If anyone's still hungry, I'll give you some pocket money and you can go get yourself something to eat in Flatta," I said, only to be hit by another revelation mere moments after the words left my mouth: Giving kids pocket money was a super old lady thing to do, too!

Oh, rats! I'm turning more and more elderly by the minute! I just have to hold out for a few more days, though. Just a few more days! If only they'd hurry up and pass by, already!

"Oh, right! Hey, Halkara?"

"Yes, Madame Teacher? Did you need something?"

"Does Halkara Pharmaceuticals make any hard candies? I've been feeling the weirdest craving for them."

The fact that old ladies stereotypically carried bags of candy around with them only struck me after I'd already asked the question. My current body really *was* impacting my state of mind…

"O-on second thought, never mind! I don't need any after all!" I sputtered.

"Oh, really? We do make cough drops, for what it's worth," said Halkara.

I do kinda want some, but I refuse to succumb to temptation!
"No, I'm fine! I'm going to go out for a quick stroll!"

I stepped outside…and Sandra followed along with me.

"Do you need something?" I asked. "If you're planning on joining me, you should know I'm not going all the way to Flatta today."

"That's fine," said Sandra. "I just know sometimes humans leave the house and never come home again. I'm worried that might happen to you if you go out alone, so I'll be keeping watch."

My whole family's worried about me now!

The one silver lining to the situation was that I now knew for a fact as long as I kept living here with everyone, I'd be well taken care of in old age.

◇

Six days had passed since I was turned into an old lady. In other words, I thought to myself as I sat around in the dining room once more, I would theoretically be going back to normal before much longer.

I didn't want rumors to start spreading about my condition, so my plan was to avoid Flatta until I'd recovered. Even if I hadn't been avoiding the town, though, I didn't end up feeling any desire to walk around. I figured I'd spend the remaining one, three, or however many days it took taking it easy, just like I'd done up to that point.

That said, there wasn't anything I could do about people who came to visit the house in the highlands—which was exactly what happened. A knock rang out on the door, Rosalie happened to be nearby and went to see who it was, and Eno, the Witch of the Grotto, walked inside.

"Hello! It's been a while, hasn't it? Is Miss Azusa—Gaaaaaaaaah!" Eno shrieked, to no one's surprise.

Yeah, that makes sense. This really does raise a ton of questions, huh?

"What in the world happened to you?" asked Eno. "Does this mean when I pretended to be the Witch of the Highlands back in the day, I actually looked closer to your true form than I realized…?"

Quite some time ago, Eno had traveled around the countryside pretending to be me. That was before we'd met, and she hadn't known what I looked like, so she'd disguised herself as the old, wizened crone you'd expect a veteran witch to be.

"No, that's totally wrong! I just got hit by a spell that made me look this way! It's temporary!" I said, then launched into a detailed explanation of what had happened.

"Oh, I see… There really are all sorts of spells just waiting to be discovered, aren't there…?" Eno said after I'd finished my explanation. She'd listened to the whole thing with such seriousness, you'd almost think she was the one who'd been artificially aged.

That's when Eno said something that caught me completely by surprise.

"But you know, that isn't a bad look for you at all! It's

dignified, somehow. It makes you look like a really respectable, influential sort of figure!"

"Huh? Wait—are you *jealous* of how I look right now?" I asked. She was the first person to react that way, and I was a little taken aback.

"Well, I don't want to look like an old woman right away, but I'm aiming to be a veteran witch in the future, and that's exactly the right look for the job!" said Eno. "You could totally be a leading figure in the witching world! Looking old doesn't mean you can't look impressive, in my book—in fact, sometimes the two are connected! That's exactly why I went with the appearance I did back when I was impersonating you."

"I guess that makes sense, when you put it that way."

Eno really had gone with a pretty elderly disguise back when she went around pretending to be the Witch of the Highlands. There hadn't been any rumors about me looking like an old woman floating around at the time, either. Eno had pulled her image of me out of thin air, presumably because to her, appearing old and wizened was natural and desirable for witches.

"Y-yeah, okay, maybe I can take the compliment at face value after all," I said. The funny thing about people is that all it takes is a single compliment to make us change our minds on a dime sometimes, even when that compliment is half-baked.

"Anyway, I brought a few samples with me that I thought I'd share with you," Eno said as she lined up a series of small bottles on my table. She made her living selling medicine and tended to bring some of her products along whenever she stopped by for a visit. "But," she continued, "before that, there's something I'd like to suggest to you!"

"What's that?" I asked.

Does she want me to collaborate with her to develop a new product, maybe? I'd be fine with that, though I think Halkara would throw a fit about it, considering those two are business rivals.

Eno's proposal, however, turned out to be something completely different from what I'd been expecting.

"You don't look anything like your usual self right now, so

there's no danger of anyone realizing who you are. Why not come along with me to a witches' get-together?"

"'A witches' get-together'?" I repeated skeptically. That sounded like a pain, as far as I was concerned.

"Ah! I can tell by the look on your face that you're thinking it's going to be a bother, aren't you?" said Eno, calling me out without wasting a beat. Honestly, that made this easier than if she had been completely oblivious. "That's exactly why I've never invited you to one of these up until now. Plenty of witches are like you and have no interest in getting involved in the social scene of your trade."

Maybe I shouldn't say this, considering it's my own profession and all, but I had the impression that being a witch meant there was an above-average chance you were a bit of a weirdo. That, or the sort of person who quietly lives in your own little corner of the world, perfecting your craft all by your lonesome—there were quite a few witches who fell into that category as well, I was pretty sure.

"I only made a name for myself and my medicines a little a while ago, so I've just started attending the gatherings recently," Eno continued. "It's kind of intimidating for a complete no-name to stroll on in to one of those, after all."

"I can really tell you're speaking from experience there… Though I can understand where you're coming from, too."

I didn't much care for the idea of strolling into a social gathering all alone, either. That sort of thing was always hard, unless you had a friend there to go with you—otherwise, there was a serious risk you'd end up standing around awkwardly with no one to talk to and stick out like a sore thumb. Unless you were the sort of person who could strike up a conversation with anyone, I guess. Those people would probably be just fine.

When you could count on people knowing who you were at events like that, the odds of someone talking to you proactively shot up. By the same logic, however, when you were a total unknown mystery person, the odds were good nobody would come near you. You probably wouldn't know what sort of topics people would be interested in discussing, either… That's why I could understand why Eno had waited until she'd gained a degree of fame as the Witch of the Grotto before she set forth

into the witchy social scene.

Come to think of it, I didn't even realize there were *official witch get-togethers… I'm so far out of the social scene I didn't even know those were a thing, period.*

Around that time, Sandra made her way inside from the garden. The moment she laid eyes on Eno, she let out a little "Ugh!" of distaste. She was on guard and not afraid to show it.

"Oh. You're still afraid of me, huh?" said Eno. "Don't worry, though! I'd never lay a finger on one of Miss Azusa's housemates."

"Sandra's pretty shy around people she doesn't know well, too. I think that's half of your problem," I added.

Sandra raised a hand in what more or less functioned as a greeting, then went off down the hallway. I had a feeling she was on her way to Falfa and Shalsha's room. Seeing her pass by, however, had brought an old incident to mind for me.

"You worked with a bunch of different witches back when you were trying to catch Sandra, didn't you? Did you end up keeping in touch with any of them?" I asked.

"I have, yes! They're the ones I'm planning on meeting at the gathering," Eno confirmed. "So what do you think? There's no chance any of them will realize who you are, considering how you look right now, so why not take the chance to come see what it's like? Think of it as a scouting run!"

I had no idea what she thought I'd be "scouting" at a social gathering, but I could more or less understand what Eno was going for. She was trying to give me an excuse to agree to come along, essentially. Most likely, she was hoping I'd decide there was no harm in going just once, so I might as well at least give it a shot.

I was very proactive about getting out and about when my daughters had somewhere they wanted to go, but I hadn't attended a gathering of witches for my own purposes even once so far. Once a witch like me had an understanding of the fundamentals of our work, we could do our jobs alone, no problem. There weren't any aspects of the job that required us to make connections to get work leads or anything like that.

In that sense, a social event like this didn't offer any real benefits that would convince me to go. It did, however, offer

plenty of advantages to make me stay away. For one thing, I'd never associated with other witches in any real capacity, and I was afraid my long years of running solo would make me come across as a depressing loner.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, being the Witch of the Highlands meant I also had to worry about becoming the center of attention. My reputation had gotten way too overinflated for my own good lately, after all, and I didn't like the idea of a bunch of witches using my presence at a social gathering as an excuse to invite themselves over to the house in the highlands…

Eno certainly understood me well, in that respect. She knew I'd be concerned about my reputation, and so she'd waited until I looked like someone completely different before inviting me to go give the event a look.

"It's a gathering of witches, so you don't have to worry about anyone being an overly cheery extrovert that's impossible to deal with. People in our line of work tend to prefer to keep things a bit gloomy, after all. How about it? Just one quick scouting run!" Eno said, laying on the peer pressure.

I mean, I guess I might as well give it a try.

I hadn't left my house at all since I'd been accidentally aged up, and this seemed like a good chance to get out a little. Seeing as I could pretend to be someone totally different, I didn't see any harm in just going with the flow for now.

"I guess, sure. I'll try it at least once," I said.

"All right!" exclaimed Eno. "In that case, you'd better get ready! We're meeting up this afternoon!"

"Not wasting any time, are you?!"

"I was actually stopping by your place on the way to the gathering, really. The venue's relatively close to here."

I guess when you go somewhere for a meetup, it only makes sense to get any tasks you've been meaning to do in the area done while you're there.

I stood up.

"Hrmmmph!"

Gah! I made one of those noises again…

◇

Eno and I set off on the wyvern she'd taken to my place, and it wasn't long before we arrived at the venue for the witches' gathering. By the time we showed up, it was already packed with witches. I could tell in part because, as expected, the ratio of people wearing robes was weirdly high compared to a more typical social event. That isn't to say, however, that there being a bunch of witches around made the place feel creepy or uncanny.

"Oh, I get it now. Witches are immortal sometimes, so of course a bunch of us would look perpetually young," I said to myself. At a glance, the average age of the gathering's participants seemed to be somewhere in the mid-twenties.

"You're not wrong about that," said Eno. "It doesn't feel like a big old folks' meeting at all, does it?"

That said, the attendees weren't universally young. Some of them looked like they were in their nineties, and I had to wonder if they'd made themselves appear that way deliberately as a sales tactic.

"The veterans take on forms like that since it makes them seem tougher. They make themselves look old on purpose," Eno explained, partially confirming my suspicion.

"That makes sense. I get where they're coming from," I replied.

Sometimes, you have no choice but to put on a strong front.

There was, however, just one thing I felt the need to complain to Eno about. I tugged on her sleeve. "Hey, Eno. Could you look over there for a second?"

I gestured toward a group of four seemingly young witches.

"So how'd the harvest moon the other day turn out for you girls?" "It was exhausting! I mean, this is already the busiest time of the year for me, even without that overlap!" "These things always seem to line up with each other somehow, don't they?" "Sounds to me like you could use a drink or three!" "Oh, I'm down for that. I know a cheap joint nearby that serves some pretty nice herbal liquor!"

They're so lively*!*

That wasn't even the only group of witches engaged in that spirited chatter. I picked out a couple of witches off to the side saying something along the lines of "I was thinking of burning a tortoise shell on the beach to fortune-tell with sometime soon. And throwing a whole barbecue while I'm at it. You in?" "Oh,

you know it!”

“I thought this was going to be a gloomy event, not *this*! This is like a totally normal industry meetup! Everyone’s so happy and cheerful!”

I mean, come on, a barbecue on the beach? That’s just a straight-up beach party you’re describing, not witch business!

“Ugh,” Eno grunted. “N-no, I don’t think it’s as unbalanced as you’re making it sound… Th-this is a totally ordinary number of cheerful businesspeople, trust me… Anyway, there’s a guest book over there, so we should go write our names down…”

I’d only come along because she’d specifically told me there wouldn’t be that many overly cheery extroverts, and what did I get? The uncomfortable, extroverted atmosphere of my worst nightmares made a reality.

Why do social events always seem to turn out this way?!

Events like this were really rough for people who were less than sociable. We were all witches, but that shared profession wasn’t making me feel any connection with the people around me at all…

“Don’t worry, though. You’ll barely have to talk at all to get through this gathering. That, I can guarantee!” said Eno.

“I won’t have to talk? Huh?”

I didn’t understand what she meant by that, but in any case, I signed in at the guest book, writing my name as “Azu Liliri.” I figured a name I came up with on the spot would work as well as any, and I’d used “Liliri” as a fake name in the past, as well.

Come to think of it, that was back when I first met Eno, wasn’t it? I couldn’t go around claiming to be Azusa when an imposter was using my name, so I just made something up. Then there was the time I claimed to be a dragon named Azuzard, too. I’ve used fake names weirdly often, haven’t I?

“Have you finished signing in? Here you are, then!” the witch on receptionist duty said as she handed me a wooden hammer. Eno received one as well just a moment later.

“Huh? Eno, what’s this about…?” I asked.

Why a hammer? Are they doing that thing they do at ceremonies in Japan where you break open a barrel of sake? I

didn't think that was a very widespread custom, and even if I'm wrong about that, it seems weird to have some random first-timer be one of the ones with a hammer! I thought that was exclusively for bigwigs in the business world, or something.

"There's going to be a croc-whacking event this time! This gather's more about moving around than talking!"

"I'm sorry, 'croc-whacking'? Whatever that is, I've never heard of it," I said. I'd resolved some trouble involving a crocodile that had taken up residence in a shrine's pond before—maybe this was something similar?

"Oh, this is perfect! It looks like someone's about to explain the rules," said Eno. She was right—a witch wearing a formal coat that made her look like the event's host had just floated up into the air to address everyone.

"Hello, witches all and sundry! Thank you very much for taking the time to attend today's social gathering. This will mark gathering number seven thousand eight hundred and sixty, which makes it particularly auspicious!"

When you're counting in the thousands, you can't say that an event's auspicious just because it falls on an even ten! Though I guess people did that back in my past life, too—like how people would say stuff like "This year marks the two hundred and sixtieth anniversary of this painter's birth," or whatever. I always ended up wondering if two hundred and sixty was really *all that significant of a number.*

"This time, we'll be holding a croc-whacking event," the host-like witch continued.

A stir passed through the crowd, and I heard a few witches mutter comments along the lines of "I've been waiting for this!" Apparently, it was a pretty well-known activity.

"The rules are simple. You'll all split up into teams of two and use your hammers to whack as many crocodiles as you possibly can within a time limit."

Okay, but there can't possibly be that many crocodiles around here in the first place, right? I thought, just moments before a reptilian cluster appeared out of nowhere, right by our feet.

"Okay, I stand corrected! That's a lot of them, all right!"

I was a little surprised for a moment, but at a second glance,

they were obviously just illusions. They didn't have a real sense of physical presence at all, and they looked more like cartoony crocodile characters than the actual, real-life animals. That meant they weren't scary in the way real crocodiles were, either.

"These illusory crocodiles will disappear when you hit them with your hammer, and you'll earn points for every crocodile you hit. Finally, the highest-scoring group will win a fabulous prize! Now then—it's time to divide up into groups! Give it your best shot!"

Okay, I get it now.

This is basically just a large-scale version of whack-a-mole!

Something about this still seems weird, though. Like, why do we have to be in teams of two? It'd be easy enough to whack crocs on your own, and whack-a-mole works just fine as a single-player game.

"If you're not acquainted with any of the witches around you, please go ahead and introduce yourself to someone nearby! This is the perfect chance to meet someone new and strike up a friendship!"

Oh, so they're just trying to be helpful in the most obnoxious way possible!

I understood what the organizers were going for now. This was a social event, so they'd felt the need to make the game work in a way that encouraged socializing. To be fair, it really would feel pointless to bring a bunch of people who work in the field together only to *not* socialize at all, but on the other hand, this felt like a pretty tall order for those of us who were used to being on our own…

I glanced over at Eno and found she seemed weirdly pallid all of a sudden.

"Wh-why do they always have to pull stunts like this at these events…? Just because I know a few people here and there doesn't mean it's easy for me to suddenly find a partner… Spare me, please…"

Oh, okay. It all makes sense now.

"You brought me along because you were worried they'd make this into a group activity, didn't you?" I asked.

“I’d like to say no, but yes,” Eno said with a nod.

Well, at least she’s honest.

“Just to reiterate, it’s not like I don’t know anyone here! I have acquaintances! It’s just a little more ambiguous whether I have anyone here who I could say I’m definitely-for-sure friends with. Also, it’s easy enough to talk with people in a four- or five-person group, but when you’re socializing one-on-one with someone, it’s totally possible for it to turn out that you have nothing to talk about, right? I really can’t stand it when that happens,” Eno said at a very rapid clip.

“I get that. I really get it,” I replied.

All the cheery extroverts in the crowd always seemed to have such an easy time making groups at times like these. Even just a moment ago, the four-person group of witches who’d been chatting before had split into two groups of two and were now hyping each other up over how they were definitely going to win. A group of five not-so-outgoing witches, on the other hand, had realized one person would be getting left over no matter what they did and were acting really awkwardly as a result.

“I think Carmilla’s probably going to be left over in that group over there. I’ll go ask!” “Oh, good idea! A friend of mine named Luitalua might need a partner, too! I’ll look for her!” “No, wait, one person was plenty!”

Yep. Breaking up into groups of two always ends up really hard in situations like that… And of course, I’m sure that’s a problem Eno’s worried about at this very moment.

“So seeing as we have to make groups, would you like to join up with me, Great Witch of the Highlands…?” Eno asked hopefully, her voice unusually feeble. I didn’t have the heart to refuse her.

“All right,” I said. “Actually, I would’ve been pretty upset if you’d decided to leave me on my own.”

I’m her senior in the witching world, so I feel like I have a responsibility to support her. Also, joining in on this game sounds way more fun than introducing myself to a bunch of random witches I’ve never met (considering I already have someone to team up with, anyway).

Apparently, the crocodiles would be dispersed throughout a nearby woodland. It wouldn’t be fun if they were all just wandering around an open space, after all.

“All right, Miss Azusa! Let’s whack as many crocodiles as we can!” said Eno.

“Sounds good. Leave it to me!”

A few minutes later, the other witches had finished forming their teams and nobody seemed to be searching for a partner anymore. Of course, when the person running an event like this asks, *Is everyone ready? Nobody still needs a group?* it’s really hard to speak up and admit you’re still on your own!

“It looks like everyone’s all prepared. Okay—ready, set, go!” the witch running the event called out.

Just like that, all the assembled witches charged into the forest en masse. Some of them took to the skies, but the majority proceeded on foot. Some witches were very specialized in pharmaceuticals and could barely use any magic at all, and plenty of others were quite fit thanks to long hours spent foraging in depths of forests and on mountains, so the whole event felt more like an athletic festival than anything else.

I, however, was strolling along slowly and deliberately. We’d only just begun, and it already felt like I was lagging behind. Eno, who had charged along ahead, quickly realized something was wrong and came running back to me.

“Hey! What’re you dragging your feet for?! We have to hurry into the forest!” she shouted. “Don’t tell me you can’t deal with getting a little exercise right now?”

“No, that’s not it. My legs work just as well as ever,” I said.

My body hadn’t been turned to stone, or anything like that. I could move around as much as I wanted to with no issues.

“I *can* move…but the thing is, I don’t *want* to move!”

Not only did I not want to be running around right now, but I also would’ve stayed stock-still if I’d had my way. I’d explained that to my family again and again over the past few days, but Eno had yet to get the picture.

“Well please, just get into the forest, at the absolute least! We won’t stand a chance otherwise!” Eno begged.

“…Yeah, okay,” I sighed. “I’ll go, I’ll go. Just give me a minute,

and I'll be there before you know it."

"It sounds an awful lot like you're not planning on going at all, to me!"

Whoops—busted. I just really, really *don't want to run around right now!*

"It's fine. I'm pretty sure I'll reach the forest before the time limit ends," I said.

"And how's that supposed to help?! You need to get in there as quickly as possible and whack some crocs! I'll take you there myself if I have to!"

Eno made good on her threat, dragging me by the arm as she set off at a run. "This is more than I bargained for… I didn't think it would turn out like *this*," she muttered.

"Ugh, too fast! Too faaast…"

"You're still young at heart, aren't you?! Stop talking like some old fogey!"

In the end, Eno pulled me all the way into the woods, where I soon spotted a number of crocodiles.

So I'm just supposed to give them a whack, right?

"Hup! Hup! Hup! Hyup! Hiyup!"

I nailed one croc after another with my hammer. It felt like muscle memory—or something like it, anyway—took over before I knew it, and my reactions were quick enough to rack up some decent numbers in short order. I'd played a game that was awfully close to this in my previous life, after all. The fact that the rules were so simple—the more you hit, the better—made the game fun, even when I was just a kid.

"You're doing incredibly, Miss Azusa! Your hammer's moving so quickly, I can't even keep up with it! They don't call you the Great Witch of the Highlands for nothing!"

"Ha-ha-ha! I hope you weren't starting to underestimate me—these old bones have some life in them yet!"

I was starting to use more and more old lady phrases as time went by. I'd always acted like a relatively young woman, since that matched up with my seventeen-year-old appearance, but it seemed when I looked like an elderly lady, my behavior naturally started to shift to match that appearance as well.

I am *three hundred years old inside, after all… If anything, the way I look right now is probably more appropriate than my usual*

appearance. Or maybe that doesn't really apply so much, considering an ordinary person would never live to three hundred in the first place…

"Hup! Hiyup! Hyup! Hup! Hup!"

I battered away at one forest croc after the next. It was sort of a chore, but the more I got into it, the more fun it started to feel.

"Um, Miss Azusa? I appreciate that you've gotten a lot faster about this, but, well…" Eno awkwardly muttered.

"Yeah? But what?" I asked. I didn't see anything wrong with me doing a good job, but the way she'd trailed off made me think she did.

"You've only been hitting the crocodiles on the ground. Please go for the ones sitting up in the trees, too! You're acting like some sort of dedicated ground combat specialist!"

"Ah! When did I stop looking up? I didn't even notice!"

Now that she mentions it, I started hunching over! That must be why I was so focused on my feet. There were no smartphones in this world, so I usually never had any reason to look down or hunch. I generally had quite good posture, but somehow, I'd started hunching over anyway.

"I don't really feel like standing up straight, though, so I'll just keep doing it like this, if you don't mind," I continued.

"What?! But these crocodiles are illusions, which means they can turn up anywhere—even in the air! If you keep focusing on the ground, you'll let tons of them get away!"

"Well, that's the crocodiles' fault for appearing in places that don't make sense."

"It's a game! They're flying crocodiles! There, see?! There's one flying right now!"

"Those are all yours. I'll hit the ones on the ground. Isn't that convenient, since there's two of us? We're splitting our efforts. It's teamwork."

"I have a feeling you're not really doing it that way for efficiency's sake…"

Eno still didn't seem convinced, but I wasn't budging, and she seemed to give up on convincing me otherwise. It was no surprise I'd won, in a sense—the older you get, the more stubborn you become. Or, well, maybe less stubborn, and more unwilling to go to the trouble of changing your lifestyle and giving up deep-seated habits. That's something I'd come to

understand very well since I ended up in this body.

Your body has a lot more of an influence on your personality than I would've imagined.

I kept focusing exclusively on the crocodiles on the ground, smacking them one after another with my hammer. Before long, however, a new problem arose.

"I think I'll take a quick break. Harrumph!" I grunted as I sat down on a nearby stump. "Ah! What a convenient seat—this stump's the perfect height."

"Miss Azusa, please keep hitting them until our time's up! This isn't the sort of exercise that tires you out quickly, and we both know it! Plus, we've only just started!" Eno wailed.

Apparently, she was really in this to win it. I wasn't too surprised by that, considering how some people got really heated over this sort of game. I had one in my family, even—Halkara was the same way. Flatorte was a pretty sore loser as well, but that was a little different.

"I know I shouldn't be tired yet, but my body just really wants a rest," I replied.

"Did the spell that got cast on you impact your endurance, too? It didn't sound like it from what you said before!"

"Like I said, it's not that I'm actually worn out! I just *feel* like I need to rest. If I see a nice place to sit down, my first instinct's to use it. Oh, a croc!"

A crocodile happened to appear right in front of me, so I whacked it with my hammer without even standing up.

"Oh, there's another one!"

Another croc manifested at point-blank range, and I whacked it as well. My hammering speed, at least, was as fast as could be.

"Now that you're sitting down, the area you can cover's even smaller than before!" Eno groused.

Well, yeah, seeing as I won't be hitting anything that's out of reach. Any crocodiles that do come within arm's reach are getting pulverized, though!

"I'm enjoying myself doing it this way, so what's the problem? It's just a game for a social event," I said. I didn't have a problem with her enthusiasm for the game, but it didn't seem like something worth going really all-in on to me.

“Argh! I thought teaming up with you would mean an easy win for sure… I didn’t think this through…”

“Hey! This is the first I’m hearing of that little scheme!”

“Well, I had to try! They’ve done raffles and stuff at these events in the past, and the prizes tend to actually be really nice! I’ve won a few of them in the past! I figure the top prize for this croc-whacking game’s probably going to be a good one, too!”

Social gatherings with weirdly lavish prizes were something I’d experienced as well. When you were throwing a gathering for a large enough group, giving out something lackluster had a way of putting a damper on the whole event, so it was understandable, in a sense. I’d seen game consoles, home appliances, and vacation packages worth tens of thousands of yen get given out in my past life.

“Okay, but still—you invited me along just to get at the prizes? That really gets my goat, frankly! Hup, hup, hup!” I grumbled as I exterminated all the crocodiles that happened to be close at hand. Oh, and slipped into old-timey speak on accident again as well.

“It’s true I didn’t have anyone else to pair up with, though! I just thought it’d be a nice stroke of luck if I happened to get a prize out of it!” protested Eno.

I didn’t think she was lying about that. She hadn’t been attending these gatherings for long herself, and I could understand why she’d hesitate to join in on a team event unless she had someone to be on a team with.

“Okay, but I’m still not moving,” I said. “Standing up feels like more trouble than it’s worth… And right now, that means it’s an insurmountable obstacle…”

“Miss Azusa, you’re really starting to think like an old lady now.”

Yeah, that’d be because I’ve been living in an old lady’s body for almost a week!

For some reason, I was feeling an irresistible urge to munch on some vinegar-flavored seaweed snacks. Unfortunately, I couldn’t imagine anyone carrying any of those around for me to help myself to.

Even if I can’t get my hands on seaweed, though…

“Hey, Eno, do you have any candy on hand? I have the

weirdest craving right now. My instincts are telling me I could really use some."

"Huh? Is candy really something you crave that intensely? I've always thought of it as the sort of thing you snack on because it's there."

"I'm usually the same way, but I just have this really strong urge right now. There's something nice about candy—it's not heavy or oily, and you don't even have to chew to eat it!"

Eno sighed heavily. "I guess this is another effect of your current body, isn't it?" she asked.

Judging by her reaction, I figured she did not, in fact, have any candy on hand. No surprise there—not very many people made a point of carrying it around with them. But much to my surprise, she pulled out a little bag a moment later.

"I do have some herbal cough drops I brought along as samples. You can have one of them, if you'd like."

"That's perfect!"

What a lucky break—Eno really is the sort of witch who carries candy around!

I accepted one of her cough drops and popped it into my mouth. It didn't exactly fill me with brimming reserves of energy or anything like that, but it did certainly give my motivation a significant boost.

"Harrrump!" I grunted as I slowly stood up from the stump.

"I'm happy you're standing up and all, but don't you think your hunch is getting a little too extreme?" said Eno.

Yeah, I know. Trust me, I'm well aware. It's not that my back hurts if I stand up straight, though!

"Actually, Eno, I'm more efficient when I work this way," I said as I brought my hammer down in front of me, pummeling a crocodile the instant it appeared. Then I took out a second one that showed up to the left without wasting a moment!

"Whoa, that was fast! It's like you're already swinging for them the instant they appear! You'd think croc-whacking was deeply ingrained in your muscle memory, the way you're moving!"

"You get it now, right? Beating every single crocodile that shows up on the ground like this is my most efficient option. All right, let's get moving!"

"Moving? Where to?"

"If we go somewhere that's a little easier to walk around,

we'll be able to rack up points quicker. Take care of the ones that come out of the trees, okay? We're going all-out starting now!"

"A-all right, I will!"

At long last, I was starting to get motivated. Before we could set off, however…

"Ah! Actually, wait just a moment," I said.

"What is it? Did you realize hunching over like that is bad for your back after all?"

"Could you pass me the candy bag? I have a feeling I'm going to lose my motivation to keep moving otherwise."

Better to head that risk off at the pass, I figured. In the end, Eno gave me three whole bags of her candies to keep me going.

From that point onward, the two of us silently applied ourselves to our hunt. My posture was terrible, sure, but that terrible posture happened to be the most efficient pose for whacking crocodiles on the ground! Plus, though I had a feeling I looked pretty bored, that couldn't have been further from the truth!

"Hup, hup, hup! Hup, hup, hup, hup, hup, hup, hup!"

My hammer was a blur, smacking crocs at a breakneck pace. They fell victim to blunt force trauma one after the next.

Now these are the movements of an old lady who's been working the same job for sixty years plus! I remember seeing old ladies who were astonishingly good at opening up shellfish in no time flat, and now I'm one of them, in a sense! I may look like I'm scowling, but deep down inside, I'm actually enjoying myself!

Eno was hammering away at the crocodiles in silence as well, by the way, and it wasn't long before the other witches had started talking about us behind our backs.

"That old lady's incredible!" "It's like she's been hitting crocodiles her whole life!" "You go, granny!"

"Whoever just called me a granny, you're gonna regret it!"

"Crap! She heard us!" "Run! *Run*!"

I saw you, and I remember your face! Just you wait until I look like a seventeen-year-old again a couple days from now! You'd better not complain when a young and chipper teenage witch

shows up at your doorstep looking for revenge!

Right now, though, I've gotta focus on beating these crocodiles! I'll keep pounding them into the ground until there aren't any left!

Something about this situation felt weirdly nostalgic to me, though I couldn't understand why. I'd been through a lot, sure, but I definitely would've remembered if I'd ever pounded hordes of crocodiles with a hammer before.

Oh! I get it now.

This is a little like my slime-killing lifestyle, in a sense.

It wasn't a perfect equivalent, though. For one thing, the crocodiles appeared way quicker than the slimes did back home.

Just then, a shining, rainbow-colored crocodile materialized just nearby.

"Miss Azusa, that crocodile's worth as many points as fifty of the normal ones! It's way faster than the normal ones, too, though! We have to catch—" Eno shouted, but I'd already smacked it into the ground before she could finish.

"No need to worry. By the time I see something vaguely crocodile-shaped, I'm already moving to whack it."

About three minutes after I beat the bonus crocodile, a rather creepy cry that sounded like it came from some sort of bird echoed through the forest, signifying that our time was up.

"I guess that's it! I can't wait to hear the results," Eno said as she brandished her hammer. She seemed pretty satisfied with herself.

I, on the other hand, just muttered, "Phew! Finally over. Hrrmph," as I sat down on a nearby stump.

"What? No, no, this is no time to rest! We have to go back to hear who won, or we'll be disqualified! That means we won't win any prizes!"

"Well, now that I'm sitting down, I'd like to take about ten minutes or so to stay still."

"I'll give you candy if you can just get through this one last push!"

"This isn't a problem you can solve with candy. I'm feeling sleepy, so wake me up in twenty minutes or so."

“That’s even longer than your last estimate! Okay, fine—I’ll carry you if I have to!”

Eno did just that, picking me up and carrying me piggyback to where the event had started.

I’d had a feeling I’d done a pretty good job, and when our scores were announced, I learned I’d been right.

“In first place: Eno and Azu Liliri, with 7,524 points! That’s more than five hundred points above our second-place finishers, making for a decisive victory!”

At the announcer’s urging, Eno and I stepped forward to the front of the group. The other witches applauded us, and I heard one of them say, “Oh, that’s the old lady from before” as well. Thankfully, the one who’d called me a granny was nowhere to be seen.

Eno received a rather valuable assortment of medicinal herbs as her prize for taking first place. It would’ve looked like a pile of weeds to anyone not in the know, but to witches like us, it was a substantial gift. I could really understand why Eno looked so ecstatic when they handed it over to her.

I guess playing to win was the right idea, after all. Just leaving with a participation prize would’ve been a waste.

After that, the social gathering began in earnest, and a number of different witches tracked me down for a chat. Winning the contest had earned me quite a lot of attention, though, and since I looked like an old lady at the moment, I couldn’t go around introducing myself as the Witch of the Highlands. As such, whenever someone asked me a probing question…

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just can’t seem to recall! Hmm, hmm, hmm!”

…I would feign forgetfulness until they gave up and dropped the subject. I didn’t want to risk accidentally letting my guard down and answering a question in a way that exposed my identity, so instead, I dodged them altogether.

“What’s your secret to staying healthy in your old age, ma’am?” asked a witch who looked like an actual child.

I mean, considering most of the witches here are pretty long-lived themselves, you could easily be a couple hundred years old, too, for all I know! But anyway, as far as an actual answer goes…

“My secret is not dying,” I replied. I knew it wasn’t a great answer, but it got me through that conversation, at least.

In the end, I got to meet all sorts of witches at the event, and I decided it might be worth attending more of them every once in a while in the future. I wasn’t interested in participating as the Witch of the Highlands, though, so if I did, I’d have to find a way to change my appearance again…

The event wrapped up without a hitch, and I returned to the house in the highlands aboard Eno’s wyvern. She thanked me repeatedly for coming along, possibly on account of the prize she’d won.

“Thank you so much! I owe you for this, ma’am!”

“You’d better not get used to calling me that! Anyway, I’m just glad this curse didn’t end up fading away partway through the event. I was a little worried that might happen.”

This sort of problem always seemed to resolve itself the moment you got used to coping with it. Not that I wanted to stay like this my whole life, of course!

“When you put it that way, magical effects that can’t be removed by magical means do tend to have time limits! I’m sure it’ll go away before much longer,” said Eno.

“Yeah, I thought so. I think it’ll be about three more days, at most,” I replied.

I mulled over the possibilities as we headed home. In the end, I arrived back at the house in the highlands around nine in the evening.

◇

I said my goodbyes with Eno after I got home, then headed for the house, wondering if the girls would already be asleep. That question was partially answered when I nearly ran into Sandra, who was buried right in front of the front door.

“Whoa!” I yelped. “You scared me! Why’d you plant yourself there, of all places?!”

“I was waiting for you. Now hurry up and come inside,” said Sandra.

I didn’t understand what was going on, but I let her herd me into the house anyway, where I found Falfa and Shalsha waiting in the dining room.

“Welcome home, Mommy!”

“Shalsha is glad to see you don’t look overly exhausted.”

What’s going on here? Did those two really go out of their way to wait for me to get home? I don’t think that was really necessary, was it…?

“Come on, Azusa, sit down,” Sandra said as she pulled me over to a chair. I went along with it and sat down, wondering just what the three of them were up to. That’s when Falfa started gently tapping my shoulders with her fists.

“Huh…? Is this a shoulder massage?”

“That’s right! Tap tap tap, tap tap tap!” Falfa replied, hitting my shoulders in time with her chant.

“Shalsha will do it next,” Shalsha said. Her massage was slightly off-rhythm compared to Falfa’s, but that didn’t make me appreciate it any less.

“Okay, but where’s this coming from?” I asked.

“Well, since you look like an old lady now, Falfa ended up realizing something: We’ve never had a good chance to help take care of you like this before,” Falfa explained. She made it sound like a much more serious problem than I’d been expecting. “You usually look so young that even though you’re our mommy, we end up acting more like you’re our older sister sometimes. That’s probably why it never occurs to us to help you out the way good kids should!”

“There’s a relevant saying,” said Shalsha. “‘Show your parents you appreciate them now, because you might never get another chance.’ Tap tap, tap, tap tap, tap, tap tap tap tap!”

“I don’t like the implications of that saying, so let’s not apply it to me, thanks!” *Also, your rhythm’s definitely a little off, Shalsha!*

Next, Sandra took over shoulder-massaging duty. “Anyway, that’s why we decided we could at least massage your shoulders. You look a lot weaker now than you usually do, so we thought you’d appreciate it.”

“That’s nice of you, though I’m not so sure about the part about me looking weak!”

Sandra’s shoulder-taps weren’t very strong at all, but that just made them feel nice in a different sort of way.

“Plus, you’ll be turning back to your usual form, right?” Sandra added. “Doing this for you won’t feel very worthwhile if you’re young, so we needed to take care of it now while we still

could. This body looks like it tires out way easier."

My daughters really have been thinking hard about me, haven't they? I guess they're right—I'm usually tough enough that something like this would feel pointless. Who would bother cleaning a room when it's already sparkling? If you want to help someone, you need to find something they need help with first, and I don't usually make that very easy.


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“All right, then,” I said. “If I ever need help with anything in the future, I’ll try to make it a little more obvious.”

“Please do,” said Sandra. “What’s the fun in acting tough all the time, anyway? It gets boring fast when one side of a relationship’s always the one helping out the other!”

I guess this has turned into a great opportunity to reflect on my relationship with my daughters, hasn’t it?

“By the way, what *do* you think my weak points are?” I asked. This seemed as good a chance as any to get an outside perspective on the question.

“Well, you went to the witches’ gathering looking like that, right, Mommy? What did you call yourself?” Falfa asked in lieu of an answer.

“Oh, I used a fake name—Azu Liliri,” I replied.

Falfa hesitated for just a moment.

“Coming up with names is definitely one of your weak points, Mommy…”

◇

The next day, with no warning whatsoever, I turned back to normal right around lunchtime. I wouldn’t have even realized it happened if Laika hadn’t been with me at the time to exclaim, “You turned back!”

Yep, there’s nothing like a seventeen-year-old body! I feel so much lighter now! I’m full of vim and vigor again!

That evening, I took my rejuvenation as an excuse to celebrate and put together way more dishes for dinner than I’d usually bother making. Their reception, however… Well, it left something to be desired.

“Mommy, Falfa doesn’t really like this stewed radish and poultry dish… They would’ve been better if you’d served them separately.”

“The stew with carrots and onions in it is bland, too. Speaking of which, Shalsha wonders why there are so many stewed dishes.”

“Ugh… It looks like my cooking repertoire’s still stuck in old lady mode,” I groaned. I just didn’t feel the urge to eat any rich, meat-heavy dishes yet, and everything I cooked had ended up

modest and bland as a result. “Ugh! If I at least had some kombu, I could make a good stewed seaweed dish…”

“What is kombu, Lady Azusa?” asked Laika.

Rats! I forgot they don’t eat that sort of seaweed here! “It’s, um… What was it again? I forgot,” I said.

Ever since I turned into an old lady, I’d started using forgetfulness as an excuse to brush off more and more problems, and that clearly hadn’t quite changed yet. In the end, it took several more days for me to shake off all those old lady habits and go completely back to normal.



One evening, I'd just gotten out of the bath and retired to the dining room for a nice cup of cold water.

"Oof—this almost feels like this is going to give me brain freeze, but that's nice in its own right," I said to myself.

Halkara was in the dining room as well, reading a book. It seemed she hadn't been drinking tonight. The title of her book was *The Secret to Keeping Your Company Afloat*, and I figured it had to be some sort of business-centric self-help book.

Eventually, Halkara looked up from her book.

"Um, Madame Teacher?" she said. "I have a question for you."

"Go ahead, as long as it's not something management related," I replied.

"Don't you think we should let the mimic in the vacant room go out on walks sometimes?"

Now that sure wasn't the question I was expecting… I haven't considered that at all, actually.

"W-walks…? Is that something mimics do?" I wondered out loud.

Mimics were treasure chest–shaped monsters that attacked anyone unlucky enough to try and open them. The mimic Halkara was talking about, however, was a sort of special one who lived in our house.

A member of the demons' order of Appraisal Knights named Sorya ran an antique shop called Ten Thousand Dragons, and I'd recently been roped into exploring one of their warehouses with a phantom thief named Canhein. That warehouse was full of mimics, and for some reason one of them had taken a liking to me. I'd decided there'd be no harm in letting it follow me, and in the end, it had accompanied me all the way home and taken up residence in one of our empty rooms.

Taking care of an animal was harder than people gave it credit for, and I knew it wasn't something I could treat like a game. Mimics, however, lived on a diet of dust, which meant I didn't have to bother feeding it. Its eating habits kept the empty room nice and clean, actually, which was killing two birds with one stone. Plus, although I knew introducing new, invasive animals to the highlands would be a bad idea, there weren't any other mimics around for this one to breed with, so I didn't see any danger of it throwing off the local ecosystem.

So that's how I ended up with a mimic living in my house… but honestly, its presence hadn't made much of any impact on our lives since then. This probably shouldn't have surprised me, but the mimic had spent pretty much all its time since then sitting still in its room. I wasn't neglecting it, to be clear—I stopped by to peek in on it, and even opened its box every once in a while to make sure it was doing fine. It's just that I hadn't really interacted with it much in any other way. To be honest, it wasn't the most exciting pet to watch.

And now Halkara's talking about walking it…?

"Why in the world would we take it for a walk? Mimics are supposed to stay still most of the time, right? It's always sitting in the same spot when I check up on it, anyway."

I was pretty sure the mimic would be totally fine even if we left it on its own for a couple months straight, but seeing as I'd brought it home with me, I felt an ethical responsibility to keep a slightly closer eye on it than that. My daughters peeked at it on occasion as well. At this point, that empty room was more or less the designated mimic chamber.

"Maybe so, but even mimics move around every once in a while, don't they?" said Halkara. "It opens up its box on its own when it eats dust, too! I thought it might appreciate getting some fresh air out in the highlands from time to time."

"Do you really think a dust-eating monster has much interest in fresh air…?" *If anything, I get the sense it would like being secluded somewhere nice and quiet.*

"Maybe they do! Think about how eager they are to bite anyone who accidentally opens them up. Mimics might be surprisingly active monsters, when all's said and done!"

Halkara really isn't backing down on this, is she? I guess they

are *supposed to be dangerous from a normal person's perspective, if you're unlucky enough to open one, so they probably can move quite a bit when the moment calls for it.*

"I guess that makes sense," I admitted. "Come to think of it, you always pay really close attention to animals, don't you, Halkara…? Do mimics count as animals? You know what I mean."

Halkara was pretty blasé about taking care of herself, between all the poisonous mushrooms she ate and all the booze she guzzled, but she could actually be very attentive when it came to taking care of something or someone else. That trait was probably a big part of why she could do a good job as her company's president. It was something I certainly couldn't hope to imitate, that's for sure.

"You're really flattering me today, aren't you, Madame Teacher? I've never thought of myself as an attentive person at all! I just thought since the mimic's our pet, it would only make sense to take it out on a walk sometimes, that's all," Halkara said, tapping her closed book with her hand for emphasis. It seemed she was having a hard time taking my compliment.

"Well, I can't imagine taking it for a walk could do that much harm. Why not give it a try?" I said. "If it doesn't want to leave the house, it just won't follow us outside."

How the mimic felt about this prospect was, of course, the single most important factor. Taking it for a walk to make ourselves feel like good pet owners would be an awful idea if it didn't actually want to go. Then again, I had mixed feelings about treating it as a pet in the first place, considering we'd mostly just let it sit in an empty room…

"Understood!" said Halkara. "Okay, then—I'll go take a look in the mimic's room!"

Halkara got up and trundled along down the hallway. The mimic's room, by the way, had a sign hanging on it that read DANGER! DO NOT ENTER! I didn't think the mimic would instantly jump anyone who stepped inside, but it still seemed best to be a little cautious about opening the door, just in case. A pound of prevention, and all.

Fortunately, my daughters were very good about listening to me and had refrained from opening the mimic up when Laika, Flatorte, or I weren't around to watch over them. The mimic seemed to be used to me (or I at least assumed so, considering it

had followed me home and all), but there was no predicting how it would react to my daughters, and I didn't want to wait until after they'd been badly bitten to take action.

I also knew that even though the mimic seemed comfortable around me normally, it could very well attack me for no real reason someday. I'd heard too many stories about people being mauled out of the blue by animals they'd kept as pets for years to think it couldn't happen to me.

I heard Halkara's voice from down the hallway. It was nighttime, so I could make out her words very clearly.

"Ooh, you really are energetic today, aren't you! Good mimic, good mimic!"

Sounds like it really does want to move around a little, then. They sit still most of the time, sure, but I guess the main body inside the box must enjoy getting some exercise from time to time.

A moment later, Halkara strolled back into the dining room with a big smile on her face—

"I brought the mimic, Madame Teacher!"

—and the mimic riding on her head, attached with its teeth!

Actually, maybe "riding" isn't the right word for that… It's more like it's gnawing on her?

"Oh, geez, are you okay?! It sure doesn't look like it! And why are you *smiling*?!" *This isn't a situation that calls for a smile, no matter how you look at it! I'm witnessing a mauling in real time, for crying out loud!*

"Oh, it just has so much pent-up energy it can't stay still, see? I'm sure that means it'll enjoy some time to romp around outside!" said Halkara.

"That's really not the problem here! Doesn't that hurt?! Are you just bearing the pain, or something?!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, sure, it hurts a little, but I'm used to it! My family kept dogs, cats, deer, and even wolves back when I lived with them in the Wellbranch Marquessate in Hrant, and they used to bite me all the time!"

"That's not the sort of thing you should get used to! **Healing,**

healing!”

I chanted a healing spell as quickly as I could, and Halkara’s injuries vanished. Thankfully, they weren’t very serious, which made sense—even if she was used to getting bitten.

I couldn’t imagine Halkara smiling through anything truly life-threatening.

There was just one little problem.

The mimic was still firmly attached to Halkara’s head.

“Okay, you need to get that thing off you, pronto,” I said. *This is making me remember some Halloween costumes I saw back in the day.*

“Oh, no, it’s fine! Its teeth aren’t digging into me at all anymore, so I’m totally calm and comfortable,” said Halkara.

“Well, *I’m* not calm or comfortable just watching you!”

For the time being, I pried the mimic off Halkara and set it on the floor. It opened its lid just enough to stick its tongue out, then started hopping in place. It didn’t seem to care about keeping up its treasure chest disguise when it knew the people around it.

I guess that makes sense. It’s like how a spy wouldn’t bother holding their breath and staying hidden if they knew their location was already compromised. Looking at it now, maybe Halkara’s right—it does seem like it might be surprisingly energetic.

“I know it’s night and all, but we might as well try taking it for a walk right now,” I said. “You have work tomorrow, so by the time you’re back and ready to go, it’ll be dark again anyway.”

“True enough! I’ll go ahead and bring it out,” said Halkara.

Halkara stepped right outside, carrying the mimic in her arms. She could be pretty proactive when she decided to be. I followed along after her and quickly found by the time I got outside, the mimic had already sunk its teeth into her head again.

“Oh my! It really seems to like my head, doesn’t it? I didn’t realize it was this fond of me!”

“Nope! Cut it out! We want it to be fond of you as a person, not as a snack!”

Once again, I yanked the mimic off Halkara's head. I set it on the ground, and with a hop, a skip, and a bounce, gaining a little height with each jump…it vaulted up and bit onto her all over again!

"Hmm—I wonder if my hair just smells nice, maybe? I've heard some women smell naturally citrusy, after all!"

"This is *not* the time, Halkara!"

This is weird, right? Like, really weird! If anyone happens to be walking around at night and sees this from a distance, they're liable to mistake her for something way scarier than a mimic!

Anyway, Halkara sure is tough in all the weirdest ways. Is she just really soft when it comes to animals, or something?

"That does it—no more walks until you learn to stop biting Halkara!"

I held the mimic in the air as I scolded it. I was afraid if I let it go, it would go right back to biting her head again.

"All right! I already have an idea for how to deal with this! I think I should be able to manage something tomorrow," Halkara said in a tone so confident, you'd never think she'd had teeth in her head just moments before. In fact, she seemed so bold about all this that for a moment, I actually wondered if she'd been put under some sort of all-powerful defensive spell.

"Wait, tomorrow?" I said. "Considering how it's acted so far, don't you think that's a little optimistic? I guess it might be possible if you take the day off work…"

"Oh, no, I'll be going in to work, as usual! The fact I have work tomorrow is convenient for my plan, actually."

"Not sure what that means, but I'm just gonna let you know now that we're absolutely not drugging the mimic into submission."

I didn't think Halkara would actually do that, considering she was pretty taken with the mimic, but I still wanted to head off that line of thought before it could cause any problems.

"Oh, I'd never! Don't worry—my plan won't have any effect on the mimic at all, and it's sure to keep me absolutely safe!" Halkara declared.

"That sounds perfect, if you can actually pull it off. I'll leave it up to you, I guess."

◇

The next day, Halkara got up earlier than usual to head out for Halkara Pharmaceuticals' factory, returning home later on that evening. We had dinner, as usual, and the moment we finished, she stood up from her seat and left the room. That wasn't exactly a major event or anything, but it was pretty unusual for her. Normally, she'd take her time sipping a drink, or at least just hanging out in the dining room with the rest of us.

"I wonder if she's going to bring the mimic out…?" I muttered.

"Is something the matter with it, Lady Azusa?" asked Laika.

I quickly explained everything that had happened the night before.

"I see. So she told you that she had a good idea that would prevent her from being bitten?"

"Yeah, though to be honest, I'm not super convinced it's going to work. It's not like she'll be in any serious danger either way, at least, so I thought I might as well let her give it a try."

Just as I was wrapping up my explanation…

"All right, everyone! This should do the trick, don't you think?"

…Halkara returned to the living room with a helmet on her head. The mimic, meanwhile, was perched atop the helmet, gnawing on it.

Oh, so her plan is armored defense!

"All right, I'll admit it: That won't harm the mimic at all, and it'll keep you safe! You were right!"

Now that's a solution I never would've even dreamed of!

The rest of my family looked just as dumbstruck as I felt.

"You should be careful about wearing old helmets! You never know when one of those might have a nasty curse on it," said Rosalie, who was the one person present with a uniquely skewed perspective on the issue.

Setting any potential curses aside for now… "Looks like it's not hurting you at all anymore, huh? Although…I can't really say this is solving the fundamental problem, here…," I said. The mimic was still just as dedicated to biting her head as ever, after

all.

"That's true," said Laika, hand pressed to her chin as she considered the problem. "If it ever ends up anywhere in the vicinity of Flatta, then it might try to bite one of the townspeople. It would probably be best not to take it anywhere near populated areas…"

"Yeah. That's definitely the big problem," I said. "And even if it doesn't attack any of the townsfolk, they probably wouldn't like seeing it biting Halkara, so I'd rather not get anywhere near Flatta with it regardless."

I can't have any rumors about the house in the highlands being full of weirdos spreading, after all.

"By the way, Big Sis Halkara, where did you get that helmet?" asked Falfa. She seemed keenly interested in the armor itself, and now that she'd pointed it out, I noticed it was rather finely crafted. It didn't strike me as the sort of cheap helmet you'd find lying around just anywhere.

"Oh, this? It was in the museum! I remembered seeing a convenient helmet just lying around in there, and it ended up being a perfect fit! I stopped by during my break today to pick it up."

So that's why having work today was convenient for her! "You're using a relic from your museum's collection as actual armor?! Is that allowed?!"

"The relics in the museum were technically our private property from the very start, so it's fine!" said Halkara. "And besides, this is what helmets are for! It's doing its duty way better like this than it would sitting around in a dusty old museum, so I'm sure it's happy to be of service."

That seemed like a pretty flimsy argument to me, but she *was* the museum's director, so if anyone had the right to wear that helmet, it was her. As a side note, all my other family members were still present in the dining room to finish their meals, but the mimic didn't go after any of them for so much as a second. It just kept biting Halkara's helmet without making any attempt to attack anyone else.

I wasn't worried at all about myself, the two dragons, or Rosalie getting hurt by the mimic, but my daughters were another story. Sandra had come inside to talk with Falfa and

Shalsha that day, so all three of them were present. Maybe the mimic had somehow realized they were off the menu, as far as biting went…? Though if that was the case, it would raise questions about why it *was* biting Halkara, so I decided to rule it out for the time being.

"I guess this means it only wants to attack you, for some reason…?" I muttered.

"Lady Azusa, I'm certain the mimic is aware the helmet is hard enough to ward off its teeth. Given it continues to bite her anyway, I believe we can conclude…or at least *assume* it does not intend its actions as an attack, per se," Laika said, though she sounded a little hesitant about her own analysis.

"You have a point there. If it was really trying to take Halkara down, it could just bite her somewhere other than the head."

In that case, maybe it really is attached to her, in a certain sense…?

My daughters gathered up around Halkara to observe the mimic up close. The way it was attached to her gave them a very rare chance to observe a mimic from below.

"It really is just like a treasure chest! Falfa's never seen any other mimics—I wonder if they all look the same? Do you know, Shalsha?"

Shalsha opened up a book with *An Illustrated Guide to Monsters* written on its cover.

"There are various theories as to how mimics are born," Shalsha explained. "One theory hypothesizes that they're monsters that take up residence in, and subsequently assimilate, treasure chests. Another suggests that the chest portion serves as a protective shell, and another still theorizes that they resemble chests as a form of mimicry to deceive other creatures."

All those sounded plausible enough to me, but proving them seemed like it'd be really hard unless you had some serious scientific chops.

I guess that first theory would mean mimics are sort of like hermit crabs? Though since this one's chest is definitely part of its body now, I guess it wouldn't be exactly the same. Then the second theory would make them sort of like shellfish, and the third would make them like those praying mantises that look

exactly like twigs.

"All those explanations are so dreamy! Falfa could watch this mimic all day!"

I'm not sure that's really what "dreamy" is supposed to mean, Falfa.

"Although the truth remains unclear, Shalsha thinks they're very interesting monsters as well. It's rare to have the chance to watch them bite something, too."

Shalsha was certainly right about that. If you got bitten by a mimic in combat, your first priority would be getting it off you, and most mimics would probably choose to bite you somewhere unprotected rather than deliberately going for your helmet and dealing no real damage. As such, we were witnessing a phenomenon most people would never get the chance to see.

Meanwhile, Sandra was watching from a slight distance off to the side. She looked a little exasperated as she spoke up.

"You know that thing's looking down on you, right, Halkara…?"

Ugh! And here I was, trying my hardest not to point that out…

It was just like how pet dogs tended to only bark loudly at the family members they viewed as being beneath them on the social ladder. Considering the mimic was only biting her, it seemed very possible she was the only one it saw as its inferior…

"What? That's not true! How's it supposed to look at me with its mouth wide open to bite me?" said Halkara.

"I didn't mean it literally!" snapped Sandra. "Actually, I think you know perfectly well what I mean! Aren't you embarrassed to have a mimic walk all over you?!"

"No, not particularly," Halkara said as she turned to face Sandra. She genuinely didn't sound like the idea bothered her at all. "Elves aren't very capable fighters, generally speaking, so it's only natural. I don't think that's something worth getting upset about, and I'm not embarrassed about it, either. I bet you're not embarrassed you can't breathe fire, right, Sandra?"

“I’ve never even considered it, but if I could breathe fire, I bet it’d come in handy for dealing with some of the nastier plants out there.”

Well, you sure took that to a violent place quickly! Sandra did seem to find herself without a counterargument for Halkara’s point, though, and she didn’t press the point further.

“B-but…I do understand what you mean, too,” Sandra meekly admitted.

Right? Most of the time, whether or not a monster saw you as a target was totally dependent on how tough you were in a fight. The less tough races were naturally predisposed to being viewed as easy pickings. That’s why very few monsters or animals were inclined to go out of their way to start fights with dragons, for instance. Considering it was all a matter of your innate nature, it didn’t seem like something worth getting embarrassed about.

Even if you were weak in a fight, you could compensate for that shortcoming in all sorts of ways. Halkara’s helmet was a perfect example of that point, really. The fact she seemed to understand that made me suspect that, just maybe, she had a pretty philosophical view of this whole situation… But on the other hand, watching the mimic gnaw at her helmet was so surreal, it was hard to think about anything else…

“Also, for the record, I’m just saying *if* it was looking down on me, I wouldn’t be embarrassed about it. I still don’t think it actually is, though!” Halkara declared.

“All right, then. I’ll take your word for it,” I said. She wasn’t drunk at the moment, so her confidence carried some actual weight with me.

“Okay, Madame Teacher! Would you like to go on a nighttime walk now? The moon’s nice and bright tonight, so it’s the perfect time for it!”

“Oh, right. I suppose I did say we could take it for a walk as soon as you’d worked out a solution for the biting problem, didn’t I?”

Her solution had come from pretty far out of left field, but I couldn’t deny it had taken care of the danger I was worried about quite handily. I wasn’t about to walk the mimic around Flatta in the middle of the day and risk it attacking people, but nobody else would be walking around the highlands at nighttime, so taking it out for a stroll now didn’t seem liable to

cause any trouble.

"Okay then, sure. Let's go. Does anyone else want to come along? Not that it'll be that interesting—we really are just going for a walk, that's all!"

As I'd more or less predicted, everyone decided to accompany us on our walk in the end. I'll admit I'd been expecting Sandra, at least, to say something along the lines of *Plants don't go on walks*, but even she tagged along. Going out on an evening stroll with the whole family was a rare treat.

The nighttime air in the highlands was refreshingly chilly. Flatorte, who was a fan of cold weather in general, seemed to be particularly enjoying it. Halkara had talked about getting some fresh air the day before, and I had to admit, it really was tempting to just stand still and take a long, deep breath. Or at least, it would've been…

…if it weren't for the distraction of the mimic, which was *still* latched onto Halkara's helmet.

"Does this even count as taking it for a walk, at this point?!" *It's literally not even walking!*

"Some pet owners take their kittens for walks by carrying them around the neighborhood, Madame Teacher! This is basically the same thing," said Halkara.

"Okay, but the image here is a lot less heartwarming than that sounds!" *This is closer to something out of a horror movie, at least on the surface! There's no way we could walk around like this if anyone else was here to see us!* "Also, wasn't the whole point of this walk giving the mimic some time running around outside? Considering how it's acting, I'm starting to think it might not have wanted to go out in the first place…"

Treasure chests belonged in caves or buildings, not out in the middle of wide-open fields. Even if a mimic did end up out in the wild for whatever reason, it would look so out of place that it'd get found out in an instant and nobody would ever open it. Plus, the wind and rain seemed like they'd be really bad for the box itself. Sitting around outside felt like a health hazard, from a mimic's perspective.

“Okay then, Mistress—I’ll try prying it off her! That should clear things up,” said Flatorte. She stepped over to Halkara and yanked the mimic off her helmet in an instant. For a dragon, apparently, overcoming a mimic’s jaw strength was hardly any different from removing a paperclip from a bundle of papers.

Flatorte set the mimic down on the grassy ground.

“Okay, mimic! If you wanna run around, now’s your chance!”

For a few seconds, the mimic seemed to survey its surroundings. Then, all of a sudden, it started bouncing around the field in huge leaps.

“Huh! That thing can really clear some distance, actually,” I said, a little impressed.

“According to Shalsha’s guidebook, jumping is a mimic’s primary form of locomotion. They jump around until they find a place where a treasure chest would plausibly be located, where they settle.”

That was when I realized Shalsha had brought the guidebook she’d been reading along with her on the walk. It seemed a little bulky to me, but then again, as long as she wasn’t running around with it, it probably wouldn’t be too much of a hassle.

The mimic jumped along happily, occasionally letting its tongue flop out from within its chest. I felt a little grateful toward it, actually—it had given me a rare opportunity to go on a stroll with my whole family.

“Hmm. The way it jumps feels kinda weighty and deliberate, doesn’t it? Slime jumps are a much lighter motion,” I noted. I’d been watching slimes hop around for three hundred years, and I considered myself something of an expert in the field.

“Shalsha believes there’s something spring-like about the mimic’s anatomy within the chest. It compresses that spring-like mechanism, which generates the force to propel itself into the air by releasing it,” Shalsha said, her face practically pressed into her guidebook as she spoke.

“Something spring-like, huh…? I guess it’d have to be something like that, seeing as it doesn’t have legs sticking out of the bottom or anything.” *Monster anatomy’s even more complex than animal anatomy, isn’t it?*

“Nice, nice! Looks like the mimic’s really enjoying this walk! I knew it’d be a good idea to let it outside every once in a while!”

Halkara said with a clap of her hands.

She was acting a little like one of those know-it-all pet owners, and she seemed very pleased to see the mimic looking so happy and energetic. I could understand where she was coming from. I'd brought it all the way back to the house in the highlands, so it'd be a shame if it didn't enjoy its new life here.

Every once in a while, the mimic seemed to screw up a jump and only get a tiny bit of air compared to its usual leaps. Sometimes, it even ended up moving in the opposite direction it wanted to. Its movements were imprecise in a way that made it oddly fun to watch. In any case, I figured as long as the mimic itself was enjoying the experience, a failed jump or two wasn't a problem at all.

…Hmm?

……"The mimic itself"? Come to think of it, isn't there an open question here I probably should've addressed a long time ago?

"Hey, Halkara?" I asked.

"Ah, yes, Madame Teacher? I didn't bring any dust to feed it, if that's what you were wondering."

I mean, I'd hope not! Something about the idea of bringing a pocketful of dust along on a walk just feels nasty… Though then again, that's what it eats, and there's not really any avoiding that.

"No, that's not it. I was just thinking we keep calling the mimic 'it' or 'the mimic,' right? Shouldn't we come up with a name for it?"

Halkara gave me a blank stare. "Huh? Why? What's wrong with calling it 'the mimic'? There aren't any other mimics around for us to confuse it with, so I can't see why that would be a problem."

"Sure, it's not confusing, but it just feels so cold, doesn't it?!" *Also, it's weird how inconsistent your attitude is! Why would you care enough to suggest taking it for a walk and not enough to bother giving it a name?! If anything, you'd think the name would be the higher priority!*

"A name, huh? Let's see… It's a mimic, so why don't we call it Mimi?"

That's the most predictable name you could've possibly

proposed!

"Let's give it a bit more thought, okay?! Like, at least five minutes' worth or so!" I insisted.

Oh, but then again, Fighsly named herself that because she was a fighter slime, right? And I named Smarsly and Wizly based on basically the same logic that would justify calling a mimic Mimi. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad name, after all…?

No, no, we really should give it some more thought. There's no harm in at least considering it, right? Plus, a walk like this is the perfect chance to think up a name! There's always a chance Halkara will come up with something a little less glaringly obvious!

We spent a few minutes just strolling along through the highlands, letting the mimic set our path by jumping ahead of us. In my last life, I'd lived in a part of the world where just walking outside for a couple minutes could end with you dripping with sweat, so I was very glad to be somewhere a little cooler this time. There was nothing worse than taking a bath, then ending up sweaty and gross again just because you decided to walk over to the nearby convenience store…

"How about this one, Madam Teacher?" said Halkara.

Oh? Sounds like she came up with another idea for a name!

"We could call it 'Box'! What do you think?"

"I think we'd be better off sticking with 'the mimic' at that point!"

Something was very weird about how Halkara went about expressing her love for her pets. Maybe she viewed names from a really utilitarian perspective? You only had to look back a century or so in my old world to see people who put numbers in their kids' names based on their order of birth, and that was considered totally normal.

At that point, Falfa tugged on my sleeve.

"Falfa thinks Mimi's a really cute name, Mommy!"

"All right, that settles it! Let's call it Mimi! That's the only vote I need to hear, personally!"

If my daughter says it's cute, then I have no reason to argue about it!

“That’s good enough for me! From now on, our mimic’s name is Mimi!”

Halkara was perfectly happy to see the name she’d proposed get adopted. There was just one little factor that still had me a bit hesitant, though: Mimi was clearly a girl’s name, and I had no clue what sex our mimic was.

Maybe it’d be better to call it…I don’t know, Milo or something? Actually, do mimics even have sexes?

I wasn’t going to get anywhere with that line of inquiry on my own, so I decided to ask Shalsha instead.

“According to Shalsha’s guidebook, ‘Nobody knows.’”

Okay, fair enough. If not even a monster guidebook can help, best to just accept the mystery.

“Okay! I think this is settled. Mimi it is!”

And so that night, our pet mimic gained a name.

◇

A week had passed since we gave our mimic its new name, Mimi. On that day, my family and I had decided to take Mimi out for a walk again, this time while it was still light out.

After the success of our first walk, we’d taken Mimi out again for two days straight. It hadn’t seemed very interested, though, and it had barely moved at all either time. It had been particularly lethargic on the second attempt—if a stranger had happened to catch sight of us, they probably wouldn’t have seen it as anything other than a treasure chest left mysteriously lying around the highlands. In the end, I’d had to carry Mimi home myself.

That’s why we decided to give Mimi a few days off between walks. It seemed like keeping them as an occasional thing would be to its preference—it wasn’t like a pet dog that would happily go out and about every single day.

I guess that makes sense. Of course a mimic would stay indoors most of the time. Walks are probably just a nice change of pace for it.

If you asked a group of people who liked to hike whether they’d spend three hundred days a year up in the mountains if they could, an awful lot of them would probably say no. That’s

how it went for a bunch of hobbies, really—they were nice on occasion, but downright inconvenient if they became your primary occupation.

As expected, after having stayed inside for a few days, Mimi was excited to get outside and jump around the highlands. I was starting to think one walk a week or so would probably be just right.

“Yep, yep! There’s nothing like a mid-afternoon walk!” said Halkara, who sounded quite spirited as well. If I had to pick out a single problem that spoiled the image, it’d have to be the helmet. She sure was wearing it again today.

“Hey, don’t you think you can stop wearing that thing? It’s gotta be heavy, right?” I said.

“I would, but Mimi still tries to bite me every once in a while, so I think I should probably keep it on for now,” said Halkara. “I don’t want to over-rely on your healing magic, after all. I might as well defend myself as best I can on my own!”

Just then, before Halkara even finished her sentence, Mimi jumped up to bite her head from behind.

“See?”

“Okay, but do you have to sound happy about it?! You should be scolding it for biting you, if anything!”


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You named Mimi, for crying out loud, and that more or less makes you its parent! If you act happy about it biting you, it's never going to stop!

Around that time, I noticed a pair of figures off in the distance, walking up into the highlands. Our house was the only landmark in the vicinity, so I immediately assumed they were some of our acquaintances, and as they drew closer, I was proven right. That said, they turned out to be a rather rare pair: For some reason, Fighsly and Misjantie the pine spirit were heading our way.

"Ah, hey! You all out for a walk? Good to see you, man," said Misjantie.

"Boy, running up this hill would make for a pretty good lower body workout! It's always nice to find ways to train that don't cost anything," said Fighsly in what I figured was the closest thing to a greeting I'd be getting from her.

"Okay, I get why Misjantie would be walking around here, but what about you, Fighsly?" I asked. "I don't think there's anything for you to make money off anywhere near here! Don't tell me Beelzebub and the others are here, too?"

Misjantie had been running a nearby café called the House of the Pine Spirit since shortly before the most recent Dance Festival, so she was more or less a local at this point. I even saw her around when I went down into Flatta, every once in a while.

"Nah, I came here from the demon territories alone this time. She footed my travel bills," Fighsly said as she pointed at Misjantie.

"Yeah, 'cause I heard if there's one person who knows how to make money hand over fist, it's a lady named Fighsly. I basically hired her as a consultant, man."

"I went from being a dead broke slime to the manager of a training gym all on my own, after all! You might say sharing my wisdom's my way of sharing the wealth!" Fighsly said with a smirk I found really irritating, for some reason.

She's definitely charging for this, isn't she? Not that there's anything wrong with making money off your specialized skills, I guess, but still.

"Right. So I get why Fighsly's in the area now, but why are

you two up *here*? This isn't the right direction to get to your café or your shrine, is it?"

If Fighsly was acting as a consultant for Misjantie, I would've expected her to head for one of the establishments the pine spirit ran. The shrine or the café would both make more sense as destinations than my house.

"Oh, we're heading for the pine tree, man. Y'know, the big one that's growing right by your house?" said Misjantie.

"Oh, right. The one you gave to me as a sapling, yeah."

That sapling, which I'd planted beside my house, had grown into a tree so massive it served as a pretty good landmark. The remarkable thing, though, is I'd only planted it just recently. Misjantie had given it to me as a memento of a sisters' wedding she'd officiated between Falfa and Shalsha, and it had grown into its full, massive form over the course of just three days. I was convinced she'd used some sort of pine spirit power to make it happen—it would've been a literal miracle for it to grow that quickly, otherwise.

"So what about that tree? How's a pine tree supposed to do any business with you?" I asked.

Misjantie awkwardly broke eye contact. "Well, um… Y'see, we were thinking it'd be nice to plant some more trees and make a pine forest there, if that's cool with you…? We thought if there was a pine forest with some real impact nearby, it could give all my other businesses a nice boost…"

I flashed Misjantie a bright, friendly smile and crossed my arms in front of my chest.

"Absolutely *not*!"

Oh, this was way too close… If I hadn't caught them, they might've ruined my life of peace and tranquility. Being able to clearly say no is such an important skill at times like these…

"Huh? No?" repeated Misjantie. "But I thought we'd be able to turn it into a real tourist attraction, since it's right by the house in the highlands and all…"

"That's exactly why I'm saying no! I knew you were trying to profit off my fame! You're not even trying to hide it!"

I'd figured they were going for something like that. Misjantie and Fighsly were hoping to pull us into their money-making scheme, whether we liked it or not.

"Look, you already have a café and a little shrine in the area! Plant your forest near one of those, okay? We have to actually

live in this house, so it'd be inconvenient in all sorts of ways to have a store or whatever opening up right next to us!"

"Couldn't you give it a little more thought, at least?" said Fighsly, rubbing her hands together hopefully as she tried to talk me into it.

You look more like a sleazy merchant than a martial artist right now, Fighsly.

"If everything goes well, we'll even be willing to pay rent for the space!"

"I said no, and I mean it. And if you decide to plant your forest without my permission, I won't hesitate to chop it down myself if it comes to that."

I knew I had to draw a very clear line in the sand, and judging by the look of panic that came across Misjantie's face when I brought up cutting down the trees, I had a feeling I'd done a good job of it.

"Oh, all right, then," said Fighsly. "We'll give up on this line of attack. These things never go well if you can't get the locals' permission, after all."

Well, she backed down surprisingly easily. That's nice, at least. Anyway, did she really *expect to "get the locals' permission" for this? Surely she didn't think she could tell me she was planning on using my name and home for publicity and just get away with it?*

My best guess was that Fighsly had known it was a doomed effort, but just didn't care since it wasn't really her problem. She'd get her consulting fee whether her plans worked out or not.

Misjantie, on the other hand, seemed to be reeling a little from her failure.

"I really thought if we just took a stab at it, we might get permission… Guess it's never that easy, man… We'll have to think up a new way to make money now…"

I wish you wouldn't act quite that distraught. You're making me feel like I did something wrong… But anyway, no more plans that put my life of leisure at risk! I'm not budging on that! If I let this one little project slide, then for all I know, the Witch of the Highlands Village will have sprouted up around my house just a couple years from now. I really wouldn't put it past those two…

At that point, Misjantie and Fighsly's business with me was, in a certain sense, concluded… But before they could say their goodbyes, I noticed something hopping toward us from behind them. Four somethings, specifically, and when I took a closer look, I realized they were slimes.

They looked like the sort of perfectly average slimes you could find literally anywhere, but for some reason, they struck me as oddly familiar. There were only a small number of slimes I was personally acquainted with, and considering the context, only one explanation made sense.

"Oh, hey—if it isn't Free Tuition 1, 2, 3, and 4!"

The four Free Tuitions lived at Fighsly's training gym. They were, for all intents and purposes, her pets.

"That's them, all right," said Fighsly. "Seeing as we came all this way, I thought I'd take them out for a walk."

"Well, someone's certainly taking good care of her pets!" I said.

"I can't really walk them around my gym, after all. Too many waterways. I might lose one of them again, or end up with even more…"

"Right, yeah… It's tiring when you can't take your eyes off them for a second." *And no matter how much she loves her pets, even Fighsly would hit her limit eventually if she ended up with a new one every single week.*

"Plus, if one of them *does* end up going out and getting lost, there's no way for me to tell which one it was. It'd suck to lose one of them and not know which, right?"

So even Fighsly, a slime herself, can't tell the four of them apart? I really have to wonder if there's any difference between them at all, at that point…

"But when I'm traveling, unless we happen to go somewhere with slimes that have a really similar color scheme to theirs, I can go out and about with them and have a nice, leisurely stroll without worrying about them getting lost," Fighsly concluded.

The Free Tuitions were all bouncing around very enthusiastically (as far as I could tell). They seemed like they got a lot more exercise than the wild slimes that lived around here (again, as far as I could tell). If the disclaimers aren't making it

obvious: It was *really* hard to tell what sort of physical condition a slime was in.

"And hey, I bet the Free Tuitions like having the chance to get out into the countryside and take it easy sometimes," I said. "They're from Vanzeld, so I bet they get those city-slicker urges from time to time."

"True enough. They're not my pets or anything, but taking them with me doesn't cost me, so no reason not to," said Fighsly. She was always very stubborn about insisting the slimes weren't her pets, even though she clearly lavished them with affection in her own sort of way.

Around that time, I heard a noise that was somewhat similar to the slimes' bouncing, but slightly distinct. It was a bit duller, overall. I turned around to find Mimi was jumping around with its mouth—or, well, box—wide open.

Suddenly, I had a very bad feeling. "Mimi, no! Stay over there!" I shouted.

Oh no—it'll be a disaster if Mimi decides to attack the Free Tuitions! Slimes like them can't survive a mimic attack!

The only reason why we were able to let Mimi walk around freely was because nobody else ever came to the highlands, meaning there was nobody around who it biting would be a huge problem. If outsiders were present—and, worse still, present with very fragile pets in tow—then the situation was suddenly much more dangerous!

"Oh? You're keeping a mimic as a pet? You have pretty weird taste in animals," said Fighsly.

"It could make for a good security system if you keep it next to your valuables, man," noted Misjantie.

The two of them were taking the mimic's presence very casually, but I didn't have that luxury. The situation was getting worse and worse by the second: the Free Tuitions were bouncing their way directly toward Mimi!

"Free Tuitions, no! Not that way! Don't you have any sense of self-preservation?!" I shouted, but my cries fell on deaf ears. The Free Tuitions drew closer and closer to Mimi…

…and jumped right into its open mouth!

A second later, Mimi's lid snapped shut with a *clunk*.

“Gaaah! Mimi, no! You can’t eat them! Spit them out!”

How am I supposed to make it up to Fighsly if my pet eats *hers?! I have to save them, before it’s too late!*

“Oh, it’s fine. No need to panic,” said Fighsly. True to her word, she seemed completely unconcerned about the situation. Maybe her slime status gave her some sort of insider information? Regardless, I wasn’t about to calm down until I had a very good reason to.

“How am I supposed to not panic?! For all we know, the Free Tuitions are getting digested as we speak,” I moaned.

“Nah, it wouldn’t try to eat them,” said Fighsly. “I mean, monsters turn into magic stones when they die. Other monsters know that, so they don’t bother eating each other.”

“That makes sense, actually!”

“Some people claim mimics like eating precious stones, magic stones included, but that’s just an old wives’ tale. The truth is they sometimes keep precious stones and items in them to make themselves look more like real treasure chests, and people got the wrong idea as a result. I bet your mimic’s never tried eating any gemstones, has it?”

“Now that you mention it! That’s such a reasonable explanation!”

Maybe there were monsters that really did eat gems out there somewhere, but I’d never seen Mimi eat anything other than dust. I had no reason to believe it could eat gems. That left one pressing question, though.

“Okay, so then why did the Free Tuitions jump into Mimi?” I asked.

“Who knows?” Fighsly said with a shrug. Even a slime like her couldn’t tell what the other slimes were thinking. “By the way, is Mimi what you call it? Nice name.”

I’d really rather not talk about its name right now, thanks. But now that you’ve brought it up—is it a nice name, really? Slime naming standards must be naturally simplistic.

At that point, Halkara came rushing over to Mimi’s side. I suspected Halkara felt a certain responsibility for it as the one who named it.

“Would you open your mouth for me, please, Mimi?” Halkara asked as she reached out toward the mimic.

Oh no. Please don’t let this turn out as terribly as I think it’s going to! Please don’t let us find four freshly generated magic

stones inside in place of the Free Tuitions!

"Oh, look at that! It's like you're a real treasure chest, all full of gems!" Halkara exclaimed.

A chill ran down my spine. *Oh. Oh no. Does that mean…the Free Tuitions are no longer with us…?*

There were tons of mimics out there in the world, and for all I knew, some of them attacked monsters and ate magic stones. The only reason why I wasn't totally convinced the slimes were dead was Halkara's voice seemed weirdly cheerful and unconcerned, considering.

No, there's no point thinking about it. I just have to look and see for myself, right away! Just go!

I rushed over to the mimic, which still had its mouth wide open.

Please, let it not really be full of gems! Let this be a weird misunderstanding!

I wasn't far away from the mimic at all, but for some reason, it felt like it took an eternity for me to run over to it. Finally, I was close enough to peer into it…

…and see all four Free Tuitions packed neatly inside the treasure chest.

I had to admit: when the light of the sun hit them just right, they *did* maybe look just a little bit like gemstones. Slimes were translucent, after all.

"O-oh, thank goodness… They're safe," I said, so relieved I slumped to my knees on the spot. *That almost gave me a heart attack.*

"I think they're just playing treasure and treasure chest, don't you? Or maybe the slimes just like fitting into tight spaces? Either way, it's downright adorable, isn't it?" Halkara said, her voice bright and cheery as could be. "Isn't it, Mistress Teacher?"

"Yeah. Sure is," I said with a forced smile. Internally, I was fuming. "They're adorable, but *you* need to learn a thing or two about being careful with your phrasing! Do you have any idea how badly you just freaked me out?!"

"Ah… Sorry, Mistress Teacher! I didn't mean it like that! It was an accident!"

Mimi and the Free Tuitions spent quite a long time just

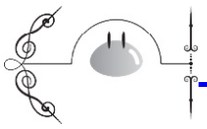
sitting there, not moving a muscle. I had no idea how a mimic and some slimes could possibly be friends, but one way or another, they seemed to get along fabulously.

“Do you think Mimi would like having actual gemstones inside it, too?”

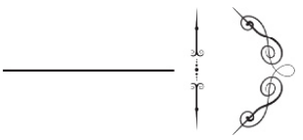
Halkara pondered out loud as she gazed affectionately at the mimic.

“Maybe it would. But, I mean—a mimic with gems in it…?” I said, cocking my head. “Wouldn’t it just be a normal treasure chest, at that point…?”

I’d like to propose a new theory regarding the origin of mimics: Maybe they’re just the monster form of a perfectly ordinary treasure chest.



I DREAMED ABOUT SAVING THE WORLD



“Ah—another day come and gone without any major disasters!”

I tucked myself into bed with a leisurely sigh of relief. There really was nothing better than going to bed with nothing to worry about and no work on your plate, knowing you’ll be able to sleep like a log. I always felt way healthier when I got a full night’s sleep, too.

Viva the highlands lifestyle!

That evening, however, a peaceful night’s sleep simply wasn’t to be. No sooner had I climbed into bed than a telepathic voice rang out in my mind.

Hello there, Azusa!

Ugh—that was definitely Godly Godness’s voice! Is she about to ask me to help her with something obnoxious again…? I really wish she’d stick to bothering me in the daytime, at the very least. Calling someone right as they’re going to bed is illegal, dang it!

Oh, but this time, I’m asking you for something you couldn’t do during the daytime! In fact, it’s something you can only help me with while you’re asleep!

Oh, I think I know what that means… Are you dragging me into another weird alternate world? What is it with you and these weird sleep learning-adjacent schemes…? You’ve already sent me to a world made up of nothing but slimes and a world that was basically just an action game, remember?

Oh, I do indeed! And as a matter of fact, I’m currently

developing another new training program for my followers. I was hoping you'd be willing to play-test it for me again! Thanks so much for being such a good sport about it!

Being a good sport about what?! I haven't even agreed yet! Stop assuming I'm in!

This was another collaborative work between me and one of this world's most renowned game designers, Pondeli! I wrote the whole story myself, and she helped with the programming! Now it's all up to you, Azusa. Please get in there and save the digital world we created!

Huh? You want me to save the world? That's kind of a big ask, you know…?

◇

The next thing I knew, I found myself standing in a mysterious new world.

"Again? Seriously?"

Those two words summed up my feelings on the matter in a nutshell, honestly.

The last time this had happened, I'd ended up in a very pixelated, video game–like world. I found myself looking at a similar landscape now, but this time, the graphics had received a conspicuous upgrade.

The sky above and the town around me looked way nicer than before. Flowers were blooming here and there, and I could even see a river flowing off in the distance. In gaming terms, it was like we'd moved up to a new, more advanced console generation—like we'd upgraded from an Entertainment System to a Super Entertainment System, shall we say.

"I see you've wound up in this world as well, Lady Azusa. I will do my utmost to help you overcome this trial!"

I only know one person who's that stiff with her greetings. That's gotta be Laika!

I turned in the direction her voice had come from, and lo and behold, Laika was indeed standing nearby. Or, rather, a jagged, pixel-art version of Laika was standing nearby.

"Laika! You look like you belong in a video game world!"

"And your body is oddly blocky and angular, Lady Azusa!"

I took a look at my arms and legs, and found she was right. I was just as pixelly as she was!

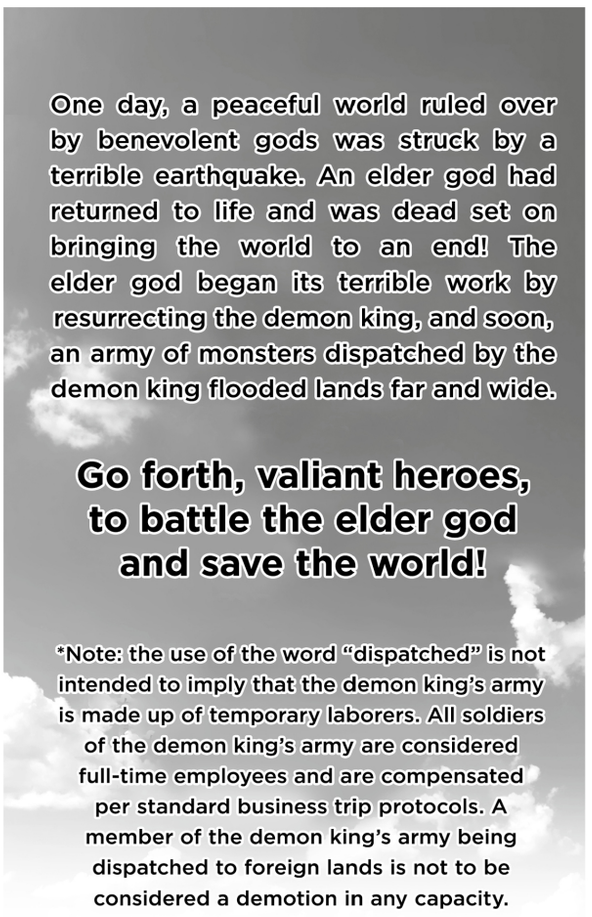
Just then, writing started scrolling through the sky overhead.

"Dedicating an awful lot of space to the workers' rights disclaimer, aren't you?!" *That is* so *obviously not the part of the backstory that's most in need of clarification!*

That said, I now had a pretty clear idea of what Godly Godness was going for this time. Most likely, I was in an RPG world. To clear this game, I would have to defeat its final boss: the elder god from the preamble.

My best guess, by the way, was that the elder god role would be played by Dekie, a literal elder god. She seemed easily powerful enough to fill the final boss role. As for the demon king, I had to assume she'd end up being a mid-game boss. She would be played by Pecora, because of course she would.

You know what? Compared to the unnecessarily hard action game I had to deal with last time, an RPG feels like it'll be totally possible to progress through steadily as long as I take it slow. Psychologically speaking, this'll be way easier than the last game.



Just then, the word "Warrior" appeared above Laika's head.

"Looks like you're playing a warrior, Laika. Counting on you to hold down the front line!" I said.

"Of course!" Laika agreed. "And incidentally, the word 'Hero' is currently displayed above your head, Lady Azusa."

Oh, so I'm a hero, huh? Looks like I'm getting the real protagonist treatment.

"All right! I have a feeling the two of us aren't going to be traveling as a duo for very long—I'd bet there are a few other party members somewhere out there for us to find. I'd like to track them down quickly, if we can," I said.

Considering this game had character classes, it would feel very odd for us to be forced to go through the whole thing with only a hero and a warrior. Generally speaking, games like this would have other recruitable party members with other classes available somewhere.

It turned out, though, we didn't have to go searching for familiar faces at all. A pair of them found us before we had the chance.

“Aha! I knew I’d find you here, Elder Sister!”

“T’would seem the two of you are unusually angular today, I see.”

Pecora and Beelzebub came strolling up to us, just like that.

“Huh?!” I gasped. “Wait, the demon king’s showing up already?! Isn’t that a huge problem for us?!”

If this game’s working on RPG mechanics, there’s no way we could win that fight right now! We’re still level 1, for crying out loud…

“No need to worry, Elder Sister. Look, look!” Pecora said as she pointed above her head. The word “Wizard” was floating up above her.

Oh, so they’re party members? Beelzebub had the word “Cleric” floating above her, as well. It seemed the four of us were this game’s starting party.

“So you’re telling me the real-world demon king is going on a quest to slay the in-game demon king…? Talk about confusing.”

This seems like a pretty obvious miscasting, if you ask me.

“Please try to play the character you’ve been assigned, Elder Sister!” said Pecora. “As far as you’re concerned, I’m just Pecora the wizard right now. My dearly beloved elder brother was taken away by the demon king’s army, so I became a wizard and set out on a journey with the hero to search for him! That’s my backstory right now.”

“I guess you’re one of those types that goes all-in on the RP, huh?” *Though the fact that the in-game demon king is deeply involved in her character’s history just makes this more confusing than ever.*

“I, meanwhile, was born into a noble house,” said Beelzebub. “Being the youngest child, however, I was sent off to a monastery and forced to become a cleric. ’Tis an almost upsettingly grounded backstory, I must say…”

Yeah, she’s not wrong about that. It totally seems like something that could’ve happened to her in real life.

“If we’re sharing our backstories, I lost everything after a dragon attacked my village and burned it to the ground,” said Laika.

“Okay, again: That’s a *serious* miscasting! You couldn’t possibly have less in common with the character you’re playing!”

“Nor would I ever be so villainous as to burn down a village. I know very well those who commit such misdeeds will never amount to anything in life…”

“Ah, yeah, don’t worry. Of course I believe you, Laika…”

Part of me wanted to question whether having people from a world with *actual* dragons and demon kings play an RPG was a good idea, but on the other hand, there were plenty of TV dramas set in modern Japan back *in* modern Japan. Maybe it wasn’t that strange after all.

“What’s your backstory, Lady Azusa?” asked Laika.

As I considered the question, a backstory seemed to pop into my mind out of nowhere. “Um… Apparently I had absolute faith starting from a young age I was the hero. That’s…all? I guess…? I, um… I think I might just be some delusional weirdo who’s convinced herself she’s a hero?” *Isn’t that a pretty weak backstory compared to the other three?*

“Well, ’tis simply how these matters go. Becoming a hero is as simple as declaring yourself to be one before anyone else beats you to it,” said Beelzebub.

“That’s right,” said Pecora. “Plus, giving the protagonist too complicated of a backstory makes it harder for the player to self-insert! It’s possible the developers made your history deliberately simplistic.”

“I guess you have a point…”

Being consoled by two demons felt like it flew in the face of RPG storytelling as well, but it was high time I stopped applying real-world logic to this experience. And so our four-person party set off on our RPG adventure!

“I mean, I’d like to set off, but where are we supposed to go first?” I wondered out loud. We hadn’t been given any sort of immediate objective.

“T’would behoove us to start by gathering information,” said Beelzebub. “Let us ask one of the townsfolk over there for advice.”

That seemed like a solid enough plan to me. In games like these, progression always seemed to involve talking to NPCs for

info about the plot. Once we knew enough about what was going on, we'd be better equipped to do something about it.

Beelzebub approached a townsperson who was walking nearby and struck up a conversation.

"Pardon me, good citizen. Might you share with us any information you have pertaining to these lands?"

"This is the town of Stahrt!"

"I see, I see. And what, pray tell, can we find in the town of Stahrt?"

"This is the town of Stahrt!"

Suddenly, I had a bad feeling about where this was going.

"Yes, I'm aware. You already told me its name."

"This is the town of Stahrt!"

"Are you mocking me, you miserable wretch?! Give me an actual answer! Or perhaps you're looking for a fight? Know that you trifle with a cleric! I have the might of the gods on my side!"

Beelzebub had only met one person so far and already looked ready to snap, so I decided it was my moment to intervene.

"Wait, wait!" I shouted. "I'm pretty sure this is just one of those things where they *can't* say anything else!"

"Huh?" grunted Beelzebub. "You think someone who can only say the name of their town is 'one of those things'? Hell's bells, I've seen bottom-shelf artifacts with more functions than that! Has the elder god or the demon king already afflicted this town with a curse?"

"No, no, not one of *those* things!"

This might be really hard to explain to someone who's never played an RPG, actually…

In the end, I just glossed over the matter and explained the people in these games were designed to only say the same dialogue on loop.

"Hmm… 'Tis a strange world we've found ourselves in. Well then—if the townsfolk will offer no advice, let us forge an alliance with a country with a mighty military and lead them into battle against the demon king's forces. Or perhaps we could send an assassin to dispatch the enemy's top-ranking generals, seeding chaos and confusion among their men?"

“That’s not how this works, either. Generally speaking, games like these have a small party—that’s us—go out and do all the work.”

Come on, Beelzebub! You’re basically an RPG mini-boss yourself, so you’d think you’d *understand how this works. Plus, the enemy’s generals are all going to be as tough as you are, so sending in an assassin wouldn’t work in the first place.*

“I am well aware that when attacking a foe as mighty as a demonic minister, there is a clear possibility they will turn the tables and slay our agent. However, our foes are an elder god and a demon king. To them, we are but a trifling threat from a remote region. They would not send their best to deal with a foe such as us, and so a well-placed assassin could likely dismantle the upper ranks of the force they do deign to commit to this region. Don’t you think?”

“No, as a matter of fact, I *don’t* think that.”

Ugh, this is exhausting… Game logic and Beelzebub’s common sense are just too far separated. Though then again, it’s not like I spent all my time playing games, either. The fact that I have their logic so internalized is proof of just how much of an influence they can have on you, I guess.

“Well, then have it your way,” said Beelzebub. “Our only option is to grow mighty ourselves. We may be of poor standing now, but in time, we’ll have climbed the social ladder far enough to lead a force numbering in the tens of thousands. Our ascent begins here and now!”

“You’re still not quite on the right track there, but you’re right that we have to get more powerful, so close enough for now!”

We took some time to ask around and gather information. The more people I talked to, however, the more I started to realize Beelzebub had a point.

“So it turns out living in a world where people can only repeat set phrases is actually really creepy when you’re experiencing it up close and personal…”

It didn’t help that a lot of people’s dialogue consisted of phrases like “We’re all doomed if the demon king attacks!” It was starting to feel like the townspeople were being controlled by an evil force of a far scarier, far higher order than an elder

god or a demon king.

“Lady Azusa… I’m sorry, but dealing with horror is beyond me. I’ve already reached my limits,” moaned Laika. It hadn’t taken her long at all to tap out.

It seemed to people who weren’t familiar with RPG conventions, living through an RPG was its own brand of horror game. There was, I had to admit, a certain uncanny creepiness about it all. It made you wonder if we were the only genuine, flesh-and-blood humans present in this world.

“You’ll get used to it, Laika! It’s just one of this world’s rules, that’s all!” I said. I had a feeling if I didn’t make like a real hero and encourage my party, this was going to end very poorly…

In any case, one info-gathering session later, we’d figured out our next objective.

The four of us gathered around a table at the town’s inn to conduct a strategy meeting.

“So we know if we can find the item a certain townsperson wants, they’ll trade us a small boat for it. The item that person wants is somewhere in a cave, so for the time being, exploring the cave and finding that item’s our objective. Having a boat will expand our range of movement dramatically, so it’s worth the effort.”

“What sort of person so desperately wishes for an item hidden in a cave? Their tastes must be peculiar indeed,” Beelzebub said with a rather skeptical look on her face.

“I get how you feel, but it’s one of those things. You’ll just have to accept it.” *But yeah, honestly, no real person would ever be that desperate for some random cave item.*

“Moreover, is this town not under the looming threat of monster invasion?” Beelzebub continued. “The way I see it, t’would be in their best interests to provide us with all the resources they can, with all expedience! Forget small ships—this nation’s rulers should be presenting us with a galleon! If we try crossing the sea in some rotted-out dinghy and sink halfway there, our quest will be over in an instant!”

“Look, I really need you to stop trying to logic your way through this! Also, our boat’s not going to sink halfway across the ocean! It’ll be fine!”

“No, I think not! I’ve grown tired of this nonsense, and I

shan’t miss this chance to air all my grievances! What of the townsperson who asked us to gather precious herbs, or the one who wanted a malformed chicken? What possible relevance could they have to the so-called ‘events’ we’re meant to be seeking? The scale of the tasks asked of us is entirely out of proportion with the scale of our quest! We seek to save the world from destruction, so why should we have to listen to the petty desires of every random plebeian we cross paths with?! Does a wise monarch sequentially ask each citizen how they think the country should be run? No, because *nothing* would ever get done, and this is no different!”

“It’s just how it works! Let it go!”

I had no idea how trends in modern RPGs had developed since I died, but in the ones I’d played back when I was a kid, you always progressed the plot by solving problems that seemed totally unrelated to the ultimate goal of world peace. Looking back on it, though, I had to admit Beelzebub really did have a point about that not making sense… The NPCs who wouldn’t give us important items unless we found something for them were one thing, but you’d think the kingdom we were trying to save would at least pony up some funds for us to buy items with.

Just as I was thinking bringing Beelzebub on board with the game was going to be a nightmare on its own, Pecora shot to her feet.

“You’re far too uncultured for your own good, Beelzebub! You’ve failed!”

“I-I’ve *failed*…?” Beelzebub repeated, somewhat bewildered by Pecora’s scolding. She was getting told off by her boss, technically, so of course she wouldn’t know how to react.

“Think of the scenes in plays where the characters disguise themselves. The actors don’t actually wear convincing enough disguises to fool the audience, of course—anyone watching can easily tell who’s who. Would you, when watching a play like that, gripe about how unconvincing the disguises are, and how little sense it makes that they would fool anyone? No—that would be boorish! Downright uncultured! And that, Beelzebub, is precisely what you’re doing at this exact moment!”

Sh-she's right! Plays have their own set of narrative shorthands and conveniences, but nobody has any trouble separating them from reality!

"Plays exist within a reality of their own. This game, meanwhile, exists in a reality of its own as well! You have no choice but to accept that!" Pecora concluded. Even I found myself nodding along in agreement with her explanation.

"Y-yes, 'tis a fair point… I understand… I swear I'll stop nitpicking the finer details of the story," Beelzebub said with a meek nod.

"Good, good! So long as you understand! ♪" Pecora said happily. "At times like these, you always have to start by accepting the rules of the world you find yourself in and engaging with it on its terms! ♪"

"I guess all the weird schemes you've cooked up over the years have made it pretty easy for you to understand these things, huh…?" I said. If anything, it felt like she'd accepted the game's logic even faster than I had.

"Oh, I wouldn't say I understand them! I'm just paying the creators the respect they're due," said Pecora.

Talk about broad-minded! That's a demon king for you!

"Um, Lazy Azusa? I believe it would be best for us to return to the matter at hand soon," said Laika. I hadn't realized just how much time we'd spent on our little digression until she pointed it out.

"Right, yeah!" I said. "So, um, our next objective's in a cave, but considering we haven't had a single fight so far, I was thinking we should go out into the overworld and do some leveling up before anything else."

"Oh? Perhaps you'd have us defeat nothing but slimes to accumulate experience points?" asked Beelzebub.

I gave her a nod. "That's exactly what I'm saying. If we go into the cave at level one, we'll get wiped out. We might even have to fight an early-game boss to get at the item we want, so we need to level up and make sure we're ready for it."

"I see! So we're training, then! I shall dedicate myself to self-improvement in this world as well!"

You're really into this all of a sudden, huh, Laika…?

"I don't think we need to go quite that intense to win this,

honestly. We don't know anything about this game's battle system for now, so let's start by heading out into the overworld and finding something to fight."

We left town, stepped out into the overworld, and were immediately confronted by a group of doglike creatures that started gradually closing in on us.

"Hmm. Is this one of those games where we have to actually bump into an enemy sprite to make a battle start?"

"Do you mean to say there are other sorts of games, Lady Azusa?" asked Laika.

"Yeah. Sometimes you can't see the enemies at all, and you end up getting taken to the battle screen randomly as you walk around. Then there are games where the fights happen on the actual map itself, without any battle screens. That's particularly common in games with action-RPG elements. Then there are games where you move your characters around individually on a bigger battle map to fight—sorta like chess, basically. Those tend to be more tactical type games."

I wasn't much of a gamer, but I could still come up with a handful of examples right off the top of my head. Video game logic had clearly firmly taken root in my mind.

"This is all very fascinating! In that case, let us make contact with that oddly angular dog creature!" Laika said. She stepped forward to touch the dog, and the screen instantly shifted into battle mode.

Okay, that was some pretty authentic RPG stuff, all right!

A trio of zombies was now standing in front of us.

"Hell's bells! What is the meaning of this?! That was a dog moments ago, wasn't it?! Why are there zombies now?! And there was only one of them before—why *three*?!"

Beelzebub's calling out the game logic again!

"I mean, it's just one of those things again… Probably…," I stammered. Before I could say anything more, however, a voice rang out in our minds.

Hello hello, Godly Godness speaking! As you've seen, we decided to go with a non-random, contact-based encounter system for this game. We didn't have the resources to make individual sprites for every monster in the game, though, so all monsters ended up being represented by dog sprites on the overworld!

Surely that's just too much of a cop-out by anyone's standards…?

By the way, I should note there's no real point to grinding levels in this game! In order to make sure battles stay tense and exciting, the enemies are designed to scale in strength based on how many battles you've fought so far up until around halfway through the game or so. You'll get some powerful spells in the second half that'll make everything pretty easy, but grinding levels outside of town won't have any impact, so there's not much of a point to it at all.

That's a pretty meta thing to straight-up tell your players, but considering how much of a pain beating the game would be without knowing that, probably better to just come out and say it.

As such, beating slimes over and over and over again until you're gone up to an outrageously high level isn't going to work in this game!

Well, it's pretty obvious that statement was laser-targeted at me… It's not like I spent all that time killing slimes because I was trying to level up, for the record…

"Hmm. Sorry, Laika, but it sounds like leveling up by fighting a ton of enemies over and over isn't an option this time. We'll have to try something else," I said. I had a feeling she'd been looking forward to a very lengthy stretch of combat, so I thought I should say something to console her.

"To the contrary, Lady Azusa—our foes growing stronger as we level up will just make for better practice! This system makes me feel a greater need to devote myself to my training than ever!"

“Diligent as always, I see!”

I guess this won’t be a problem, then. Judging by how Godly Godness described the system, there’s nothing stopping us from just leveling up until we get bored and moving along.

The fact that I didn’t want to get anywhere near the zombies was still a bit of a problem, but I decided to just suck it up and move along with the encounter. I made like a hero and swung my sword at one of the monsters.

[Zombie took 8 damage!]

A window appeared in my field of vision. The game had a system to tell me how much damage I’d done through text—obviously, I guess.

A moment later, the zombie next to the one I’d attacked was consumed by a ball of fire that flew from somewhere behind me.

[Pecora cast Fire! Zombie took 30 damage!]

With just one spell, the zombie collapsed.

“Ooh, that was one powerful spell! Looks like wizards are pretty tough!” I said.

“It’s not every day I get to use magic as weak as this! It’s a little refreshing! ♪” said Pecora.

“I guess for a demon king, that was nothing.”

The zombies proved to be the early-game enemies I’d expected them to be, and between Laika’s and Beelzebub’s attacks, we finished off the whole pack with ease. They each took about two hits to take down, on average.

[You defeated the zombies! Obtained 6 TP and 9 Genni!]

Once again, a window appeared to inform us of our spoils. I didn’t know with total certainty what TP was, but I figured it was probably some sort of point system that would let us learn skills. Genni, meanwhile, was probably money we got from killing monsters.

“But, wait… Where’d the nine Genni we got go…?”

Money wasn’t abstract like experience points were, so not being able to see the money I’d obtained made me feel vaguely anxious. Fortunately, Godly Godness the developer herself was ready to step in and explain.

After you’ve beaten a group of monsters, you have to search their bodies to get their money!

That's the worst system you could've possibly gone with! "Are you trying to make your players feel like muggers?! This is criminal! Come up with a better system, please!"

We added this system in for the sake of realism! The idea was that money spontaneously appearing in your wallet was too unnatural.

Of everything, that's where you chose to be realistic?

Pecora, meanwhile, was rifling through the fallen zombies' belongings.

"Ah, they had money on them! Look—it was in their pockets!"

Honestly, the way you sound so cheerful about it just makes it harder to come up with a response.

Laika seemed to feel just as conflicted about this development as I did.

"Are you certain this is all right, Lady Azusa? Even if our foes were monsters, this feels rather, well…"

"I know what you mean, and no, I'm not certain it's fine. This is definitely a don't-try-this-at-home scenario. It'll be hard to beat the game if we don't have a good way to make money, though…"

I'd never stopped to consider it before, but imagining the protagonists of all the RPGs I'd played in the past rifling through their enemies' pockets for spare change made it suddenly feel a lot harder to root for them… This was raising a major ethical dilemma about the nature of justice in my mind. In the end, though, I decided to compromise by just blaming it all on Godly Godness and calling it a day.

Our party gradually grew more and more used to the RPG world as we progressed through its story. We found a key item in the cave, traded it for the boat, and explored the new lands it opened up for us. We also ran into enemies out on the sea that looked an awful lot like palette-swapped versions of Curalina the jellyfish spirit and Captain Imremico. Apparently, going out of the way to make unique, ocean-themed enemies was too much of a bother for Godly Godness…

Needless to say, we made sure to complete all the quests we encountered in the new lands we traveled to. Also needless to say, we encountered some slight issues every once in a while when our party members' perspectives clashed with the game's.

"'Tis a crime to walk into someone's house and make off with the belongings stored in their treasure chest, Azusa. Are you not supposed to be a hero?" Beelzebub jabbed as I opened up a chest I'd found on the second floor of a random home.

"Ugh… No, this isn't what it looks like! I mean, it kind of is, but that's not how it works! Heroes are allowed to do this, okay?!"

The fact that searching through someone's belongings for loot was an unambiguous crime according to usual logic made it really hard for me to explain myself. That wasn't the only bump in the road we encountered, either—Laika ended up getting very suspicious at one point while we were gathering information. It happened when we were talking to each random townsperson who happened to be walking around a city in a particular kingdom.

"Outsiders aren't allowed into the castle, but there's a secret entrance in the waterway out back!" an old man told us.

"This, um, may not be my place to say…but it might be dangerous to share a secret of that gravity with someone you've only just met," said Laika.

"Rumor has it the minister's secretly a monster in disguise! He's pulling the strings behind the scenes!" said another old man.

"That…is most definitely not a safe rumor to be spreading carelessly," said Laika.

After we'd finished gathering information, Laika crossed her arms and walked over to speak with me.

"This is strange—*too* strange," she said. "If a perfectly ordinary townsperson is aware the kingdom's minister is a monster in disguise, then surely the minister's identity is an open secret at best? I can't understand why nobody's done anything about it! Surely this must be a trap? We should look into the background of the old man who told us about it!"

"I understand how you feel, but it's just one of those things! Tell yourself he's just surprisingly well-informed and move on!"

"The man who told us about the secret waterway passage into the castle was suspicious, as well. We'd only just met him!

For all we know, the enemy will be lying in wait to ambush us if we take his word for it and try to sneak in…"

"It's fine, really! We can trust him! And even if it does turn out to be a trap, we still have to fall for it!" I said, realizing how ridiculous I sounded halfway through my own sentence. Unsurprisingly, the rest of my party wasn't just going to sit back and accept that.

"'Tis madness to march into what you know full well could be a trap," Beelzebub said, just like I'd known she would. "And that's not even taking into consideration our lack of numbers. If the enemy is lying in wait for us, they could easily wipe us out. Walking headfirst into such danger would be foolhardy beyond all reason."

"Right, but, um… The thing is, if we don't walk into it, then the plot won't progress… The worst that'll happen is us getting locked up in jail, I promise…"

"How would the prospect of being thrown in jail ever serve as consolation? If that's the consequence on the table, t'would behoove us to come up with a better option."

Boy, I sure do wish I could force her to play through three classic RPGs or so before we carried on with this!

I somehow managed to make Beelzebub see reason, and the four of us slipped into the castle through the secret passage in the waterways. As it turned out, the information wasn't a trap in and of itself, but the secret passage was strictly guarded. We ended up getting cornered by a hoard of monsters under the minister's command, and ultimately got thrown into the castle's dungeon.

"Oh nooo, how *terrible*! Why, there's just no way we could *ever* resist that many monsters at once! ♪" Pecora said as she sat down in the middle of our cell. She'd grown completely accustomed to the RPG world, and I was sort of impressed by the sheer adaptability she'd displayed.

"Hell's bells! If I could only return to my true self, I could shred these bars like tissue paper!" Beelzebub growled, shaking our cell's bars back and forth to no particular effect. She was actually acting out a very typical RPG response to getting locked up, if you ignored the finer details of what she was saying.

"We've certainly found ourselves in a difficult situation, Lady

Azusa. If we don't escape soon, we'll be executed," Laika said nervously. And, I mean, of course she'd be worried, considering.

"Yeah, we're in trouble all right, but I'm pretty sure we'll be able to get out of it pretty easily," I said. "We were basically forced into it, after all."

Since the story had railroaded us into this, it would also surely give us an opportunity to escape. Only an irredeemable piece of shovelware would compel you to get yourself arrested and *not* let you break out of jail.

"And hey, if you're still worried, just try following Pecora's example," I said as I glanced over at the party wizard.

"Oh nooo, we're *doomed*! Oh, if only someone would come along and save us! Oh, what mortal peril we've found ourselves in! Whatever shall we do, whatever shall we *do*?!"

"She…could use acting lessons," Laika said with a slightly chilly stare.

"Right? *That's* about how seriously you should be taking this."

I figured someone would be showing up to save us before we knew it. It wouldn't be much of a game if they kept us locked up in jail forever.

Lo and behold, a moment later, a series of screams rang out from down the hallway.

"Who *is* this girl?!"

"Blaaargh!"

Judging by the tone of the screams, I'd just heard a pair of monsters get taken down. Shortly afterward, a girl who looked distinctly like an adventurer arrived at the door to our cell.

"I take it you were imprisoned by the monstrous minister?" said a pixelated version of…Wynona!

"Wynona!" I exclaimed. "You came to save us!"

"I don't know how or why you know my name, but yes, I did," said Wynona. "I understand you're on a quest to defeat the elder god, so I thought it would be for the best to offer you what aid I can."

"Oh, that's great! Always glad to see a friendly face! So what class did you end up getting?"

“To reiterate: Stop acting so overfamiliar, Stepmother! It doesn’t make sense! This is supposed to be the scene where we meet for the first time!”

Oh! Right… I guess I was ignoring the plot, wasn’t I?

“Well, uhhh, you’re a famous adventurer, right? I must know you by your reputation!” I said. “Oh wow, this is amazing! Won’t you save us, O mighty adventurer? And I beg of you, please fight the minister with us while you’re at it! Having a fifth party member would make such a big difference! Please, and thank you!”

“That was *pathetic*! If that’s the best you can do, just talk to me normally! You dropped out of character partway through your line, and you didn’t even sound like an adventurer to begin with!”

I’m sorry, okay? It feels like the more I try to role-play the hero I’m supposed to be, the weirder my adventurer-speak feels…

While I moped about my failed line delivery, the other members of my party started introducing themselves. Personally, I felt it would’ve been nicer to save that for after she’d freed us from our cell, but whatever.

“I’m Pecora the wizard, and I’m going to defeat the demon king! Oh, and find my missing brother, too!”

“You may call me Beelzebub the cleric.”

“And I am Laika, a warrior. Your aid is most appreciated.”

The whereabouts of Pecora’s brother were still a complete unknown, but considering how these things went, I figured it was only a matter of time before he turned up somehow. There was no way they’d establish she was searching for someone and not have that person show up at all in the end.

“It seems you really are adventurers, as I expected. You may call me Wynona the hero.”

“Wha— You’re a hero?!” I yelped.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand why you seem so astonished. Is there some reason why I shouldn’t be a hero? Seeing as I’m an adventurer in real life, I believe it’s a very appropriate class for me to be given,” Wynona huffed. It seemed she wasn’t very pleased with my reaction—most likely, she’d taken my surprise

to mean I didn't think she was heroic enough for the job.

No, that's not it! "It's just that *I'm* a hero, too," I said as I pointed at myself. "I've been fighting as the hero this whole time!"

For a moment, Wynona just glared at me.

"Well then, I'll be taking my leave now."

She's just leaving?! "Wait a minute! At least open the cell before you go! This is the weirdest possible time for you to say your goodbyes!"

"Well, I hardly think multiple heroes are called for in this scenario. If you're a hero, too, then it'd be best for everyone if you made an early exit—specifically, right now."

Now that's an unheroic comment if I've ever heard one! "Come on! This must be one of those stories where a pair of heroes save the world together! Help us, please!"

"Oh, for the… Fine, fine! One of the guards I just defeated dropped the key to the cell, in any case, so it'd be a shame not to use it…," Wynona muttered irritably as she unlocked the door.

Breaking out of prison sure is easy in RPGs, huh?

With that, Wynona joined our party, bringing us up to five members in total! We wiped the floor with the boss monster that had taken the minister's place, and peace returned to the kingdom at last.

"If he was that much of a weakling, we should have just marched up and fought him instead of getting locked up and going through all that trouble."

And there's Beelzebub, picking another classic nit with RPG storytelling.

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All right! Now that all five of us are together, it should finally be time for the story to begin in earnest.

Our party headed for a nearby tavern to plan our next move.

"So where should we go next?" I mused. "I think we've already been pretty much everywhere we can go, with our current means of travel."

"When you put it that way, it does seem like we've encountered a large number of obstacles on our boat," noted Laika. "There were strong winds that pushed us backward,

shallows we couldn't sail through, and even whirlpools that turned us right around. It would be so easy to ignore them if I could only turn into a dragon…"

Eh, all that stuff's pretty typical in RPGs. The boat's never enough to get you access to the whole world map. And you're just a warrior in this world, not a dragon, so it's not your fault you can't help as much as you'd like to.

"While I was traveling on my own, I heard rumors about a hidden village where dragons live in human form," said Wynona.

That rumor was music to my ears. I was positive it was leading us toward a new party member, or something along those lines.

"That's perfect!" I exclaimed. "I think that should be our next big objective, actually: getting a dragon or an airship or something that'll let us travel to new places!"

Getting a new method of transportation that could take you to previously inaccessible locales was a key component of classical RPG progression, and I was all for it. Laika, however, had started scowling the second the word "dragon" was mentioned.

"I suppose this means that Flatorte will be making an appearance after all. How unfortunate…"

Oh. I guess that is on the table, yeah.

"There, there," I said. "We don't know for sure she'll be there yet! Maybe the dragons will all be regular people in this world who can only say a couple set phrases."

It seemed like this dragon excursion might end up being trouble after all, but our only choice was to go and check it out.

"So then, Wynona the hero, where is this so-called hidden village said to lie? One would assume its location is not common knowledge, considering they call it 'hidden.' We'll have to find it before anything else," said Beelzebub. She seemed to be getting more and more comfortable with RPG logic as time went on. She was clearly thinking along the lines the developers had hoped she would now.

"I was told it's supposed to lie somewhere in a forest to the north of this nation," said Wynona. "At least, according to the

drunkard in a pub who told me the story."

"Why would a drunkard in a pub have that kind of information in the first place? This must be a trap, surely… Or perhaps it's nothing more than a groundless rumor…?"

Sorry, Laika, but it's definitely true! No decent game would throw a bunch of totally baseless information at you for no good reason!

Needless to say, we soon set out on our quest to track down the hidden village. The pace of our expedition, however, ended up being painfully slow. The problem at hand was that our cleric, Beelzebub, would heal us the moment we took the slightest bit of damage. All that indiscriminate healing meant she'd run out of MP in no time, and we'd have to turn back before we made any real progress…

"Hmm? I see Laika's lost a quarter of her health. 'Tis time for healing, just to be safe."

"No, it isn't! It's way too soon to heal her! Why not let her take a little more damage before you pull out the healing magic?" I protested.

"Nay, I think not! There's no such thing as too soon when it comes to healing—the sooner, the better! I shan't force any of us to face the fear of entering into combat at less than our full strength."

She really doesn't like taking risks, does she…? I never expected to learn something new about Beelzebub's character here, of all places.

There were two types of RPG players: the ones who deliberately rushed into danger under-leveled so they could enjoy the challenge of forcing their way forward unprepared, and the ones who made sure their preparations were all completely airtight before they so much as set foot in a dungeon. Beelzebub, it seemed, was the latter type. There was no way she'd even consider taking on a boss under-leveled. No, she was the sort of person who would train her characters up until she was certain they could handle any enemy.

Of course, unlike playing an RPG, we were more or less fighting our enemies in person in this dream. Considering that, I could understand why she'd go to some pretty great lengths to make sure we didn't put ourselves in danger. Then again, even

if you ran out of HP in a fight in this world, you'd be left just barely alive after the fight was over. Actually dying after getting knocked out in a fight was apparently just not a thing.

Good thing, too. I'd rather not die if I can help it, even in a dream…

It took quite some time, but in the end, we finally managed to find the hidden village where the dragons lived. Considering the people walking around in it had horns, I was positive we were in the right place.

"All right! Now we just have to find a dragon who'll fly us around," I said.

"It's very inconvenient that there isn't an adventurers' guild in this world," said Wynona. "If there was, we could simply put out a recruitment notice saying we're looking for a dragon to transport our party."

"That wouldn't make for a very interesting game, though, would it…?" *You can't just let the player buy their way out of all their problems if they have the money to hire someone!*

According to the pixelated townsfolk, there was a very unreasonable but mighty dragon living in the center of the village.

"Isn't it somewhat illogical to specifically seek out an individual who's been described to us as difficult to deal with…? I'd think we'd be better off seeking someone a little friendlier…"

Laika, no! You're trying to apply real-world logic to the game's story again!

"Sorry, but nope! Whenever you hear about a character like that, you can be sure they won't *just* be unreasonable when you actually meet them! That's gonna be the dragon that helps us out!"

Though of course, now that I'm saying it out loud, I'm starting to realize if someone actually went out looking for a person rumored to be a pain, I'd have to assume they weren't listening to anyone's advice to begin with…

"If I may be frank," said Laika, "the truth is, I'm not so much disinterested in meeting with an unreasonable person as I am disinterested in meeting with Flatorte."

"Oh, is *that* where this is coming from?!"

"I've reached an understanding of this game's driving

mechanisms, and I'm very certain if we do meet her, she'll send us on another irrational and time-consuming fool's errand. I have to assume the goal of those digressions is to artificially inflate the amount of time it takes for us to finish the game."

That's actually a pretty insightful observation on her part, but I think I'll just keep quiet about that for now…

In spite of Laika's apprehensions, the story wasn't going to move forward if we didn't visit the unreasonable dragon, so we made for the center of town. When we got there, however, we found not Flatorte…

"Oh my, oh my! It's so nice to see all of you! Please, come in and have some tea with me! I'll bring out snacks as well, if you give me just a moment."

…but a pixelated version of Momma Yufufu!

Unreasonable, my foot! She's as reasonable and approachable as could be! She's offering us tea, even though we showed up totally uninvited!

"I'm known as the unreasonable dragon," said Momma Yufufu. "Oh! Do you have an inn to stay at tonight? If not, you're welcome to spend the night here!"

This is the worst miscasting ever!

"We've need of a dragon's power, and that need has brought us to you. Would you be willing to fly us wherever our quest compels us to go?" asked Beelzebub, moving the conversation right along.

"I'd love to, really, but the monsters have built a tower on the mountain just beyond this hidden village, and my draconic power has grown weak ever since. It seems they're using some sort of magic."

Oh, I know what that means. We have to beat a boss in the tower before she'll fly us places.

"But as it happens, I have just enough power left to carry you around! So certainly, I'd be happy to help!"

"No! Miss Yufufu, you mustn't!"

What?! Pecora jumped in before I even had the chance!

"We'll resolve your issue with the tower, and you can fly us around afterward! It would be unacceptable for you to transport us before we go through the proper steps!" said Pecora.

“Oh, really? In that case, I’d be most obliged if you’d help,” said Momma Yufufu.

Pecora heaved a sigh of relief. Apparently, she was even more dedicated to making sure we didn’t break the game’s story than I was.

Momma Yufufu treated us to dinner that night, and we stayed at her place before setting out to deal with the tower the next morning.

“Take care storming the tower! Oh, and please take this with you! It’s an item that will fully restore the health of you and all your friends. Also, take this plant—if you eat it, it will let you see the weak points and current HP of all the enemies you encounter between here and the end of the tower!”

“I’d really appreciate if you’d stop lowering the difficulty level for us, Momma Yufufu…”

This game’s a challenge in so many ways I wasn’t expecting it to be.

The tower’s boss turned out to be Nosonia the butterfly demon, who we beat with ease in about five turns total…or so I thought, right up until the post-battle twist.

“Ugh! Well played! It looks like it’s time for me to reveal my true form!”

She’s a multi-stage boss?!

With a brilliant flash of light, Nosonia changed from her butterfly form…into an enormous caterpillar.

“Pretty sure you have that backwards! Why would you turn back into your childhood form?!”

“Well, because doing it the other way around would’ve meant waiting here as a worm for ages. That would’ve been awful, right?”

Then ask the devs! It’s their job to take care of that!

“You’re my savior, Miss Azusa, and it pains me to have to fight you like this, but I’m going to have to ask you to please die now, thank you very much!”

“Please don’t bring our real-world relationship into this! The story is making no sense!”

Anyway, we beat the caterpillar in two turns.

“Why are you *weaker* after you transform?!” Beelzebub roared. I, on the other hand, was more or less used to this game’s crappy design by that point…

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With the tower’s boss defeated, Momma Yufufu and the other dragons regained their power. That meant she could transform into a fully draconic form and carry us wherever we needed to go.

“If we have a way of flying, we’re probably pretty far along in the story now,” I said as we soared through the skies. Flying on a pixelated dragon was a new and weird experience.

“Hmph. Is that just how it goes, then?” asked Beelzebub.

“Yeah, exactly. There’ll be places all over the world we can only get to via dragon, and our next step’s to visit them all. We’ll solve problems in all those remote areas, and that should gradually get us closer to fighting the demon king.”

“‘Gradually’? ’Tis remarkable we’d have the time, considering we brought down the demon king’s tower stronghold. What sort of ruler would be so lax with their response to a loss like that? I see no evidence their forces have any sort of plan at all.”

“That’s just another of those things… But, I mean, think about Pecora. She’s so crazy strong, she could more or less handle everything on her own, right? That’s just how it works sometimes…”

Eventually, we found a village located in a field surrounded by an almost unnaturally tall and perfectly formed circle of mountains. We asked around for information there and received a few tidbits:

- There was a lake to the south of the village, and a group of sages lived on an island located at the very center of said lake.
- Those sages had the ability to draw out a truly incredible power in heroes like us unlike anything we’d ever seen before.
- There was also a barrier set up around that lake, and we’d

need to obtain a Crest of Courage from a nearby cave in order to get through it. Without one, there'd be no way to bring down the barrier.
- We'd also need to get ahold of a small boat to cross the lake in.
- The monstrous armies were drawing closer and closer to the village by the day. Time was of the essence.

"Well, this is a complicated state of affairs… It seems we'll have to go through an extended process this time," Laika said as she took the time to note down everything we'd learned. Her conscientious nature really shined through at times like these.

"Well, that's pretty normal, really. Having to go through a whole process and solve a few problems to reach your next destination is standard fare. It'd be pretty boring, otherwise," I said.

"I suppose I can see that. More importantly, though, we should take this chance to search for treasure chests and hidden items in the village," Wynona declared.

"My instincts are telling me this village will be destroyed before long. A number of the villagers dropped hints to that effect, and it seems likely at some point, any action we take will trigger an army of monsters rolling in and razing the place. We should collect everything we can before that happens."

I think you're totally right about that, Wynona, but it sure does feel weird to hear from a role-playing perspective!

"Wait just a moment, please. Are you not supposed to be a hero, Miss Wynona? I believe it would be very odd for a hero to abandon a village in peril in the manner you're describing."

Looks like Laika the pure-hearted isn't going to let her get away with it.

"I would save the village if that were an option, certainly. That said, this village's destruction has already been written

into the story. It's unavoidable. Just one of those things, if you will. The intent, I imagine, is to make our party feel a sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming odds. A story in which the world is saved without any sacrifice would hardly be exciting. In any case, I would recommend you address any complaints you might have to the developer, not me."

I get where you're coming from, Wynona, I really do! Pecora was nodding along as well, which told me this really was the natural decision from an advancing-the-story perspective. *This sort of thing's just so hard to accept sometimes…*

A town or city you'd visited previously being destroyed by monsters was a pretty stock development, as far as RPGs went. You have to put the protagonist in trouble eventually, or the story would get stale. That said, actually killing the protagonist would bring the story to an early end, so that was off the table. Having a place you'd already visited get destroyed was a more practical option, so it tended to get used rather often.

That being said, writing off a village that seemed likely to get attacked by monsters still struck me as a sort of weird decision to make. What sort of hero abandons a whole village just because it seems likely to get destroyed?

We'd already figured out the village was at risk of destruction, and we couldn't get rid of that knowledge. We could technically have asked Godly Godness for more information, but that would've felt like cheating. Ordinary players wouldn't have the option of consulting with the devs whenever they wanted, after all.

All right! I don't know what we'll actually be able to accomplish, but we'll do what we can, anyway!

"Okay then—let's split up into two teams! One team will go out to deal with our quests, and the other team will stay in the village and prepare to fend off a monster attack. What do you think?"

I asked everyone for input on my plan. "We have two heroes, after all!" I added as a natural afterthought.

That's right—we have two *heroes in this party! If this is a story about a hero saving the world, then why can't there be a*

sub-story about a hero saving a village packed in there somewhere?

I'd really only brought up the hero thing to try and support my proposal, but I was starting to feel like it actually made some legitimate sense.

Wynona cracked a smile. She usually kept up a pretty strict deadpan expression, so when she actually smiled, I could be confident she was in a good mood.

"That's not a bad idea at all, Sub-Hero," said Wynona.

"Wow—that's actually even more irritating than hearing you call me Stepmother!"


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Can't the two of us heroes be on even footing? The way she said it just now makes it sound like I'm playing second fiddle to her!

"You're right. We have two heroes, so why not split up? As far as who'll stay behind to defend the village…I believe Laika and I will be well-suited to the task."

Wynona laid a hand on Laika's shoulder as she spoke.

"Huh? You want the two of us to stay here…?" said Laika.

I got the sense Laika was a little uncertain about teaming up with Wynona. It made sense when I stopped to think about it: Out of all the people here, Wynona was the one who Laika knew the least.

"I'm capable of using healing magic, which means I'll be able to support us to some degree in a battle of attrition. You, meanwhile, are a warrior, which means you have the highest HP out of anyone in our party. It will take more than a few enemies concentrating their attacks upon you to bring you down," Wynona explained.

I guess that does make sense, actually. Pecora and Beelzebub seemed sold on her logic, as well.

"I think we're all fine with that," I said. "But Laika, are you __"

"I have no objections. Please allow me to help!"

Laika's reply rang out loud and clear.

"I was the one who proposed we save the people here in the first place, and I have neither the right nor the intention to run away from that responsibility! I'll lay down my life to defend this village!"

Yep, that's exactly the answer I'd expect from Laika. Plus, from a certain perspective, it finally feels like this game might actually be working as a training program for her followers, like Godly Godness said it would. Having to battle your impulse to abandon a village in need feels like some sort of ascetic training, anyway.

Beelzebub, Pecora, and I set out for the cave, headed straight

inside, and beat the boss that awaited us there. It was a tough fight—the boss used every single turn to spam an ability called Song of Lament that did AoE damage to our whole party. The damage wasn't actually the problem, though. No, the ability's true potential lay elsewhere.

"No achievements means no work, ♪ no work means no achievements! ♪ There's no escape from the spiral of a failure's fate! ♪"

The real problem was every single turn, the boss would sing a full, unabridged song. A single attack took about five minutes to resolve…

"Enough! Make it stop! A few seconds would have been more than enough to get the idea across!" Beelzebub finally snapped. She'd ended up curling up in a fetal position on the floor to suffer through yet another of the boss's ballads.

"But it wouldn't make sense for listening to a few seconds of music to deal damage, would it? Plus, this seemed like a perfect chance to stage a little concert," said the boss—who, by the way, was just Kuku wearing a jet-black dress. She cut an imposing figure, I had to admit, but I wished she'd be just a little quicker about her turns…

Anyway, we managed to beat the boss and got ahold of the item that would let us undo the sages' barrier.

"It's finally over… That battle took almost forty minutes on its own," Beelzebub moaned.

"Don't worry. I'm pretty sure the time we wasted on that boss fight won't get acknowledged by the game's actual story…"

There was one more item we needed to obtain to get to the sages' island: a small boat. We traveled back to a craftsman we'd met in a previous town to handle that necessity—the role of the craftsman in question being played by Canimeow the moon spirit.

"I can make you a boat, certainly. However, since I make it a point to only work on nights when the full moon is out, you'll have to—"

"Hell's bells, just make it now! We're in a hurry!"

And just like that, we strong-armed our way into getting a boat immediately.

Having finally finished off all the quests that were keeping us away from the Sages' island, it wasn't long before Pecora, Beelzebub, and I safely made landfall on its shore. Waiting there for us were Smarsly, Moryake the asphalt spirit, and Miyu the dryad.

"Well, at least everyone here actually deserves to be called a sage," I said. It would've been less than convincing if the devs had tasked someone weirdly shallow to play the sage role.

"We've been waiting for you, brave heroes," said one of the sages.

Specifically, Smarsly.

Huh?! It talked*?!*

"You can talk, Smarsly?!"

"Who is this 'Smarsly'? That seems like a name fit for a slime, which I certainly am not! I'm simply an ordinary human."

"Okay, I know this is just an act, but really? *Really*…?"

It's super hard to take it seriously when a slime tells you it's a human!

I understood how Smarsly was talking to me after a moment of reflection, though. This was both a dream and a game at the same time, so why not?

"You have made your courage plain to see," said Smarsly. "Now then—when two heroes present themselves, there's supposed to be an event where we have them fight each other to demonstrate the true meaning of heroism, but seeing as only one of the heroes has made it here, we'll be skipping over that bit."

"So you really were going to pick one of us!"

Apparently, the decision of which of us would come here—which we'd made very casually—had actually been a super important one.

"Now then, we will bestow upon you your ultimate spells and techniques. Use them to put an end to the foul designs of the demon king and the elder god!"

A widow appeared in my field of view with the words *"Azusa learned her ultimate spell:* ***Meteormeteor****!"* written on it. I immediately assumed it was some sort of explosion-based spell. It seemed Beelzebub and Pecora had learned similar abilities,

as well.

“So are Moryake and… I mean, are the other two sages going to teach us something, too?” I asked. I figured I should hear them out as well, at least.

“Your stats in this game level up based on the number of times you use each available command in battle,” said Moryake. “Using ‘Defend,’ for instance, levels up your defense stat. However, if you select ‘Defend,’ then cancel that selection immediately and attack or cast a spell instead, the system will still think you defended that turn and give you the associated stat bonus.”

“You definitely taught me something, all right, but that was forbidden knowledge if I’ve ever heard it!”

“Using this technique will allow you to significantly reduce the damage you take from enemy attacks. That said, the moment you input the ‘Defend’ command for the last member in your party, all your selected actions will be locked in, so they won’t be able to take advantage of the exploit.”

I’ll admit that would be very beneficial, but it’s also way too meta, so I’ll just ignore it.

I decided to talk to Miyu next.

“There’s a ring in this game that’s, like, super plot important? So it’s supposed to be marked as an essential item so you can’t sell it or throw it out and all, but one of the devs, like, screwed up and stuff, so you can totes sell it anyway! You won’t be able to beat the game if you do that, so you’ll just have to reset! Watch out, ’kay? It’s, like, *such* a major drag, omigod!”

“Okay, but wait—if you’re programmed to tell me about that, then doesn’t it mean the devs noticed the bug while the game was still in development? Couldn’t they have, I dunno, *fixed* it?!”

“Nope-nope! We’re not programmed to say anything—we’re just saying whatever we want! I was just, like, messing around to kill time, so I found that bug myself just a moment ago.”

Okay, so I guess the whole “only saying one thing over and over” thing doesn’t apply to these three.

Just then, Smarsly approached me again.

“Oh, that’s right! I’ve heard tell a nearby village was attacked by monsters. I wonder what’s become of them…?”

Looks like making it to the sages’ island triggered an event!

“Oh no, this is terrible! We should hurry back!” Pecora exclaimed, hopping anxiously as she urged us to get a move on.

“Agreed. We have to go save Laika and Wynona! Once all five of us are back together, we can take the fight to the monstrous army and send them packing!”

Now that we have our ultimate spells, we’ll be able to wipe them out no problem!

“In regard to that matter—we shall provide you our aid,” Moryake said as she stepped over to me.

“So the two of you will help as well? I can’t guarantee any of us will survive the endeavor,” added Smarsly.

“It’s time for us sages to finally take action!” Miyu concluded.

Oh, this must be one of those parts where you get a few temporary party members! Now that’s an exciting turn!

“Plus, now that the barrier’s been dispelled, I would really like to get off this island for a time. Being trapped here for so very long was terribly boring,” said Moryake.

“Wait, the sages couldn’t leave this whole time?! Didn’t you guys put that barrier up yourselves?!”

Miyu waved a hand in the air, denying my assumption. “Nah, that’s not it! It’s just the game was set up to not let us leave. Like, for real, this place has been crazy cramped!”

Can I really trust any magic and abilities from sages like these? Will I be okay the rest of the game…?

In any case, it was time for us to head back to the village…in theory.

“My hero, look! There’s a store over there!”

In practice, we were instantly distracted as Pecora discovered a building on the island. Considering this was a video game, we couldn’t just ignore it. We took a look inside and found a number of shops were set up within.

First up was a shop run by a naga who looked suspiciously like Sorya.

“We sell the ultimate equipment for every class except for hero here,” she said. “If you ever have any spare money on hand, I’d recommend you come look through my wares.”

Yikes, that was close! This was one of those buildings we’d end up really regretting not looking into!

I couldn’t really tell what the next store was supposed to be selling. It was run by a shopkeeper who looked a lot like Canhein the phantom thief.

“Wah-ha-ha! If you find any of the artifacts left behind by Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser that are scattered throughout

the world, bring them here! I'll trade you rare items for every artifact you bring to me!"

"We're in a dream, and you're *still* collecting those things?!"

"Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser's artifacts are hidden all over the place, after all! You might find one in a vase, or at the bottom of a well. You should make a habit of searching for them, anywhere and everywhere!"

If somebody threw one of those down a well, isn't that a sign they were treating it like literal trash…? Anyway, we should come back and check this place out again once we've dealt with the crisis at hand.

The three of us, plus the three sages, set out together toward the town we knew was being attacked by monsters. We arrived to find there were indeed monsters swarming absolutely everywhere. They really had invaded en masse. That said, we also heard Laika's battle cries almost immediately.

"Well?! Who's next?! Come at me, and I'll cut you down where you stand!"

Laika and Wynona were clearly struggling, but they seemed to have kept the monsters at bay, for the time being.

"Thanks for holding down the fort, you two!" I shouted as we charged in to back them up.

"Lady Azusa! Welcome back! If you'd taken much longer, we might not have lasted!" said Laika. Her expression lit up the moment she realized we'd arrived.

All right, monsters! It's time for round two!

"You certainly took your time, didn't you, Sub-Hero?" Wynona grumbled, though even her griping had a distinctly positive ring to it.

"Sorry, but at times like these, help always arrives at the last possible second!" I said. "What's the situation with the monsters? Is there a boss around?"

If there was a boss present, then the monsters were likely to retreat once we'd taken it out.

"One of the fleeing villagers said something about a commanding officer taking up position in the center of the village," said Laika. "I was hesitant to gather information at a time like this, but I suppose it was valuable in the end."

Yeah, that's RPGs for you. If an NPC has dialogue, it's definitely

in your best interests to listen to it, no matter how dire the situation around you…

Our party went on the offensive, cutting a path toward the invading army's leader. Godly Godness's prediction from way back whenever proved true: Our offensive spells had grown so powerful that we were mowing our foes down with ease.

"Let's do this! **Meteormeteor**!" I shouted, wiping out a whole group of monsters with a single spell. "Yep, that's powerful all right! No wonder I can only use it a few times."

"Your heroic powers are incredible, Elder Sister!" said Pecora. "I've gotten some new attack spells, too—I can summon now! Come on out, dragon!"

Pecora chanted her own spell, and a moment later, a blue dragon appeared in the air above her.

Wait a minute. Is that Flatorte?

"I'll turn you all into icicles!" Flatorte roared. The next thing I knew, she had done just that—the monsters we were facing had been frozen solid.

[Shock Trooper took 2448 damage!]
[Shock Trooper took 2466 damage!]
[Shock Trooper took 2503 damage!]

Once again, the enemy squad was wiped out in the blink of an eye. Flatorte paused for a moment, seemingly pleased with the show of force she'd put on, then vanished.

"Yikes! That's some overkill, all right," I said.

"I can't wait to use it every turn during our next boss fight! ♪" said Pecora.

We made a beeline for the boss, slowly but surely whittling away at the monsters' numbers. Between our new spells and the offensive magic of the sages who were fighting alongside us, we ended up reaching the boss with ease.

"Who will it be this time, I wonder? Perhaps Fatla or Vania, presuming we're to once again fight a familiar face?" Beelzebub speculated.

"I could see that," I said. "It feels a little early for us to fight the actual demon king or anything on that level, but those two seem like they'd be just the right sort of encounter for this point in the game."

"If it really does turn out to be them, I shall give them an earful the next time I see them at work."

"No bringing training dreams into reality! All the others

were pretty much press-ganged into this, just like we were!”

The boss, however, did not turn out to be the leviathan sisters after all. Instead, we were confronted by a sprite that bore a distinct resemblance to Nahna Nahna.

“My name is Nahna Nahna, and I was bribed to leave my previous position in the land of the dead and become a commanding officer of this army. I will now proceed to ensure you never get in the way of our plans again.”

I can’t tell how much of that was her sticking to the script, and how much was her ad-libbing!

“What point could there possibly be to attacking a village this petty and insignificant? ’Tis folly! Pull your forces back at once!” shouted Beelzebub.

“I’m afraid that isn’t an option. We will conquer this town, construct a hotel and large-scale commercial facilities selling goods at dirt-cheap prices, and undercut all the local stores, equipment dealers, and inns, driving them to bankruptcy.”

“Stop running your war machine with the power of capitalism!”

Now that’s a monstrous plan if I’ve ever heard one!

“The demon king intends to conquer humanity through military and economic means. I will not allow you to interfere.”

With that, our battle with Nahna Nahna began. Since she was an enemy, of course, the moment the battle started, her sprite grew way bigger—and ended up looking a lot cooler as well. We, on the other hand, stayed in the same cute little mini-sprite form as ever and looked downright weak in comparison. Just another one of those things, I guess.

Nahna Nahna pulled no punches. She came at us mercilessly and was just as tough as you’d expect a boss from the latter half of an RPG to be. Even with the three sages throwing out attacks of their own, it was tough going. Beelzebub had to keep casting healing spells every single turn—otherwise, she never would’ve been able to keep up with the damage Nahna Nahna was putting out.

“Oh, that’s right! I forgot to tell you something important,” said Smarsly. “The members of the party who didn’t come along to visit us sages have had their ultimate spells and skills

unlocked, too! There was no way for the developers to know who you'd bring to the island, so they just made it so its effects would apply to everyone."

Now that's some top-tier video game logic if I've ever heard it! That's good news for us, though!

"Check to see if you have any new powers, Laika!" I shouted. Most likely, a warrior like her would end up with at least one ability that could deal incredible amounts of single-target damage.

"I do, Lady Azusa! I'll use it now!"

Laika leapt into the air and swung her sword in a downward arc, plunging toward Nahna Nahna.

[Oneshot Strike! Nahna Nahna takes 6296 damage!]

Yikes! That was one heck of an attack, all right!

"You've outdone yourself, Hero and her companions. I admit defeat," Nahna Nahna said before tossing a sack of gold coins toward us. "This is the money you get for beating me. Good day to you."

And just like that, Nahna Nahna vanished into thin air. We'd beat her…apparently? I had a lot of questions about that sequence of events, really, but for the time being, we'd got rid of the boss and saved the village!

"All right, we did it! This plan was a huge success!"

All of us gathered together to celebrate our victory. It had been a pretty tough event, but we'd overcome it in the end. And, now that the danger had passed, Smarsly the sage had another vital piece of information to share with us.

"A passageway to the demon king's world lies on an island surrounded by rocky mountains, where no humans dwell. You must go there, travel to the demon king's world, defeat the demon king's four generals, and finally cast down the demon king! Once the deed is done, the elder god is sure to reveal itself!"

Considering how painfully expository that was, I'm guessing it came straight out of the game's script…

We were finally nearing the story's climax. I had a feeling we were about to be in for a boss rush.

"The demon king's invasion is steadily advancing. Stop them, brave heroes, whatever it takes!"

You know, I'm starting to get used to Smarsly talking like this.

"We would love to come along with you, but I'm afraid my

back pains me terribly. We'll have to say goodbye here."

Does Smarsly even *have* a back?

Before anything else, our party stopped at a nearby store to stock up on items.

"Incidentally, who do you suppose this world's demon king is? We can say with confidence it's not *our* demon king, at the very least," Beelzebub mused as she glanced over at Pecora.

"I've been wondering that myself," I said. "It seems pretty likely all the other bosses we run into from now on will be played by people we know, too."

"Not that it matters a whit who stands in our path, of course. Also, let us purchase as many full health restoration potions as we can, so I can minimize my use of healing magic. With them in hand, we shall storm this so-called demon king's citadel and give them the drubbing they deserve!"

Beelzebub had started displaying some serious motivation lately. That said, it wasn't that she was getting into character, per se. It felt more like motivation to beat the game than motivation to save the world. Then again, this *was* very literally a game, so what right did I have to judge her for enjoying it in her own way? If anything, Pecora was a much stranger case in how much she was getting into character.

"The sages spoke of the demon king's invasion sweeping the lands, but we're the ones who are now invading the demon king's territory, and they're on the defensive. 'Tis a flagrant contradiction, and yet I find myself more and more willing to overlook such lapses of logic," Beelzebub noted.

"Well, we're going on the offensive with just five people, right? Maybe they're keeping up the invasion in the background, and the enemies we fight in their stronghold are just their defending troops? That'd make sense, right? It's not like we're dealing with full-blown clashing armies or anything."

"Hmph… Perhaps. Regardless, I shall ensure we are healed to perfection."

When we actually purchased the healing potions Beelzebub had wanted, however, her expression suddenly stiffened.

"Well. It would seem the demon king's invasion really is steadily progressing after all," Beelzebub said, gesturing at one

of the potion's labels. I gave it a read.

Demon King's Seal of Quality 

"They're beating us on the economic front!" *So Nahna Nahna was actually being serious about all that stuff…?*

"T'would seem we really do need to defeat the demon king as soon as possible, then," Beelzebub muttered. We still needed healing potions, though, so we bought about twenty.

We decided to take some time to finalize our preparations before setting out. To start, we went back to Sorya's store on the sages' island and used all the funds we'd amassed to buy the ultimate equipment for everyone except our two heroes. Laika's new sword made a huge difference, and her attack stat shot up dramatically.

We also spared a moment to fly all across the overworld on Momma Yufufu's dragon form, visiting all the places we hadn't been to yet.

"Ah! Do you see that ring of mountains surrounding a suspiciously unnaturally placed forest? Please land by it," said Wynona. She was pretty sharp-eyed and had apparently spotted something.

"'Tis but a perfectly ordinary forest, as far as I can see," said Beelzebub.

"A featureless forest in an unnaturally isolated location is suspicious in and of itself. There must be something there!" Wynona countered.

We touched down at her insistence and quickly found she was right: There really was something there. The moment we entered the forest, we found ourselves in a wooded area with a little hut smack-dab in its center.

"This has gotta be a hidden area, right? I had no idea," I said.

We stepped into the hut where we found a sprite that looked an awful lot like Wizly.

"Oh my, oh my! So you've found me," Wizly said as we

entered her abode.

Oh, that makes sense. The real Wizly uses magic to hide her workshop in a secluded region, too, after all.

"Welcome to my secret hermitage," Wizly continued. "You'll be glad to hear I have wonderful news for you! Deep within these woods dwells a spirit who possesses the hero's ultimate equipment!"

Never thought my ultimate gear would be hidden in some random forest! This is a stroke of luck, though. I'll feel better going into the endgame with my ultimate gear on my side.

I had, however, forgotten a crucial detail.

"Oh, good," said Wynona. "That means I'll have equipment befitting my position as the hero."

Ah. Right. We're a two-hero party…

Wynona seemed to pick up on that little issue just a moment after I did and glanced over at me. "Oh… Well, seeing as I'm the one who discovered this place, I'll be taking the ultimate equipment for myself. I'm sure you understand," she said.

"All right, all right," I sighed. "This *is* all thanks to you, so you have first dibs on the gear."

It's not like we'll get anywhere by fighting over it. Better to give up now and let her have her way.

"Oh, also, the hero's ultimate equipment consists of a sword and armor that come as a set! Be sure to equip both," Wizly added.

"Understood, O wise hermit. I'll be sure to do that!"

Wynona getting an upgrade would mean our party's overall power level would rise, so I decided to view this as a net positive.

We set out at once, making for the center of the forest where the spirit was said to live. Eventually, we arrived at a clearing that was home to a strangely large slime, roughly the size of a Mongolian yurt.

Oh, that must be the Great Slime.

The Great Slime was a slime spirit formed from the thoughts of slimes all over the world. It had also been Falfa and Shalsha's caretaker, back before we'd met.

"You've done well to reach me, heroes. I am the Great Slime, a being made up of the wills of good slimes everywhere," said the Great Slime. "I shall now grant you the ultimate arms and armor that will enable you to strike down the demon king and

the elder god: the 100% Slime Armor and the 100% Slime Sword."

"Those are both extremely outlandish names, but I would be happy to receive them!" Wynona enthusiastically replied. Who wouldn't be excited about receiving their ultimate gear, really?

"Well then, I'll make use of them right away! I won't be needing my old weapon or armor anymore!"

Wynona equipped her ultimate gear, which turned out to be a sword and suit of armor made from what looked like solidified water. Needless to say, a suit of armor made of solid water had one very distinctive trait: It was *completely see-through*.

"Eeeeeek! What in the world is this gear?! My undergarments are completely exposed! This is terrible!"

"The 100% Slime Armor was made from the spirits of slimes with pure, untainted hearts. Its exceptional translucence is a sign of the quality of its materials," said the Great Slime.

"Well, then you can keep it! I'll use my old gear!" Wynona declared, switching back to her original armor without wasting a moment. If this was really just a game, then having your characters wear see-through armor wouldn't be a problem at all, but when *you* were the one equipping it, it was a whole different question…

Pecora picked up the slime set and carried it over to me.

"How about some ultimate gear, O mighty hero?"

"Absolutely not!"

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At long last, our party proceeded into the monsters' world. It ended up being about what I expected it to be: one of those creepy, uncanny zones every game seemed to feature at some point. I strongly suspected only monsters would want to live in a place like this.

It turned out the demon king's four generals were all holed up in caves or towers, each of which was located in one of the cardinal directions. Our task was to visit them in sequence, defeat the generals within, and then finally storm the demon

king's castle.

"We'll be going from one boss battle to another from now on, most likely, so be ready for a real gauntlet," I said. Judging by the story so far, we'd be fighting the elder god immediately after beating the demon king.

"We sure will, but there's something else I'm more worried about," Pecora said with a look of concern on her face.

"What is it? Don't just keep it to yourself," I said.

"We never found any sign whatsoever of my missing elder brother!"

"Now that you mention it…!"

"It's totally unthinkable the story would end without him ever showing up," said Pecora. "Do you think he's become the demon king, maybe?"

"I can't rule it out, honestly…"

Having an older brother or former teammate turn up as an enemy's a classic plot twist, after all.

In the end, we had no choice but to delve into the first cave without solving the mystery of Pecora's brother. The enemies within were tough, but our ultimate spells and techniques were powerful enough to swat them like flies. By making ample use of magic recovery items, we were able to make a beeline for the cave's deepest point with ease.

"All right, then—who's gonna be the first of the demon king's four generals? Whoever it is, we'll wipe the floor with them!" I said. I was feeling pretty hyped up for the battle to come. We'd been playing this game for quite a long time, and I have to admit I'd gotten rather wrapped up in it.

We stepped into a wide-open room in the cave's depths—the sort of room where a boss was sure to lie in wait—and found… Falfa and Shalsha!

"We're the first of the demon king's four generals, Falfa and Shalsha! We'll take you heroes down!" said Falfa.

"Shalsha agrees. You'll never see the other three generals, because this cavern will be your grave."

Aww, look at them! Those outfits make them look just like top

executives in a demon king's army! It suits them so well! Then again, Falfa and Shalsha look amazing in just about any outfit!

There was, however, one element of this scenario that didn't quite make sense to me.

"So hey, you two—how many generals does the demon king really have, in the end? Do both of you share the same position?"

In that case, wouldn't they technically be the demon king's five *generals?*

"Falfa and Shalsha are being treated as just one general together," said Falfa.

"Two of us means twice the fun," said Shalsha. "But it causes some friction, too. Whenever we get treats, we have to split them and only get half as much as we should each."

You didn't have to tell us the downsides of the arrangement, Shalsha! It's fine to skip that part!

Anyway, I'd found myself in something of a dilemma.

"I don't want to fight you two! Why'd you have to get cast as the demon king's generals?! This training program is the worst!"

I sheathed my sword on the spot.

"Hmm—fighting my girls may be beyond me, as well…"

And Beelzebub took a step backward, too!

"Hold up—don't call them *your* girls! And don't you dare try to use not wanting to fight them as a chance to play yourself up as their mother!"

"How dare that dastardly demon king! Making a mother fight her daughters is a monstrous thing to do!"

"Stop it! I'll smack you down with one of my spells if you don't cut that out right now, so help me!"

Suddenly, the boss fight was the last thing on our minds.

"Falfa didn't even cast confusion magic on them, and they're fighting each other anyway!"

“Their lack of teamwork is astonishing. Shalsha wonders how they made it this far.”

And now Falfa and Shalsha are disappointed in us! There’s no solidarity in this party at all, is there?

“We’ve no choice! The three of us who remain will overcome this trial on our own! This is not reality! Endure, and push through!” Laika shouted. She was clearly resolved, but it wasn’t going to be quite that easy.

Wynona tossed her sword to the ground.

“I could never possibly turn my blade against my sisters. I choose to admit defeat!”

“Could it be running into Falfa and Shalsha is all it takes to put this party in checkmate?!”

Looks like Laika’s finally caught on to our greatest weakness.

Even Pecora muttered, “Well, this isn’t happening,” and raised her hands in a gesture of defeat. She and Laika didn’t seem as opposed to fighting my daughters as the rest of us were, but they weren’t exactly excited about it, either, and they certainly weren’t about to carry the fight on their own.

“Come on, try it! Come at us with everything you have! ♪”

“To hold back against us would be gravely impolite. You must meet all challengers with your full ability.”

Our foes, on the other hand, were as motivated as could be.

What am I even supposed to do here? The battle hasn’t started, and we’ve already been driven to the brink! Maybe I should just let us get wiped out once, then revisit this whole mess from the top…?

Just then, however, an unexpected visitor flew onto the scene!

“Pecora! Everyone! You can’t give up now!”

Wait, that sprite—isn’t that Rosalie?!

Rosalie flew straight into Falfa and Shalsha, plowing into them and knocking them—plus herself—to the floor in a heap.

“Heh! Looks like I’m taking you two with me,” Rosalie

muttered.

“Aww, we lost! ♪” said Falfa.

“What a shame,” said Shalsha. “However, you’ll never foil the demon king’s plans.”

The whole thing was very anticlimactic, but apparently, Rosalie had sacrificed herself to take down the demon king’s general. I had to wonder, though: Just who was Rosalie supposed to be? That was the first time we’d seen her throughout the whole game—we hadn’t even met.

That’s when Pecora sprinted over to Rosalie’s side.

“It’s you! You’re my elder brother, aren’t you?!”

Oh! So this is where that part of Pecora’s backstory’s coming into play!

“That’s right, Pecora,” said Rosalie. “Your brother’s been fighting the demon king this whole time!”

“Brother, you’re alive! I’m so moved…,” said Pecora. She was so into her role she’d actually started crying.

Kinda confusing to have her still-living brother be played by a ghost, though!

“I’m glad I got to see your face one last time before the end… but this is it. It’s time for us to say goodbye,” said Rosalie.

“Brother, no! You can’t die!”

Again, the fact she’s already dead is making this really *hard to follow!*

Rosalie, Falfa, and Shalsha started flashing for a moment, then blinked out of existence.

“I swear to you, elder brother: I’ll defeat the demon king and the elder god, and bring peace to the world in your stead!” Pecora said, fist clenched tightly with a powerful resolve.

Beelzebub clapped a hand on my shoulder, then leaned in to whisper in my ear.

“If her brother was fighting the demon king this whole time, then why hadn’t he managed to defeat a single boss up until now? The sages would have said something about him if he had, but they didn’t so much as mention him.”

“Nitpicking the little details here is a losing battle…though considering how many little details there are to nitpick, I guess I can’t blame you.”

The fact that Pecora was the only person throwing herself into her role just made all the inconsistencies stand out even more.

We made it to the second of the four generals with ease. This time, we found ourselves facing off against Fighsly.

“Heh-heh-heh! You humans have no idea how to provide the sort of service that keeps customers coming back time after time. That’s why you’ll never defeat the demon lord!”

Fighsly spent a while rambling about business and finance until Beelzebub the cleric cast an instant death spell, oneshotting her and winning the battle.

The third of the four generals was Misjantie.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Let me guess: You’re the sort of heroes who’re always talking about love and peace, aren’t you, man?! Well, that’s not good enough! You need love, peace, *and* money to save the world! If you don’t have money, then all the good vibes you pour into your quest are bogus, man!”

Okay, these generals are definitely *going way off script!*

Anyway, Misjantie turned out to have a critical weakness to fire magic, so we beat her easily.

The last of the four generals was the Witch of the Grotto, Eno.

“I intend to overthrow the demon king and claim the throne for myself. I’ll seize the foundations the demon king has built up and turn them into something truly spectacular. The idea that the title of demon king must be handed down in the same family for generations on end has no place in the modern era!”

I know having one of the demon king’s executives turn traitor is a whole trope, but this doesn’t feel quite right to me!

Eno proved highly resistant to magical attacks, so we just beat her up instead. Beelzebub had our healing totally locked down, so we were more or less back to full health the instant Eno dealt any damage to us.

“Battles are a joke if you know you’ll be able to stop at an inn and fully recover afterwards! I can use all the magic I want without a care in the world!” Beelzebub declared after it was

over.

Yeah, it really is nice we don't have to worry about conserving MP in these boss fights. Eno had taken a bit longer to beat than the other generals, but it still hadn't been a struggle by any means. In fact, Laika's ultimate skill had proven so overpowered, it could take out one of the generals in five or six hits on its own.

"Ugh… How could I lose…?" said Eno. "Well, fine… If your goal is to defeat the demon king, then do it. I can work with that…"

Can you? Can you, really?

Once our battle with Eno was over, the ground started shaking so violently, I wondered if it was an earthquake.

"Huh? What's going on?!" I yelped.

"Now that we four generals have been defeated, the barrier protecting the demon king's castle has been dispelled. We're feeling the aftershock," Eno explained. "I do hope you'll defeat the demon king in my place…"

All right, this game's climax feels like it's right around the corner now! We've got a demon king to take down!

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The route through the demon king's castle ended up being really complex, and getting to the end took quite some time, but we steadily made our way through the map. Of course, the fact that our overly cautious healer insisted we return to fully heal in town after every single floor certainly didn't speed the process up. Our expedition ended up taking several trips as a result…

"Okay, but seriously, why bother going back? We still have plenty of resources!"

"Too many resources is just the right amount. When you push yourself to your limits without caution, 'tis only a matter of time before disaster strikes and ruins you! I've seen many a governmental agency travel that path! Every bit of insurance you can give yourself is worth it!"

In the end, the burdens Beelzebub bore as a government

official were too weighty for my commoner's mind to deal with, and I gave in to her way of doing things. Our victory was assured as a result, of course, but the pacing of our adventure dragged like nothing else…

Finally, on our fifth expedition into the demon king's castle, we arrived at a vast chamber that seemed like the exact sort of room where the demon king would finally take to the stage. The one slight problem: The room was totally empty. There was, however, a single door at its far end.

"'Tis all but certain the demon king lies just ahead," Beelzebub said as she took inventory of the sack we kept all our items in. If we wanted to heal before the battle, this room would be the place to do it. There was a real chance we'd be forced into combat the second we stepped through the door.

"Agreed," I said. "I wonder what sort of person ended up in the demon king role, though?"

"Seeing as they're a demon king, I sure hope it's someone with poise and dignity! ♪" said Pecora. She'd never struck me as the poised and dignified type herself, but I could see why she'd want a fictional demon king to live up to the image.

"Um, excuse me, everyone," said Laika, who seemed to have noticed something. "It would seem that part of the wall over there is made of glass…and there's something just beyond it."

Oh—maybe this is one of those things where you can get a hidden item by investigating a wall?

On closer inspection, Laika was right. A portion of the wall, roughly at eye level, seemed to have been made into something of a display window. A row of items—the sort you could buy in most stores—was lined up behind the pane of glass.

"Can we really buy stuff here? I mean, I'm not complaining if we can," I said.

On a closer look, however, I found a line of text written in one of the window's corners.

Bringing you the power you need, now and forevermore: The items that have earned the demon king's seal of quality!



“It’s like the samples you’d find at a company’s corporate headquarters!” I moaned, clutching my head. This world’s demon king was operating under a terrible misunderstanding of what demon kings were supposed to do.

“Look at the writing over there, Step-Hero. It says, ‘Our products outdo items from the human lands in price and quality! The demon king’s seal of quality: a guarantee you can always count on!’…”

That’s great, Wynona, and I’m sure it must have you pretty distracted, because you just accidentally called me something that felt really *rude…*

I had a funny feeling I knew who the demon king would be. We stepped through the door at the back of the room, and there she was: a sprite I assumed to be Halkara wearing a pair of weird horns. I say “assumed” because between the horns and the graphical style, it was honestly a little hard to tell for sure.

“So you’ve all finally made it here! I’m the demon king, Halkara!”

“Yep. I had a feeling it’d be you.”

Halkara the demon king started pacing back and forth in front of us, like a bear in a cage. Apparently, it was hard for her to monologue while she was standing still.

“I heard the demon king’s job was to conquer the world, so I decided to work toward that goal using my own methods. I’ve spread my mark far and wide across the human lands—in the form of the demon king’s mark of quality that’s attached to the products the humans buy!”

Honestly, at this point, I’m not sure if we even need to bother defeating her…

“Oh, that’s right! Here, have this,” Halkara added before passing out business cards to each of us in order. I’d seen her give one of those to Nosonia in the past, so this was pretty much business as usual for her, but I really wished she’d skipped over that part during our big confrontation scene, at least. “It’s really impressive that you made it here at all! I can’t offer to make you the general manager of half the world, but I can at least make you the general manager of a single country if you agree to surrender to me! How about it?”

She's trying to recruit us now?!

Pecora took one step toward Halkara, then another. A wizard like her getting into close combat was dangerous, even when she wasn't doing it with the literal demon king, but she approached her all the same.

Is she actually going to take Halkara up on her offer, maybe…?

"Oh, Halkara? ♪" Pecora said with a smile. It looked just like her usual smiles, on a surface level, but there was something weirdly menacing about it this time.

"I'd like you to take your role as the demon king seriously, okay? ♪ If you keep making this weird, then a *real* demon king—you know, *me*—might decide to give you a crash course in how it's done! ♪"

"Ah! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Please allow me to battle you now, like I'm supposed to!" Halkara babbled. She must have sensed how much trouble she'd almost gotten herself in. Messing around when you were supposed to be playing a character was, it seemed, something Pecora did not take kindly to.

"Oh? You're sorry? That's weird, isn't it? The demon king is supposed to be haughty and arrogant! It doesn't seem to me like you're taking this seriously at all!"

"I'm so, so sorry! I'll do better! I… Oh. I'm not supposed to apologize, right… But I can't be rude to a genuine demon king, either! What should I do?! Help me, Mistress Teacher!"

"Stop asking the hero for help, to start!" I shouted back.

"Exactly! A demon king would never ask the hero for help, so you shouldn't, either! You really should get your act together, or I might have to make you *deeply* regret it, you know?"

Pecora got mad, Halkara freaked out, and then Halkara's freak-out made Pecora even madder. *Oh no, we're stuck in an infinite loop!*

"Agh, that's it!" Halkara wailed. "It's time for our battle!

We’re fighting now!”

Our showdown with the demon king had finally begun. Our foe swapped over to the larger sprite that represented her in battle—and now that I could see her design more clearly, I realized her outfit wasn’t exactly modest.

“Um, Miss Halkara…? Covering yourself exclusively with a few strips of fluttering fabric is rather indecent…”

Laika blushed beet red and averted her eyes.

Yep, that’s a thing that happens all the time with late-game RPG bosses! For some reason, lots of them decide to fight you mostly in the nude!

“Aaaaah!” Halkara shrieked. “I had no idea I was wearing this, either! Please, just think of it as a swimsuit, or something…”

Halkara seemed just as shocked by her clothing as Laika was. On reflection, it made sense she wouldn’t have seen her battle sprite before, either. It’s not like she would’ve battled any of her subordinates, after all.

The fight itself, however, proceeded a lot more normally than I’d expected it to. There was one sort of questionable bit where, after she struck a nasty blow against us, the text “When you’re wounded, try a demon king–endorsed full recovery potion! It’ll carry you through even the most drawn-out battle of attrition!” showed up on-screen and she actually *healed* us… But then Pecora unleashed a terrifying barrage of incredibly powerful spells at her.

“You know, I just *despise* people who don’t take games seriously! ♪” Pecora said with another of those smiles that told you she was actually really, really upset…

“I-I’m sorry! I just can’t help but let my real personality shine through from time to time…”

“Why are you apologizing? Demon kings don’t apologize, do they?”

Once again, Halkara and Pecora were caught in their endless loop of apology and apology-induced fury. To make a long story short, the battle finally ended with Wynona using the ultimate

sword technique she'd gained thanks to the sages' event to finish Halkara off, and her battle sprite was sent packing.

"Ugh. I knew the heroes would be tough…," Halkara groaned. It was kind of hard to tell, since her normal sprite was so small and distorted, but I was pretty sure she was lying face-down on the ground. "But in the end, I was only doing the elder god's bidding. Unless you defeat it as well, this world will never again know true peace!"


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Yep, I think we all saw this development coming.

"The entrance to the realm of the gods lies just outside my castle. Go ahead and try to stop it…if you think you can! Blarg!"

With that final bit of exposition, the demon king vanished away, thoroughly vanquished.

"Okay, then! The demon king's out of the picture, so now we just have to move along and take on the final boss!" I said.

The five of us took a moment to exchange high fives and celebrate our victory. Our party had been brought together by circumstance, but we'd been traveling together for long enough now that it felt like we'd really learned to work as a team.

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We stepped into the realm of the gods, which turned out to be colored in such an intensely bright, rainbow-like hue, it hurt my eyes just looking at it.

"Ooof, yikes. This feels like where the final boss would be, all right," I muttered. *Actually living in this place on a day-to-day basis would be seriously rough, I bet…*

"This is the final stretch, isn't it? We'll defeat the elder god and restore peace to the world!" said Laika. She'd really gotten used to the game's world, it seemed. Laika had never struck me as someone who was very good at immersing herself into a role, so it was kind of fun to see her pull it off for once.

I, of course, was intent on playing the role of the hero to match.

"That's right!" I said. "We've come this far, so we might as well finish the job and save this game's whole world!"

Saving the real world just wasn't something you could expect to do in your lifetime. The real world was complicated, and between all the various interconnected factors involved, coming up with a single, straightforward save-the-world solution just wasn't possible. In the world of this training program, however, the solution was simple: Defeat the elder god. That was something I knew we could pull off.

The realm of the gods didn't seem to have any towns in it… which was probably a given, considering. Even if it was technically possible for people to live here, the constant shimmering of the landscape would be so maddening I had a

feeling they'd move elsewhere before you knew it.

There were, however, plenty of enemies. Random mob sprites were scattered all over the place, and touching one of them would naturally result in combat. I had to wonder: Just what sort of random enemies would show up in the realm of the gods? The monsters we'd been fighting so far were the demon king's minions, so surely we wouldn't still be encountering them here?

[Nintan appeared!]

"Why are We being treated as a common minion?! This is unacceptable!"

Nintan showed up out of nowhere as our first encounter, and she got angry just as quickly.

"There, there. It could be worse!" I said. "The enemy sprites in games like this are way bigger than the player characters, so even if you're technically a common minion, you still look way cooler than we do!"

"That does not even begin to quell Our rage! If you must involve Us in this farce, at least make Us a boss!"

Before Nintan even finished airing her Godly Godness gripes, a storm of stones rained down on her. Pecora had cast a spell.

"How dare you?! What sort of cur would attack Us while We were speaking?! You miserable coward!"

"Sorry, but only people who make an effort to play their characters get to monologue! ♪"

Pecora really does take these things seriously, huh? I guess she's one of those people who can switch between serious mode and messing-around mode in an instant.

"Hmph! We shall turn Godly Godness into a frog the next time we see her. But for now…," Nintan said, pausing to look each of us in the eye, one by one. "The holy sanctuary lies just beyond this point, and if you do not bring your all to bear as you progress through it, you will surely be cut down before ever reaching your goal. Do not think this will be an easy task. The sanctuary serves as the culmination of this training program, and it will require you to battle a gauntlet of gods."

I could tell Nintan meant it. She was giving us a genuine warning.

"If there are any spells or techniques you still wish to learn, now is your last chance to turn back and do so. Be sure you are well-stocked with items, as well. Should you perish in the

sanctuary, you will be returned to its beginning. In other words, if you cannot defeat the elder god, you will be locked in an eternal cycle of battle and defeat."

Oh no—it's one of those situations where you can save yourself into a corner right before the final boss! RPGs sure do love not letting you go back to the overworld after entering the final dungeon, don't they…?

"Got it. Thanks for letting us know—we'll be ready," I said.

"See to it you are," Nintan replied with a satisfied smile…

…as a torrent of offensive magic continued to batter away at her.

"Boy, endgame mobs sure have a lot of health, huh!"

Without showing so much as a hint of mercy, Pecora ended the conversation by defeating Nintan single-handedly.

◇

The moment I stepped into the sanctuary, my footing felt strangely unstable. It's hard to put it into words, but it felt like I was walking on air, more or less.

I wonder if this place was based on the actual realms the real-world gods live in?

"I've been to all sorts of places over the course of my work as an adventurer, but this is the first time I've seen anything like this," said Wynona. Her professional instincts were kicking in, I could tell. She was taking this just as seriously as she took her real-world adventures.

"This feels unsettling to me as well, yes," said Laika. "If this were the real world, I would have to resist the urge to fly away…"

"'Tis a sign the ending is close at hand. Endure for just a moment longer," said Beelzebub.

Okay, then—who's the first boss in here gonna be?

At the far end of the space we'd found ourselves in, I saw what looked like a big, scruffy ball of fur. A moment later, a pair of hands and a face emerged from it.

"…Look upon me, Ost Ande, god of death. I shall grant you your ends. Perish, here and now."

Looks like the sanctuary's first boss is Ost Ande, then. Having a reaper show up as part of a game's final boss rush certainly felt appropriate.

"Pecora, cast attack buffing magic on Laika and Wynona!" I shouted.

Pecora, however, didn't reply. She—and Laika as well, for that matter—went limp and collapsed in a heap without a word.

"Huh? Laika? Pecora? What's wrong?" I asked.

"…It was the work of my instant death power. Witness the might of Reaper's Requiem."

"Now that's the sort of power I'd expect from a true god of death!"

"…Can't use it in the real world, though. Too many liability problems."

Oh! She's talking more like how she usually does now.

Since Beelzebub, our party cleric, had made it through Ost Ande's attack alive, we were just barely able to revive our fallen members and turn the battle around. The god of death's actual physical abilities were quite low, as it turned out, so we decided to stage an all-out offensive in the hopes of defeating her before she could use her instant death power again. Somehow, we pulled it off and emerged victorious.

"I can't believe I collapsed like that—I was so shocked! I see my training is far from complete…"

Laika ended up muttering regretfully to herself after the battle was over.

"Nah, I think that's the sort of move you can't do much about, no matter how perfect your training was."

Bosses with instant death spells were a common obstacle. Overcoming that obstacle was a sign we had what it took to make it through the remainder of the challenges before us.

Okay! Let's head for the second boss!

We proceeded at random through a convoluted series of

branching corridors until finally, we encountered an individual with a long, reddish-brown ponytail and rather androgynous features. There was no way an ordinary person would be in a place like this, so I immediately knew we'd met our next boss.

"Hey there—I'm the god of fate, Caven. Fair warning: I'll be using an unavoidable instant death ability called Inevitable Fate on you every other turn."

"That's basically the same thing as the first boss's ability!"

I really wish this game would stop making the bosses look tough with insta-kills and start making them deal actual damage! All this instant death is making the training we did feel like it was a total waste…

"Don't like it? Not my problem. Take this—Inevitable Fate!"

Once again, Pecora and Laika got hit by Caven's ability and dropped like stones.

Maybe some people are just naturally more susceptible to instant death skills than others…?

Our party, of course, wasn't about to take that lying down.

"Have a taste of *my* instant death spell: **Divine Punishment**! 'Tis my ultimate magic!"

She's using the exact same sort of spell the boss did on her very first turn! But wait…insta-kills barely ever work on late-game bosses, so there's no way this will—

"Oh. I can't deal with moves like that. Ah, crap…"

The god of fate, Caven, went down in a single attack.

"What goes around, comes around! 'Tis just as true for a god of fate as it is for us mortals," Beelzebub said with a smirk as she healed Pecora and Laika. Thankfully, the system that brought them back to the verge of death post-battle still worked just fine, even when they'd been hit by a death spell. That meant basic healing magic was all it took to bring them back to full strength.

"I was under the impression you were cautious to a fault, Beelzebub, but I see now you can be quite aggressive as well," Wynona said with a rather mystified look on her face. Beelzebub had demonstrated her cautious side on plenty of occasions throughout our adventure, so that trait was one we were all familiar with.

“Dragging out the battle would only force me to waste healing magic,” Beelzebub explained. “As such, I decided it was worth giving an instant death spell a try, just in case.”

So in the end, even this was all about keeping her MP economy in a good state…?

“While I’m at it, I shall fully heal the rest of you as well. For all we know, the final boss may be mighty enough to blow away most of our health in a single spell.”

I didn’t know if this was a coincidence or if Godly Godness had planned it all out, but surprisingly, Beelzebub was very well-suited to the role of party cleric.

“Incidentally, considering the final boss has been referred to as an ‘elder god,’ I imagine we’ve all made a certain conclusion regarding who we’ll encounter?” asked Laika.

“Sure have,” I replied. “I mean, all the bosses we’ve fought since we got to this sanctuary have been real-world gods. If the game says it’s going to throw an elder god at us, I think we can expect a real elder god.”

Plus, we’ve already worked our way through most of the people I know who could turn up as characters in this game. There aren’t really many options left. It’d be weird if the very last boss was the only one who turned out to be a total stranger, right?

When we arrived at the sanctuary’s deepest point, we found a girl floating in the air, wearing a white robe that just screamed, *Look at me, I’m a god.*

“I, the ELDER god Dekyari’tosde, will REMAKE the WORLD in my IMAGE!”

Yep, there she is. Of course it’d be Dekie.

She didn’t look very intimidating at all, but I knew for a fact she was tremendously powerful. This was all but guaranteed to be a brutal smackdown of a final battle.

“I’ll trust you to call the shots in this battle, Sub-Hero,” Wynona whispered to me.

“Really? Are you sure?” I whispered back.

“If all of us were to fight on our own initiative, we would stand no chance of beating her real-world form, correct? She even defeated you once. As such, I believe that following your orders is our best chance at victory.”

The other members of our party turned to glance at me. I could tell by the look in their eyes that they trusted me to take the lead, as well.

“All right, then. I’m not exactly an expert commander, but I’ll give it my best shot!”

At long last, the final battle began. We found ourselves transported into the battle screen.

“First up, Pecora and Beelzebub, get all our defenses buffed up! Especially our magic defense—any spells for that would be perfect!”

I was convinced we were about to get slammed by some absurdly powerful attacks. We needed our defenses up as high as they could go! Unfortunately, however, before the demonic duo could follow through on my orders, Dekie targeted Wynona with the most powerful lightning spell in the game!

“That just drained seventy percent of my health in a single hit!” Wynona shouted.

“And here’s attack TWO out of THREE!” Dekie said as she swung what looked like a blade of ice at me, which I assumed was her basic attack. Basic or not, it shaved off a third of my health… She used the same attack on Pecora as the final hit of her turn, taking our wizard down to half health in one blow.

“She’s really not holding back,” I muttered. “Laika, keep attacking every turn! Use whatever you have that deals the most single-target damage! Wynona, make sure to heal yourself up any time you’re hurt! When you don’t need healing, cast whatever your strongest spell is at her! Pecora, just keep using that one staff that heals the whole party!”

I figured I didn’t need to give Beelzebub orders—she’d be focusing on healing whether I told her to or not—and was immediately proven right, in a sense, as she cast an incredibly powerful but incredibly expensive spell that fully healed our whole party.

“What—no! That spell uses up way too much magic! This isn’t the time!” I shouted.

“I shan’t let our allies die by being miserly with my magic reserves! Or are you hoping I would let you perish?”

“Just trust me, okay?! I have a plan!”

My plan was to spend the early stages of the battle fighting defensively. The best way to make it through battles like this one, in my book, was to dedicate a small part of your party to attacking, and the rest to just keeping you alive. Laika the warrior would be filling our main attacker role.

[Oneshot Strike! Dekyari’tosde takes 7515 damage!]

All right, nice! Laika’s Oneshot Strike deals just as ridiculously high damage as ever against the final boss!

On turns when we had HP to spare, Beelzebub and Pecora used their actions to cast defensive magic on us. I knew there was a chance Dekie would have an ability that dispelled those buffs, but using it would eat one of her turns, so it still seemed worth it to me. The question of how much health she would have, however, was a mystery. I had to make sure we’d be able to last through an extended battle of attrition.

On turns when I had the chance, meanwhile, I went on the offensive. I wasn’t using the strongest equipment in the game, but I could still dole out some pretty substantial damage when I tried.

“Here I come, Dekie!”

“Hero’s Smite! Dekyari’tosde takes 4686 damage!”

I don’t hit quite as hard as our main attacker, Laika, but I’m no slouch, either!

“Our plan is working! So long as our healing remains sufficient, we can beat her!” Beelzebub shouted, encouraged by our success.

She wasn’t wrong to think that, precisely. The most important part of a final boss fight was setting yourself up to weather a war of attrition, and we’d pulled that off. That said, the one thing we couldn’t do was let our guards down.

“I think we’ve probably got a second phase coming up! Bosses transform all the time, and this is Dekie we’re talking about!”

Dekie may have looked human, but she had the option to transform into just about anything whenever she wanted. And, just as expected, she suddenly dropped to the ground right after we passed the thirty thousand damage mark.

“You know, I THINK I like your FORM. I’ll USE it for myself!”

Dekie said before transforming into an identical copy of me.

Oh, I get it—we have to fight a copy of our own hero. That does feel like something a training program would pull. The final battle is overcoming yourself, or something like that. The game's premise kinda obscured the point of all this, but I guess it really does have some training merit in at least one sense.

"All right, then. If you want me to fight myself, I accept your challenge!"

Much to my surprise, Dekie's new form had more of an effect on the rest of my party than it did on me.

"Ugh… I'm not sure I can bring myself to strike down someone who looks just like you, Lady Azusa…"

Our frontline attacker Laika had stopped attacking entirely!

"Come on, Laika, it's super obvious she's just a fake! You're looking at the real me right now!"

"B-but still! A barehanded fight would be one thing, but striking you with a sword is very difficult on a psychological level!"

"I look JUST like AZUSA! Woo-HOO!"

She doesn't sound anything like me, either! Just compartmentalize a little, please! Agh, this is bad! If our most powerful attacker stops dealing damage, we won't have any good way of whittling the boss's HP down! Whose turn is it next? Beelzebub's? Not like she'll ever do anything other than heal in this fight…

[Beelzebub cast the instant death spell Divine Punishment! But it had no effect on Dekyari'tosde!]

"Hey! Why are you using a death spell, of all things?! Of course that's not gonna work on the final boss!"

"Seeing her take on your form made me feel the urge to give it a try, that's all."

That's seriously the worst justification you could've gone with! Wait… It's Wynona's turn next, isn't it?

[Wynona used Merciless Blade! Dekyari'tosde took 4308 damage!]

"I suppose this battle will determine which of us is the mightier hero, then. I like the sound of that! We missed our

chance since our party was split for the sages' event, after all!"

"Why are you so much more aggressive now that she looks like me? Stop it!"

This is seriously bad—our plan's falling apart…

Next up, it was Dekie's turn to launch an attack using my form.

"TAKE this thunder spell: **Godly Hammer**!"

Even though this was a dream, I still felt that one! It dealt severe damage, bringing me down from full HP to around 60 percent or so. That was nothing I couldn't endure, though, especially since Beelzebub used her next turn to heal me up again.

All right, I can take this!

We were struggling, sure, but we were still chipping away at her. It wouldn't be much longer until we struck the final blow, at the rate things were going. The one problem was that ever since Dekie's transformation, Laika hadn't used her most damaging skill, the Oneshot Strike, even once.

"It's up to you, Laika. Finish her off," I said in a calm, gentle tone.

Laika, of course, looked very conflicted. She seemed to know anything she could say would sound like an excuse, and so for a moment, she didn't say anything at all.

I'd better give her one last push.

"You never hesitate to battle with yourself, do you, Laika? You've been training and tempering your skills for way longer than I've known you, so I can say that for sure. Well, now it's time for you to battle me and win. You think of me as your teacher, right?"

"Of course!" Laika replied instantly. It seemed she'd finally realized what she had to do.

"As your apprentice, it is my duty to endeavor to surpass you. That's how apprentices have always paid their instructors back, isn't it? I don't believe I'm anywhere close to surpassing you in the real world, but here in this dream, I wish to take that step forward!"


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Laika had never been lax when it came to surpassing her own limits, and the next wall she would have to overcome…was defeating me. She looked me in the eye, and though she didn't say a word, there was a powerful resolve in her gaze as she gave me a single nod.

Then, the next thing I knew, Laika had struck a critical hit against Dekie. She dealt 9,999 damage—the strongest attack allowed by this world's system.

"Oh NO! I'm going to BE sealed AWAY again!"

Dekie the elder god slowly but surely vanished into nothingness…and so peace was restored to the world.

◇

After the final battle was over, we spent some time doing the typical RPG victory lap where we traveled around the world, visiting all the locations we'd been to on our quest—and then, suddenly, my eyes snapped open. It was morning, and I was back in the real world in my perfectly ordinary house. The sun was shining bright and clear through my window.

Wonderful, wonderful job! You've earned yourself so many virtue points, you wouldn't believe it!

Godly Godness's voice rang out in my mind.

I mean, I'd hope so. After all that time, I'd like to get something out of it!

I headed into the dining room, where my family greeted me. They didn't say good morning, though—instead, they congratulated me on a job well done.

"Oh, right! You all played roles in the dream too, didn't you?"

All of them seemed very tired, on the whole. Falfa and Shalsha in particular looked like they were still half asleep.

I wonder if we slept less soundly thanks to the game?

"Falfa and Shalsha were part of the four generals, so we didn't turn up until the very end," said Falfa.

"Still, it was a good learning experience. Shalsha won't have many opportunities to be one of a demon king's four generals," Shalsha added.

I decided to just think of it as the two of them having

participated in an arts festival at their school. In that sense, the experience might actually have been a valuable opportunity to learn for them.

Laika, meanwhile, was the last person to arrive in the dining room for once. I'd sort of assumed she'd be the most tired out of everyone, since she'd been on-screen the longest, but it turned out that wasn't the whole story. She also seemed weirdly reluctant to look me in the eye, and I soon learned why.

"Um, Lady Azusa...? I can't apologize enough for attacking your double," Laika finally said.

"Why would you apologize for that? That was a double, not me! Plus, we wouldn't have been able to beat the game if you hadn't!" I said as I gave her a reassuring pat on the head. "You'd better work hard if you want to beat me in the real world next, okay? Though if I'm being honest, I don't think you really need to bother. I've never been much for all that striving toward a goal stuff, myself."

Considering how hard of a worker Laika was, I had a feeling she really would manage to beat me eventually. I knew when that day arrived, I'd be truly happy for her.

"Understood!" said Laika. "I'll keep striving to reach your level, Lady Azusa!"

"Sounds good. For today, though, I think we're probably all tired out from a certain weird dream, so let's just take it easy."

Just then, the front door swung open and Sandra stepped inside.

"Morning," said Sandra. "Why do you all look so tired?"

"Ah! Sandra wasn't in it!"

I thought back on my journey through the game, wondering if she'd had at least a little cameo appearance, but no, she really hadn't played any role in the dream at all.

"Huh? I wasn't in what? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Ah! Could it be?" Rosalie exclaimed, then drifted over to Sandra. "So I was asleep last night, but what about you? Did you sleep through the night?"

"I go dormant during the nighttime, but I'm always conscious. It's not the same thing as how you animals sleep."

"So it was because she didn't sleep at all!"

That's why Godly Godness couldn't drag her into the training program! It all makes sense now!

I had a funny feeling Godly Godness's overblown schemes were only going to get more and more ridiculous as time went on.



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The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls

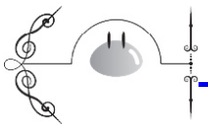
I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level

SPIN-OFF

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio



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THE **TRIALS** OF A NEW STUDENT COUNCIL



The third year of my education had begun, but that wasn't to say the daily routine of my trek to school had changed in the least. As always, I found myself trudging up the steep incline toward the academy.

I could hear a group of upperclassmen chatting happily as they walked in front of me. Their voices carried no hint of anxiety or trepidation for the beginning of a new school year.

Interesting. Perhaps most students would treat this change casually.

To me, becoming a third-year student represented a dramatic shift in my school life. I don't mean to imply I went through a sudden physical change—I hadn't woken up to the realization I'd sprouted a new pair of wings, or anything of the sort. In fact, on a purely personal level, I could safely say I'd hardly changed at all. The fact that my elder sister Leila had graduated, however, had had a substantial impact upon me.

My sister's strength was overwhelming, and for many a long year, she had reigned over the student council with an unshakable and indisputable authority. I appreciate that I'm making her sound like a certifiable dictator, but the truth was rather less impressive. For all the perfection she projected at school, deep down, Leila was a slovenly and apathetic woman who would find the rigors of despotism to be more trouble than they were worth. As a matter of fact, her legacy as the student council president despite her lack of responsibility was now posing a problem in and of itself.

There was a very real chance that the order and discipline of the Red-Dragon Academy for Girls was about to go through a total upheaval.

I could say with confidence that I was not the only one feeling those apprehensions. I had not forgotten the persistent air of nervous tension that had lingered in the student council chambers all throughout the last year. For the time being, however, no such change had occurred. The academy had carried on as normally and naturally as ever. Its environment represented an anxiety-inducing unknown for the new first-year students, of course, but to those in the upper grade levels, I imagined it felt as if they'd simply returned to the same daily lives they'd grown used to.

As I pondered the state of affairs in the academy, I felt a presence behind me and leapt forward, putting some distance between me and the interloper before I spun around.

"Oh, so you noticed me, Sister? A shame."

I found Hialis standing behind me. She was a classmate of mine in the same grade level as I was, and yet for some reason, she looked up to me as an elder sister figure.

"You seemed so absent-minded, I thought it was the perfect opportunity to use my body-breaking technique to give you a pulled muscle."

"No need to worry about my absentmindedness, thank you very much. Also, using a technique of that nature as a sneak attack is hardly fair play," I replied.

Strength was everything in the red dragon world, but one had to play by a certain set of rules in order to be accepted as truly strong. Sneak attacks were broadly looked down upon. If you were to challenge your opponent to a duel, and they accepted that challenge, then there would be no issues in the court of public opinion, but if you did not go through the proper procedures, any victories you may have won would be rendered invalid.

"You don't deny you were acting absent-minded," said Hialis. "Whatever might be the matter? If you have troubles to discuss, I would be happy to lend an ear."

I was starting to lose track of which of us was supposed to be the elder sister in this relationship. Still, I chose to be frank and explain what was on my mind to her.

"…In short, you were expecting upheaval in the new school year, and you felt let down by the fact the transition has, in fact, been entirely peaceful," Hialis said after I was finished explaining myself.

“Ugh,” I grunted. “It all sounds so very simple when you sum it up on those terms…”

I certainly look like a fool now.

“That’s the only truth to be found in your words, Sister. That being said, it baffles me why the one responsible for bringing about this peace would fret so on account of it,” Hialis said with an exasperated sigh as she gracefully scaled a cliff side. Lagging behind would mean seeing up her skirt, so I climbed alongside her. The road to the Red-Dragon Academy was so perilous by ordinary standards, even the most experienced human mountain climber would take one look at it and flee in terror. “You defeated the previous student council president and ensured order would be preserved in the academy’s hierarchy, did you not? It would be one thing if you’d failed, of course, but as is, I see no reason for you to worry.”

That was true. I had challenged my sister prior to her graduation and ultimately defeated her in battle.

“I didn’t challenge her for the sake of protecting the academy, for the record. I simply wished to battle my sister at least once before her graduation, that’s all,” I replied.

“Be that as it may, the end result was a plethora of our fellow students witnessed the student council president they thought to be untouchable be defeated by her younger sister. That means so long as you remain in good health, order within this academy will be preserved. Our lives of peace and leisure will continue on as they always have,” Hialis said, giving me a pat on my back as we pulled ourselves up onto the top of the cliffside. “Intentional or not, there can be no mistaking that you are the one who brought about this peace. You ought to be proud of what you’ve done!”

“I wish I could be as confident as you are that everything will play out that perfectly,” I said.

There was every chance some students would conclude my victory over my sister was a fluke. I, myself, could not confidently claim I would come out on top if we were to battle anew. Moreover, I was only in my third year at the academy. Surely the fourth-years and those above them would not look kindly upon my newfound status?

“You certainly can be paranoid sometimes, can’t you, Sister?” said Hialis. “But even if trouble did arise, you’re the secretary of the student council, which means you’d learn about it before

just about anyone!”

“I suppose that is true, yes,” I admitted. No word of any major issues had reached the student council’s ears…for now, anyway.

“Then what more is there to do but enjoy your life at the academy to its fullest?” Hialis said as she gave my back another firm slap. A little too firm—it hurt quite a bit—but it also blew away both my drowsiness and my hesitation in one solid smack.

◇

“This is the *fifth* report we’ve received of these wretches causing trouble!”

Rubiaflash Sadie, the president of the student council, clenched her fist and slammed it against her desk, seemingly unconsciously. The impact was so great it sent her teacup flying most of the way up to the ceiling, and it would have surely shattered against the floor if she hadn’t averted disaster by catching it partway through its descent.

“My, oh my. I see our president is rather irate today. Hardly the most elegant of attitudes, I must say,” a student with distinctively wavy hair, Direwolf Etigra, said without sparing Sadie so much as a sidelong glance. It seemed she’d understood what had just happened through her keen senses alone. Etigra, incidentally, was in charge of the council’s general affairs.

We were in the student council chamber: a room with an extraordinary presence ordinary students were too scared to so much as approach.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I *am* irate. These incidents are unprecedented, which serves as concrete evidence the current student council has failed to keep the student body under control!” Sadie said, raising her fist to slam the table once again—though this time, Wyrmspeed Ricuen swept in to collect her teacup before it could be launched all over again.

Ricuen was swift enough to exploit even the opening caused by her opponent taking a single breath. She worked as the council’s subsecretary, meaning she was the secretary’s subordinate. To be frank, having an upperclassman work beneath me was an intensely uncomfortable situation that I had not yet come to terms with.

“If I may speak freely, there have always been certain students at this academy who are prone to poor behavior. Any excuse is good enough for their kind, and their behavior does not reflect upon your abilities,” said Ricuen. Her words were consoling, by all rights, but her frigid expression made it hard not to read a hint of sarcasm into them.

You’d think she’d at least try to smile when she’s comforting someone.

“Well then, they could have at least had the decency to not cause these issues the moment the new term started! It’s infuriating!” Sadie raged.

I understood her indignant anger all too well. The problems that had been reported were clear proof the academy’s order had not, in fact, been preserved. I had to wonder: Had my sister’s graduation brought about a new era in the academy’s history after all…?

Of course, that wasn’t the only reason why Sadie was so incensed.

“As of this fifth incident, we are finally certain the culprits are students of our own school. Sixth-years, specifically—in other words, members of my own grade level… Are they trying to spite me? And did they really have to cause trouble *outside* the academy, of all things…?”


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“I see. So we know for sure that the incidents in question were the work of our students, then. You’re beside yourself with fury not only because your own pride has been besmirched, but also because students causing trouble outside of the academy is sure to damage its reputation,” Ricuen said, summarizing the crux of the issue neatly.

Oh no, no, no*… So the only reason why this problem hadn’t been mentioned before now is because it wasn’t certain one of our students was involved…? And now that we are certain of that fact, it’s painfully clear the order we thought had remained stable is anything but!*

“That’s exactly correct, much as I hate to admit it,” Sadie said, head hung with shame.

“However, President Sadie, while the incidents may have occurred off school grounds, the victims were nevertheless all our students. We can take some small comfort in the fact that dragons unaffiliated with our school have yet to be impacted,” said Ricuen.

“I’m afraid you’re being far too optimistic, Ricuen,” said Sadie. “It doesn’t change the fact that sixth-year students have been repeatedly engaging in illicit activities. A member of our highest grade level is completely flouting the responsibility that comes with her position…”

It struck me that, in recent times, Sadie always seemed to be worrying about one thing or another. She’d been active and engaged back when she was the Vice President of the East, but ever since she took up the president’s office, it seemed she’d struggled to cope with its myriad responsibilities. The pressure of the president’s seat was not to be underestimated—or perhaps I should say the pressure of following in Leila’s footsteps was not to be underestimated.

Within a month of my sister enrolling at the academy, students had started calling her the “shadow student council president.” Not long afterward, she had been elected to the office proper as a mere first-year, establishing herself as a living legend. No one would ever want to be compared with her—not even I, her sister, was an exception to that rule. The clearer it became you didn’t want to be compared to someone, however, the more prone to doing so people became… To Sadie, my sister’s legacy was probably something akin to a curse.

“Well, if their pranks have gone too far, then our only choice

is to show them some discipline. If anything, their being students here will make it easier for us to bring them in line. It works out in our favor," Direwolf Etigra said as she scribbled away in a notebook. I assumed she was working on her homework. "Fortunately, it seems our culprits will be striking again today. I'm to understand they'll be making an appearance on the northern side of Mount Rokko roughly thirty minutes from now."

The question of how Etigra knew that was instantly raised, and as it turned out, it was just something her instincts had told her. Sensing an enemy's bloodlust in battle was relatively believable, but how one could sense a battle that would occur in half an hour somewhere entirely different was a mystery… although considering every one of the council's members possessed abilities that were equally extraordinary, it may have just been par for the course.

"Makes sense. We know how many of 'em there are, and we know where they're from, too. Sounds like the student council heading out to teach 'em a lesson might be just what's needed. I'm for it," said Paulownia Tokinen, the student council's treasurer, throwing her weight behind Etigra's proposal.

Tokinen was a rather rare red dragon in the sense that her hair was so conspicuously darkly colored, it almost looked black. Although she stood out physically, Tokinen herself was very much not a contrarian—in fact, she was the sort of person who would regularly agree with the popular opinion, even when she didn't agree at all deep down. As such, it was a little hard for me to take her vote at face value. She was almost my exact opposite in that respect. In any case, credible or not, a vote was a vote.

"It sounds like our treasurer is in favor of handling this ourselves," said Etigra. "How about it? What say we—"

"Let's do it!" I said, shooting to my feet and shouting out loud in spite of myself before Etigra had even finished. "If they believe there's nothing wrong with disturbing the peace, then we have an obligation to teach them how foolish their actions truly are! That goes doubly given we're dragons—when our kind messes around, we have the potential to cause earth-shaking disasters! We must never be allowed to misuse our power!"

Needless to say, that little speech drew the gazes of all the

members of the student council toward me…and I found myself feeling extremely bashful. I shrank away from their stares in embarrassment…

“My intent was to convince our president, but if our secretary is that motivated, I think the matter is as good as settled. I, Etigra of General Affairs, shall depart to battle.”

“I, Subsecretary Ricuen, will do the same. Better to take action and wrap this up today than sit here and worry about it—not to mention my superior has already made her intentions clear.”

“I’ve told you a thousand times, Miss Ricuen, please stop calling me your superior!”

Etigra stowed her notebook in her bag, and Ricuen filed the papers she’d been approving away on a shelf. They moved with purpose, wasting not a hint of time or effort.

President Sadie heaved a sigh. “Very well, then. We will wipe them out! Our foes are five in number, and so we will dispatch five members to oppose them. I trust our remaining members will handle the office work in our absence!”

◇

Being as we were already aware of where our foes would appear, thanks to Direwolf Etigra’s prediction, we proceeded in our human forms rather than turning into dragons. We didn’t need the mobility, and our dragon forms would have drawn far too much attention. If our foes noticed us and chose to cancel their plans, the entire endeavor would be rendered meaningless.

“By the way,” I said to Sadie as we walked, “what exactly is it the offenders have been doing wrong? In retrospect, that seems rather significant.”

“You’ll understand when we arrive,” said Sadie. “And while I’m at it, I would like you to serve as our bait, Miss Laika.”

“…Pardon?”

Not only is she not giving me an explanation, but she’s also assigning me decoy duty on top of it? Why does it feel like I’m being mistreated…?

“It’s a role you’re well suited for,” Ricuen explained. “Not only are you my superior, but you’re also the previous

president's little sister. A group of arrogant punks like them are all but guaranteed to try to pull something on you."

Not that it matters in this particular moment, but I did just *ask her to stop calling me her superior, and she's certainly showing no sign of complying.*

"D-do you think so…?" I replied. "I don't mean to boast, but I *have* defeated my sister in single combat. If these ruffians are truly as cowardly as I've been led to believe, would they not be wary of me…?"

Ricuen was usually on point with her analysis, but in this one case, I felt she might have made a misjudgment. If I was used as bait, and the plan failed as a result, it certainly wouldn't reflect well on me. Of course, then again, our bait would by necessity be a member of the student council. Ultimately, it might make very little difference who we sent…

"Yes, they are indeed likely to be a cowardly bunch," said Ricuen. "That's why we can expect them to take the chance to come at you—an individual of no small renown—in numbers. They'll believe it's their chance to engage you five-on-one rather than one-on-one."

"Oh, I see now. From their perspective, being able to surround me would be desirable. Just how devious of a group are we dealing with…?"

"If they pull a stunt like that in the vicinity of the school, the risk of them being caught increases dramatically. They would earn no prestige from the story getting out—if anything, it would damage their reputation. Far from the school grounds, however, that would not be a concern in their eyes."

The more I heard about the perpetrators, the lower my opinion of them sank. I knew, however, such fools had always existed, and always would. Dragons in particular were prone to such foolishness—we were mightier than the average race, but that meant we were more likely to be lulled into arrogance by our own power.

"Once we reach our destination, Miss Laika, I would like you to assume your dragon form and fly at a reasonable pace," said Sadie. "I believe that will attract our perpetrators in short order. Once they arrive, we will move to assist you."

"Understood," I said. "I will not fail you!"

I shifted into my dragon form and slowly ascended into the sky. I knew if I flew too far, my compatriots on the ground would lose sight of me, so after flying a relatively short distance, I turned around and flew back the way I'd come.

A few minutes after I started flying my circuit, a number of other dragons flapped their way toward me—and flew so close to me, it seemed like they were deliberately trying to collide with me!

"What's the fun in flying like that, slowpoke?!" "Better hurry up, or I might just rear-end you!" "Oh wait—guess you can't, with me up ahead of you!" "You look young—bet'cher from the academy, right? In that case, you're goin' down!"

The dragons started heckling me relentlessly.

Is this *what the culprits are guilty of?! Sky rage?!*

I was being subjected to one of the many methods dragons used to harass each other mid-flight. The harassment was outrageous enough in and of itself, but when you took into account the danger of doing so in the air, it became a truly inexcusable act!

I see now what our rule breakers have been up to! They've been targeting students who fly home on their own!

"You should all be ashamed of yourselves!" I roared. "Perhaps we dragons would come out with a few light injuries if we collided midair, but if one of us fell on a village, we could inflict untold damage upon it and its inhabitants!"

"Who friggin' cares?!" "Come on, we're sixth-years! We deserve to have a little fun for once!" "And besides, you're the last president's little sis, right? We've got a score to settle with you!"

They've crossed far too many lines… This is misbehavior deserving of a harsh punishment indeed.

The delinquent dragons kept flying close enough to graze me and cutting in front of me without warning. One of them was flying right behind me as well, meaning I couldn't slow down to escape. It was a textbook example of reckless flying if I'd ever seen it.

"Better pay attention, kid! Let yourself get rear-ended, and you might fall on something important!" "Are those people I see

walking down there? Bet you don't wanna give them a bad day, huh?" "We've been holding back ever since the last president took over! Now it's time for us to cut loose, and we're gonna have you make up for all the time we wasted!"

They'd finally said the words I wanted to hear the least. "What utter stupidity…," I muttered. "You're supposed to be upperclassmen! The least you could do is give me some small reason to respect you!"

I was under no illusions my scolding would prompt a change of heart. I said it because, frankly, being subjected to their sky rage was more than a little irritating… Had I been alone, I likely would have thrown caution to the wind and launched an attack at the dragon in front of me, spewing flame like no tomorrow. The only reason why I was able to hold myself back was I knew I was working as part of a team.

Now then—they should be along any minute, I'd think.

"Gah! Who the hell're they?!" "Whoa! Watch it, pal!" "Hey, I'm above you, here! You're gonna make me lose my balance!"

I heard the panicked and bewildered shouts of the delinquent dragons and looked downward. There I saw a number of other dragons launch themselves up from the ground, flying swiftly in our direction. The other members of the student council were here to help me!

The other members had no interest in letting the delinquents' reckless flying go on for any longer than it already had. They went on the attack immediately, grabbing on to the delinquents' tails, forcing them downward toward safe, empty patches of land, and generally attempting to ground them.

"What's your problem?! Cut it out!" "I can't fly like this, you jerk!"

It seemed for all their reckless and aggressive flying, the culprits were less than skilled when put on the defensive. They soon gave up on staying in the sky and clumsily touched down in an unpopulated area. At the absolute least, we had forced them to put an early end to today's midair harassment campaign.

In the end, it only took about a minute for us to herd the troublemakers down onto the northern slope of Mount Rokko, where they returned to their human forms. Staying in dragon

form while on the surface was, generally speaking, a hassle.

"We're finally sixth-years, and some jerks are already trying to pull us down?!" "Who are those cretins, anyway?! Oh… It's the student council…" "They're onto us already…?"

We had transformed into our human forms as well, which made it rather easy for the delinquents to surmise our intentions. Being the president, Sadie stepped forward to speak for us as a group.

"I know you," she said. "You're the near-dropouts of the new sixth-year class. You're an embarrassment to our entire academy, and I request you never pull a stunt like this again."

"Shut'cher mouth! You're only the president 'cause the job got handed to you on a silver platter—where do you get off talking down to us?!" "What she said! You're the president in name only!" "Hurry up and retire already, you faker!"

Oof—that's the worst argument they could have possibly chosen to make.

Sadie's smile had grown noticeably strained. "Oh? I see you have some very *fascinating* ideas, don't you…?" she muttered. They say sometimes when you're truly upset, you find yourself smiling in spite of yourself, and I suspected the president was experiencing exactly that.

Suddenly, with a mighty *thud*, Sadie stomped the ground with all her strength. It felt like a minor earthquake, and I nearly lost my footing.

"Everyone? Crush these fools. On the double, please. We brought just as many members as their group numbers, conveniently enough, so I'd like each of you to claim one of them for yourself. Take them on one-on-one and slaughter—pardon me. Killing them is off the table, of course. Take them on one-on-one and *destroy* them, please."

It felt like Sadie was using her command, in part, to quell the roiling rage within her. Regardless of her intentions, the meaning of her command was clear: We had been granted permission to use force.

"Let us demonstrate what the members of our fair academy's student council are truly capable of. It's clear, after all, the only solution to this problem is a lesson in how far separated we are from *them*."

The delinquents seemed rather less enthusiastic after Sadie's speech than they'd been before.

“Sadie, what the hell are you—” one of them began, but she never got the chance to finish her sentence. Ricuen had, before anyone even realized it, circled around behind her and struck the back of her neck with a powerful barehanded chop.

“I believe my work here is done, then. Let me know when the rest of you are finished, please.”

Considering how Ricuen fought, there was simply no way she *wouldn’t* circle around behind her enemies if they gave her such a wide-open opportunity. Her unfortunate target fell face-first onto the ground, fully unconscious. One of our foes was down, and four remained.

As to the exact nature of Ricuen’s movements, describing them was unfortunately beyond me. She was capable of moving as quickly as it was physically possible for a dragon to move—in other words, they didn’t call her “Wyrmspeed Ricuen” for nothing.

The remaining delinquents, finally realizing the predicament they were in, fanned out at once.

“Oh, crap! The student council’s here!” “You *just* noticed?! Let’s do this—we’re taking them down!” “Yeah! We’re all dragons here! We can take ’em!”

If they’d stayed clumped up together, there was a chance we could have defeated them all in a single attack. In that sense, they had made the right call. As for our side of the equation, the fact that they’d spread out made it easier for us to follow up on Sadie’s rather eccentric order to battle them one-on-one.

“Well, then—I believe I’ll take on…*you*,” Direwolf Etigra said as she pointed toward one of our remaining foes.

To be clear: Her finger was pointed toward the delinquent. Her *gaze*, on the other hand, was directed straight up at the empty sky above. Whatever she was thinking about, it seemed very unlikely her chosen foe had anything to do with it.

Etigra would never look the people she spoke with in the eye. That habit was a touch rude of her, in my mind, but looking a conversational partner in the eye would have been meaningless for her. The rest of us made eye contact and observed people’s expressions in order to judge how they were feeling and better understand them. She, however, could understand people perfectly clearly without going to the trouble.

“I should inform you in advance: Seven seconds from now, you will be unconscious,” said Etigra.

Her unsettling, almost devilish proclamation seemed to send a chill down her opponent’s spine. “D-don’t you mess with us! We’re sixth-years, too! We’re on your level!” the delinquent shouted, succumbing to rage and charging forward blindly.

Etigra, on the other hand, began walking backward at a slight diagonal angle, still facing her foe. The delinquent closed the distance in an instant, of course, and began a ferocious onslaught, but each punch and kick she threw missed Etigra by a hair’s breadth.

The delinquent clicked her tongue with irritation. “I almost had you there—this time, I’ll knock you out for sure!”

She hadn’t “almost had her” at all, in truth, but I could hardly blame her for seeing it that way. Etigra simply knew exactly how she had to move in order to evade every strike. Woodland wolves were known for having senses so finely tuned they could tell when prey was moving through the trees far, far off in the distance, and Etigra’s senses were even keener than that—or so the rumors had it, anyway. That story was how she had earned the popular title “Direwolf Etigra.”

Etigra was entirely calm and composed, so anyone watching the fight would be forgiven for thinking her opponent was missing her, rather than that Etigra was dodging. All it took was a slight lean on her part to cause her opponent’s strikes to sail through the open air. From Etigra’s perspective, however, that wasn’t anything remarkable—it was simply a truth that had been set in stone since before the fight began. Her extraordinary senses bordered on a form of precognition, and I was certain she’d used them to set up some sort of trap for her foe, though I had yet to see through to its nature.

At long last, Etigra’s skirt fluttered as she lifted her right leg high into the air. Her opponent had chosen that exact moment to charge forward, and wound up plowing face-first into Etigra’s foot. It was almost like her foot was magnetic, and her opponent’s face had been drawn to it irresistibly.

“Bwa— Ugh…” Etigra’s opponent grunted. I wasn’t sure if she’d tried to say something, or if it had just been a painful exhalation, but one way or another she collapsed to the ground in a heap.

“As predicted: seven seconds, on the dot,” Etigra said,

punctuating her victory with an extended yawn. “I must say, when you know the exact timing with which you’re going to win a battle, it’s terribly tedious to actually go through the motions.”

Etigra pulled some sort of sweet out from her pocket and popped it into her mouth. It seemed that was her personal reward for a job well done.

“There really is no greater pleasure in life than eating. You can never experience a food’s flavor at any time other, after all.”

That, I suspected, was a sentiment only Etigra herself would ever understand…though I was in firm agreement that eating was one of life’s greatest pleasures. I, for one, rarely felt more alive than when I was sinking my teeth into a slab of meat.

It felt as if the overall outcome of the battle had already been decided. The disparity in ability between us and our opponents was simply too great. No matter what they did, there was no plausible means by which they could make a comeback, and they were well aware of that fact. That being said, they also seemed to know running away would be hopeless, and so they stood against us for lack of any better option.

Paulownia Tokinen took to the front next, choosing a target and squaring off against her. She held in both hands an enormous sword made from the wood of a paulownia tree. However, she wasn’t standing in any sort of fighting stance. At a glance, she looked to be perfectly relaxed and unguarded.

“I’m Tokinen, the treasurer. Nice duelin’ with you,” said Tokinen. Her mother was a color of dragon other than red, and she spoke in a distinctive manner I assumed came from that side of the family. Her blackish hair was likely on account of her ancestry as well.

“What, coming at me with a weapon?! You coward! If you want a duel, then duel me with your fists!” Tokinen’s opponent shouted. She seemed terrified to take on an armed member of the student council.

It occurred to me that red dragons very rarely used weapons on the whole. Direct attacks using our own bodies were generally faster, which probably played a factor in that preference, of course.

“Coward, am I? Well, I happen to be pretty weak, so usin’ this

is the best choice I've got. Never been good at breathin' fire, either, so how 'bout you think of that as a fair trade, eh?"

"You can't breathe fire? What sorta sorry excuse for a dragon are you? Maybe I *can* beat you after all," Tokinen's opponent spat.

When faced with a moment of crisis, people tend to leap to reassuring conclusions in order to stabilize their state of mind. Tokinen's opponent seemed to have done just that, and chose to open the battle by breathing a burst of flame in Tokinen's direction. It was a rather impressive fireball—as one would expect from one of the eldest upperclassmen at the academy—with heat to spare, and enough reach that one could easily call it a long-ranged attack.

Those flames, however, were split in half. Tokinen had cleaved them in two with a single thrust of her blade, splitting the stream to either side of her. That, it seemed, was her way of dodging the flames, and by the time her opponent realized something was wrong, Tokinen's sword had slammed straight into her gut.

"Aaaaaaaaaugh! I can't stooooooooooop!!!"

The delinquent dragon was sent flying into the distance at an incredible speed, and didn't return. Tokinen's thrust had been powerful enough to bash through even the thickest of castle gates in a single strike, so that wasn't much of a surprise.

"Went a bit hard on that one, huh? I'm weak 'n frail, so I'm s'pposed to carry a battering ram 'round with me for self-defense. Can't exactly walk 'round with one of those every day, though, so I made it into a sword instead," Tokinen said as she returned her blade to its sheath—or rather, to the tube-like case she carried it in.

Her sword hadn't been made to cut, or even to bludgeon. It had been made to destroy anything she swung it at. The fact she'd sent her opponent flying was, in a sense, her way of showing mercy. If Tokinen had gone for the knees instead, they—and the bones surrounding them—would have been completely pulverized, dragon or not.

"Well, that was even easier than winning the treasurer spot in the election," said Tokinen. "Gotten better at holding back since then, too, so her bones're probably mostly in one piece. Couple fractures, maybe. Can't win 'em all," Tokinen said with a faint chuckle as she gazed out in the direction her foe had

disappeared in.

All right, then. I believe that makes it my turn…though of course, it looks like our remaining enemies have long since lost the will to fight.

"Oh no… Why do I have to go up against the girl who beat the ultimate student council president, of all people…?"

She was, of course, referring to the former student council president—my sister—rather than the current one. It seemed her absence was just as grave of an issue for the academy as I'd feared. The majority of our students simply couldn't conceptualize anyone being the president other than Leila. Even I associated the word "president" with her so strongly, I referred to the current president as "Miss Sadie" rather than invoking her title.

Sadie seemed less than pleased to hear the word applied to herself, as well. She didn't wish to be compared to her predecessor, but the fact was Leila's face sprang to mind the moment the word was spoken. There was no helping it. It would take time—a lot of it—before she could be freed from that curse, and until then, pointless bouts with feckless troublemakers like these would simply be a fact of life.

It struck me Sadie couldn't bring herself to take pride in her position as president, and if everyone else perceived that, it was no surprise they would take the president's instability as a sign her subordinates—and thus, the whole organization—would be petty and weak. That would damage Sadie's self-confidence in turn, forming the beginnings of a vicious cycle…but *that*, at least, was a problem we could solve. It was a trial our new student council was capable of overcoming so long as I did my part to help.

"I'm afraid to say you had already lost the moment you chose to engage in reckless flying," I said to the delinquent I'd been paired up with. "No one who truly believed in their own strength would ever do such a thing. They wouldn't need to. Your acts have declared to the world that you have succumbed to your own inferiority complex. Speaking as one who has been the subject of your harassment, I found myself more inclined to pity you than be irritated by you. There is nothing for me to gain through fighting you."

“S-so then…you’ll let me off the hook…?” said the delinquent. She thought she was saved, and the tension began to drain from her expression ever so slightly.

“No, I will not! Regardless of whether or not I’ll gain anything from this battle, it is my duty as the student council’s secretary to see it through! I will forge your weak and frail spirit into something stronger with my own two fists! Now—come at me!”

Unfortunately for you, it’s very important I teach you a lesson you won’t forget about your own powerlessness! You’ll only be able to grow after learning and acknowledging who you are right now!

“Oh, to hell with this! If I’m going down, I’m getting one good hit in first!” the delinquent yelled. She transformed into her draconic form and launched herself forward, seeking to crush me under her massive bulk.

“An admirable mindset!” I shouted in reply.

I could have assumed my full form as well, but chose not to, instead leaping into the air with all my might—and slamming my fist directly into her enormous, draconic face. It was a simple, perfectly straightforward attack, and a method of fighting I had learned through my battle with my sister.

I had no need for cheap tricks or strategies. Frankly, I wasn’t suited for them. When I fought, I would throw all my strength into a head-on clash with my opponent. If I proved mightier, I would win, and if my opponent was mightier, they would defeat me. Whatever the outcome, I would be satisfied.

“How’re you…this…strong…?” the delinquent muttered in disbelief before slowly collapsing to the ground.

“It was a pleasure to spar with you,” I said, giving my fallen foe a polite bow.

At long last, only one enemy remained. The final delinquent and Sadie faced each other down, glaring at one another with unconcealed animosity.

“You don’t have what it takes to be the president, Sadie,” said the delinquent. “Hell, you don’t even have what it takes to be on the council! You were already lucky to be the vice president, and now you think you can just step on up and take the president’s seat? What a joke!”

Her barbed words flowed freely. I could tell her grudge against Sadie had by no means started today.

“That’s why we’ll never bow down to you and your cronies! We’re gonna do whatever we want to! We played nice while the last president was in office, but she’s gone, and we’re *done*!”

“I can’t disagree. The fact that people like you have begun to crop up proves my unworthiness for my position in and of itself. Hence the first step I must take in rising to my station is defeating you,” said Sadie.

Her words were calm, but her eyes were glazed over with fury. It was written all over her face: No matter what happened, her opponent would pay for what she’d done. There are moments in everyone’s lives when they’re faced with something or someone they must overcome to move onward, and this was one of Sadie’s. This was her trial, and hers alone.

“As the president of the student council, I will set an example for you—and everyone like you—to follow, demonstrating it to you one by one if I have to. Now it’s time for me to open your eyes to the truth!”

“The hell you will! I’ll burn you to ashes!”

The final delinquent spewed a full-powered gout of flames in Sadie’s direction. It was quite a display—a crimson blaze one could easily have described as an inferno. It was by no means an attack one could dismiss out of hand, and it proved that in spite of her wrongdoing, she had been through her fair share of battles and hardship to obtain genuine strength. That knowledge made it all the more tragic to know she had lost her way, and I knew Sadie, a student in the same level as her, was the best possible candidate to set her back on the right path.

Sadie opened her mouth wide…

…and breathed out not a burst of flame—but a beam of light!

The ruby-red flash of searing hot light engulfed the delinquent’s fire breath, swallowing it—and the delinquent herself—up in an instant!

“Aaaaaaaaargh! This is way too hot, even for a red dragooooooon!” the delinquent screamed, but even the sound of her voice was blotted out by the roar of Sadie’s breath! My eardrums shook so violently, I almost thought a full-sized

dragon had just barged its way directly past me.

Eventually, the light of Sadie's breath faded. The delinquent was left standing stock-still, steam gently wafting from her body, until she finally collapsed on the spot. She'd fallen victim to a technique only Sadie was capable of using: A beam of red-hot light that was the result of her quest to perfect her fire breath. It was powerful enough to have earned her the name "Rubiaflash Sadie"!

"Your battle was exceptional. I'm truly impressed," I said, speaking on behalf of the council's other members.

"I've done nothing worthy of such praise. As I said before, this battle would never have occurred were it not for me. And so," Sadie said, clenching her fists, "I will continue to fight until every one of the fools who look down on us are defeated and the academy is cleansed of their influence!"

"Understood! I will help in any way I can!" I said. "Though then again, considering this incident was the student council's responsibility to solve from the start, I suppose it's a given I'd assist you."

If the academy's standards for behavior had grown slack on account of the students' disdain for the current student council, then I bore some responsibility for the way things had turned out.

"I'm in full agreement with everything my superior just said. We will wipe them out together," Ricuen said, stepping up beside me.

Tokinen smiled and joined us as well. "We'd better be getting back and telling everyone who didn't come along 'bout how this turned out," she said.

Etigra, it seemed, was already prepared to leave. She'd turned to face the academy, ready to set off at any moment.

As I gazed at my fellow members of the council, a thought struck me: Even if the order my sister had brought about collapsed, all we had to do was bring peace to the academy once again. All *I* had to do was devote myself more wholeheartedly than ever to constant self-improvement!

I would build a new student council with my own two hands!

My newfound resolve, however…

“By the way, Miss Laika, I’d think it’s time you were given some sort of title.”

…would soon be dashed by Etigra’s words.

“Huh…? What brought this on…?” I asked. I hadn’t at all anticipated I would become the subject of this conversation.

“Now that you mention it, it’s weird for only one of us not to have one. Seems like a good chance to think one up, eh?” said Tokinen. She was just as enthusiastic as Etigra, at a glance, though knowing her, there was every chance she was only saying that and really didn’t think it was a good idea at all. It was quite hard to tell what she truly thought about anything.

“But I don’t have any special abilities in particular that would earn me that sort of name,” I protested.

“It seems to me you always pick the simple, straightforward way of doing things. Why don’t we call you ‘Simple Laika’?” said Ricuen. It was perhaps the single worst possible suggestion I could have received.

“Absolutely not! That makes it sound like I’m incapable of doing anything other than the most simple and straightforward option!”

“I believe that reflects your personality quite nicely, actually.”

“Not in a positive light, it doesn’t!”

I wonder if there’s any chance I could convince everyone to do away with these horrible titles altogether…?

The End

AFTERWORD

Hello, this is Kisetsu Morita.

Killing Slimes' anime has begun! Episode one was broadcast on April 10, just a few days before the release of this volume! (Of course, although I'm writing this in past tense, the broadcast hasn't actually happened yet at the moment I'm writing this afterword. I wanna watch it, already!)

This might go without saying, but to everyone reading this volume, the events the anime will be covering will represent the very, *very* beginning of the series. I hope you'll enjoy looking back and thinking, "Oh, right, that *is* how it happened back then" as you watch!

I have a lot of announcements to cover this time, so I'll just list them out one by one! To start, something I have yet to mention up until now regarding the anime: Its opening theme song, "Gudafuwa Everyday," sung by Azusa's voice actress Aoi Yuuki, is already available for purchase! It's just a plain *fun* song, and I encourage you to purchase it and listen to the full version for yourself!

On a related note, although its release date has yet to be announced as of the writing of this afterword, the ending theme song "Viewtiful Days!," sung by Flatorte's voice actress Azumi Waki, is a really wonderful song as well. I hope you'll give it the same treatment!

Songs aside, there are a number of projects I believe will be announced as the anime continues to air. There's only so much information I can communicate in real time in a novel's afterword, so I encourage you to keep an eye on the official *Killing Slimes* Twitter account!

Next, the eighth volume of this series' manga adaptation, by Yusuke Shiba, has been released! Once again, the manga has received a massive additional print run. I was astonished when I learned just how many copies were going to be printed! I have

a new appreciation for just how broad the reach of manga really is!

Meanwhile, the manga spin-off *The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls* began this March as well! It's drawn by Hitsujibako! Thanks for waiting! It's finally here! I hope you read it! On a related note, this volume includes the seventh *The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls* story as a bonus! We've included something unrelated to the main story in these volumes so many times now, it just felt wrong to have a volume without some sort of bonus, so I went ahead and wrote one from scratch!

Speaking of spin-offs, the first one, Beelzebub's *I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1,500 Years*, is celebrating the release of the third volume of its manga adaptation, drawn by Meishi Murakami! I hope you'll give it a look as well!

Finally, an announcement unrelated to *Killing Slimes*. A novel of mine that was published by GA Bunko a few years ago, *Kirei na Kurokami no Takashina-san (Mushoku) to Tsukiau Koto ni Natta*, has a manga adaptation that's started up recently in Gangan GA! The manga is being created by a tag team of Hironari Takachi on drawing and Makoto Ohara handling the script!

If you're wondering why a series like that would get a manga adaptation after all this time, well, good question! When I heard the news, my first thought was, "What, now? Really...? It's not even set in another world..." Which isn't to say I'm not incredibly pleased, of course!

Another manga adaptation of one of my works that's serialized on Gangan GA, *A Mysterious Job Called Oda Nobunaga*, has been very well received! It's drawn by Riku Nishi, who's been doing a phenomenal job! I hope you'll give it a try!

There are many people I have to express my gratitude to. I'd like to thank my illustrator, Benio, who once again did a wonderful job with the art for this volume. We've seen the black-haired, real-world high school version of Azusa in a previous spin-off story, and this time, I was very glad to see the cover of the special edition features her Witch of the Highlands form wearing a school uniform! Speaking of which, *The Red-*

Dragon Academy for Girls involves Laika wearing a school uniform as well. Somehow or other, this series ended up with quite a few of those.

Next, thank you very much to everyone involved in the anime's production! I'd heard getting an anime adaptation was a major turning point for any light novel, and I've really come to understand what people mean by that. Generally speaking, there are only a few people involved in the initial creation of a light novel. You couldn't exactly pull a hundred people into a light novel's creation, slap a 15,000 yen per volume price tag on it, and expect it to sell. As such, seeing the sheer, stunning number of people involved in an anime's production was a shock, plain and simple.

Of course, as the series' original author, my involvement in the anime's production is limited. I'm just the author who provided the base material—not a member of the actual production staff—so I believe I'll be able to enjoy the anime from the perspective of just another viewer when it airs.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who has continued to read and support *Killing Slimes*. I don't think a single person on the planet Earth imagined the series would carry on for this long back when the first volume was released. Not even I, the author, had the slightest clue. It's all thanks to the support of my readers the series has been able to continue for this long. I view it as an incredible miracle brought about by the combined power of all sorts of people, Spirit Bomb style.

There's still more to come in the fun and carefree lives of the house in the highlands family, and I hope you'll continue to enjoy experiencing them in novel form!

Kisetsu Morita

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It's hard work taking it slow...

After living a painful life as an office worker, Azusa ended her short life by dying from overworking. So when she found herself reincarnated as an undying, unaging witch in a new world, she vows to spend her days stress free and as pleasantly as possible. She ekes out a living by hunting down the easiest targets—the slimes! But after centuries of doing this simple job, she's ended up with insane powers... how will she maintain her low key life now?!

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