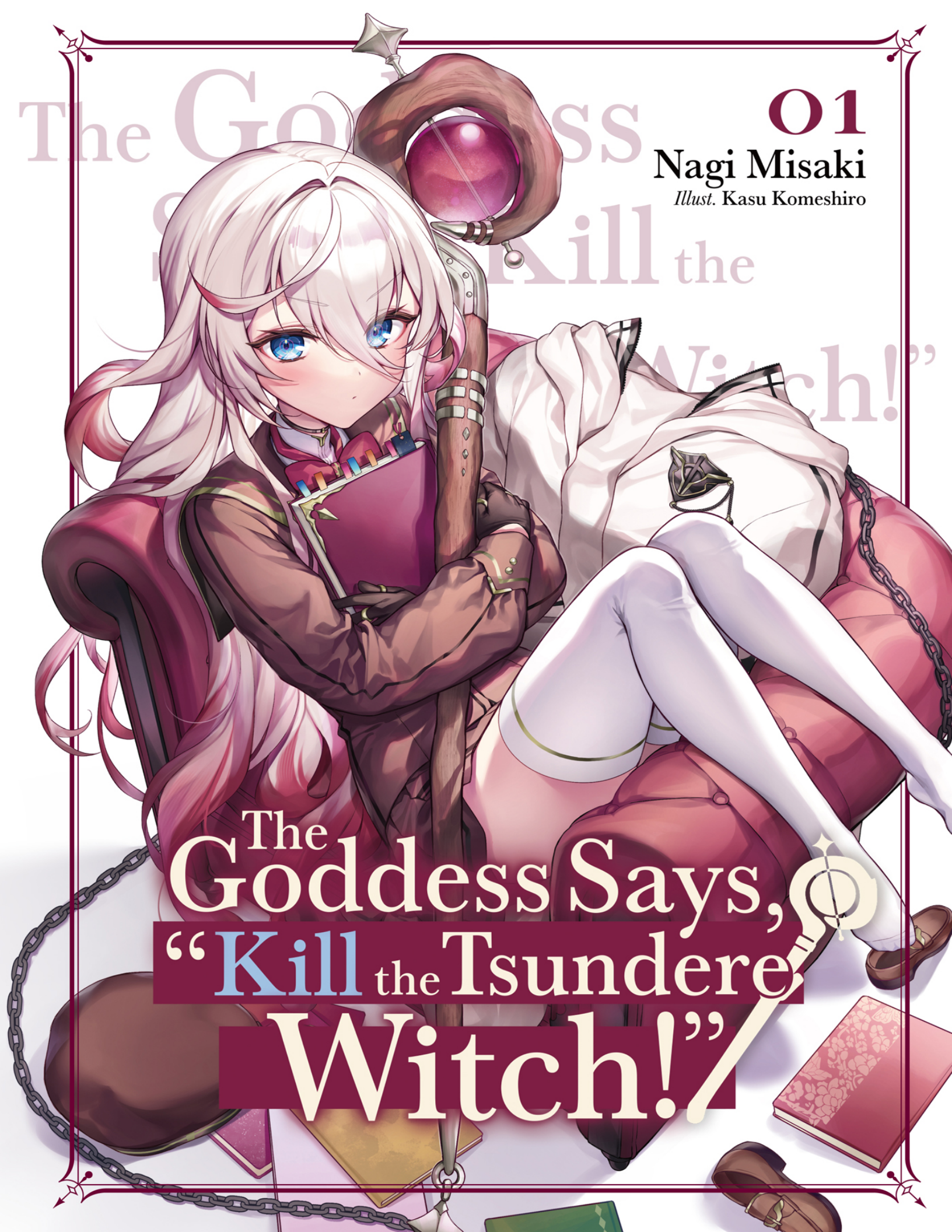
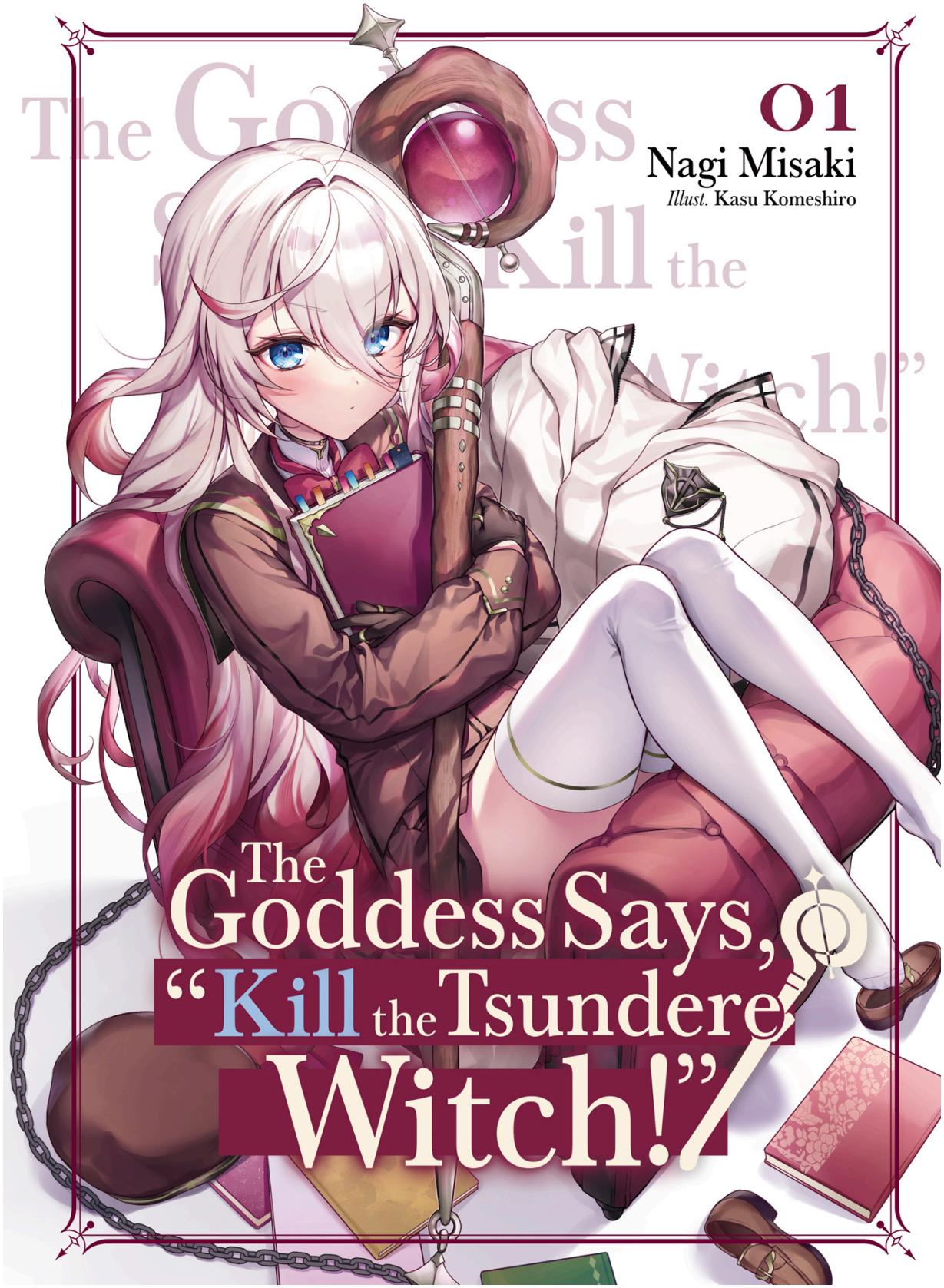

01
Nagi Misaki
Illust. Kasu Komeshiro
The Goddess Says, "Kill the Tsundere Witch!"


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Stella the Tsundere Saint's

CUTENESS CORNER!

~A Cuteness Guide by Her Fans~



Overwhelming Beauty!

Peak aesthetics! Her sharp eyes and glamorous silver hair leave a lasting impression!

(17 years old * Male * Staff)



Fatal Social Awkwardness!

It's precisely because she can't be honest that glimpses of her kindness hit so hard!

(17 years old * Male * Staff)



An Honest Hard Worker!

She aims to be the strongest saint to stand against the magibeasts that stole her parents and home!

(17 years old * Male * Staff)

How cute Stella is!


Stella: A student at a saint academy.
"I-It's not like I'm doing this for your sake, okay? I just happened to find you, that's all!"
"I care that you're saving my life by digging me out. I want to thank you somehow."
Otaku: Someone from another world who was reincarnated into a staff.


That was an incantation, but unlike when the villainess chanted it, nothing happened. Stella's voice was getting tearful. She rubbed her cheek against me, trembling, and repeated the incantation as if praying.
"Wh— Ah!"
What looked like a light bulb floated between us. Light shone upon Stella's face and lit her up.
"O Spirits of Light, fulfill your contract in the name of the Goddess supreme: Luxsaria Sein!"

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I bolted into a sprint the moment I left the interview room.

The school building, which had long since been empty of other students, was silent—save for my footsteps and heavy breathing. Even the dim light of dusk made me feel alone and out of place; it painted the hall in orange.

The silence was interrupted by a loud excited cry from elsewhere. I stopped and turned to a window in the hall, which showed the towering statue of the Goddess placed in the center of the dormitory plaza. A musical performance began. The once-yearly Descension Ceremony was beginning.

There was a saying everyone repeated as gospel: If you have a wish, pray to the Goddess. What they didn't explain was what to do if you prayed constantly and nothing happened.

I crouched beneath the window, as if to hide from the music and excitement, turned my back to the statue, and clasped my hands together. Closing my eyes gifted me darkness in which I could be alone.

"Please, grant me..." I began, praying to myself for the first time.

Chapter 1 — Let Our Idols Be Rewarded, Says I

Today is not my lucky day.

I knew it would be terrible the moment I woke up.

After all, it was February 14th—Valentine's Day. Some would call that the day girls give boys chocolate, but for me, it's the day I'd consider lucky if anyone felt obligated to give me anything at all.

That said, while I'd expected a miserable day of sorrow and isolation, what I hadn't expected was to find myself half buried in the dirt of a gloomy forest. It was hard, even for me, to believe. But I was, in fact, stuck deep in the ground, with my head sticking out. The only thing I could see were miserable-looking trees, and my nose was filled with the cloying scent of the earth.

This isn't good... Why am I buried?!

I elected to trace the steps that led me here.

After class, my childhood friend had shot me down in front of everyone in our homeroom. She'd given me handmade chocolate, which I'd celebrated as a confession of her real feelings—only for her to get genuinely pissed off. I'd remember her words forever: "Never in my life would I ever give a nasty otaku like you any real chocolate. Quit celebrating, it's gross."

From there I'd staggered out of school, but I couldn't remember where I'd gone. I'd passed by a construction site and heard someone shout, "WATCH OUT!"

I'd looked up to see a falling pipe that, in swift order, slammed into my skull.

When I woke up, I was in my current predicament.

Wait, what?!

There was a major gap there. How exactly did getting hit in the head with a pipe lead one to being halfway in the ground? Shouldn't

I have woken up in a hospital bed or something? Why was I buri—

AH! Don't tell me!

A horrible theory suddenly formed in my head.

An innocent passerby getting nailed by a falling pipe would be a huge incident. Worst-case scenario, it would become national news and the head of whoever ran that construction site would roll. He might have tried to make the whole incident "disappear" to save his own neck—after all, no victim would mean nobody bringing it to the news. Everyone would just think a rejected high school student ran away from home or something.

Get real! I shouted on the inside.

I tried to claw my way out, but no matter how hard I flailed, I somehow couldn't move a muscle. The earth must have been packed too tight; even when I tensed my hand as hard as possible, I couldn't so much as bend a finger, much less an arm or leg. I couldn't even turn my head to look around.

A bird cried somewhere above me and left behind the sound of flapping wings. The dark blue piercing through the tree canopy indicated night was coming soon. Things were looking grim.

It was just as I was considering the piece of trivia that humans could survive three days without water that I heard a rustling bush, accompanied by the crack of a foot stepping on a twig.

Thank goodness! Someone is—

I almost called out for help, but stopped.

What kind of person would be walking through a forest at this hour...?

I didn't want any of the construction workers to find me. No doubt they had chosen to bury me in a place nobody would ever find, which meant anyone passing this way had to be one of them. They were probably here to make sure I was dead or something. If they knew I still had the strength to shout, they might elect to finish the job themselves.

Gotta play dead. It's my only way out.

I shut my eyes and held my breath.

The footsteps approached, then stopped in front of me.

"Ugh... Finally, there it is."

Huh?

That was a girl speaking. And I didn't specify that because I was closed-minded; in this era of gender equality, there was nothing strange about female construction workers. My surprise came from how young the voice sounded.

I looked up.

WHAT?!

So. Have any of you ever seen a silver-haired beauty with your own two eyes before? Because I hadn't. I was born and raised in Japan, and I was a profound lover of anime and manga; to me, silver-haired beauties were a fantasy that existed only in the second dimension.

Or so I'd thought until exactly one second ago.

A robed girl, her almost dazzlingly bright silver hair flowing in the wind behind her, was looking down at me.

She had a lithe figure, and I would pin her as middle school age based on her frame alone. She had sharp eyes, skin so pale one could almost see through it, and most remarkable of all, a face so pretty that even her fantastical silver hair didn't feel out of place on her head. No doubt she would grow up to be an absurd bombshell. And that wasn't even mentioning how the prickly expression she wore was exactly my fetish. The day that a girl like her said "I-It's not like I like you or anything!" was the day I could die in peace.

W-Wait, I was trying to play dead! What am I doing?!

I hurriedly shut my eyes.

I heard the rustling of cloth, then felt soft hands embrace my head.

What? What's she trying to pull?!

I trembled on the inside in fear. The girl hesitated for a moment, then pulled incredibly hard.

"Nmmmmpppphhh!" she grunted with exertion.

"AAAAARGH! STOP STOP STOOOP!"

She's insane! I could get trying to dig me out of the ground, but just pulling on my head like I'm a vegetable? I ain't no radish!

"Bweh? Who?!" she exclaimed, head swiveling as she looked around.

Talk about a weird question. The only two people here were me and this silver-haired beauty. Maybe she thought I was already dead?

"I'm still alive. Please, dig me out, O prickly silver-haired beauty!"

Clearly now was not the time to be playing dead. The fact she tried to pull me out meant she was here to help me, not finish me off.

"Prickly...? Are you talking about me?!"

"Of course. Do you see another silver-haired prickly beauty wandering a forest?"

The girl pouted. To me, the word "prickly" was nothing less than high praise befitting only the most noble of tsunderes, but it seemed she didn't take it that way.

She scanned the forest with a stern expression. "Who's bad-mouthing me? Stop hiding and come out!"

"I'm right in front of your face already. Didn't you just try pulling me out of the ground?"

Her gaze fell. Two large, round eyes bored into me. At last, she noticed me. I could now rest ea—

"AAAAAAAAAAH! THE STAFF SPOOOOOOOOOOKE!"

"H-Hey, wait! Why are you running?! D-Don't leave me behind! Please help me, I'm begging you, O prickly silver-haired goddess!"

"EEEEK! Don't call me a goddess!"

My desperate pleas went unanswered. The girl bolted, her silver hair swishing behind her like the tail to a comet. That left me alone with my head stuck in the ground, consoled only by the rustling of tree branches.

"This just isn't my lucky day..."

The person I thought was here to help instead ran away—and with a weird last comment too. I didn't see any talking staff.

* * *

The prickly silver-haired beauty returned with a large shovel resting on her shoulder.

Not much time had passed since she'd run away. The sky had

turned from bright blue to a more navy color, and I could see glimpses of twinkling stars.

She began digging out the earth around me. My body became visible, and I let out a stunned yelp.

"What the heck is going on...?"

I was...a staff.

When I looked down at myself, all I saw was a stick. I had turned into a staff.

No wonder I couldn't move a single muscle in my body. I had found myself unable to turn my head not because I was buried, but because I *literally* couldn't turn my head.

"Hah, I got crushed by a big metal stick and turned into a stick... When am I going to wake up from this nightmare?"

"What nonsense are you even spewing? Jeez, you're in there deep..." the girl said; beads of sweat were forming on her brow as she swung the shovel.

Staff-Me seemed to be a meter tall in total, meaning she had to dig pretty far down to get me out. Dream or no, it cut deep that I had to stand here like a bundle of sticks while forcing a dainty young girl to do hard labor.

"Sorry. I'd help if I could, but I don't think I can."

"You're a staff. What do you care?"

"I care that you're saving my life by digging me out. I want to thank you somehow."

"Thank me...?" she repeated, lifting an eyebrow. In the blink of an eye she had tilted her chin away from me. "I-It's not like I'm doing this for your sake, okay? I just happened to find you, that's all!"

"Ngh!"

Did you hear that? She just spoke sacred words right from the holy tsundere texts! That was trademark tsundere dishonesty. A childhood friend of mine said the exact same thing after coming to wake me up every morning.

"I-It's not like I'm doing this for your sake, okay? I just have to do this since the teacher will get mad at us both if you're late!"

Thinking back, that line of hers had totally fooled me. I'd ended

up convinced she was a tsundere.

Incidentally, do all of you actually understand what "tsundere" means? It's one who, due to shame or whatever else, can't express their affection honestly and ends up acting in cold, prickly ways... That's a tsundere.

In short, without affection you have no tsundere at all. You just have a harsh, prickly girl. It's like a barren wasteland in which one will never stumble upon true love.

My childhood friend wasn't a tsundere. She was just prickly as all hell. My love for tsunderes blinded me to her true nature, and discovering the truth shook my entire world to its core. This dream of mine was no doubt some kind of defense mechanism contrived to heal my damaged soul.

"So wait, this girl is the most perfect tsundere my mind could imagine? HELL YEAH! NOW I'M GETTING PUMPED!"

"Eek!" the girl yelped, before falling back on her rear. "Don't shout like that! You startled me."

She gave me a sharp glare... Which was exactly what I wanted. Now *that* was a tsundere.

"Good, good. That prideful expression, those sharp narrowed eyes... This is the kind of merciless prickliness that sends shudders of bliss down my spine."

"Wh-What the... Why are you panting li—"

"What's the appeal of a tsundere? In a word, the gap. The fact I can see up your skirt despite your haughty attitude—that kind of gap just speaks right to the heart!"

"Eek!"

The girl's robe had gotten hitched when she fell. Beneath it she was wearing something like a school uniform, and the contents of her skirt were left bare before me.

Her legs were slender, but had an ideal amount of meat. Her thighs were pale and looked as smooth as they likely were soft. Even the triangular cloth farther within was—

"Unbelievable! Where are you looking?! You're the worst!"

The girl jumped up and gripped the hem of her skirt, her cheeks red. Her expression was a stimulating mix of embarrassment and

anger.

"I'm the one who can't believe this. I never thought I'd get to see a tsundere girl's panty shot."

"Whaaa?! P-Pan... Did you really see my panties?!"

"The plain design, reflecting a youthful innocence...the purity of its whiteness, reflecting a truly innocent soul... It was like the embodiment of a tsundere girl's pure heart!"

"AAAAH! Stop describing my panties in detail! Stop being a pervert in general, actually!"

The girl's shoulders heaved as she gulped air.

"Wait. No way. Goddess, I thank you for your gift of a spirit. However, a perverted spirit like this is more of a curse than anything!"

"I would like to thank the gods as well. Only a miracle could have led me to meeting the perfect tsundere."

"You keep calling me this 'tsundere' thing, but I have a name, you know. It's Stella Millesia. I won't let you off easy if you keep calling me some weird nickname."

"Stella, huh? I'm glad to have met you, Stella."

"And I wish I had never met you at all," Stella said with a sharp jerk of her chin to the side. That was a classic tsundere move. I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Why are you laughing...?"

"Your answer was just so ideal I couldn't help but be moved."

"Moved? Are you listening to me? I didn't say a single thing that should make you happy."

"But I've been on cloud nine this whole time."

"We just don't seem to be on the same page. Let me be clear—I am expressing that meeting a perverted, boorish, shameless guy like you has filled me with pure, unfiltered disgust!"

"Hm, gotta admit, I didn't expect a bashing that hard..."

"Ah," Stella inhaled. Her expression indicated she had noticed the severity of her comments. She wiggled her hands back and forth awkwardly. "I-I mean, anyone would react this way if someone started talking about their pa—"

"Superb! Now I know for sure: You, Stella, are my ideal

tsundere!”

Silence fell.

Stella’s arms froze in the air.

“Wha...?”

“Go ahead. Call me a gross otaku, a pervert, or anything else you like. The important thing is what comes next. If you would blush in secret when I’m not around, or start muttering `*That idiot!*’ to yourself, then I have no complaints. A tsundere is most beautiful when hiding her embarrassment, and—”

“Hold it, hold it, hold it! What are you ranting about now?! I don’t understand half of what you’re saying!”

“Basically, you insulting me is a reward of the highest order.”

“Wha, wha... WHAT EVEN ARE YOOOU?!” Stella shouted so loudly she almost fell over again. Her cry echoed throughout the trees.

“That’s an easy question. I’m an otaku. We love tsunderes more than our three meals a day, and our life work is venerating tsunderes.”

“Otaku...? That’s a weird name. You look at panties, love getting yelled at... You’re a pervert for sure!”

“A classic, delicious insult! You sure know how to make me happy, Stella. Are you a genius?”

“I’m not doing it on purpose! Jeez, Otaku, it’s like we’re talking two different languages! Bweeeh, why did this insane person have to be my staff...” Stella cried and resumed swinging her shovel with tears in her eyes. The earth around me vanished bit by bit.

It seemed she was willing to dig me out despite all the insults. That was no surprise. Tsunderes seemed cold on the outside, but were always kind on the inside.

“Let me thank you again, Stella. Thanks for rescuing me.”

“Like I said, I don’t have a choice! You must be an idiot if you think I’m doing this for you.”

“Aaah, such a prickly line... It’s perfect! Give me another one!”

“ARRRGH! I forgot you’re a pervert! How is one supposed to insult a pervert?!”

“Hmm... Yep, you’re just as cute when you’re stressed out. Every face you make is just so adorable.”

"Listen up, you. I'm not the type to be won over by empty praise, so—"

"Do you think it's empty? I mean every word I say. You're the cutest girl in the world, Stella!"

"Sh-Shut up! Compliments from you mean less to me than this dirt."

"Your cheeks are red, Stella. Your grip is weakening too. It's so obvious it's getting to you."

"N-N-No it's not! This is just me getting tired. Your words mean nothing to me, Otaku!"

"That so? Then let me continue," I said, giving a short cough. Then, I shouted in a voice loud enough to echo through the forest, "STELLA! I LOVE YOOOU!"

She froze as if time had stopped. I slammed her with all my honest feelings even as her shovel remained stuck in the ground. "YOU'RE THE PERFECT GIRL I'VE ALWAYS DREAMED OF! LET ME SPEND MY LIFE WITH YOU!"

I heard a popping sound.

Stella was, at this point, completely bright red. Her mouth flapped open and closed, while her hands tightened around my neck (or where it would be if I had one).

"You...!"

She pulled me out of the ground. I didn't have any time to rejoice being free before she started to swing her arms around with me in hand. *Oh crap, my head is spinning.*

"WH-WHAT ARE YOU EVEN SAYING, YOU IDIOOOOT!"

With steam blowing out of her entire body, Stella threw me as hard as she could.

"AAAAAAAAH!" I shouted. Never underestimate the sensitive, shy heart of a tsundere.

I soared through the blue expanse of the sky, aiming to pierce the heavens. Only then did I notice that the forest I had been buried in was next to a large Western-style mansion built out of bricks. There was some kind of bonfire burning by the entrance surrounded by armored soldiers. A shed beside the mansion had covered wagons next to it, with people taking care of the horses. This was

distinctly not Japan.

After sailing for some time, I plopped into a pond at the edge of the forest.

Yeah, I got a bit carried away.

I reflected on my misdeeds as I sank to the floor of the pond. In the end, though, I had no regrets. Who wouldn't get excited if the girl of their dreams suddenly appeared in front of them? Who wouldn't shout their love to the high heavens? That said, given the current situation, I had clearly made a misstep somewhere.

I finally hit the pond floor.

For a moment I was worried I would drown down here, but then I remembered I was a staff. I didn't need to breathe. I didn't feel any oxygen deprivation, and my eyes weren't filled with water either.

The problem was that I had been separated from Stella.

As a staff, I had no means by which to escape this pond. I'd be here forever unless she came to get me.

Mm, judging by Stella's tsundere levels, she should probably come get me once she's cooled her head a bit. I just have to wonder when that will be...

A shadow suddenly fell over me.

I looked over and saw a giant trout-looking fish, who I'd presume was the boss of this place. It opened its mouth like a black hole and started sucking in water. I ended up getting sucked in too.

"Really..."

What a disappointment.

I thought a tsundere had come to save me, only to be eaten by a trout instead. This dream kind of sucked. And, on top of that, the trout's teeth digging into my body actually hurt.

"Ow, ow! Who wants a dream of being eaten by a trout?! Wake me up already!" I shouted. And that's when it happened.

"GIVE ME BACK MY STAAAFF!"

It was like a silver star crashing into the earth. A girl, with her robes hitched up, slammed onto the head of the trout and instantly stabbed into its skull with a knife. It roared with pain not unlike a monster in a movie might and started flailing, swinging its head every which way. In the process I was flung out of its mouth and

landed on the shore.

Stella promptly jumped off the trout's head and landed next to me.

"Talk about fast," I said. "I didn't expect you to come for me this quickl—"

"Wrong! I didn't come to pick you up, I just happened to have an errand to run over here," Stella said, but she picked me up and cradled me gently regardless.

I started to ask what that errand might have been, only for a large shadow to wiggle up behind her.

"Behind you, Stella!" I shouted. The giant trout was opening its mouth to try and eat us.

Stella let out a "Ngh!" and rolled to the side, but the trout chomped down hard and managed to get part of her robe. She instantly cut it off with a knife to escape. There wasn't a shred of hesitation in any of her movements.

"Are you a combat veteran, Stella...? Normal people can't do stuff like that. Or I couldn't, at least."

"We can chat later! Running away comes first!"

Stella got up and began running from the pond with me in her hands. The trout roared again. It had us in its sight, and it came charging at us while slamming its fins into the ground.

"GAAAAAH!"

"Otaku?!"

The trout had bitten into my head. My screams left it unfazed; it kept its teeth locked on me.

Stella didn't abandon me.

"Let go, you! LET GO!"

She grabbed my leg(?) and pulled, digging her feet into the ground. The problem was that the trout weighed several times more than she did. This was not a game of tug-of-war she'd want to play.

Stella's feet were getting pulled into the pond, but she nonetheless tugged on me with fierce intensity. At this rate, we'd both end up as fish food.

"It's too strong, Stella! Leave me behind and run!" I declared, trying to act as cool as possible. This was all a dream, after all. What

harm was there in getting eaten by a trout?

"Leave you behind...? Don't be ridiculous. You're my staff...!" Stella yelled back, her tearful expression twisting. That caught me off guard, and as I faltered, Stella was pulled into the pond herself.

"EEK!"

"Stella...!"

It was then the trout opened its mouth wide, as if it had been waiting for this very moment. The fish intended to swallow us both down.

And just like that, with staff in hand, Stella was...

"Not happening!" she shouted with a flash of her eyes.

She twisted me to wield me more like a spear, then stabbed it upward into the top of the trout's mouth.

I felt a kind of squishy pop as I tore into flesh. The trout roared again, but Stella didn't stop her attack.

"This. Staff. Is. MINE! I'm not letting anyone else have hiiim!"

Stella repeatedly stabbed the trout's upper mouth. The trout flailed each time before eventually settling down.

Whoa.

I just watched on in a daze like a lump of wood, which was fitting. Stella had far more strength than her dainty body implied. Tossing me over an entire forest and killing a giant trout was no easy feat.

Stella hopped out of the immobilized trout's mouth.

The now sopping-wet girl held her staff (me) and left the pond to return to the forest. Her steps were the only sound in the quiet night.

"Thanks for coming to pick me up. I thought I would never get to see you again," I said. Her shoulders jerked.

Since she was holding me upside down, I couldn't see her face. If only she would flip me around.

"Like I said," she replied after a pause. "I just happened to have an errand to run by the pond."

"Right, right. And what was that errand?"

"None of your business, that's what."

Mm. Now *that* was the sauce for a tsundere lover like myself...

That completely non-subtle way of hiding embarrassment. She actually had come to pick me up, but she didn't want to admit it, so she was claiming she had an errand instead.

"Aaah, now *this* is a tsundere! I'm glad to belong to you, Stella!"

"A-Are you stupid?! Let it be known I hate your guts, Otaku!"

"If that were true, you could've just let me be."

I laughed to myself; she really was dishonest. And this was a rare case where she didn't immediately snap back.

She hesitated, then asked, "Are you not mad?"

Mad? Now that was a head-tilter.

"Why would I be mad?"

"You nearly got eaten by a magibeast. They even chew up bones, so staff or not, you would have been a goner."

"Come again?!" I yelped.

Stella sniffed. "Did you not even know the danger you were in...? W-Well, I didn't mean to throw you into the pond. I didn't think you would go so fa—"

"That's not what I mean, Stella."

Apparently Stella was worried about me being mad or not, but that made no sense considering I was the one who had embarrassed her to the point of implosion. If I was mad about anything, it was something else entirely.

"Why did you put yourself at so much risk just to get me?! That was dangerous!" I exclaimed. A shudder went down my spine in retrospect. I had to thank my lucky stars Stella was okay. "What would be the point if you got eaten yourself trying to save me?! Your safety is obviously far more of a concern."

"Don't be condescending. That was a walk in the park for me."

"Your robe's torn up. And your clothes are soaked."

"Good; I was just thinking of getting changed."

"I'm glad you helped me, but I don't want you getting hurt, Stella. Don't put yourself in danger for my sake."

"As if I'd ever do that for you, Otaku. Your misunderstandings are getting kind of irritating!"

"Fine, fine... Thanks, Stella."

"Mnnn! You just don't get it!"

Stella swung me around as if throwing a tantrum, which afforded me a look at her face. Her cheeks were so red it was visible even this late at night. Her eyelashes were lowered in embarrassment. And, long story short, my love of tsunderes was only reaffirmed.

"Stella, you shouldn't wait on getting changed. You'll catch a cold."

"I was obviously going to do that regardless. You...weird spirit," she said. Her tone was cold, but she tightened her grip on me.

* * *

Stella entered the sizable Western mansion I'd seen earlier. After passing through the grand entrance hall, we entered a long hallway with a rigid row of doors. Stella entered the door farthest inside.

There were two bunk beds inside and four study desks. A pretty traditional four-person room.

"Listen up. I'm going to get changed now, but you'd *better* not look! You'd *better, better, BETTER* not look, okay?!" Stella said, looking down at me with her hands on her hips.

"You're putting on a show of pretending you don't want me to look, but that always leads to the other person looking anyway."

"I'm not pretending! If you look, I'll never stop calling you perverted."

"That's not the trump card you thought it'd be."

What man wouldn't rejoice over having a beauty call them a pervert? It seemed Stella was still far from understanding how men thought.

Stella balked. "I forgot! You're an actual, literal pervert!"

"If you don't want me to see, stuff me in your bed or something. I don't have the hands to throw off the covers."

"Wow. True," Stella said, then promptly stuffed me into one of the beds. I was engulfed by soft fabric.

This must be Stella's bed...sniff, sniff! Am I in heaven? It smells incredible. I'm so glad I still have my sense of smell.

After a bit, Stella flipped off the covers.

"I'm done," she said. She was now wearing casual clothes. There

wasn't much to say about them, but that in turn emphasized her natural beauty. The sophisticated mounds on her chest, the gleaming legs extending from her skirt... She had even fixed her hair, since it had ended up disheveled during the fight with the trout.

She took a new pair of robes from a closet and put them on.

"Aaah, all that activity's made me hungry. I think I'll go to the square. But, hmm, whatever shall I eat...?"

"Hold it, Stella."

"What?"

"I'd kind of like to go back to reality now..."

I knew talking to her about this likely wouldn't be productive, but I couldn't help myself. I was actually starting to panic a bit.

This dream was just a little too real. And I didn't seem close to waking up. Normally, a dream like this would end around the trout part.

"Reality... What, do you still think this is just a dream?"

"Allow me to prove this is a dream with simple but definitive reasoning," I began. Stella gave an exaggerated sigh.

"First, my body's turned into a staff."

"It's totally normal for spirits to possess staves."

"Next, you understand Japanese for some reason!" I declared, puffing out my chest with pride (metaphorically).

As far as I could tell, this wasn't Japan. Why, then, did she understand my Japanese, and why was she speaking Japanese? If this wasn't a case of dreamworld convenience, then what was?

"Japa-what?" Stella asked, tilting her head. "I'm speaking Oravinoese."

"Excuse me?"

"The scriptures say the all-knowing, all-powerful Goddess devised a system by which spirits and people could communicate. The air itself automatically translates our languages so we can understand each other."

What the hell? You're telling me the air here has machine translation functionality? That's just way too convenient!

"Finished your little bout of escapism, Otaku?" Stella asked, looking down at me with exasperation.

Escapism... Right, this was an escapist dream. All those horrible revelations about my childhood friend must have really done some damage to my psyche. Here I was, unable to recover without forming my ideal tsundere wife.

It's about time to go back to reality. I'll hate to say goodbye to this girl, but if she's a delusion of mine, we can just meet in another dream—hopefully one in which I have a human body.

The question was, what do I do to wake up?

"Stella, could you give me a good smack?"

Stella's expression tightened, and she looked at me like I was garbage.

"Pervert..."

Well, that gave off the wrong impression. I just wanted to try pain as a wake-up method again. I'd bash my head against a wall if I could, but alas.

Incidentally, she was clearly disturbed by my request. She took a step back as if to protect herself.

Well, looks like she's leaving me no choice. I have to flame her embarrassment until she loses control of her hand.

"By the way, your bed smells incredible. Forget what I was saying—just let me stay here forever."

"What...?!" Stella hurriedly nabbed me off her bed, then glared at me with bright red cheeks. "Who said you could sniff my bed, you freak?!"

"What, did you expect me to hold my nose the whole time?"

"You don't even have a nose! How can you sniff?! Where are your nostrils?! Tell me so I can plug them!"

"Now that's an even more prickly line than I expected! That's Stella for you; she'll never let an otaku down!"

"Grr! I didn't say that to make you happy!" Stella shouted with loud stamps of her feet.

"Well, you're in kind of a rough spot, then."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm confident any insult of yours will bring only joy to my heart. After all, I love your type from the bottom of my heart!"

Stella's face basically caught fire.

It took just a glance to confirm I had gone far beyond what her shy heart could handle. She trembled, and pulled back the arm holding me.

"YOU BIG STUPID DUMB IDIOOOOT!"

All according to plan.

Stella threw me as hard as she could. At first I cheered and prepared to slam into the wall hard enough to shatter my theoretical skull, only to instead soar through the open window.

Huh? Well, whatever.

The last thing I saw was a sort of *oh, crap* look on Stella's face before I flipped over and crashed onto the stone below headfirst.

* * *

Some would say the definition of insanity is expecting a different result from the same thing.

After awakening, I found myself resting on the lap of a silver-haired beauty. We were beside the Western mansion that we'd just been in. Stella, having sat down on a bench, had a backdrop of stars behind her as looked down at me. The back of my staff-head (don't interpret that the wrong way) was set upon the divine softness only thighs could have. On top of that, she was even stroking me. What bliss! It took a lot to contain my urge to stay here forever in still silence.

"Stella."

Her hand froze after a jerk. She realized I was awake and hurriedly pulled back, replacing her look of worried concern with a poker face.

"You got me scolded by my mentor, you know."

"What'd they say?"

"'Don't go throwing your lifeline out the window, stupid girl.'"

"That's an exaggeration. I'm not your lifeline or anything."

"Normally people treat staves with the same importance they do their own lives."

"News to me... Well, anyway, sorry. I won't be making any stupid requests like that again."

After all, here I was, still a staff in fantasyland. Not even pain great enough to knock me unconscious had been enough to wake me up.

And that meant this wasn't a dream.

"Where is this?"

"Um...the dormitory of Saint Antohsa's Academy?"

"What's the name of the country? What year, month, and day is this?"

"This is the Kingdom of Oravina, the Goddess-blessed ruler of the west continent. This is year 1023 of the Goddess Calendar and day fifteen of the Month of Wind... Where's all this coming from?"

If I had hands, I would have cradled my head. This place was totally beyond my understanding. I had to use all of my otaku knowledge to determine this was, perhaps, a fabled "isekai reincarnation." I was hit by a steel pipe in Japan, died a brutal death, and reincarnated into a staff as another world.

Sure, makes sense. Get hit by a stick, turn into a stick... REALLY?!

If gods were real, I'd fight them to my last breath. Why turn me into a staff? Wouldn't that logic mean people hit by trucks should turn into trucks? Not to mention, the standard isekai trope was to start with some kind of special skill. I didn't get anything. Unless I was actually all-powerful and just hadn't noticed yet?

"STATUS, OPEN!" I declared.

"Um. What?"

"N-Never mind..."

No status window popped up. My only saving grace was that Stella didn't laugh in my face.

"Well, anyway. If you're awake, I'm going to the cafeteria. I don't care what it is, I need food in me."

"Oh, okay."

"D-Don't get the wrong idea, okay? I wasn't waiting for you to wake up or anything! I had NO plans to eat dinner with you at all!"

"Oh, okay."

Silence.

"Is it just me, or are you kind of depressed right now?" Stella asked after a pause.

“Well, I mean... How unlucky do you have to be to get isekai’d with no cheat skill?”

“Want me to call you a pervert? Maybe slap you a little?”

“Nah... I want to save gifts like that for when I can be me...”

Like, come on. I used to be a *human*, and *now* look at me. Of all things I could reincarnate into, I came back as a staff. It was beyond me to move even a single centimeter. Turn me into a pig, a spider, a slime, whatever! Any living creature would do—all I wanted was to be able to move. But instead, I was stuck as a staff, unable to move without someone else carrying me.

This was something I felt when I fell into the pond earlier: It was *very* stressful to have no capacity to move one’s own body. As it stood, I had no means of changing my fate... And since I was a staff, I had no natural lifespan. Worst-case scenario, I would be stuck like this for thousands of years.

Aaand suddenly I miss my old world.

“This might come off as sacrilegious, but are gods real in this world?”

“Are you talking about the Goddess?”

Oh yeah. She had been yapping about a goddess for a while now.

“What kind of god is this Goddess of yours?”

“I mean, she’s an omniscient and omnipotent being of transcendental nature. She shined light upon the world, formed the continents and oceans, and gave man fire. Plus, she circulates the wind. She watches over us from the stars. There is no god but the Goddess,” Stella said, each word and syllable dripping with faith.

So this land be monotheistic, eh? Given that she could, uh, fill the air with machine translation particles or whatever, those claims of omnipotence were likely well-founded.

Which meant I had found someone to complain to.

“Stella, how can someone meet the Goddess?”

“Um, what?” Stella balked. “Meet the Goddess? Why?”

“I want you to listen carefully and calmly to what I’m about to say. I came from another world.”

“What do you mean, another world?”

“I mean a place that was never meant to cross paths with this

world. Think of it as me coming from a country so incredibly, unfathomably far away you would have no means of ever visiting it yourself. Before becoming a staff, I was a high schooler in Japan."

"High sch-what? You say so many words that just make no sense."

"It means on the inside I'm a seventeen-year-old student."

"Wait, what? You're not a spirit?"

"I don't know what 'spirit' means to you, but I'm a human. I spent seventeen years living as a human in another world, then got hit on my head and woke up here in a staff."

"No way..." Stella said, and then she seemingly found herself unable to say anything else. My story was just that out there.

"I need your help here, Stella. Do you know of any precedents for humans inhabiting staves? Is that normal in this world?"

"I don't think so..."

"Then it sounds like I need to pray to your Goddess and complain that isekai'ing me into a staff is pretty unreasonable. I can't do anything as a staff. When I was stuck in the ground, and back when we were attacked by a trout, I couldn't move a finger—I don't even have any. Why do I have to deal with being pulled into some weird foreign world and live this nightmare? I had seventeen years of life as a loser otaku I worked hard to develop. Stealing all of that to turn me into a staff seems a bit cruel!"

This was probably some kind of horrible mistake. An intern angel shuffled in the wrong file, the Goddess didn't double-check before executing it, something something.

"I won't demand a cheat skill as recompense, of course. I just want my old life back. That's all."

A cold nighttime wind blew, causing Stella's robe to flutter. Her temperature must've dropped; her lips were trembling.

See...? This was why I hated being a staff. I couldn't even hold down her robes for her.

Stella absentmindedly scratched at her robe. "Okay," she said. She then started swinging me about in the air. "Aaah, jeez. I knew something was wrong here. I've never heard of a talking staff before, ever."

"Oh, so staves don't talk in this world, then?"

"The staves my classmates have don't. That's why I thought I had gotten a really special spirit. Maybe a Grand Spirit, even."

Swish, swish.

She was swinging me about from my feet. The spinning world around me afforded no glimpse of her expression.

"Guh... Stella, stop with the swinging. I get motion sick easily. I'm about to hurl."

"You're a staff. You can't hurl."

While true, I still felt gross. I'd rather she stopped.

"Can you see that? It's the statue of the Goddess," Stella said, thrusting me in front of it. We had arrived at the entrance to a plaza before I'd even realized it.

Before us stretched out rows of busy food and merchant stands. At the far back end was a giant statue of an adult woman, clad in robes and holding a divine-looking staff. Her expression was filled with compassion. She seemed very goddess-like indeed.

"I'll do what I can to help you meet the Goddess," Stella said, smiling and looking over the lamps surrounding the stands. "You're lucky. This is the Goddess's yearly Descension Ceremony."

"Descension what now?"

"The Goddess descends to the mortal realm once a year to answer our prayers. And that's today."

"Does she grant any wish?"

"Obviously not. The Goddess loves peace and tranquility. She wouldn't grant any wishes offensive to a moral society, or those filled with greed. There's also requests that contradict her own will... Do you see those little strips of paper by the statue's feet?" Stella asked. Her tone kind of got awkward at the end there, but I looked at the statue anyway. Her feet were covered with countless pieces of paper.

"Yeah. That's quite a bunch."

"They say the Goddess inhabits the statue on the day of the ceremony. Anything touching the statue then becomes sacred and reaches where the Goddess lives. That's why we write down our prayers and offer them to the statue."

"You wrote yours on a strip too?"

"Of course."

"What was your wish?"

"Who cares? Yours is more important right now," Stella said, poking my head. "If you want her to hear you out, you need to touch the statue during the ceremony yourself."

"Can't you just write a strip for me yourself?"

"There's a rule of one strip being given out per person. And you don't count as a person."

"You can't just use some other kind of paper?"

"Obviously not! Listen up—the strips are made through a divine miracle granted by the Goddess. All wishes written on the slips fly to the statue the moment the ceremony ends. Normal paper won't get you anything from the Goddess."

She ended up scolding me. It seemed that a religious adherent like Stella found my suggestions offensive.

"And since you can't write your slip yourself, you have no choice but to touch the statue sometime today, become a divine instrument, and plead to the Goddess directly. You'll have to ask her to take you back to your original world."

"All right! Let's go touch the statue!" I exclaimed. And while I would've made the first bold step right away if I were a human, my only choice was to look at my owner with hope.

Aaand she didn't move.

"Take a closer look. Do you really think touching the Goddess statue will be easy?"

I checked the plaza again. The statue was surrounded by armored guards, and despite the large crowd, not a single person went anywhere near it.

"The king's soldiers guard the statue during the Descension Ceremony. They stop anyone from just up and touching the statue or messing with the slips."

"Makes sense. The statue would be swarmed if it was anyone's ticket to seeing the Goddess."

"And that's why our first move will be figuring out a way to get rid of those soldiers."

Soldiers' side: twenty armored adults.

Our side: Stella and me (a staff).

"Hold it, hold it. I get that I need to find my way past them, but there's no reason for you to go this far for me, is there...?"

This was a bad direction. I kept finding myself relying on Stella since I was just a staff.

I wanted to meet the Goddess so I could go back to my world, but Stella had no reason whatsoever to help me. It was possible she'd make an enemy out of the king's army. That was a big risk with no rewards for her.

"I appreciate your willingness to help, but you have your own life, and—"

"D-Don't get the wrong idea! I'm just helping you so I can get you out of my staff as soon as possible," Stella said, placing a hand on her hips.

"Am I...a problem?" I asked.

"Obviously. You being in there is why I can't get a Grand Spirit staff."

"Grand Spirit... I feel like I heard that before. Very recently."

"They're the highest rank of spirits. My staff was supposed to house a Grand Spirit, not a pervert like you, Otaku!"

"Sorry. This is all my fault..."

"W-Well, as long as you understand. I'm offering my help because I want you out of my staff... Not because I feel awful that you have no way of turning back into a human!"

"You care about my situation that much? You sure are kindhearted."

"Wrong! That's the opposite of what I just said, jeez!" Stella exclaimed with a sharp tilt of her head. Her cheeks were red.

Let it be known that tsundere lovers are no shallow fools. I can see through their shy, embarrassed acts as if they're made of glass.

Still, the fact I was causing problems by being inside of her staff was likely true. I wouldn't want an otaku in my sick wizard staff either. Give me a Grand Spirit any day.

"While I'm at it, I'll touch the statue too. I can meet the Goddess and get my wish granted to kill two birds with one stone. It's genius," Stella said.

"And what's your wish?" I asked after a pause.

"I mean, isn't it obvious? I want a Grand Spirit in my staff."

I had no idea what the relative value of a wish like that would be, but I could tell it was important to her.

"Well, let's go get our wishes granted," I said. Stella nodded. I felt her tighten her grip on me. Our plan was to get past the guards and touch the Goddess statue, but that was so bare-bones it could hardly be called a real plan at all.

"With this many people, we won't have any chance at all. We'll have to wait for the festivities to end before we try. Which means getting something to eat sooner rather than later," Stella said, walking between the stands with me still in hand.

The sweet and savory scents of loose candy and cooking meat drifted to me. It seemed the food here wasn't much different from what I was familiar with. There was a stage with lit-up hearths at the back of the plaza, and girls wearing matching outfits were chanting some kind of grand, solemn song.

On the other end of the stage was a statue of the Goddess. She was looking down upon the plaza with a calm smile—one that was so perfect, it ended up feeling kind of fake and fishy. Though maybe that was just me.

"So, Stella. Why is everyone here a girl?" I asked, having noted that everyone we passed by was a girl wearing robes and carrying a staff just like Stella was. Even the Goddess's statue had a staff, which possibly pointed to the fact carrying one was common sense here.

"This is Saint Antohsa's Academy. It's an all girls' school with a dormitory, so boys are obviously banned from the premises."

"And they seem to mostly be teenagers too. Don't think I see someone twenty or older here."

"There's some older guys working the stands here due to the ceremony, but normally a single boy here would kick up a huge fuss. The soldiers would come barging right for them."

"To think I've infiltrated an all girls' school. Maybe being a staff isn't half bad after all."

"Why do you sound so lively?"

“I mean, name a more common harem trope than there being a single guy at an all girls’ schoo— Ow, ouch!”

“Idiot! You pervert!” Stella shouted, slamming me against the stone path all the while. Uh-huh. I had ticked her off.

“Look, no matter how many heroines end up flocking around me, you’ll always be my one true love, Stella! I won’t leave you behind to go flirt with other girls. No archetype can beat a tsundere!”

“Um, excuse me?! I’d rather die than be caught flirting with a creep like you, Otaku.”

She intensified her slamming with each word. The banging was starting to make my head hurt. I was a fan of embarrassment expressed through violence, though. It meant she was so intensely embarrassed that only a high-impact tsundere beatdown could calm her down. How cute was that?

“Hey!” came a shout from the side.

An older woman came running this way with a scary frown. “How dare you treat your staff so poorly? Your life is in its hands. What would the Goddess think if she were to...”

The woman, probably a professor, launched into a verbose, tedious speech. She must’ve been scolded like this when she threw me out her window too. Stella listened with a solemn expression.

“Good grief, this is why nobody likes you,” the professor concluded. Stella flinched.

(Uh... “Nobody likes” her?)

The professor coughed and left, leaving Stella to bite her lips and lower her head.

“Stella, what was—”

“Shut up for a second; I need to buy food.”

Stella bound me with a cord and put me on her back, then went to a stand with a long line. The staves of this world weren’t talkers either, it seemed. Sella would end up looking weird if we had a conversation.

I fell silent and allowed myself to become a true staff.

The moment Stella lined up, the girl in front of us turned around; she balked, then quickly left. The other students followed one after another, scattering like spiders.

(What...? Are they avoiding Stella?)

Stella arrived at the stand before I could even finish that thought. The entire line had vanished into the wind. They were watching Stella from afar and whispering to each other.

Not exactly pleasant.

Stella had surely noticed all of this, but she didn't seem bothered. She stayed facing directly forward with a calm demeanor and ordered some kind of kebabs from the older man at the stand.

He chatted with her while preparing the order. "Yer pretty tiny, miss. Are ya really a student here?"

"Hmph... I'm a first-year."

"Ha ha! I'm sure yer growth spurt's comin' right up. Lemme help ya with that—this one's on me," he said, sticking some extra meat onto the kebab.

Stella waved her hands. "I-I didn't order this much...!"

"It's fine, it's fine," he said, sticking out the loaded kebab. Stella hesitated, eyes wandering all over, until finally she shook her head in defeat.

"F-Fine, if you insist. I accept your kindness," she said. Her tone indicated she was none too pleased to do so, but the smile creeping on her lips betrayed her true feelings. Her eyes were sparkling at the kebab too.

The man gave a broad smile. "Hey, may the Goddess bless ya."

Good job, random guy! Let's get together and discuss tsunderes one day.

Stella left the stand with her wrapped kebab.

The plaza had a bunch of tables and chairs lined up like what one might see in a food court. The moment Stella sat down in an open seat, all the students in the nearby seats left to sit down elsewhere.

They're not even trying to hide it. Well, that gives us the opportunity to talk, I guess.

I started to speak, only to be interrupted by shrill laughter. "Oooooh ho ho ho! I should have known you were behind the sudden killing of the mood, Stupella."

A haughty redhead girl came walking into the space left by everyone avoiding Stella. She seemed about Stella's age, but with

her ballroom gown decorated with lavish accessories, she was much gaudier. She even carried a glittering folding fan.

Ah, the fabled isekai villainess...

"What are you even doing here in our most noble of plazas? Do not tell me you think you are a fitting presence to celebrate the Descension Ceremony," the red-haired girl said with dripping condescension. Beside her were three other girls, wearing less-flashy outfits and nodding along.

"I have to imagine she is only here to eat before leaving. Pffff..."

"Let us hope her inability to use holy magic does not rub off on us... She is the shame of Antohsa."

"She truly is."

They really are like a cliché villainess and her equally cliché gang of groupies.

Stella looked at them with her mouth drawn into a thin line. Even on her back, I could feel the tension running through her. I gave her a silent but hearty cheer on the inside. No matter what happened, she would have an ally in me.

As if offended by Stella's mere gaze, the villainess sneered. "What? Have something to say, Stupella?"

Stella didn't respond. She just continued staring back at them.

The villainess sniffed. "Hurry back to your room. There is no place for you in this most holy of ceremonies. The fact you are here at all is a hindrance to everyone," she said, then brandished her staff with a flourish. "O Spirits of Fire, fulfill your contract in the name of the Goddess supreme: *Ignaria Sein*!"

With an explosive boom, the tip of the girl's staff was wrapped in fire.

What the heck...?!

Before I knew it, a fireball the size of a tennis ball was floating next to the villainess's red hair. That was something that couldn't be explained by modern science. Was it magic? Did this world have magic?!

My enthusiasm was in contrast to the increasing danger of the situation.

The villainess put on a devilish smile and swung down her staff.

“Now! Begone, you waste of space!” The fireball shot toward Stella.

“Ngh!”

Stella kicked her chair, leaped up, took a bag out of her pocket, and threw it at the group of four. It exploded with a pop and showered the area with white powder.

“Wha... *Cough, cough!* Is this flour?!”

“How chi—*cough*! Childish! Pfffhohoh!”

“*Cough, cough!* What a coward... Refusing to fight holy magic with holy magic...”

“She truly—*ACHOO!*—is...”

Stella fled in the blink of an eye. The fireball chased after and exploded where her feet had been. Others looked our way to see what was going on, but none of them tried to help—not even the professors. They would warn a student about how they’re treating a staff, but not intervene in a fight? I could hear Stella’s ragged breathing right next to my pseudo-ears as she ran.

I think she’s gone far enough...

“Stella, you lost them.”

She paused. We found ourselves in a corner of the plaza where none of the music from the stage or lights from the stage could reach us. Here, Stella could catch her breath.

After some silence, she said, “I’ll be eating here.”

“Sounds good.” Any food eaten next to a tsundere would surely be the highest delicacy. However... “WHY DO I HAVE TO BE A STAAAAFF?!”

We were at the edge of the plaza. Stella sat on some stairs next to some overgrown shrubbery and bit into her kebab. I rested on the stairs next to her.

“Guh? What was that for?” she asked, surprised by my shouting.

Putting me like this made it look like we were sitting next to each other, but at the end of the day I was just a staff. I couldn’t eat. And I didn’t feel hunger either.

“I curse your name, O Goddess... You have granted me a dream scenario in reincarnating to another world where I get to go on a festival date with a tsundere girl, only to make me a staff! I don’t even get to try out isekai food with her!”

"Date?!" Stella yelped. "Th-Th-That's stupid! This isn't a da— Wait. I'm alone with a boy, which may, in fact, make this a date... WH-WHAT DO YOU DO ON DATES?!"

"Ngggh! My chance to have a tsundere mock me for not having money on me, lend me half of her food, and ultimately up shyly feeding me has been stolen! Do the divine have no hearts?!"

"O-Open wiiide?" Stella, her cheeks bright red, pushed a chunk of meat against my cheek and rubbed. The wood of my face soon became covered in sauce and grease. "H-Happy now? Jeez, this is so stupid."

"You're so kind my faith in the divine has been renewed," I replied, looking at Stella with the piece of meat still stuck to my cheek.

She was burying her face in the kebab, completely devouring it. The furtive glances she sometimes shot my way were delightfully innocent. This had turned into an actual date.

"So, Stella. Does this world have magic?"

"Mnn, magic?!" Stella cried, a look of shock on her face. That was the kind of reaction one gave when a taboo subject was brought up.

"That redhead just blasted out fire, didn't she? Isn't that magic?"

"Obviously not. Magic is a cursed technique used by witches. Quinza is a bully, but she isn't a world-ending witch."

Hmm. Seems like this place views magic differently from how my world does.

"What do you call that, then?"

"It was a miracle. Do you not know what miracles are...?"

"Not ones that actually happen, no."

"They're just what they sound like—miracles performed by borrowing the power of spirits. Nature is filled with spirits of five types: Light, Fire, Water, Wind, and Earth. We ask the spirits for their aid, and they let us use their power."

"Hence the fireball."

"Quinza's staff has a high-ranking Fire spirit, which makes Fire miracles her specialty," Stella explained. It basically sounded like the same thing as the magic I was familiar with.

Apparently it was common for staves to be inhabited by

elemental spirits, which explained why I was a bit of a problem for Stella. Fair enough. The fact she wanted a Grand Spirit in her staff was indicative of just how important spirits in staves surely were.

"Just one more question. What was with all her insults?" I asked. The villainess had addressed Stella as "Stupella," and even the professor from before had said nobody liked her. Truth aside, there had to be something behind having a nickname like that.

Stella paused. She glared into the distance, where a bunch of students were enjoying the festival.

"Don't talk about that again. It's uncomfortable."

"But why? I want to know why you're being treated like that. Who in the world could ever dislike you?"

"Drop it. I told you not to talk about it, didn't I?"

"Why are you avoiding the subject? If there's something going on here, I want to know. I can be bias-free since I'm from another world."

"I don't want to talk about it! Why do I need to explain every little detail to you?"

"I mean, 'Stupella' is just too cruel! I want to help y—"

I rolled off the stairs and fell into the shrubbery. Staves couldn't roll on their own; Stella had kicked me.

She looked at me through the gaps between leaves.

"Stella...?"

She crushed the wrapping of her finished kebab with a balled fist and stood up. "Forget it. I'm done dealing with you. Maybe someone else will find you here, if you're lucky. Bye."

The moment she looked down at me with scorn in her eyes, I knew I had messed up.

She was serious this time. There was no tsundere-ness here. I was finished if Stella abandoned me; there was no guarantee anyone else would want to keep a talking staff with them.

I desperately called out from my place in the shrubbery. "Wait, Stella! Leaving me behind won't solve anything!"

"I won't have to talk to you again, at least."

"Please, don't get mad; just tell me what's going on."

"Shut up! It has nothing to do with you," Stella yelled.

She started to run away, her silver hair vanishing into the distance.

Pathetic as I was, I couldn't catch up to her. Anxiety swept me. This was exactly why I hated being a staff.

"Of course it has something to do with me. Because, Stella... YOU'RE MY IDOL!"

My roar echoed down the street. Stella paused. After a moment, she turned and muttered, "Idol...?"

"Otaku get their life energy from their idols! You could say we live for them. We want them to be happy, and we want to see them smiling. Your happiness is our happiness. If it's for our idols, we otaku can work hard day in and day out!"

Stella blinked rapidly. Her vocabulary most likely lacked both "idol" and "otaku." Still, I continued on, the words stumbling out of my mouth.

"If my idol has a problem, I want to fix it. I want to do anything I can to help my idol smile. Didn't I say it at the start? 'Let me spend my life with you.' From that moment, you were my idol. But up until now I've been unable to help you at all; you dug me out and told me about the world, but there's nothing I've done! It's pathetic. An otaku must repay their idol. Please, let me do something for you...!"

It was a self-centered request, but my passion seemed to reach her. Stella walked over and looked down at me.

"Are you stupid?" she asked, a backdrop of stars twinkling behind her.

After picking me up, Stella leaned me against the stairs again. She sat next to me and cradled her legs.

"Jeez, how stupid can you get...? Wanting to repay me over basically nothing...?"

"Most otaku are idiots."

"Don't be so serious with meat on you."

Stella flicked off the piece of meat stuck to my cheek, then spoke in a heavy tone while wiping me off.

"This is Saint Antohsa's Academy. It's one of Oravina's most prestigious schools, established to raise talented saints. I'm a student here, but I've never cast a single miracle."

"Saints?"

"Women studying miracles are called saints. You really don't know anything, do you?"

"That's why starting with the basics is such a help."

"Anyone who holds a staff and chants the proper prayer can cast a miracle—it doesn't matter how old or rich you are, or even if you're a girl or a boy. Though talent will impact how strong they are."

"But you can't use miracles, Stella...?"

"That's right."

"Do you know why?"

"It's because the spirits hate me, apparently."

"Excuse me?" I asked after a pause.

"That should be obvious. Miracles happen by asking the spirits for help; if the spirits hate you, they won't inhabit your staff, and your miracles won't work."

Stella was hated because the spirits didn't like her? How much bad taste did the spirits have to have to dislike Stella? I'd like to gather them all in one place and give an entire presentation on Stella's appeal. Shilling one's idol was an otaku's duty.

"So, the reason those girls all left the stand was..."

"They think that being near me will make their spirits run away and leave them unable to use miracles too. But that would never happen. It's not like I'm touching their staves or anything," Stella said. Her eyes began to shift, and she fidgeted in place. "And that's why...you're my first."

My first. The phrase made me tense up.

"Y-You're the first spirit to ever inhabit my staff."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I'm not a real spirit."

Stella sighed and picked me up. "If only I could cast miracles with you..."

She began to spin, taking steps as if dancing. The hem of her robe flowed out like a blooming flower, and her long silver air fluttered softly in the wind.

"O Spirits of Light, fulfill your contract in the name of the Goddess supreme: *Luxsaria Sein*!"

That was an incantation, but unlike when the villainess chanted

it, nothing happened. Stella was engulfed only in the suffocating darkness of night. Even so, she continued her chant.

"Pray and ye shall receive. Even the darkest of midnight caves shall shine with dazzling light: *Luxsaria Sein*... Why do you answer everyone else, but not me? Spirits of Light, please, come out... *Luxsaria Sein*..." Stella's voice was getting tearful. She rubbed her cheek against me, trembling, and repeated the incantation as if praying.

Hey. You spirits of Light or whatever!

I was starting to get pissed.

Where do you get off, when Stella's about to cry begging for your help? Seems like you have no idea just how precious a tsundere asking for help is, so listen up.

Tsundere girls do NOT go around asking for help. After all, it's a struggle for them to be honest with themselves, and even if they want something, they won't admit it. They'll especially avoid any requests that make it clear they have affection for someone else. Reason being, their crush learning about their feelings would make them so embarrassed they could die.

But right now, Stella is making a request! This is a moment of miracles, visible only when a tsundere's iron defenses have broken down.

Imagine a girl who's usually all mean and prickly suddenly begging for something with tearful eyes... Is there anyone alive who wouldn't be hit by that?! I can't fathom how you can ignore her. It's just shining a bit of light. Look at how desperate she is; at least grant this one wish, you Light spirits!

And just as I thought that...my vision was blinded by a flash.

"Wh— Ah!"

What looked like a light bulb floated between us, shining upon Stella's face. By the time her mouth opened wide in shock, the bulb had disappeared.

"Did you see that?"

"Yep. I did."

"I cast a miracle...! Wow, that was my first time! I actually cast a miracle!"

Stella began celebrating with a sparkling smile. She lifted me up and spun in circles.

Not bad, spirits. A tsundere's smile is the greatest miracle of all, isn't it? I will acknowledge you as my compatriots.

"I did it! Thanks to you, I finally cast a miracle and..." Stella suddenly clamped her mouth shut. Her bright smile morphed into a prickly frown.

"What's wrong? Keep on celebrating. I love the prickly attitude of tsunderes, but I adore their lovey-dovey smiles most of all."

"Nobody asked for your opinion! I-I was just thinking I can't let myself be satisfied over something so small," she said. Apparently celebrating like that had left her embarrassed. She placed hands on her flushed cheeks. "That ball of light was like a bean at best. If that's the best you can do, you really are a bottom-tier spirit."

"I'm not a spirit to begin with, but yeah."

"I'm grateful you let me cast a miracle, but you're not the spirit for me, Otaku. After all, I'm aiming for the Opti Baculus."

"Opti-what?"

"The top saint squadron of the military: the Opti Baculus, also known as the Staves of the Goddess. They're an elite, tight-knit group known to be the strongest in the kingdom, and only the most skilled of saints can pass their brutal entry tests. I need a Grand Spirit, not a weak one like you," Stella said.

If she had such a Grand Spirit, the other students would surely stop avoiding her. Meet the Goddess, become a human, and get Stella a Grand Spirit—we had a clear plan.

Lights began to pop up, one after another, back in the plaza. Stella glanced back, turning her head. "Looks like the festival is coming to a close. At the end of the Descension Ceremony, everyone uses miracles to bring light to the darkness and pray to the Goddess," she explained. The lights filled the sky in the blink of an eye. It felt like I was seeing a sports arena get turned on.

"Should we form a light too?"

"What's the point when your light can't even last for more than a few moments? Don't push yourself; just enjoy the sights."

Fair enough. I decided to follow her lead.

Light engulfed the nighttime plaza. I was enraptured by the profile of the girl gazing upon it all. Her silver hair glittered under the light, and her long eyelashes left shadows across her face. She was prettier now than I had ever seen her.

A strong wind blew, and Stella grasped at her hair to hold it down; at the same time, cheers erupted at the plaza. The stage area seemed the loudest.

"This wind... Could Captain Hamiel be here as a guest?!"

"What, is that someone important?"

"Only the captain of the Opti Baculus! She's said to be one of—if not *the*—strongest saint there is. After all, she has a Grand Spirit of Wind in her staff!" Stella exclaimed, excitement exuding from her. She must have really admired this woman.

"This ceremony has guests, then?"

"Captain Hamiel is a graduate of Antohsa. She visits sometimes when there's a big event."

"Want to go see?" I asked.

"No," Stella replied with a shake of her head, then looked up. "I can see the Grand Spirit from here."

I looked up too. The night sky was dotted with twinkling stars; after a moment of looking, white clouds suddenly formed from nothing and began to gather.

This is...

The clouds flew with immense speed and formed an obvious shape in the sky: a wide torso, large scales, sharp claws and fangs... A massive dragon that spanned the sky formed.

I felt my heart thump. The intensity was enough for me to be left speechless. The dragon was flying at such a low altitude it felt like I could reach out and touch it. It circled the plaza with all its infinite lights. The wind roared, and Stella's robe loudly flapped behind her.

"Normally, you can't see spirits, but high-ranking ones can give themselves forms like that. This is just a performance for the event, but if the kingdom were ever in danger, these winds would blow away all of its enemies," Stella said, gazing upon the dragon blissfully.

So this is a Grand Spirit, huh...? No wonder Stella wants one for

herself.

Clouds taking the form of a giant dragon and a constant tempest... That fireball the villainess shot out earlier seemed like child's play now.

The soaring dragon ultimately curled around the statue of the Goddess to protect it, then disappeared.

Deafening applause filled the plaza. Stella ended up clapping too.

And that meant we were in go-mode.

Stella and I went over the plan one last time in the shrubbery.

"Listen up. Our time limit is the moment the date changes. Once the clock tower's bell rings, the ceremony's over. The Goddess will leave the statue. We have to touch it before then."

I followed Stella's eyes to the clock tower. If the clocks in this world were read the same as those I was familiar with, it was 11:30 right now.

"We just have to touch it for an instant, right?"

"Uh-huh. That will ascend you to the Goddess's heavenly seat."

Stella poked her head out to look at the plaza. Every last stand and table had been taken away. There was just the massive statue and about ten soldiers guarding it.

The soldiers seemed a bit relaxed, maybe since their duty was almost over. Some were yawning, some were eating a late-night kebab; none seemed overly tense.

The Grand Spirit of Wind's performance had marked the end of the ceremony.

The students and staff-runners were urged out of the plaza, and Stella obeyed. We returned to her room, prepared for a bit, then stealthily returned to the plaza.

Stella was now wrapped in a black robe that reached all the way down to her ankles. She had covered her head with a large hood, hidden her silver hair in a ponytail under it, and even covered her mouth with a cloth.

"Let's go."

"Yeah."

Stella burst into the plaza with me on her back. It was otherwise empty, so the soldiers immediately noticed the mysterious robed

figure.

"Who goes there?!" came the sharp shout. Since this was an all girls' school, the soldiers who had been sent were all women too. They all had on plate armor and wielded staves.

Stella sprinted without deigning to respond; as per our plans, she cut through the plaza without approaching the statue.

"You there, robed person! Stop! We'll shoot!"

Stella froze, and shot one glance at the soldiers. The guards relaxed just a bit thanks to her following their orders.

"It's past curfew for the dormitory. Take off that hood and state the name of your class."

This time, Stella didn't obey. She stood in silence, hood still covering her eyes.

The soldiers frowned. "I will repeat—take off your hood and identify yourself. Otherwise, we'll have to detain you."

Several of the soldiers approached. Once they were close enough, that was my mark to yell. "*Tch!* I'm not gonna get caught now, of all times!"

A shudder ran through the soldiers—my voice was far too deep to be a girl's.

"It's a man?!"

Stella's face was hidden by cloth. The hood hid her long hair and slender neck, and with the robe hiding her figure, one couldn't tell her gender for sure. (Though Stella had stamped her feet in an angry tantrum when I'd pointed that out back in her room.)

"A male has infiltrated Antohsa... Unthinkable!"

"Catch him at once!"

A palpable murderous intent radiated off the knights—just as Stella had predicted earlier. The older gentlemen running the stands had been let in for the festival, but under normal circumstances, men would get the soldiers charging right for them. Securing a male infiltrator came before anything. The knights did indeed charge right for us, their armor clinking.

Stella had already resumed sprinting to the exit.

"Halt! *Terararia Sei*— Gah!"

Stella threw a pouch of flour onto the chanting soldier's face,

inciting a coughing fit that left her unable to chant any miracles.

"Aha ha ha! That's what you deserve!" I cackled. My role here was to provide my voice. I'd bait them so hard they'd forget all about guarding the statue. "Catch me if you can, small fries!"

"You...!"

Stella threw pouch after pouch while I was taunting the soldiers, thereby keeping them unable to chant. She resumed running once they were totally covered in flour.

"You villain! We won't let you get away!"

The soldiers wiped the flour off and swung their staves.

"O Spirits of Light, *Luxsaria Sein*!"

"O Spirits of Earth, *Terararia Sein*!"

"O Spirits of Fire, *Ignaria Sein*!"

It was a flurry of miracles. Despite it being near midnight, Stella was lit up like a spotlight, and balls of fire and earth shot toward her like bullets.

"Stella!"

"I know."

I was getting nervous, but Stella remained completely calm. She jumped into some bushes; the fireballs and earth chunks hit the trunk of the shrubs. She lowered her head and kept running while using the shrubs as shields. The armored knights failed to catch up to Stella and couldn't land even a single blow.

Whew. I did a bit of a mental victory pose in relief.

Everything was going according to plan. I had thought the same during the trout fight, but Stella had incredibly honed fighting instincts. She held her own against saints without any miracles of her own. This was likely how Stella had survived all the difficulties in her life up until now using only her own body.

The soldiers ended up infuriated.

"Ngh, one trick after another...!"

"He'll make it out at this rate. Close the plaza!"

A soldier gripped a staff and slammed it against the cobblestone ground. They gripped it with both hands and began to chant.

"Yet the miracle-made castle walls never faltered, not even before thousands upon thousands of magibeasts. *Terararia Sein!*"

Suddenly, a wall resembling that of a castle's suddenly appeared in front of Stella. That blocked the plaza's exit, and left Stella without a path forward.

So this is the power of miracles...!

I could only look up in a daze at the wall looming before us. Stella stopped too, as if unsure of what to do next.

"Now you have no chance of escape. We've caught you, rogue."

The knights were closing in the distance from behind.

What do we do? Come on, me, think of something...!

Our plan would fail if Stella couldn't escape from the plaza. And just as I began to panic...her breath tickled what would've been my ear.

"Chant in a loud voice," she whispered, her lips almost touching me.

I obeyed at once.

"...May the third seal be broken!" I roared. The knights froze in shock. "She who kills is a calamity! She who steals is a calamity! She who violates is a calamity! The heavens punish those who aid witches. Those who seek magic will be burned in the hottest of hells. Eternal torment descends upon those who seek to overthrow the gods...!"

"Not this chant...!"

"A flood is coming. Protect the slips!"

Apparently the chant Stella taught me was for an incredibly powerful chant. The soldiers shored up their defenses with miracles. In the blink of an eye, a wall had formed between Stella and the soldiers.

I continued my chant, feeling as if I were a true miracle user. "The sea of blood that fell from the heavens sank the seven continents, washing the witch away. *Aquaria Sein!*"

My chant ended...but there was only silence. Far from a flood, there wasn't even a drop of water.

The confused soldiers poked their heads around the wall.

"Gah?!"

What they saw was Stella climbing over the plaza's wall. While the soldiers had been hiding, Stella had used her knife to climb—

something only possible due to her physical strength.

"Adios!" I called triumphantly, and Stella landed on the other end.

"Ngh! We were tricked!"

"Chase him, now!"

The soldiers made their walls disappear and chased after us, but they were too slow. Stella had escaped the plaza.

She immediately turned a corner and removed her hood. She tossed the cloth around her mouth into some shrubs and undid the ponytail binding her wealth of silver hair.

Now she was obviously a girl.

Some clambering footsteps came, and the soldiers turned the corner with such speed they nearly bumped into Stella.

"Eek!"

"Got you!"

Stella fell back onto her rear. The soldiers all instantly thrust their staves into her face. A light orb floating in the air lit her up.

"Hm? A girl...?"

The soldiers frowned. The person on the ground in front of them was a girl with long silver hair. She was wearing a robe, but who didn't in this world?

"What are you doing out at this hour?"

"S-Sorry. I dropped a really important hairpin, and I can't find it..." Stella replied in her high, girly voice; anyone could tell she was no man.

A clamor ran through the soldiers.

"Where did the infiltrator go?!"

"You—what's your name and class?"

"I'm Stella Millesia, a first-year."

"Stella?!" the soldiers exclaimed, recoiling. Apparently Stella was so widely hated that even they knew about her. Ridiculous.

"Did you see any suspicious, black-robed figures run by?"

"Um, there was some hooded person who ran to the dormitory..."

"The dormitory?! Not good!"

"We need to get him, and fast. Our pride as the king's soldiers rely on it!"

"Return to your room, girl!"

The soldiers left Stella behind and rushed off. Once they were gone, Stella and I exchanged glances (so to speak). It was 11:50...

Stella ran back to the plaza.

“Hooray! Now’s our chance to touch the statue.”

The troublesome soldiers had all dispersed. They were now hunting for some guy that didn’t exist by the dorms. Our victory was absolute.

Before us stood the towering Goddess statue. It was looking down at us with a compassionate smile.

As we approached, the massive amount of paper at its feet came into view. They were tiny slips with complex black patterns on them. I started to look at them, but then—

“I see. Well done,” came a voice from above.

“Who is it?!” Stella exclaimed with a jerk of her head.

A woman riding her staff was floating in the sky.

With amber hair that stood out against the night sky, she was a natural beauty. Her polished armor went perfectly with her good looks, and her long, fluttering robe had gold embroidery lining its hem...which took the shape of a divine staff.

“Captain Hamiel...of the Opti Baculus...” Stella forced out, her voice cracking.

Captain Hamiel of the First Saint Squadron... One of the strongest saints in the country, and possessor of a Grand Spirit of Wind.

Hamiel landed gently before Stella. She was one head taller than her, and gave her a kind smile. “Return to your room; you are too promising a student to fall here.”

Stella trembled.

“I can imagine your objective. You came to touch the statue and see the Goddess, no? I once snuck out of the dormitory to do the same in my student days. It felt so important to meet the Goddess,” Hamiel said, a hint of nostalgia arising in her eyes. “My attempt failed, of course. The soldiers assigned to guard the statue are anything but incompetent. Those you dispersed earlier left only because they knew I was here; otherwise, they would never abandon the Goddess statue to chase someone.”

Stella bit her lips in frustration. Hamiel continued, in a consoling

tone. “If you wish to see the Goddess, devote yourself to pious worship. She sees all those of faith.”

Stella tightened her grip on me.

I thought that was the end for us...but Stella didn’t falter, not even before the mightiest saint of all.

After some silence, she muttered, “I don’t want to.”

What?

Both Hamiel and I were equally shocked.

“What was that...?”

“I don’t want to leave! I want to meet the Goddess and make my request directly, no matter what. I’m going to speak to the all-knowing, all-powerful paragon of compassion herself!”

What are you saying, Stella...?!

Caution was a virtue at times like this. We had both seen that Grand Spirit of Wind. A head-on fight with Hamiel wouldn’t end well with either of us.

Still, the conversation went on despite my panic.

“You cannot be sane. To touch the statue, you will need to first defeat me. You will stand your ground knowing that?”

“I never thought meeting the Goddess of all the heavens would be easy. Nothing will get in my way.”

“Fascinating. To think a student would not balk in fear before me.”

Hamiel spun her staff with practiced movement; the look in her eyes grew sharp.

“I am Elise Hamiel, captain of the First Saint Squadron of the Oravina Army. I shall be your opponent.”

What am I even supposed to do here?!

A duel was about to start at any moment. Hamiel looked utterly confident, and Stella was burning with clear determination. This wasn’t good. I had to do the one thing I could...speak.

“Calm down and think! We’re talking about the strongest saint there is here. We need to fall back!”

“We don’t have time for that. The ceremony is ending soon. We lose if we take a single step back.”

Hamiel paused and furrowed her brow. “You have a talent for

ventriloquism?”

“Uh-huh. This is how the coward within me speaks.”

This isn’t cowardice. It’s caution!

I wanted to protest, but kept it to myself. I didn’t want Stella looking like a sad, lonely girl who talked to herself.

The needle on the clock tower ticked. We were now two minutes away from midnight.

Falling back would indeed mean running out of time, but in front of us was the mightiest saint of all.

There are no good choices here!

Our goal was right in front of us, but we couldn’t reach it.

Stella inhaled, having seemingly steeled her resolve. She lifted her staff and began to chant.

“O Spirits of Wind. O breath of the Goddess, O atmosphere in the sky...”

“Oh?” Hamiel muttered. Her voice had both shock and exasperation. “You would oppose me with a Wind miracle despite knowing my staff has a Grand Spirit of Wind...? Do you think your Wind capable of blowing away mine?”

It seemed Stella attempting to cast a Wind miracle left Hamiel in disbelief. She didn’t even try chanting a miracle of her own.

What are you planning, Stella...?

This was different from when she bluffed earlier. Was she actually trying to cast a miracle...? No, not a chance. She was fully aware her own miracles were useless. That was why she hadn’t even tried to use miracles. She had gotten this far using flour, knives, and bluffs—her own power.

Why, then, was Stella trying to chant?

“The faithful are gifted joy. Spirits belong to them. The Goddess’s might covers the world eternal, and brings about unending peace...”

She swung her arm hard, and in that moment I understood her intentions—for better or worse.

“Stella! Don’t! This wasn’t what I wanted. We had vowed to touch the statue together.”

“One question,” she asked out of nowhere. “What exactly is an ‘idol’ like you were talking about?”

I found that curious, but as an otaku I answered on instinct.

"An idol is one you devote your eternal love to f—"

"AAAAH, STUPID STUPID I SHOULDN'T HAVE AAAASKED!"

Stella's arm was made mightier through shame. She had played me like a fiddle, but I didn't notice until it was too late.



The chant was, of course, a bluff. Stella had never intended to cast a miracle. She only chose a Wind miracle to make Hamiel lower her guard and not interrupt her chanting.

All so she could throw me, and only me, to the statue.

"O Wind, take me to the heavens! I offer this victory and glory to the Goddess. *Winaria Sein!*"

Stella threw me with all her might. I, lacking arms, had no means of stopping her.

"STELLLLAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" I roared with regret and frustration as I shot right toward the statue.

* * *

Stupella. When had people first started calling me that, again?

The orphanage only held a modest party for the Descension Ceremony. We would lift up our first staves and chant a prayer together. Mine was the only one that remained dark, producing no light whatsoever.

I would try the chant over and over, but I couldn't cast a miracle.

"How strange," the nuns would say without fail. "Humanity is loved by the Goddess, and so all should be capable of using miracles."

Why, then, was I the only one who couldn't?

The spirits hated me and wouldn't inhabit my staff. People hated me because I couldn't cast miracles. I begged the Goddess for help, but I was the only one she wouldn't listen to.

My world was pitch-black.

The spirits, humanity, the Goddess... All of the world hated me.

I resigned myself to my fate of being hated. Until he appeared.

"Stella, I love you!"

It felt like the first time there had been any light in my life. He surely had no idea how happy that comment had made me. In fact, he didn't need to know. I just had to grant his wish and reward his affection.

Leaning on my own embarrassment, I threw the staff with all my might.

“STELLLLAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” he yelled as he launched toward the statue. Just as planned.

“What?!” Captain Hamiel yelped and jerked her head over with shock.

Throwing one’s staff was beyond abnormal—it was unthinkable. The last thing any saint would do is throw away the staff they needed to activate their miracles.

As expected, not even Captain Hamiel herself could predict that kind of move. She was so stunned for a moment she just stood there. But she was stunned literally only for that moment; soon, she returned to her senses.

Nothing could be allowed to touch the Goddess statue during the ceremony, be it a staff or otherwise.

“May holy wind soar like a falcon...!” Captain Hamiel began. If she unleashed a miracle, my staff would be blown out of the air like a gnat.

I had started running the moment I’d thrown my staff. Captain Hamiel wouldn’t be paying any attention to me; a saint without a staff was less than no threat at all. Which was why all I could do was reach out and grab onto that magnificent staff of hers.

I could feel her recoil in shock.

This was the first time I had ever been grateful for my horrid curse. As long as I was touching a staff, it couldn’t cast any miracle whatsoever.

“I won’t let you cast a miracle. You may be the mightiest saint, but right now, you’re just as hated as me!”

The staff hit the statue with a loud clang. A moment later, the clock of the tower resounded. The Descension Ceremony had concluded.

Captain Hamiel and I listened to the bell while still stuck together. The cold night wind made our robes flutter.

“Hated... I see. You are Stella, then,” she said.

I shuddered. It was a shock to learn that rumors of me had reached even the ears of my most admired Captain Hamiel. The professors must have told her.

“M-My apologies...” I said, hurriedly letting go of her staff.

Aaaah, what have I done?! I got in Captain Hamiel's way, of all people...! No matter how desperate the situation was, she's going to be so mad. Aaah, I'm so stupid, stupid, stupid!

It took this long, but regret finally hit me like in waves. I wriggled in preparation for a scolding.

"You may be proud to have taken a victory from me," came an unexpectedly kind voice. I looked up. "A student who can cast no miracles, despite having an enormous quantity of holy power—mana. I have heard of your peculiar physical traits. All I can do for you is pray."

Captain Hamiel's eyes were downcast with clear pity. Many had pitied me before, but this was the first time it came from genuine compassion rather than condescension. It didn't make me uncomfortable.

Captain Hamiel lifted her staff, then pressed its tip against me—the process for giving a blessing.

"Ah!" I squeaked.

Despite my surprise, Captain Hamiel gave a quiet, short chant. "May you have the blessing of the Goddess."

I was at a loss for words.

You didn't go out and bless just anyone. At the graduation ceremony, the principal would bless the valedictorian, but that was about it. And I had been blessed by none other than my most admired Captain Hamiel of the Opti Baculus. I could only imagine how many students would've been envious of me.

Once she was done, she left the plaza like the wind.

The Descension Ceremony had concluded. There was no further need to guard the statue.

I watched her go, then jumped with a start. I rushed over to pick up my staff from the cobblestone ground.

"So? How'd you like my plan? Perfect, wasn't it? Hm...? You want to know why I threw you? I mean, your wish obviously had to come first. I can't get a Grand Spirit in my staff until you leave, so you know, I had no choice. Now it's your turn to take me to the statue... Hey, are you listening?"

The staff didn't answer.

His usual earsplitting raving was completely absent, no matter how long I waited.

The silence of the staff made me realize the truth.

There was no longer anything inside of it.

"...W-W-WAAAH! I'M ALONE AGAAAAIN! WAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Unsightly sobs croaked out of my throat. I wanted to stop, but couldn't.

A cold wind blew on my wet cheek, and I could feel it start to freeze over.

* * *

After Stella had thrown me and I'd smashed into the statue of the Goddess, my consciousness was tugged on like a rope. My vision distorted in a disturbing fashion, and on instinct I closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, I was sitting on the floor of some massive expanse.

Where is this...?

I turned my head, and... Oh crap, I turned my head!

"YEEES! I can move my body!"

I had only been a staff for a few hours, but the sense of release here was incredible. I was back to being a human. In fact, I even had on the same school uniform from before my reincarnation.

I looked around and saw a bunch of videos playing on the circular walls. It was like a bunch of monitors had been placed onto them.

Stella was on one of them. She was facing Hamiel and talking about something.

Are these playing in real time...?

"Well done, human of another world, for reaching my most heavenly of thrones," a voice came. I looked up with a start and saw a woman descending from a stairway in front of me.

It was the Goddess. She looked exactly like she did on the statue with her glittering, flowing robes and regal staff. Even the fishily compassionate smile was the same.

"For you to have come here, you must have some manner of request. I shall grant your wish as the ruler of this world," she said.

Her voice was grating to me, like that of a mewling cat. Everything about her, from her expression to her voice, made her seem like the big bad.

Still, I continued. “Please, return me to my world!” I exclaimed.

Her expression clouded in an instant. “Not even I, with all the might of this world, can grant that request.”

“But why...” I began, standing up, only to suddenly hear clanging.

What in the...?

At some point, my wrists and ankles had been wrapped in pitch-black chains. They ran along the ground like pythons. I struggled, but I couldn’t break free.

“Those chains are born from powerful magic. Your soul is currently bound to a staff by an evil witch’s will.”

“An evil witch...?”

“Indeed. Your spirit was never meant to come to this world, but an evil witch used their dreadful powers to bind your soul and drag it here,” the Goddess said, her expression sympathetic. “I sincerely apologize for failing to stop the witch’s evil despite being the ruler of this world. I view the world through the eyes of each statue made in my image, but by the time I’d noticed, it was already too late.”

The Goddess spread her arms and pointed to the wall. There were countless videos on it, each which apparently each came from a different statue.

“Um, wait. Does this mean I can’t go back to my original world...?”

“No, there is one option available to you.”

“And that option is...?”

She paused, then, with a compassionate smile on her face, she said, “Kill the witch. By killing the source of the magic that binds your soul, you may once again be free.”

Uh, hold on. That was no option at all.

After some silence, I said, “I’m not a murderer.”

“It is not murder if it is an evil witch. She is the reason you have been bound and sealed within a staff.”

“But still, witches use magic and—”

“I shall grant you divine power capable of slaying the witch so

that you might find success," the Goddess said, gazing at me with her unfaltering smile.

I faltered. "Um... In that case, where is the witch?"

"You should know that well... For you have spent much time with the witch, Stella Millesia."

Uh. My jaw dropped.

"Stella is the witch...? That can't be right! I mean, she can't even cast miracles! She's hated by the spirits for some unknown reason, and—"

"The spirits all despise her due to being an evil witch which brings chaos to the world."

"That can't be..." I repeated over and over.

The Goddess moved to the corner of the room. There was a piece of paper with a complex black pattern on it and an enormous number of slips. She pulled one of them out.

"Stella the Witch has written the same wish on her slip every year: 'It doesn't matter what kind; please just give my staff any spirit at all.'"

"What?! That was her wish...?!"

"Indeed," the Goddess said, presenting the slip. "This is the slip she wrote, though I expect the language will be unreadable to you."

This wasn't what Stella had told me.

My staff was supposed to house a Grand Spirit, not a pervert like you, Otaku!

I mean, isn't it obvious? I want a Grand Spirit in my staff.

Was that a lie? Had Stella been lying to me?

"For many long years, Stella the Witch sought a spirit for her staff, but I of course would never permit such a thing. The wishes of a witch must never be granted," the Goddess said, crushing Stella's slip in her fist and tossing it aside. I could only watch in a daze as it hit the floor. "Nonetheless, Stella the Witch used her foul magic to search for a spirit to bind to her staff. As her wish implies, any spirit would do. And how devilish of her to bring a human spirit from a world in which I had no power to stop her! You are a victim of Stella the Witch's malice. Behold."

The Goddess pointed to a wall, which had a new video playing.

The video depicted a modern Japanese hospital room. And in its bed was...me! My head was wrapped in gauze, and my eyes were closed.

"This is the you of your world. Your flesh has been robbed of your spirit and now lies dormant."

Beside the bed was the childhood friend who had just rejected me. She was squeezing my hand and staring at me, her eyes welling with tears.

Hold on a second. Why would you *of all people be so sad?*

The Goddess gave a refined giggle. "What an adorable girl... Might she be your love?"

"No, absolutely not," I replied in an instant. "She's just a friend."

"Would you like to see her again? Would you like to return to your world?"

"Yes," I replied cautiously.

"Then there is no reason to hesitate—eliminate the evil witch. All of your wishes will be granted if only you slay Stella the Witch," the Goddess said, then lifted her staff up high. "*Luxsaria Sein!*"

An orb of light appeared at the tip of her staff. It was so dazzling I had to close my eyes.

"There is not much time. The witch will not allow your spirit to be separated from her staff for long. You will be bound to her eternally by magic unless you take her life."

Wind began to rush by, causing the slips to rustle and flap about.

"Now, kneel, human from another world! I, Amanda the Goddess, shall grant you divine power!"

The holy light was so overpowering, I was driven to my knees—the Goddess just had that much aura. Something hard hit my forehead... It was the tip of her staff.

"Slay Stella the Witch. My eyes shall never leave you," she said, her voice sticky like honey.

I managed to open my eyes a sliver in an attempt to look up at her. The perfect smile she wore twisted alongside my vision, and with that I faded out.

* * *

When I awoke, I was enveloped in something oddly warm.

"Sniff! He's gone... My spirit's gooone! I finally got a spirit, and now... Otakuuuuu..."

We were in the plaza, which was still pitch-black.

Stella was hugging me and sobbing like you'd expect from a girl her age. The falling tears got me wet. I waited for the right timing, then called out.

"Don't cry, Stella. I'm still here."

"HAAAAAH?!" she shrieked, leaping to her feet. "What?! You, what?! No way. You were still in my staff?!"

Stella's mouth flapped opened and closed, her eyes bright red and swollen.

"Feeling better now?"

"E-Excuse me...? How long have you been awake?!"

"Since you started crying because you thought I was gone."

"I-I wasn't crying! I would never cry over you, duh. Some dirt just got in my eyes, that's all..." Stella hurriedly rubbed her eyes. A pitiful excuse, but... That's what made her a tsundere. "More importantly, didn't you meet the Goddess?! Why didn't she turn you back into a human?"

"Well... I didn't meet her."

"YOU DIDN'T MEET HEEER?!"

"I hit the statue and got knocked out. When I came to, you were cradling me in your arms."

"Awawawah! That was just the most convenient way to hold you. I mean, otherwise my wrists would get all tired..."

"Aaah, your excuses are so forced! But the fact you're trying so hard to come up with them is so cute!"

"Shut up! Are you stupid? Do you know how hard I worked to bring you to the Goddess statue?"

"Yeah, and I'm grateful. Thank you."

"I-It's not like I wanted you to thank me or anything..."

"But naturally, I don't intend to leave it with just an apology. From today on, I'm your spirit. I may be an otaku far beneath any Grand Spirit, but hopefully I can be enough."

Stella froze on a dime. She looked at me; I could see my

reflection in her teary eyes.

"Really? You're my spirit?"

"Yeah. That's why I'm here in your staff, no?"

The plaza was empty, save one girl and one staff.

Even the wind was considerate enough to quiet down, leaving us engulfed in a solemn silence.

My staff-body felt warm and cozy; the heat from Stella's palm filled me.

Eventually, Stella gave one last mighty sniffle, then looked up. "Fine, then. I'll make do with you, pervert or not, Otaku!"

Her voice was brighter than the words implied. She was like a blooming flower; her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled. Her beaming smile gripped my heart like a fist.

"Sounds good," I replied.

Stella cradled me preciously and began skipping out of the plaza. We were returning to the dormitory. The countless twinkling stars in the sky lit her up with gentle light.

I'm glad I'm a staff. This way, Stella can't see my expression.

Thinking about what came next, I could hardly be as excited as her.

* * *

It was time for good boys and girls to go to sleep.

As soon as she was back in her room, Stella slid into bed.

It was a four-person room, but she seemed to have no roommates. Apparently every other student had asked for a room change due to Stella's peculiarities. Oh well. That just meant she got a big four-person room to herself.

The left side of the room had a study desk, while the right side had two bunk beds lined up. The back wall of the room had a window, and to its side was an ornate relief of the Goddess.

"Mnmnmzzzz... Mr. Spirit, waaait..."

Stella, who was resting on the bottom bunk, was murmuring in her sleep. Apparently she was dreaming. Hopefully the spirits didn't hate her in her dreams too.

Praying time is over.

I steeled my resolve within the staff holder on the side of the study desk. My one chance was while Stella was asleep. I chanted under my breath.

"*Deus est mors.*"

The Goddess had given me divine power; the moment I finished the chant, I felt some kind of energy building up in my forehead.

I see...this is like some kind of laser beam. Just gotta focus and blast.

Now that I had a feel for what to do, I focused my mind, opened my eyes, and blasted the divine power with all my might.

There was a violent bursting sound.

And that was it. The room returned to its previous nighttime silence.

I was suddenly struck by the urge to laugh. I was tense. There was no going back now.

"Oh... Looks like my aim was a bit off. I'll need to practice more," I said. My divine power had destroyed the relief of the Goddess.

Your eyes will always be on me, huh? How about you don't stalk us at all!

A cross-shaped scar was emblazoned on the Goddess's forehead, leaving both of her eyes crushed. We were talking about a clearly evil Goddess here—it was best to suspect anything in her form was a pair of eyes.

Had the Goddess seen my rebellion? Would I be safe after defying the ruler of this world? Well, there was no point thinking about it.

I was an Otaku. I could turn my back to the gods, but not my own tastes.

Stella is an evil witch? She's the one behind me being bound to a staff? So what. Stella is a tsundere...she's still my idol!

Stella had lied to me. She'd told me her wish was to have a Grand Spirit. Even though she was fine with any spirit, even though I was more than enough to grant her wish...she'd lied.

That had to be because she'd learned my wish was to go back home.

Stella, out of consideration for me, had sacrificed her own wish and selflessly devoted herself to granting mine.

As a tsundere, she couldn't admit she hoped I'd stay in her staff no matter how much she wanted it.

I'm an idiot for not noticing Stella's lying. And there I was, lecturing the Light spirits as if I'm not just as bad! Tsundere girls do NOT go around asking for help.

Stella never would have honestly asked me to stay in her staff forever.

"Zzz... Mr. Spirit, don't go..."

Stella rolled in bed.

"Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. Like I said: Otaku live for their idols."

For some reason, the Goddess of this world wanted Stella dead, but I wasn't about to let that happen. Kill the tsundere witch? You asked the wrong guy, Goddess. As an otaku, I'd protect my idol with everything I had.


The Goddess Says, "Kill the Tsundere Witch!"
Nagi Misaki
Illust. Kasu Komeshiro

Chapter 2 — Now I Can’t Get Married, Quoth Stella

The ringing of a clock tower resounded across campus.

It was morning. Refreshing sunlight streamed into Stella’s dorm room through a gap in the curtains. Outside the door, the sound came of girls chattering excitedly.

“Look, it’s the brooch I lost during class! It was by my pillow when I woke up this morning. The Goddess granted my wish!”

“My staff looks all-new. The scratches are gone!”

“Guess what? One of the older students asked for a room’s worth of candy. She’ll be handing out all the stuff she can’t eat.”

“Really?! Let’s hurry over!”

Their footsteps vanished in the distance.

Mm. Sounds like the Goddess actually did grant the wishes of everyone else.

It was like Christmas morning. The students who had their wishes granted were all over the moon.

Now, when will Stella be waking up...?

I looked at Stella from the staff holder. She was sound asleep. Her long eyelashes and hair lay against her pillow. Since she was asleep, her normal prickliness was gone—leaving only an innocent expression which suited her age. The look of a tsundere girl completely unguarded...not bad. Tsunderes rarely showed any openings. That was why moments like these were so precious.

I ended up enraptured by the sight of my idol’s sleeping face, but the other girls were already awake and active. It kind of seemed like she was oversleeping.

“Stella. Stella...!” I called.

She groaned a bit in her sleep, but showed no signs of awakening. Her sleepiness was winning out. As a staff, I couldn’t

physically shake her, so I went for psychological shaking instead.

"STELLA, I LOVE YOOOOOOOOOU!"

"BWAAAAAAAAAAH?!" Stella leaped up with a start, blinking rapidly due to the sudden awakening.

"Morning, Stella. The sun's up."

"I-Is it just me, or did you just say something insane...?!"

"I've said nothing but the truth. And that truth is, Stella, I lov—"

"AAAAH!" Stella cried, covering her head with her comforter. "Stupid dumb idiot! Don't wake people up like thaaat!"

"Would you have preferred something else?"

"Obviously."

"All right. Next time, I'll ask for your hand in holy matrimony and —"

"No no no no! NGGGGH!"

Stella rolled violently in bed, still covered up by her comforter. Her bright red ears poked out.

"Stella, I hate to interrupt your celebration, but..."

"I'm not celebrating! I'm not happy at all!"

"Shouldn't you be awake by now? The other students seem to be up."

Stella looked at her clock with a start and instantly paled. "Eek! Eek! Why didn't you wake me up sooner?!"

"Yeah, I should've asked when you usually wake up last night."

"I need to hurry and clean my room. Roll call will be s—"

It happened just as Stella was getting out of bed. Her door flung open.

"Stella Millesia, it is time for the morning muster," a professor announced.

Stella flinched. "Oh no... Of all people, it had to be Professor Speranza..."

"Floor, below standards! Trash can, below standards! Bedding, below standards!" the professor barked, crashing into the room like a flood. She had a stern expression that seemed carved into her stony face. Her pitch-black robes and eye patch made her look like the opposite of what one might imagine when they pictured a saint. At the end of it all, she thrust her staff in the direction of Stella's

pajamaed form. “State of dress, below standards!”

Stella swallowed hard, immobile.

Professor Speranza continued in her thorny voice. “How is it that you have become so degenerate after just months of dormitory life? That this is the day following the Descension Ceremony is no excuse. Do you have no intention whatsoever of becoming a saint, and...” The professor’s sole eye fell on the wall behind Stella. Instantly, her expression changed. “What in the world?! The relief of the Goddess...!”

That was Goddess relief next to the window...in the other words, the one I had blasted last night using my divine power. The professor approached anxiously and leaned toward its blackened eyes.

“Its eyes are gouged out...? This is clear blasphemy toward the Goddess. Stella, did you do this?!”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Then who did such a sacrilegious act?!”

Stella looked up at the relief in a daze. “I don’t know...it was like this when I woke up.”

“Playing dumb, then? You are the only student in this room. Who else would have defaced the relief?”

“It was me, ac—”

“AAAAAH! I really don’t know! I didn’t do anything!”

I tried to announce my guilt, only for Stella to grab me and shout over my attempt. Her palm was plastered over my face. I felt her strong wish for me to not say anything.

Still, I don’t want Stella getting suspected over something I did.

Professor Speranza didn’t seem to notice that I had tried talking. She simply looked at Stella with tight-knit brows.

“It is unthinkable to defile the Goddess. Know that you are hated for reasons of your own making—*you* are the problem. I will be reporting this to the principal.”

The professor’s boots clinked against the floor as she left Stella’s room. She was really going to blame Stella without even doing a cursory investigation, huh? That was messed up.

Other students were peering in from the door, which had been

left open. They had apparently been watching the entire thing from start to finish, and they only pulled their heads back once the professor was gone.

Once she was alone, Stella let out a grumble. “Perverted Otaku.”

“Oh, what? Are you trying to cheer me up or something?”

“No! Why did you talk in front of the professor? Normal staves don’t talk. They almost learned about you.”

“I wanted to tell her that you weren’t the one who—”

“The professors finding out about you is a way bigger problem than that.”

“Is it?”

Stella sighed. “Do you have any idea what a rare case you are? Not even the holy scriptures have any record of a human soul entering a staff in place of a spirit.”

“The holy scriptures...”

“That means you’re something totally unprecedented in history. The professors might confiscate you for research. I doubt you’ll ever end up in my hands again, at least,” she said. She averted her eyes and fiddled with her fingers before continuing, “Y-You, you said you’d be my spirit last night, didn’t you? Was that a lie? I-It’s not like I care if the professors confiscate you, but...”

“Aaah, tsunderes are the best! Of course I’m your spirit, Stella! I’ll never leave your side!”

“Idiot...! Don’t talk in front of others, then. Only talk when we’re alone.”

“It’s kinda like we’re secret lovers, huh?”

“Lovers?!” Steam almost blew out of Stella’s ears. “Th-Th-Th-That’s not what I meant... But wait—we went on a date, so maybe that is what we are...?”

Stella turned her back to me and started muttering to herself. Suddenly, her eyes fell on the Goddess’s relief. Her expression visibly clouded. “I can’t believe the Goddess ended up like this on the morning after the ceremony. Maybe I really am hated b—”

“Don’t sweat it. You can just ignore what that professor said.”

And she also didn’t need to feel bad about the relief getting destroyed. The Goddess was less omnibenevolent and more

omnimalicious when it came to her.

"After all, I lovelovelovelove you, Stella!"

"IDIOOOOT!"

Stella swung me around with tears in her eyes.

Urp... I'm still not used to being swung around.

* * *

Saint Antohsa's Academy was a school famed for producing the most talented saints in the world, and it just so happened to be the school Stella attended. I would be joining her as her staff.

"Miracles are, self-descriptively, miraculous phenomena caused by the countless spirits inhabiting nature. Under normal circumstances, they are beyond the grasp of humanity, but thanks to the Goddess allowing our will to be conveyed to the spirits, miracles are now our domain," a professor intoned.

One class had about twenty students. Everyone wore robes as their uniforms and held staves. This lesson was titled "The Fundamentals of Miracles," and we were gathered in the garden to hold it.

The teacher, Professor Elyena, looked younger than even Stella did. She wore a pointed hat and baggy robes that made her look like a kid cosplaying a witch on Halloween.

"Now, what exactly is the process by which we bring about miracles? Three elements are key: a prayer to chant, the holy power that is mana, and finally, the spirit within one's staff," Professor Elyena explained. She looked up at the brilliantly blue sky and spun her staff... But it was too big for her, and she ended up hitting the ground with it.

"Eep!" The staff bounced into the air, and she had to do a mad leap up to catch it. After landing, she smiled as if nothing had happened; her students watched on warmly. "Tee-hee."

Looks like we've got a clumsy one.

"The prayer is chanted to reinforce one's mental image. What spirit is called upon for its power, and upon what scale is the miracle performed? Let us repurpose verses from the scripture to convey our

precise desires to the spirits," Professor Elyena said, continuing her lecture while wiping her staff with a handkerchief. "Mana can be understood to be a power source. All of you are transferring it to your staff through your hands. One's mana quantity is largely hereditary, but simply by being accepted into Antohsa's Academy, you have demonstrated having a mana quantity above a certain normal."

Apparently students were chosen based on their latent mana capacity, with mana being portrayed as a holy source of power. That explained why Stella was here despite not being able to cast miracles.

"The spirits within one's staff are called guardian spirits, and they continue to exist within your staves by using your mana as energy. They derive a visualization from the chants made and call to the spirits nearby in nature. Spirits live by something of a hierarchy, and so a stronger guardian spirit will earn the aid of more nearby spirits, which in turn lead to greater mira—"

"Professor Elyena!" cried a student with blazing red, dressed-up hair. It was the villainess who threw a fireball at Stella yesterday. She wore an expression of extreme impatience.

"Yes, Quinza?"

"Why are we covering such basic fundamentals this late into the curriculum? Anyone can use miracles. Assuming they are not hated by the spirits, that is," she said.

Stella didn't react, but that ticked me off.

The professor smiled. "Well then, Quinza. I understand you to specialize in Fire miracles. I would like you to form a ball of fire and maintain it for an hour, starting now."

Quinza froze and fell silent, prompting the professor's smile to widen.

"Oh? I am only asking for an hour. Is it not the case that anyone can cast miracles? What would be the problem with maintaining it for one full hour?"

After some silence, Quinza said, "I apologize, Professor."

"Aha ha. Your question does strike at an important reality: Although everyone can cast miracles that last for a moment, it takes

great focus to maintain them for longer." The professor began swinging her staff and chanted, "*Terararia Sein, Luxsaria Sein, Aquaria Sein...*"

At once, everyone present—the professor and the students—found themselves standing in the middle of an ornate classroom.

Instant transmission?!

I wasn't the only one who seemed shocked. The nearby students all balked and looked around.

The room looked to be part of a European castle. There was a sizable chandelier on the ceiling, a slender table capable of seating thirty-some people, and rows of chairs.

The professor alone was unperturbed, and plopped into the frontmost seat of the table. "Light, Fire, Water, Wind, Earth. If miracles can manipulate every component constituting our world, why is it that no castles made of miracles exist? The answer is simple—maintaining miracles is different. Even if one makes a castle as I have, a simple nap would make it all vanish. And it need not even be a nap—simply by losing focus for a moment, anything built with miracles will collapse. That is why no one thinks of building castles with miracles."

She made a castle...?! It wasn't teleportation, then!

Professor Elyena poured tea from a teapot on the table. She brought the cup to her lips, then exhaled.

Instantly, the chandelier broke apart. The ceiling shattered and revealed fragments of the blue sky. The walls, table, and teapot all turned to clay, and before we knew it, we were all back in the garden. The chair the professor was sitting on disappeared when she stood.

HOLY COW! Miracles are something else!

It was genuinely moving to see such a massive-scale miracle for myself.

"That said, all of you can be considered Oravina's elites, and I imagine you aim to join the military as warrior saints. During operations you may need to fly for hours at times, or maintain light sources throughout the entirety of night. Those who cannot maintain miracles for a mere hour would be rejected out of hand."

Warrior saints in the military, eh?

I glanced at Stella's way. She was listening with a diligent expression.

This academy hardly seemed like a happy place for her. What was she truly aiming for by staying here...?

"In today's lesson, I will be training you to maintain miracles for longer periods of time. Chant your prayers precisely, and maintain connection to your spirits for as long as possible," the professor said, using her staff to point to the back end of the garden. "Before class, I placed flags for each of you on the mountain peak behind us. Each of you must acquire yours and return before the end of class. That is today's lesson."

The students all fell silent and looked at the distant mountain. She said "the mountain" casually, but it wasn't an easy place to reach.

Professor Elyena grinned at the uncomfortable students. "This is a test of endurance. It otherwise requires nothing more than simple flying. Aha!"

"O Spirits of Wind, grant me wings in the name of the Goddess supreme. *Winaria Sein!*"

The unified chants of the students resounded. Girls straddling staves were engulfed with wind and flew off one by one. Stella alone stood immobile, glaring off into the distance. I waited for everyone to fly off before whispering to her.

"Stella. Stella!"

"What."

"Let's get up in the sky. Now's our chance to show everyone you can use miracles too," I said. This was an early opportunity to salvage my damaged honor. Or so I thought, but...

"Are you genuinely stupid?" Stella asked, placing a hand on her hips. "Have you forgotten the Light miracle from last night? That tiny bean disappeared in an instant."

"I'd never forget our first miracle."

"A miracle on that level could stir up a slight breeze at best. It wouldn't be enough for me to fly."

"And so...you need practice?"

"That's right. To fly like everyone else, I need to—"

"Stella," came a voice.

Stella jumped with a start. Without our noticing, Professor Elyena had walked over, robe dragging behind her. Stella swiftly hid me behind her.

"Professor Elyena."

"I understand endurance tasks will be difficult for you given your circumstances, Stella. I will ask you to write a report instead, which will be graded as normal. Aha."

Oh, huh. Seems like she has some good professors too.

There was the elderly professor that had bashed Stella back at the festival, and there was Professor Speranza from this morning. Both had seemed to hate her, while Professor Elyena here seemed to be all smiles. She was helping Stella out since she couldn't use miracles.

Stella averted her eyes from the smiling professor, then spoke uncomfortably. "I guess I don't have a choice. I'll settle for writing a report."

Stella can't be honest even with professors... That's my gal.

The professor seemed unbothered by Stella's tsundere comment. "Now then, as for the subject itself..."

"Can I ask about that later?" Stella asked. Professor Elyena tilted her head. "Um, I want to use class time to practice miracles..."

"Goodness! At last you wish to practice miracles instead of immediately going to the library...!" the professor exclaimed, moved.

Stella turned away. "I-I mean, even I want to practice miracles so __"

"Is it frustrating, Stella?" the professor asked, peering up at her. "It is my understanding you had a personal meeting with your class head Professor Speranza yesterday."

Personal meeting...?

As far as I knew, Stella hadn't had any meetings with a professor. This must've been before we met.

"I understand why you may be anxious. Professor Speranza did say that if you do not produce results by next month's finals, you will __"

"I know, Professor," Stella replied, her voice sharp as if to cut the professor off. "You don't need to worry about me. I can handle it myself."

Stella's palm was heating up. Seemed like she was getting tense.

Professor Elyena eyed Stella for a moment, then smiled. "Let me teach you a special technique of mine. Consider it the ace in the hole of an expert saint."

Stella swallowed.

"Be honest."

It was a simple, two-word suggestion. As Stella fell silent, the professor chanted, "*Terararia Sein.*" A golden chalice appeared in her hand.

"Your body is the vessel, and honest calls for aid are like water. We at all times have various wishes, prayers, and hopes within us..."

"*Aquaria Sein*," she continued, and water began pouring from the empty air, filling her chalice. "People awaken to their own power once the water overflows from the vessel. Miracles are a reward for honest calls for help... They do not occur from trifling wishes from small people."

The chalice continued to fill.

"You must hold big dreams. Let your frustration, sorrow, and agony build so that you might turn them into wishes. When they finally overflow, you will surely be a mightier saint than anyone."

With a splash, the water overflowed from the chalice. It got all over her hands, then disappeared like a magic trick.

"I believe in your potential, Stella. And now... I shall go to the side so as to not disturb your practice. Aha!"

The professor swung her staff—which was taller than herself—and left.

"That's a good teacher," I said.

"How? She's a weirdo. This is the first time I've heard anyone talk about honesty-this and honesty-that when all you're doing is getting a spirit to do miracles for you," Stella said.

But hey, she had cheered Stella on, and that made her a good person in my book.

Stella, now alone in the garden, turned to the distant mountain

and began her chant.

"Hey, Stella. What were you told at the meeting yesterday?" I asked, since her interrupting Professor Elyena had cut off the most important part. Her brow twitched. "Professor Speranza is that scary lady that came to your room this morning, right? What'll happen if you don't produce results at the next exam?"

"None of your business," she replied after some hesitation.

Her aura told me she didn't want me pressing any further, so I fell silent.

Well, the meeting's over anyway, so no point thinking about it. Now's the time to focus on practicing miracles.

"O Spirits of Wind, grant me wings in the name of the Goddess supreme..." Stella began, closing her eyes and giving it her all. She was straddling me and leaning forward as if she might fly at any moment.

Unfortunately, as expected, the miracle didn't come so easily.

The garden was dead silent and devoid of any wind whatsoever. Only the trees planted around the garden swayed, and their sound was like mocking laughter. How dare those cursed Wind spirits ignore a tsundere girl calling for their help?

I exhaled to calm my anger, then remembered Professor Elyena's lesson.

Miracles need a prayer, mana, and spirits... Stella praying forms an image, her hands fill her staff with holy power, and then her guardian spirit uses that power to call the nearby spirits for aid.

As the one inside her staff, I was a guardian spirit; it was my duty to call for the nearby spirits. Thinking back, last night's miracle had happened right after I'd lectured the spirits about tsunderes or something like that. I'd thought, *Come on, give at least a* little *light.*

In which case...

I visualized Stella high in the air, then shouted a silent scream: *O Spirits OF WIND! Don't you want to see a tsundere smiling or—Whoa!*

"EEEEEK!"

I was struck with a floating sensation, and Stella let out a short shriek. It all happened in an instant. Stella and I had been

enveloped in a strong wind and lifted up to a point where we could see the expanse of the entire garden.

"Wha? Wh-Why?! Why am I flying?!" Stella said, a look of panic on her face in place of any broad smile or whatever.

"Because you succeeded in casting a miracle."

"This doesn't make sense! I mean, the light yesterday disappeared like nothing, didn't it?! I was just trying to practice floating a bit off the ground, why am I so high in the air...?"

Yeah, it sure felt strange that it worked *that* well. Maybe the spirits around here were just better listeners? Talk about a big difference from yesterday. It was like the spirits were now fawning all over me or someth—

Ah.

I got it. I got it! This is because of the divine power!

This must have been what Professor Elyena was talking about. A strong guardian spirit meant a lot of spirits provided their aid. Thanks to the Goddess granting me divine power, I was now leagues stronger than I had been yesterday. The spirits sensed that and now listened to me much better.

"All right, Stella. Let's catch up to your classmates."

I called out to all the Wind spirits that had to be around.

We're heading right for the peak. Let's make our tsundere the top of her class!

We instantly accelerated.

"HyaaAAAAAAAH!" Stella shrieked at the immense speed.

I visualized us going as fast as possible. I felt powerful winds carrying us farther. *That's the stuff, spirits! I had you all wrong.*

"W-Wait, stop...! This is too fast, too fast!"

A panicked voice went right into my ears. Before I knew it, she was clinging tightly to me and glaring down with tearful eyes.

Holy cow, I just realized! A silver-haired beauty is riding on top of me!

Due to focusing entirely on flying, I had missed the true enormity of what was happening. Stella was even tightly squeezing her thighs around me, likely due to being afraid.

"Why are we flying faster than birds?! I didn't visualize this!"

“Sorry. I’ll slow down.”

So I said, but we had already slowed down to about a walking speed. We were also losing a lot of height. Me losing focus meant I wasn’t speaking to the spirits clearly.

“Ngh, now the flying’s all weird... Hey, is this okay? I think we’re falling!”

“I-It should be fine! If you don’t mind, uh, could you be a little gentler with your thighs?”

“My thighs...?” Stella replied, her brow furrowing. It was only then she finally realized the absolute death grip she had me in. Her cheeks instantly flushed with crimson. “YOU BIG STUPID PERVEEERT! NOW I CAN’T GET MARRIEEED!”

“Calm down, Stella! All that matters is that you’re a tsundere! This doesn’t mean anything!”

“That’s just your weird fetish! BWAAAAH!”

Naturally, I did have some guilt about being wedged up a girl’s crotch. I had to end this endurance run sooner rather than later... I cut off all emotion and honed my mental energy.

“We’re speeding up. Hold on a bit longer.”

“Eek! Nnm, no...!” Stella clung to me, digging into me even more. She let out a voiceless sort of breath.

After a moment, she started wriggling about.

“Stella? What are you doing?”

“Taking off my shoes.”

What.

Despite my confusion, she went barefoot and planted her feet on my back. She lifted her hips and stood atop me carefully.

“Wow...” Stella gasped. She spread her arms wide, long hair flowing in the wind.

Before us spread the vast expanse of a blue sky. The streaming sunlight was warm, and we lined up with birds flying in groups. The grounds of Antohsa spread out beneath us, alongside a vast forest.



Stella nodded atop me, satisfied. “Mm-hmm, this works. You can’t think of anything perverted with me just standing like this.”

“So each time we fly, I get to be stepped on by Stella... What a gift!”

“How does *this* make you happy?! Pervert!”

“Because I love everything about my idol, obviously!”

“NMMMM!”

Stella stomped on my face with her bare feet. The soles of a tsundere...what bliss. I also loved the curves of her thighs, which just barely hid her underwear.

It wasn’t long before we heard an exclamation of surprise.

“Stella Millesia?!” came a voice from down and to the side. There were girls wearing Stella’s uniform riding their staves. Apparently we had caught up to her classmates.

“No way! Stella’s flying!”

“She isn’t skipping class like usual?”

“Why is she standing on top of her staff like that...?!”

All of them voiced their shock at seeing Stella one after another. She looked down at them, standing boldly.

I took this chance to whisper. “Stella, Stella.”

“What?”

“Why don’t you say something to them? You can cast miracles now, so they shouldn’t have any reason to avoid you. You might be able to be friends now.”

As cruel as it was, it made sense that Stella would be ostracized for her inability to use miracles in a world where miracles dominated everything...but things were different now.

I wanted Stella to have a fun school life. One where someone would wake her up if she overslept. One where she didn’t eat alone. One where she had friends. And most of all, I wanted to see my idol get along with her pals!

Stella seemed to hesitate, but ultimately nodded.

“Surprised that I can cast miracles now?” she declared, arms still crossed. “Well, you’ve got a lot more of that coming. The Goddess finally gave me a Great Spirit—one higher ranked than anything most of you will ever see in your whole lives!”

Huh? Those weren't the lines I had in mind.

Stella's classmates were all staring at her with blank expressions, prompting Stella to chuckle to herself. "But listen. If you *insist* on being my friend now that I have a Great Spirit, go ahead and ask. I'll consider gracing you with my presence. Be grateful!"

Holy cow, she's so awkward! Fatally awkward! But that's a tsundere for you!

Everything Stella just said translated purely and cleanly into, *Please be my friend.* But that wasn't how it came out. She was just...peak tsundere. As a fan of tsunderes myself, I'd like to clench my fists and writhe in bliss, but it seemed I had no allies among her class.

A murderous rage emanated from the girls.

"There's no way you would ever get a greater spirit, Stupella. O Spirits of Fire, grant me blazes to burn mine enemies away. *Ignaria Sein!*"

"I'd rather die than be your friend. O Spirits of Earth, grant me stone to smite mine enemies. *Terararia Sein!*"

Their chants overlapped with those of many other students. A barrage of fireballs and rocks came shooting toward Stella.

"Eeek! But why?! I wanted to be friends...!"

"Tsunderes are by nature bad at communication. Their words are distorted by embarrassment, and so one must strive to parse them correctly. However, only those who love tsunderes can master the techniques necessary for deciphering their language, and so it is their fate to endure unending traged—"

"Enough with the explanations! Run, run, run! *Winaria Sein!*" Stella cried, and I hurriedly asked the Wind spirits to speed up. They did, but the classmates kept attacking her one after another. Dodging everything would be impossible.

Feeling a sense of danger, I yelled, "Stella! Defense!"

"Defense?!" she exclaimed back.

"Anything will do. Form a wall of stone, or blow it away with wind, anything...!"

She had spent so much of her life unable to cast miracles that it wasn't in her instincts to use them to protect herself.

"Um, O Spirits of Earth, uh, the Goddess granted a holy shield to the sav— Eek!"

A fireball flew by and grazed her hair, prompting her to interrupt her chant. My gut would have twisted if I had one.

Now, I was fully willing to admit that Stella's phrasing was poor. Still, this should've been an argument of words, not fireballs! Blasting her with miracles at the slightest provocation was just too much.

Unforgivable. I will eliminate all those who threaten to hurt my idol!

Miracles couldn't be cast without Stella chanting, but I had power of my own. I started muttering to myself as she resumed her chant.

"*Deus est mors.*"

Dark energy formed on my forehead. This was divine power capable even of killing witches. If I was to be grateful to the Goddess for anything, it'd have to be this.

I could only sneer in perfect laughter as I saw the rain of attacks coming our way...

"The Goddess granted a holy shield to the savior. *Terararia Sein!* Stones thrown by those aiding the witch all failed to reach the savior. *Terararia Sein!*"

"Stella, the attacks stopped. Use this chance to escape!"

"Heh?" Stella said. She lifted her head, which she'd been cradling while chanting to the best of her ability.

Not a single fireball or stone remained. Her classmates were looking this way in a daze.

No wonder—a mysterious beam of black energy had shot out and obliterated each of their miracles. Anyone would be surprised.

Stella's own jaw had dropped, but she quickly snapped to her senses and began chanting.

"*Winaria Sein! Winaria Sein! Winaria Sein...!*"

RUN, RUN, RUUUN!

We ran the Wind spirits at full throttle and blasted away at the speed of light. None of her classmates could catch up.

* * *

“Splendid, just absolutely splendid! I am so completely, positively moved right now...!” Professor Elyena exclaimed. It was the end of class, and she was shedding exaggerated tears in front of everyone now that we were back. “Not only has Stella finally learned to cast miracles after suffering for so long, but she even arrived back sooner than anyone. No doubt the Goddess has smiled upon your efforts, Stella. Everyone should do well to learn from her and remain diligent in their studying!”

Stella was facing the ground, overwhelmed by being showered with praise in front of everyone. She wasn’t used to being praised.

Keep piling it on. I wanted to see Stella blowing steam out of her ears.

Her classmates wore conflicted expressions. Quinza in particular seemed displeased, and even clicked her tongue in annoyance.

Professor Elyena wiped her tears away with a handkerchief, then faced Stella directly. “With that said, Stella. I must now give you your penalty.”

“...Wha? M-My penalty?”

“That is correct. Stepping upon one’s staff is an unthinkable act. Do you not understand it is your lifeline as a saint? We do not permit students to stand upon their staves.”

“B-But I had no choice! If I flew normally, I wouldn’t be able to get married...”

Stella’s incoherent protests fell on deaf ears. Professor Elyena continued, a smile on her face. “As penalty, you will need to deliver a ten-page report by tomorrow after school.”

“Ten pages?!”

“As for the subject... It can be the Pandemonium Era. Aha!”

* * *

“What’s the Pandemonium Era?” I asked from the staff holder that night. Stella was at her study desk reading a particularly thick book. She had borrowed it from the library to write her report.

Stella answered without even looking away from the book. “Right now we’re in the Goddess Calendar. What came before was the

Pandemonium Era. It was a time of chaos and war."

"So what, that was over a thousand years ago?"

"Uh-huh. There were tons of witches with cursed power back then, and the continent was never free of war. It only ended when the Goddess descended and defeated all the witches."

"The witches... Stella, what defines a witch?" I asked. The Goddess had called Stella a witch, but I didn't believe it. If she had that kind of power, why wouldn't she wield it against the villainess? I did seem bound to this staff, but there was no proof Stella had done that herself. It was fully possible the Goddess just had some kind of grudge motivating her to lie to me about Stella.

"What defines a witch...? Well, they live a long time and use magic," she said, flipping through pages in the book. "There's a description here."

She pulled me out of the staff holder and held me in front of the book. That was all well and good, but...

"Stella, I don't know this world's language. I can understand pictures, though."

"Fine. I guess I'll read it to you, then."

Stella cradled me so she could read while holding me; her hair brushed against my cheek. It had a nice, faint smell, perhaps because she had just bathed.

"During the Pandemonium Era, more deaths were caused by Liliana the Witch of Submission than any other. She stood before armies of thousands and ordered them to submit; the soldiers, under her magic, would cut their heads off. The witch would then stroll through the mass suicides as the mounds of corpses echoed with her perfect laughter."

The book had a picture of a witch, indeed, strolling past headless soldiers. She was depicted as a black-robed figure with a maniacal smile and spread-out arms.

"Vesta the Witch of Pestilence would chant 'eat,' then cast malicious curses that blackened fruit. Those who ate an afflicted fruit would perish instantly, while animals would morph into violent magibeasts that followed the witch's every command. Malbella the Witch of Conflagration would chant 'perish,' then unleash fires that

burned unending for hundreds of years, turning the towers of the continent to ash."

The illustrations depicted a witch with beasts following her and a town in flames.

That all sounded pretty brutal. Not exactly the kind of book I wanted to read while embraced by a beautiful girl.

"That's what a witch is," Stella concluded. "They control people, make magibeasts, and spit out fire that burns for over a hundred years. Magic really is a terrifying, world-warping force."

"I'd say miracles are pretty terrifying too, considering you can blast out fireballs with a short chant..."

"What's terrifying about that?" Stella asked, her brow furrowing. "They're literal miracles granted to us by spirits. Magic comes from cursed power the witches wield themselves, it's totally different. I mean, look, witches don't even have staves since they don't need spirits."

She pointed at the book. Just as she said, the witches in the illustrations didn't have staves.

"So you're saying the difference is the miracles come from spirits, while magic comes from individuals...? I can't say I really understand why that's a big deal."

As someone who had come from a world without anything like either, both miracles and magic were basically the same thing. Tomayto, tomahto.

Displeased by my response, Stella puffed out her cheeks. "Why are you so stupid? The entire civilization of the continent got wiped out by wars caused by magic. How could such an evil power be anything like miracles?"

"The civilization got...wiped out?"

"The continent was way further developed before Pandemonium. There were towers of silver that reached all the way to the heavens, flying chariots, and carrier pigeons that could go between the edges of the continent in the blink of an eye."

"Sounds fantastical."

"And the witches destroyed all of it. They twisted the world with magic."

"What do you mean by twisting the world...?"

"I didn't see it for myself, so it's not like I can explain it specifically, but... That's what they say about magic in textbooks. It erased those silver towers and flying chariots and all that. They're just gone now. It's gotta be more dangerous than I can even imagine," Stella said, disgust clear on her face. It seemed like magic really was best avoided in this world. "The Goddess gifted the survivors miracles to help them recover after their civilization was destroyed. If not for miracles, we couldn't fly, we'd struggle just to make fires to cook, and we couldn't even bathe properly."

"You're using miracles for all that...?"

"The only reason we have peaceful lives at all is because the Goddess made miracles for us. That's why we all offer her prayers," Stella said, looking up to the relief of the Goddess on her wall. Its eyes were still blackened and destroyed. She clasped her hands and closed her eyes. "O Goddess, I ask that you protect us tomorrow as you have today."

It was an honest prayer. I found myself unable to say anything. The Goddess she worshipped was trying to kill her... It was awful.

There was absolutely no way I could tell such an honest, faithful girl the horrible truth—the Goddess had crushed her wishes in her hands and given me divine power just to kill her.

With her prayer finished, Stella returned me to the staff stand. She looked at her mostly incomplete report and sighed.

"Aah, Professor Elyena always gives essays on minor topics. She had to have chosen the Pandemonium Era out of spite. There's barely any records of it already, and the one book I could find is a total doorstop."

"Why not just summarize what you've read for the report? She probably won't complain as long as you fill in the page space."

"Not a chance. Professor Elyena may be chill, but reports have a direct impact on my grades. I need to write something that gets full approval."

"Are they really that serious...?"

"Didn't I tell you? I want to join the Opti Baculus. Not even Antohsa graduates get a recommendation for them unless they're

top of their class."

"Ah, so that part wasn't a lie."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Stella asked, shooting me a piercing glare. I shrugged it off. "Even this deep into the Goddess Calendar, there are still magibeasts remnants from Pandemonium that wander the continent. There are victims every day, and..."

"By magibeast, you mean like the fish from before?"

"Right. Plants and animals disfigured and transformed by magic. That fish was basically nothing; really deadly magibeasts can wipe out entire cities in one go."

"Sounds pretty deadly..."

"My dream ever since I can remember has been to join the strongest band of fighters in Oravina and hunt the magibeasts plaguing this country. That's why I joined Antohsa in the first place," Stella said, a distant look in her eyes. I had no idea what she was looking at over yonder, but it was the duty of an otaku to support his idol's dreams to their fullest.

"All right then. Sounds like I need to put my all into this too."

"Heh?" Stella said.

"The quality of your miracles impacts your grades too, right? Sounds like a job for me—your spirit."

"Excuse me? You're not even a Great Spirit. Your 'job' is to make way for a better spirit once I find one. I have absolutely zero hopes for you whatsoever."

"You were the fastest student in today's endurance race, nooo? Is that still not enough for you, Stellaaa? Hmmmm?"

"Th-That's...! I-I mean, I guess it was a good showing for you, maybe...?"

"Stella complimented me! Hooray!"

"C-Come on, it was the tiniest compliment possible. Only an idiot would celebrate over that..." Stella crossed her arms and tilted her chin away. I'd love to admire the expression on her face, but my inability to move in literally any way prevented this.

"And anyway, is that actually what you want?" she continued.

"Hm?"

"Didn't you have other things to do than be my spirit?"

"Other things... Oh, right! I need to proselytize the entire school into the religion of Stella!"

"*No!* I'm talking about how you wanted to go back to your world!"

"Ah... Right."

Honestly, it surprised me that Stella hadn't forgotten about that yet.

"It was so important you went to plead to the Goddess in person, didn't you? I don't care about losing a weak spirit like you. Forget about me, just look for some way to go back to your old w—"

"Stella," I called to her. She fell silent.

What expression was she making, exactly? She was so stubbornly facing away I still couldn't see her face. Instead, I spoke to her silver hair.

"Have you forgotten what I am, Stella? I'm an otaku. Find any otaku and ask them if they'd abandon a chance to see their idol from good morning to good night... Each of them, down to the last man, would say no! It's the dream of any gross otaku out there to become the personal possession of their idol! To be carried around by them twenty-four seven!"

"Wha—?!" Stella's head shot in my direction with shock. Her cheeks were red.

"Calm down and think about it. Every day I get to be gripped, bashed, and even ridden by my idol. And, on top of that, I even get to stay in the same room. Living with one's idol! Where I'm from, there is no greater happiness than this. Any otaku who heard about my situation here would die of envy."

"You're the one who needs to calm down!" Stella exclaimed, steam blowing out of her ears. "Jeez, you big stupid dummy! Dealing with you would take all night. I'm going to sleep."

Stella snuffed out her candle and turned to her bed. I called out to her back, "Good night."

"Good night," she replied after a while.

Stella slipped into her bed amid the darkness and buried herself under her comforter. I heard raspy whispering from under it.

"Wait, so, Otaku and I are living together? From good morning to good night...? Guuuh, now I'm getting all sweaty. How am I

supposed to sleep now that I'm so self-conscious about this...? I can't risk oversleeping two days in a row!"

It wasn't long before I heard snoozing from under the comforter. I fist-pumped internally.

Thaaank you, nurse!

It was a day in which I feasted upon tsundere-ness to my heart's content.

At first being a staff was utter misery, but being my idol's staff was nothing if not a gift. Stella's dream was to join the mightiest military force in the kingdom, and she needed a strong spirit for that. If I could fulfill that role for her, I would gladly be her staff.

As it was, I basically had no means by which to return to my old world anyway, s—

"—O holiness," came a woman's voice.

It wasn't Stella's. Nobody else was in the room.

I looked to the relief of the Goddess with a start. Her lips moved beneath her blackened eyes. The relief twisted as if being pulled, resulting in loud creaking. It was like something out of a horror movie.

"O holiness, O holiness. O holy lord of all who sees the past, future, and present. *Luxsaria Sein.*"

The horrifying chant ended, and the light took a human shape. It was transparent like a hologram, but that figure was unmistakably the Goddess.

The Goddess had thus appeared out of thin air. Stella's bed remained immobile, indicating she was still asleep. The Goddess walked next to me, her robes shifting.

"Can you hear me, O human from another world?" she asked. I felt the illusion of a cold sweat running down my back.

I'm just gonna pretend to be asleep and ignore her. That's the good thing about being a staff; I don't even need to try to keep a straight face.

As I was focusing my mind power to drive her away, the Goddess chanted "*Ignaria Sein.*" A fireball appeared above her palm. It swelled up in the blink of an eye, until it was big enough to cradle in one's arms. It looked entirely like a miniature sun. She lifted up the

roaring ball, and—with a smile—prepared to slam it into me.

"Wait, hold it! Hold iiit!" I cried just as I was engulfed by fire.

And yet, it didn't burn or hurt. The fireball was an illusion just as the Goddess was.

Once the illusory fireball disappeared, the Goddess twisted her mouth into a mocking grin. "So you are awake. I cannot tell these things if you do not answer me," she giggled. I grimaced on the inside.

What a blackhearted Goddess...!

I just kept stepping on land mines. I hated people who mocked others in a way that made it hard to tell whether they were joking or genuine.

"I have watched the two of you from the heavens for the entirety of today. You are having quite the lively school life, it would seem."

"I'd hardly call it lively myself since I've only ever spoken with Stella."

"And what of executing the witch?" the Goddess asked, her usual smile plastered on her face.

She had kind eyes and the furthest thing from a grimace on her face, but... I felt bottomless pressure exuding from her.

"Did you not wish to return to your original world as soon as possible? It hurt my heart to see your childhood friend sobbing over your comatose body once again today. She is awaiting your return with desperation."

That was a cowardly way of putting things. It seemed like she understood what to say to manipulate people.

"I blessed your name and granted you power. All that is left is for you to execute her and—"

"Why don't you do it yourself?" I asked. The Goddess froze mid-sentence. "Wasn't it you who historically defeated the witches and ended the war? Can't you just do it again?"

I had found it strange ever since Stella had told me about it. It seemed to me that the Goddess could just kill Stella herself without all this business about granting me divine power. What was a god if they couldn't rain down fire from the heavens or whatever?

"That is not an option," the Goddess said sadly. "In the process of

ending Pandemonium, I ascended to the heavenly throne so that I might watch over humanity. As a deity, I cannot leave my throne; nor can I directly interfere with mortal affairs. All I can do is appear before my subjects in this illusory form to impart wisdom."

"Then why did you choose me for this? Wouldn't someone else be better for the task?" I asked. Unfortunately, there was no end to people who hated Stella's guts out there. Giving any of them divine power would have Stella dead the next day, so why me?

"On a fundamental level, it simply makes karmic sense to give a victim of a witch the power to strike her down. But there is another reason..." The Goddess bent down and brought her lips to me. "...And that is because I have found myself fancying you."

What?

It took me several seconds to understand what she said. The Goddess fancied me? Where was that even coming from?

I looked to the side and found the Goddess's lustrous face incredibly close. Even as an illusion her curves were visible, and a gap in her robes revealed her significant cleavage.

"My statues litter the continent, but no one dares touch them to visit my heavenly throne. To meet me requires unparalleled intellect, bravery, and most of all, a mighty will to see the mission through. You, who have passed countless trials to come to my throne, are the one most befitting to be the savior."

"The savior," I mumbled after a pause.

"Indeed. You shall save the world by killing the witch. As the Goddess I extol your name, such that it will be passed on into perpetuity. I can even insure your reincarnation to this world if you have misgivings for your world of old. And of course, this rebirth will be one with unparalleled talents."

The Goddess pointed to the room's bed. The comforter was lumped up like a mountain as always. Stella was still asleep.

"Now, honor awaits just there. Now is the time to kill the witch. There is nothing to fear. Behind you stands the all-knowing, all-wise Goddess. Use the divine power I granted you to quash her foul presence with the hammer of justice..."

"*Deus est mors*," I began in response. I heard a stifled cackle

from beside me; the kind of laughter that was ill-befitting a compassionate goddess.

Energy built up on my forehead, and after taking a deep breath, I unleashed it.

The relief exploded off the wall and fell to the ground with a clatter.

"What...?!" the Goddess cried. Once again I had unleashed all of my divine power against her relief. This time, I aimed at her mouth. Who could have guessed that a literal wall relief could mouth chants? If I had known about this, I would have blasted it off yesterday.

"Ah, crap, I missed again! Aiming this thing is a lot harder than I thought. I'll have to practice so I don't miss next time."

"Tch!"

The Goddess clicked her tongue, and with that, she disappeared. Without the relief she apparently couldn't keep her illusory form.

I sighed in the now-dark room.

Seems like the Goddess is really insistent that I *kill Stella...*

Honestly, it had been hard not to burst into laughter when she brought up that savior stuff. She apparently wanted to fulfill some kind of objective by propping me up, but she underestimated me. No otaku would fall for a corrupt Goddess's wiles over their tsundere idol. It was almost offensive.

Still, who knew how long I could keep her occupied...

"Nmm... Did something fall...?" Stella groaned, rolling about under her comforters. Apparently the sound had woken her up.

She lit up a candle in a daze, and...

"AAAH! The relief...!" she cried. She quickly picked it up off the ground and grimaced.

"Guh, what the heck...? Why is her holy visage so torn up? This is awful..."

"Don't worry about it. Probably won't get any worse than it already is."

"I'm going to worry about it! I mean... Doesn't this feel creepy to you? The Goddess relief in my room getting destroyed on its own like this really makes it feel like I'm actually cursed..."

“What feels worse than a ruined relief to me is a talking relief.”

“A talking staff is going to say that?!”

“Now that you mention it, I guess I am kind of creepy...”

Talking with Stella always made me forget I was a staff.

Stella burst into a bit of laughter. The gloom on her face, lit by the candle, vanished. I was glad. Since I could hardly be honest about being the one who destroyed the relief, this was the least I could do.

“It doesn’t matter to me even if you are cursed, Stella. In fact, that just adds personality! Otaku love seeing something like ‘cursed’ in a girl’s status menu. I certainly do.”

“You’re the only one dumb enough to actually think that...! Jeez. Talking to you makes me feel dumb for taking anything seriously,” Stella said.

Her hand shot out to snuff out the candle in order to hide her reddening cheeks. In the process, her hand hit the book on her desk, and it knocked into the ground. As it fell, something slipped out from the pages... A tiny, patterned piece of paper floated to the ground.

Stella inhaled sharply and picked up the paper with a trembling hand. “Th-This is...”

If I remembered correctly, that was one of the slips used in the Descension Ceremony.

Chapter 3 — Friends? Making Those Will Be Super Easy!

"The Goddess, known as the first saint, proclaimed this: Let there be light, *Luxsaria Sein*. Thus a spirit of Light appeared and bathed the world in its radiance. So it is that we had light, but all was icy and frozen. Thus the Goddess spoke: Let there be fire, *Ignaria Sein*."

Professor Speranza, clad in dark robes, held up a copy of the scriptures as she intoned her speech.

We were in theology class, which was a purely classroom subject.

Saints kept their staves even in written lessons, so I was here too. Everyone here had their staves placed in stands on the side of their desk.

"So it was that all-knowing, all-powerful Goddess taught humanity the first five miracles: Light, Fire, Water, Wind, and Earth. These five miracles were enough to guide the entire world forward. Within the scripture, the Goddess used combinations of the five miracles to create all manner of things," Professor Speranza explained, analyzing each passage of the scripture.

Stella, however, was too occupied to pay attention to the lecture. Professor Elyena's report was due today, and since she hadn't made much progress last night, she was instead using this time to fish through the book on Pandemonium while muttering to herself.

"...It was in 156 PE that the Gerda Kingdom, viewing the reality-shaping nature of magic to be dangerous, began the first-ever witch hunts. They erected statues of the king to hunt down the witches, and with their all-observing eyes..."

Suddenly, I sensed a wave of murderous malice. It was Professor Speranza, standing next to Stella's desk. Her eye shot wide open as she stared down at the open book in front of her.

"Stella Millesia!" she declared, slamming the butt of her staff onto

the ground. Stella jumped in her chair with a yelp, then hurriedly closed the book beneath the professor's cold eye. "Class attitude: failing grade!"

Some snickering, condescending laughter echoed from the corner of the classroom. Professor Speranza spun around, and in an instant everyone had on stony expressions.

"Among all high-level miracles borne from fusing several elements, the most technically complex of all miracles would be the creation of artificial life using all five. It was with this miracle that the Goddess facilitated Johazel the Savior in creating all manner of animals," Professor Speranza said, her shoes clacking against the floor as she strode to the back of the classroom. "If this class is simple enough you find yourself compelled to work on personal projects, Stella, I should like to see you create artificial life in front of the class."

As usual, she was a nasty piece of work, but Stella gave an enthusiastic "Understood!" and stood up. It seemed learning to use miracles had given her some confidence. That was nice to see.

She stood in front of the lectern at the front of class and began a fluent chant. "O Spirits populating the world, O those whose oaths to the Goddess hold true! Let Water be blood, let Earth be flesh, let Fire be heat, let Wind be breath, like Light be wisdom. *Aquaria Sein, Terararia Sein...*"

My position at the front gave me a good view of the classroom. There was Professor Speranza at the back, arms crossed with an increasing look of shock arising on her face, and there was the villainess Quinza sneering with her friends. I heard some whispers.

"The idea of her mastering high-level miracles of just barely learning to cast one a few days ago is laughable."

"She's just going to finish the prayer and nothing will come out, pfff..."

"All that about a Great Spirit was a lie... It won't be anything major..."

"Truly."

Aaah, shut up! Stella's working hard on this chant, just shut up and listen!

I held back my urge to shout and steeled my resolve instead. I'd have to make this "creation of life" miracle succeed so explosively all of them would eat dirt.

And that was when I realized...

Uh, what artificial life-form is she trying to make, anyhow...?

Miracles went like this: Stella chanted, I told the spirits what she wanted, and they made it happen. If I didn't know what she wanted to make, I couldn't tell the spirits either.

Now that Stella was at the front of class, having a secret conversation wasn't in the cards. I'd have to use context from the prayer to figure out what she was making.

"...There was found an altar the people had made for the witches. They had sought immortality, pride, and empty wealth to bring their city prosperity. Johazel the Savior wept and left that very night. It was three days later that all the food in the city was found to have been devoured by pests."

Yeah, no idea. Probably any living creature will do.

Stella was surely aware of everyone's condescension. She knew not a single one of them thought in a million years her miracle would actually work. No doubt she wanted to blow them the heck out too. The bigger and grander the creature, the better.

Which means the perfect thing here is a dragon. Come forth, O spirits allied in our love for tsunderes! Form a dragon so we can see a sparkling smile on her face!

As if responding to my call, a wind blew into the classroom from the window. The orb on my head shone with light, and earth swirled above it with water...

There was the loud thump of something heavy landing on its feet.

It took a moment before those in the class understood what they were seeing and screamed.

Now standing in the classroom was a copy of the dragon I had seen at the ceremony earlier. Due to needing to fit in the classroom it was smaller than a Grand Spirit, but it didn't lose out in aura. The pure red of its scales no doubt reflected the intensity of my wrath. The spirits did a good job.

The dragon spread its wings and, just as I had imagined, let out

an ear-piercing roar. Shock waves resounded that left everyone covering their ears. The updraft of wind sent their textbooks flying, which also knocked Stella's book off the table.

"Ah!"

Seeing that, Stella hurried over and picked it up before fitting the slip of paper back in...just as the professor let out a shrill voice. "Stella Millesia! What have you created?!"

"W-Wait, me?!" Stella exclaimed.

"Who else but you?!"

"I thought I was making a mouse...!"

Oh. You know, in retrospect, that's kind of obvious.

"No excuses! Get rid of this dragon now, or—"

The dragon turned, instigated by Professor Speranza's barks. She balked just as the dragon opened its mouth wide.

"*Aquaria Sein!*"

The professor finished her chant just as an explosive breath of fire rained down on her.

I had, in fact, gone a bit too far. I hurriedly cleared my mind, and the dragon disappeared.

Professor Speranza lived thanks to the barrier of water she formed, but the wall behind her had been burned to a crisp. There was nothing but soot-covered stone.

The rest of the class evacuated to the corner of the classroom. Most were literally dazed with shock, but Quinza alone was biting her lip angrily.

The classroom was now breezier than before, which allowed the infuriated professor's yell to ring out easily...

"STELLA MILLESIAAAAAAAAA!"

* * *

"Aaah, jeez... I can't believe they're making me clean such a big garden. I'm so unlucky," Stella said, her shoulders slumped and broom in hand.

As punishment for destroying a classroom, Professor Speranza had ordered her to clean a rear garden on campus. Few students

came to this gloomy, shadowy place, and so it was up to her to gather up all the fallen leaves alone.

"Sorry," I said from her back. "I should have chosen a less aggressive animal."

"Listen, you," Stella said, pausing her cleaning to glance at me. "Why didn't you just make a mouse like my prayer said? Nothing bad would have happened then."

"I didn't know what you were trying to make..."

Apparently the spirits hadn't heard any of Stella's prayers, so they'd had nothing but my calls to go on. Thinking back, during the race yesterday everything had happened according to my intentions, not Stella's. It felt like a pretty big problem that her own intentions weren't being conveyed at all.

"I said the proper prayer, you know. It's just common knowledge that after Johazel the Savior left, the city had an outbreak of mice that led to starvation."

"Not common knowledge to me."

"What, do you not even know the scriptures...? You don't know any of the 19,525 miracles the Goddess granted?!"

"Are they really miracles if there's that many of them...? And do you have each of those memorized?!"

Stella looked up. "Not all of them... But the chants she gave ended up right in the text of the holy scripture. If you don't know the scripture, how are you supposed to convey what I'm thinking?"

"Just say 'Make a mouse!' and it'll be done."

"Nope," Stella said, shooting the idea down without a second thought. "Do you have the guts to give a nontraditional prayer in front of Professor Speranza?"

"Eh... I feel like she can't complain if the miracle works."

"We're graded based on whether we can reproduce the prayers exactly. If you mess up even a single word, you'll have to write them thirty times as homework."

Seemed like becoming a saint was no easy feat.

* * *

Stella managed to finish picking up all the fallen leaves before the sun fell, then took me in her hands.

"I'll just burn these."

"Sure."

"O Spirits of Fire, fulfill your contract in the name of the Goddess supreme... *Ignaria Sein!*"

Fire spirits, burn up these leaves!

Once I focused my mind, the leaves caught fire just like that. A crackle rose in the air as the mountain of leaves collapsed in on itself in fire. Smoke rose, and Stella ended up coughing. She took out a handkerchief, and...

"Ah!"

A slip fell out and began drifting to the floor.

It was the same slip that had fallen out of her book in class. She had saved it and kept it in the book after finding it last night.

Stella picked up the slip of black-patterned paper, an expression of melancholy on her face. "What should I do with this...?"

"It's a slip for the ceremony, isn't it? Just save it for next year."

"You don't get it at all. This isn't that simple," Stella said, her voice lowering. "Listen carefully... Owning these slips is a major crime."

"A crime...? But everyone uses them during the ceremony."

"For the Descension Ceremony, people with wishes go to the church and get one singular slip to write on. It's forbidden to bring the slips out of the church."

"Why is it that serious? It's just paper."

"It's not. These are holy slips made by the Goddess herself, understand?! Each one is a miracle."

That really lowered the standard of what made a miracle, but I figured it best to keep that to myself.

"Just trying to take a slip out gets you imprisoned, and anyone who actually gets one out is given a heavy sentence. And that's not all—the Goddess sees everything from the heavens, so slip thieves are given divine punishment."

"Like?"

"A few years ago, there was a band of thieves that stole a mass

of slips. They dodged the eyes of the king's army and fled into a city, but a magibeast appeared from nowhere and ate them all up. It's said they couldn't deceive the eyes of the Goddess, and ended up facing her divine punishment."

"Hmm," I said. "So basically, whoever put that slip there had done so at great risk to themselves?"

"That's right."

"Why would they have just left it in a library book, then?" I asked. It didn't really make sense.

Stella furrowed her brow, then shook her head. "I don't know. But either way, it will be a big deal if it gets out I have this. The army will come for me and put me away for sure."

"As if I'd let them!" I declared, trying to cheer her up. "Just toss the slip. How about we burn it here, even? There's a fire right there."

"Do you want to be struck by lightning or something? Slips don't burn. They can't be harmed by any means whatsoever, in fact. They're brimming with the Goddess's holy power."

"Sounds like a suit of armor made from slips would make you invincible."

"Again with the heresy...!"

"Just joking. So, what's the plan? Want to just bring it to a professor and be honest about where you found it?"

"A professor...? Who, exactly?"

I thought back to all the professors I had seen up until now. There was only one who had been kind to Stella at all.

"Who else but Professor Elyena, really."

We finished cleaning and returned to the school building, prompting a yell of "There she is!"

A sizable group of students all raced in Stella's direction, their footsteps forming a loud clamor. Stella tensed up, but once the students surrounded her it was clear they all had dazzling smiles.

"Stella, are you free this weekend? We're holding a study group and were wondering if you'd like to join."

"Good day, Stella. Would you care to attend a tea party held in our dorm room later today? Everyone is dying to get to know you better."

“So you’re the first-year Stella Millesia! How about joining the Flight Club? With your mana, we can aim to win nationals!”

“Step down, Flight Club! A student this talented is best served joining the student council. Congratulations, Miss Stella. The student council president wants to talk to you. As for the date...”

They had changed their attitudes on a dime. I was less shocked and more exasperated.

Apparently news of Stella creating a literal dragon in class had spread throughout the entire student body, from the youngest grades to the oldest. They had all been avoiding Stella before, but now that she could use miracles, they were all swarming her.

Now, the question was... How would Stella respond to these self-interested folk?

“Are you sure you want to be spending time with Stupella?” she asked. At once, everyone averted their eyes. An awkward air arose. Everyone here had once mocked her with that nickname once before.

One of them wiped the sweat off their brow. “Er, that’s all in the past, so...”

“I mean, you’re all the ones who said it, no? The Goddess has abandoned me and the spirits hate me, right?”

At that point, nobody had a further rebuttal. One person left, then another, awkward looks on their face.

Stella, not noticing this, placed a smug hand on her chin. “And now here you all are, begging me to join your clubs. Seems like you finally understand my true abilities. Well, if you absolutely insist on needing my help no matter what, I suppose I can lend some of my valuable time. I might not even mind accepting some of your... Wait, where is everyone?!”

Stella balked at the now-empty hallway.

“That was some brutal cynicism. Even I got a chill down my spine.”

“What do you mean, cynicism? I was going to accept,” Stella said, pursing her lips. She didn’t even realize she had torn all of those people apart... That was a tsundere for you. They just couldn’t communicate to save their lives.

“Well, whatever. They’ll be back if they were serious about recruiting you.”

“True.”

Stella resumed her walk.

The change was drastic. Now, everyone was giving Stella approving, friendly looks.

They greeted her like she had been their friend for years. Even the aged professor that had eviscerated her at the ceremony was smiling.

As for Stella...

“Guh, this feels gross somehow...”

She had her brow furrowed and a conflicted expression on her face. She wasn’t used to either being complimented, or even getting smiled at in general.

When we reached the staff room, the person we were looking for just happened to be leaving.

“Professor Elyena!” Stella called.

The pointed witch hat turned and looked this way. “Oh, if it isn’t Stella. Have you finished your report?”

The time limit for the report was after class today. Stella took out the report on Pandemonium, which she had just barely been able to finish.

Professor Elyena accepted it and gave it a quick skim. “It seems you filled the necessary number of pages. This is proof you read the resources well, aha!” She nodded in satisfaction before looking up at Stella. “Admission acknowledged. I will deliver your grade after reading it. Until then.”

“Um...!” Stella called before she could leave. The professor stopped.

Stella’s expression was visibly stiff. She was probably trying to talk about the slip. She had a hand stuffed in her pocket.

“What is it?” Professor Elyena asked, her head tilting. “Pandemonium’s culture and customs are a thousand years old; they are unlike anything we have today. I will accept any questions you may have on them.”

“Um, not that...” Stella’s eyes wandered as her mind raced.

And who could blame her? If the fact she had a slip got out, she would—in the worst-case scenario—be imprisoned by the royal army. She couldn't decide on whether it was truly safe to tell Professor Elyena about it.

The pointy-hatted professor stared at Stella. Stella swallowed hard, opened her mouth, and...

"PROFESSOR ELYENA!" came a roar like thunder. Stella jumped and turned, only to see Professor Speranza standing, enraged, in the door to the staff room. She pointed inside the room with her staff.

"How many times have I told you not to brew foul-smelling tea in the staff room?! Clean it up at once!"

"Eep eep, I forgot to clean up...!"

Professor Elyena hurried back into the staff room.

"I understand you refuse to follow the rules, Professor Elyena; I hereby forbid you from ever drinking tea on academy grounds."

"Oh, how awful. Tea is good for your health, did you know?"

"You are a menace to everyone. I will accept no excuses."

It was like they were a student and professor themselves.

Stella, seeing Professor Elyena bobbing her head in apology to Professor Speranza, let go of the slip inside of her pocket. She sighed, slumped her shoulders, and made to leave.

"Stella Millesia," came a call. Stella stopped in her tracks. Professor Speranza was now looking her way.

"Y-Yes...?"

"Did you finish cleaning the rear garden?"

"Yes ma'am!" Stella replied. "I cleaned it from corner to corner."

"On your own?"

"Of course," Stella said, which was an answer worth a hundred points.

Professor Speranza sighed. "Personality: failing grade."

"Wha—?" Stella said.

"Allow me to give you this warning, Stella Millesia: Do not get too carried away," Professor Speranza said, her voice cold enough to ice over the air. "You may have formed artificial life today, but it was not the beast of your prayer, nor could you control it. Overall, you demonstrated only failure."

Her shoes clacked on the floor as she approached. The advancing darkness of her robes prompted Stella to take a step back.

"Working on personal projects in class, standing on your staff, bragging to your classmates about the strength of your staff's spirit... Your behavior as of late has been intolerable. You may be stricken by pride thanks to obtaining some ability to cast miracles, but—"

"I haven't been stricken by—"

Professor Speranza's staff slammed against the wall centimeters from Stella's face. The professor leaned forward as Stella swallowed her words. "It says it all that no student went to help you despite your ability to cast miracles. One will inevitably have strengths and weaknesses when it comes to casting miracles. Only disaster will await you if you mistake yourself to be all-powerful."

The sharp look in her singular eye allowed no protest from Stella. "The Goddess loathes pride and arrogance more than anything. If you do not amend your behavior and cease your troublemaking..." The professor moved their staff to Stella's throat, and whispered in a dark voice. "You will surely not survive in Antohsa."

* * *

"AND WHAT THE HECK WAS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?! I 'won't survive in Antohsa'? Excuse me? You mean you're going to expel me? Get real!" Stella pouted as soon as we returned to her dorm room.

"Surprised that Professor Speranza didn't change her tune at all even now that you can cast miracles..."

"And like, who even uses their staff against students like that? I thought she was going to kill me. Even if she hates me, that's just going way too far. What kind of teacher is she?"

Staves were a necessary tool for casting miracles. Having a staff pointed at you was probably equivalent to having a gun put to your forehead.

"She said I was getting cocky, but I'm not at all. I was working in class 'cause the deadline was coming up fast. I only stood on my

staff to protect my chastity, and it's true that I've got a special spirit in my staff!" Stella huffed, brushing her silver hair back angrily. She then took the slip out of her pocket. "Forget it... I'm not gonna show this to the professors."

"Makes sense."

After seeing that unreliable side to Professor Elyena, I could hardly disagree.

"I'm going to sew an inner pocket to my robes and hide it there," she said, folding it up.

"Is that actually enough to hide it?"

"There are room and bag checks sometimes, but they won't go so far as to notice an inner pocket," Stella said.

With that, she produced sewing utensils and dexterously got to work making an inner pocket. She looked very feminine as she did so; I found myself enraptured by the sight.

"That should do it. Now not even Professor Speranza will find it!"

Stella certainly had a lot of hostility for Professor Speranza now.

I could hardly blame her; she had been way too strict on her earlier. Still, something in that speech had stuck with me.

"Hey. She said something about people having strengths and weaknesses with miracles, didn't she?"

"Uh-huh. Since spirits are elementally aligned, you'll inevitably end up specialized in whichever element your spirit happens to be."

"What happens when you have to cast miracles of an elemental type you have no affinity for?" I asked.

"Obviously, you just have to cast it anyway. That's the only thing you can do," Stella said, as if it were obvious, but that felt off to me.

"I feel like the answer here isn't working harder, but instead relying on your friends...?"

If one's abilities were swung massively by the spirit in their staff, there was a limit to what one could do on a personal level. I felt like it was wrong to just buckle down and grit your teeth for subjects one was incapable of improving upon.

"During practical lessons, a bunch of students always clump up together, don't they? I think that's less because they're close and more so they can make up for the others' weaknesses."

"I don't know, but... I guess Quinza is the only one in her group I've ever seen casting Fire miracles. Maybe they're arranged according to their element."

As I thought.

In which case, it seemed best for students to cooperate during class... Or, well, throughout their entire school life, even. Maybe that was why Professor Speranza had given Stella a failing grade for cleaning the rear garden alone.

"By the way, what element is my specialty, anyway? I'd like to know my weaknesses."

"We can just experiment for that," Stella said nonchalantly. "I'll state the simplest prayer for each of the five miracles. Whichever forms the biggest ball is your specialty, since it'll mean you got the most spirits for it."

Stella gripped me and chanted five prayers one after another. And the result was...

"Mm, normally one would be blatantly way bigger than the others, but I can't tell whether Light or Wind wins here... Maybe Light, by a bit?" Stella murmured as she faced the five orbs.

"I can't actually see the Wind orb."

"That's because you have to touch it." Stella stuck me into the Wind orb.

Oooh, it's like a tornado whipping my head.

Of the two, Light narrowly beat out Wind. The Fire orb was subsequently a size smaller than either, while the Water and Earth orbs hadn't even really reached the point of being orbs—they'd fallen right to the ground.

"Judging by these results, I specialize in Light and Wind, but I'm weak with Water and Earth."

"So it seems."

"Sounds like you'll want a friend good with Water and Earth, then."

The time was midafternoon—dinnertime. There'd be plenty of students in the dining hall.

"Friends. Friends, huh..." Stella said, twirling her hair around a finger. She seemed unmotivated. No wonder, considering every

student there had avoided her like the plague not too long ago.

"Your grades will go up with friends to help you, y'know. It'll be like having no weak element at all," I said, and her shoulders shifted the moment she heard the word "grades." She just needed one more push. "You need to be top of your class for your wish to come true, no? It shouldn't be too hard for you to make a friend or two, then."

"H-Hold on a second. There's no proof that making friends will raise my grades."

"Just imagine it—you'll be able to do schoolwork better by cooperating. Even cleaning your room will be faster if you split the load. The professors will think better of you, and you'll have more time for studying. How could your grades NOT shoot up?"

Stella placed her hand on her chin in thought.

After several seconds, a look of motivation bloomed on her face. "Just you wait. I'll make a friend in no time!"

Stella briskly made her way to the dining hall with me in hand.

Aaand, to summarize...she failed to make a friend.

The dining hall was packed with students looking for dinner. A few noticed Stella and came walking over, but the first thing she did was lean back and holler.

"I have no interest in puny spirits! If anyone here wields a Great Spirit of either Water or Earth, come to me! I will be generous and befriend you!"

I clenched a fist on the inside and wept tears of joy.

What was this if not a tsundere? Her speech was far too direct and revealed her clumsiness. It was adorable she felt the need to say she was being "generous," thereby hiding her true feelings. She chose bold language, but if one listened closely, they could tell her voice was shaking and her cheeks were flushed.

Glory be to tsunderes! Thank you for everything, tsunderes!

While I was overcome by emotion, the entire student body dispersed from Stella's presence. It was like scattering baby spiders.

Stella ended up sitting alone and muttering to herself about how nothing made sense as she bitterly ate her dinner. She seemed

almost teary-eyed.

* * *

"Forget it, forget it. I don't need any friends. All the groups in class are already locked in anyway. I won't be able to make my own at this point," Stella grumbled. She was talking tough as she postured in bed, but she was depressed enough to not even light the candle beside her. She curled up her slender body into a tiny ball within the darkness.

"Be that as it may, if you can't cast Water or Earth miracles in class when you need to, then—"

"We can just practice. It may not be your specialty, but it's not like you can't use the elements at all," Stella said, "*Luxsaria Sein.*"

The spirits of Light gathered in response to my call. An orb of light floated amid the darkness. It was like a disco ball, bright and glittering. Stella stared at it before continuing.

"All I need is you, Otaku," she muttered quietly.

"Stella."

"Ah! D-Don't get the wrong idea, okay? I just meant in terms of miracles. It's not like I care about you specifically at all!"

"Sure," I replied.

Stella was starting from zero, a point in which she had never been able to cast a single miracle. I could understand why she'd think a weakness was still better than a complete inability.

Still, that reasoning wouldn't be what made her dream come true.

The chances of Stella making a friend on her own are astronomically low. This is where I'd like to step in, but a staff suddenly talking to students would cause a fuss, so...

As I worked the problem over in my head, Stella began rummaging through her closet. "I'm just gonna go take a bath and forget any of this ever happened. It's bath day, after all."

"Bath day...? Didn't you take a shower yesterday instead?"

"It's called bath day because the big shared bath is open. Each grade has a set day for using it; it's not big enough for the whole dorm to go in at once."

"Makes sense. Big baths feel the best."

"Uh-huh," Stella said, grabbing me and a change of clothes before suddenly stopping in place. "Are you trying to come with me or something?!"

Insane false charges. I wasn't trying to sneak into the girls' bathroom whatsoever.

Staves were the lifeline of saints, and so it was normal for them to bring their staves with them everywhere, including baths. People would look at her weird if she didn't have a staff.

And so it was that I found myself in the changing room to the large bath.

Or more specifically, I was stuffed into a doorless vertical locker alongside her uniform.

This normally would have led to seeing girls change in front of me, but Stella wrapped a handkerchief around my head so I couldn't see anything. It was an endless cacophony of giggling girls and rustling clothes. I could also smell steam and soap, which made for the ultimate blue balls.

Am I gonna be edged like this every bath day...?

As my heart pounded, I felt the uniform thrown over me shake. I thought Stella had gotten out of the bath. Suddenly, my neck was grabbed, and a moment later I was thrown into something next-level soft.

Mmm?!

It was a chest. This I could say for sure, given my position: I was in someone's bust—and it wasn't Stella's. It was hard to imagine she was hiding weapons this deadly, and she wouldn't bury me in her chest like this even if she was.

Who was this, then? They spun around while they clutched me tightly. I could feel them start to run.

Hey hey hey, I belong to Stella! You got the wrong locker!

As much as I wanted to inform them of their mistake, my identity as a talking staff was still top secret.

Well, she'll notice once she makes it back to her room.

I elected to remain optimistic and enjoy the peak softness enveloping me.

Unfortunately, the girl holding me did not return to her room.

"*Terararia Sein, Terararia Sein, Terararia Sein...*"

She gave brief chants between ragged breaths. She was casting miracles while running.

That meant she had her own staff. I had no idea if you could use another person's staff to cast miracles, but at the very least, I wasn't playing the part of a guardian spirit. This all led to the conclusion she had not, in fact, grabbed me by mistake.

The girl suddenly stopped and released me from her chest, then undid the handkerchief around my head.

At first glance, she seemed like a weak-willed girl. Her light-colored shoulder-length hair, her droopy eyes, and her gentle features were all reserved. The only thing that stood out about her were the absolute mountains threatening to burst out of her school uniform. I had been buried between those puppies... Wow.

We were in a gloomy woods. The area around us was pitch-black, and the girl was using a miracle to light up the tip of her staff to see. She leaned me against a nearby tree and started digging into the ground. Somehow... This felt all too familiar.

I looked closely at the girl as she dug, and suddenly I recognized her. She was one of Quinza's lackeys... She always stood in the back and just repeated "truly" over and over, so it had taken me a moment to recognize her.

All right. I think I see what's happening here.

It should've struck me before—why had I been buried in the dirt when Stella first found me? Students aiming to be saints generally never left their staves alone. Stella was the same. But they did take their eyes off them momentarily when bathing. They had used that gap to take Stella's staff and hide it. It was like an elementary school prank.

The girl set aside her shovel and wiped her brow. The hole seemed deep enough. She took me into her hands.

At this point, it'd just be stupid to let myself be buried. I needed to get back and see my idol fresh out of the bath.

"O villainous lackey, do not bury that staff. If you return it to its locker, your sins shall go unpunished," I intoned. She jumped up with

a start.

"I-Iron wall! *Terararia Sein!*"

Four gray-colored walls shot up on all sides.

Oho.

Thanks to the walls she formed being made of metal, there wasn't even a crack between them as they loomed protectively over the girl. They had no weakness...unless the threat was inside.

"Who... Who are you? The Antohsa grounds are holy. No boys are allowed here," she said, her tone guarded. Stella had reacted the same way. Nobody thought it was the staff speaking to them.

Not knowing whether she would continue to react in the same way, I proceeded with caution—and less pomp. "I'm willing to reveal my identity, but you have to promise not to run after I explain. Can you promise not to run?"

The girl, trembling with fear over my mystery voice, nodded. "Y-Yesss, I swear..."

"Then allow me to introduce myself... I'm the staff you're holding. Or more precisely, the being in Stella's staff that you're trying to bury right now."

The girl's eyes fell to the staff. Her face paled to the point of going stark white. Her lips trembled, and she fell into a state of pure panic. The walls around us vanished in the blink of an eye.

"Ah...ah..." she croaked, a faint whisper slipping between her lips. She took one step back, then another.

"Heeey, stop! Don't run! You promised not to run no matter what, remember? I can't move on my own! Don't leave me h—"

"F-Forgive my rudeness, O Great Spirit...!"

She leaned me against a tree before rapidly backing up and bowing to press her face into the dirt. Well, that was better than me being left behind.

The girl continued to grovel, making no move to look up. Her body trembled, either out of terror or awe.

This was a pickle, since I didn't exactly have a fetish for making girls prostrate before me.

"I'd like it if you raised your head," I said.

"I could never!" she cried at once. "My soul has been stained with

sin. Not even death would be enough to repay the crimes I committed by attempting to bury a Great Spirit in the earth...!”

“Eh...” I metaphorically put a hand on my forehead. “No need to debase yourself like that. I’m not a Great Spirit to begin with.”

“Only spirits of particularly high rank ever speak to people! This is the first time I have ever exchanged words with a spirit. I thank you for this miracle, oh Great Spirit!”

“Again, I’m not a Great Spirit.”

“You were surely sent by the Goddess to punish me for my sins. Aaah, oh Great Spirit, if you are to punish anyone, please stop at me! Spare my family your wrat—”

“ARGH, I’m telling you, I’m not a Great Spirit! I’m just an otaku!”

“Eeek, I have infuriated the Great Spirit...! My apologies, I shall now call you Master Otaku!”

“Master?! Holy heck, please no!” That was not a word to ever put next to otaku; it sent shivers down my spine. “Listen up, you. Otaku is a word that inevitably carries with it some degree of derision. Only chaos comes from attaching any kind of honorific to it! What I like more than anything else is for a girl younger than me to call me an otaku with a mocking tone in her voice!”

“M-My apologies! Would you prefer Lord Otaku, then? Or His Majesty Emperor Otaku? King of Kings Otaku?!”

I was speechless.

“Um, Master Otaku...?” The girl lifted her head to eye me warily.

I let out an exaggerated sigh. This girl was, how would you put it...? She was an airhead; everything went in one ear and out the other.

“Sorry. I kind of pushed my fetishes on you just now.”

“Um?”

“For now, I’d like to know your name.”

“Of course. I am Feena, daughter of Baron Serdia.”

“Oh? You’re a noble, Feena?”

“My grandfather was granted a barony after finding success in the brewing industry. Despite our low status, we are humbled to count ourselves among the nobility.”

“Why do you bully Stella?” I asked.

Feena shook, hard. “Forgive me, Master Otaku.”

“If you’re going to apologize, do it to Stella, not me. I just want to know why you all continue to bully her even now that she can cast miracles.”

“That...would be due to her status.”

“Her status?”

“This kingdom was founded by descendants of Orava, the wielder of six miracles who slew witches alongside the Goddess. The majority of nobles are descendants of saints and miracle wielders who achieved glory in the Pandemonium Era. Most who enroll in Antohsa are daughters of either royal or noble families.”

Whether one could join Antohsa or not depended on their mana quantity, with mana being understood as holy power. I’d heard in class earlier that one’s mana quantity was a natural, innate thing. Genes probably played a role here.

“Stella, however, is a commoner. One from an orphanage, in fact. There are many who think lowly of this fact.”

Oho, now that was valuable intel. Stella used to live in an orphanage, huh?

“Many think lowly of it...like Quinza?”

“Ngh... Lady Quinza is the daughter of a ducal house next in power only to the royal family. She is disturbed that Stella has more mana than her.”

“And that’s why she views her as an enemy.”

Despite Quinza being from a major noble house, a commoner had more mana than her. On top of that, Stella was now popping off incredible miracles the likes of which had never been seen before. That must’ve really infuriated Quinza.

“Are you unhappy about a commoner attending this school too, Feena?”

“Perish the thought! As I just described, although my house is now noble, we are the very bottom of—”

“In that case, it must’ve been Quinza who ordered you to hide her staff,” I said. It was hard to imagine a mere lackey going out of her way to torment Stella.

Feena hesitated before answering. “It is as you say. However, I

am the one who hid her staff," she said, her hands tightly gripping her skirt. "Although it may have been under Lady Quinza's orders, I deeply regret troubling Stella as I have. That you have found me today, Master Otaku, must be the Goddess guiding me to commit no further sins. I shall reveal all I have done to the academy staff. I will surely be expelled, but that is only just given the weight of my sins. If you will now excuse me, Master Ot—"

"Wait! Please, wait!" I called, stopping Feena right before she could bolt off. *Just think for a second! If you leave me here, I won't be able to move!*

"Feena, take me into your hand."

"At once."

"Awesome. Now, I'd like it if you put me inside the jacket of your uniform."

"Hrm? Like this?"

Feena obediently inserted me into her blazer through the chest.

Thus, I, the staff, was pressed into her chest by her blazer. I was locked so firmly into place, I wouldn't fall to the ground even if she let go of me.

"Perfect. Now I don't need to worry about her leaving me behind."

And it felt amazing. Two birds with one stone.

"Master Otaku? Has something humorous occurred...?"

Feena gave me a concerned expression. Uh-oh—it had felt so good that I'd let some cackles slip out.

"Don't worry about it. Just feels good in here. Warm and marshmallowy, like the stuff dreams are made of."

"I am pleased to delight you, Master Otaku," she said in a voice so innocent that I started to feel guilty.

I coughed. "Anyway, I don't want you kicked out of the academy, Feena."

"But..."

"You leaving won't change anything with Quinza still here. Do you think reporting this to the professors will actually get Quinza punished for ordering this?"

"There are strict penalties in place for those who bully other

students.”

“I have confidence that Quinza would dodge any penalties like that. She’ll claim to the ends of the earth that you acted alone. You don’t have any proof of her involvement, right?”

“Indeed...”

“With Quinza being an important noble, it’s unlikely that anything but a major event would get her kicked out of school. The only one who’ll be punished if you go to the professors is you.”

“However...”

“You enrolled into Antohsa with your own goals, no? You don’t want to be expelled, do you?”

Feena’s expression clouded over. She placed her hands on her chest, which naturally meant me getting pushed deeper in. “I... I...”

“Oh, so here I find you flirting, eh?” a voice, colder than absolute zero, called out. I felt goose bumps ripple across my skin, even though staves didn’t have any.

A pitch-black aura of swirling darkness emanated from between trees. There stood a girl with raging fires burning in her eyes, and her mouth bent into an upside-down V shape—Stella. She took one step closer, than another, crushing the ground beneath her.

“S-Stella...” Feena gulped, the pressure overwhelming her. But Stella never cared about Feena to begin with. The only thing in her wide eyes was a certain staff buried in mountainous cleavage—aka me.

“Stella...! You came looking for me.”

“What choice did I have? Pervert or not, you’re *my* staff!” Stella barked. She pulled me out of Feena’s cleavage, then promptly smashed me against a nearby tree. Over and over. “Do you have any idea how I feel about this?! I ran from one the bath to the other end of the school and back, only to finally find you in another girl’s chest?! What’s the big idea?!”

“Ow! Ngh! You! Sure! Are! More! Violent! Today...!”

“I wouldn’t have even bothered searching if I knew this is what I’d find. A shameless giga-pervert like you means nothing to me! Go ahead and get buried!”

She was slamming me so hard I felt like my head was going to

explode. Not gonna lie, it hurt. It did, but it was also proof that Stella was worried about me. How blessed I was to have my idol worrying about me!

But as I rejoiced...

"Please, stop that!" Feena called, grabbing me to stop the beating. She must've worked up all her courage to do so; her knees were quaking like nothing else. "It was I who stole your staff without permission. All the fault lies with me. If you are going to beat anyone, beat me."

"Let go," Stella growled. "Don't touch my staff!"

"No! I cannot allow you to harm Master Otaku...!"

The two of them started pulling me on either end. Two beauties having a catfight over me? This was an incredibly precious experience, but I couldn't just let it happen.

"Feena, let go. This is how Stella expresses her affection, so I love her beating me!"

"Wh-Who says this is an expression of love?!"

"What?! You love being beaten, Master Otaku?!"

They both let go of me at the same time, which meant I ended up plopping onto the ground. An exceedingly awkward silence fell. *Someone... Pick me up, please...*

"I'm sorry, Stella. It was I who hid your staff. I regret my deeds, and swear on the Goddess it will not happen again," Feena said while bowing deeply. From my position on the ground, I could see her tears.

Stella sniffed. "So you were the one who always hid my staff in that weird, half-baked way."

"Half-baked way?" I interjected, not following.

"Every time I lose my staff, there's a bunch of tiny, misshapen rocks leading to it. That's how I find it again. How else could I find a staff hidden in a place as big as Antohsa?"

Ah, that made sense. That explained why Feena was casting Earth miracles over and over when running with me. Feena had left a trail so Stella could find the staff where she hid it.

"You really didn't want to hide her staff after all, huh?"

"Indeed. But, um, regardless... How could I ever apologize? I did

this knowing that staves are precious objects containing one's spirit..."

"Hmph, half-baked pranks like yours are nothing to me. Do it as many times as you want. I don't care."

"I-I will never do it again! I do not wish to trouble you...!"

"Whatever."

With that came silence. A breeze stirred the trees, with wind blowing between their legs.

Feena, who had been bowing her head, timidly looked up. "Um... Is that all...?"

"Excuse me?" Stella asked.

"You could report this to the academy if you wish, Stella. I would have no excuses available to me. In fact, I encourage you to—"

"What are you even talking about? How many students *and* professors do you think have been doing this kind of stuff to me? If I reported everyone, the whole academy would shut down!" Stella barked.

"Eep... True..." Feena replied, shrinking.

"If you say you won't do it again, what else is for me to say? I mean, am I wrong? What benefit is there in me driving you out of the school?"

"I suppose..."

"So, we're done talking about this. Got anything to say?" Stella demanded, glaring at Feena. Her attitude implied she was mad, but this was her way of saying she forgave her.

Once Feena sensed that, her expression softened.

"I-I thank you ever so much...!"

Feena's eyes then fell on me. She picked me up.

"I must thank you as well, Master Otaku. Please forgive me for attempting to bury you in the earth..."

"HEEEEEEEEY! What do you think you're doing?!" Stella shouted, jabbing her finger at Feena, who had slipped me back into her chest. "Th-Th-That's my staff...!"

"Given all I owe Master Otaku, I thought to please him. Oh! I suppose he might prefer to be beaten?"

"No. In your case, this is better."

"No it's not! And why are you even doing that?! With such a big chest too!"

"Stella, size doesn't matter to me. What I care about is always whether someone is a tsundere or not."

"O-Oh, interesting... I mean, shut up! How perverted can you *be*!"

Stella snatched me back.

She was panting with her hair standing up like an angry cat, exuding naked malice. To think that Stella had a complex about her chest size much like the majority of flat-chested characters... What a valuable thing to learn.

Feena tilted her head. "Perverted...? What exactly was perverted about anything here?"

"Figure that out on your own! And don't go telling anyone that my staff can talk," Stella said, her eyes narrowing. "At this point, I don't care about you hiding my staff, but it'd be a big problem if people figured out my secret."

"I'll ask the same, Feena. It'll be a pain if the professors figure out I'm a talking staff."

"Understood, Master Otaku."

"Also, I like being called 'otaku' with scorn in one's voice, so stop with the 'master' stuff."

"At once, Master Otaku!"

Does she just have brain damage or what...? Is she gonna be okay?

There were other concerns I had too. Although Feena was reflecting on this, she was still one of Quinza's lackeys.

"Feena, you say you'll stop pulling pranks on Stella, but if you keep interacting with Quinza she'll demand the same of you again. What will you do then?"

"Right! You're in Quinza's dorm room, right? Won't it be bad to resist her?"

"It's fine. In the worst case, I have this," Feena said, grabbing her staff and chanting, "Iron wall! *Terararia Sein!*"

In the blink of an eye, Feena was surrounded by iron walls. This time, she even added a ceiling. She was hidden away as if placed

into an iron box.

Stella looked at it in shock, overwhelmed.

"What even is this... Metal?"

"Iron walls," came a voice from within the box. "Even if in her fury Lady Quinza were to throw balls of fire at my person, I will be safe in here."

So basically, she has a means of protecting herself.

Feena made the walls disappear. "Well then, I will be off. I must dry Lady Quinza's hair, prepare cold milk, and wash her clothes," she said before running off into the forest.

Stella and I watched her go.

"That's rough. She's being treated like a slave."

"It's Quinza we're talking about. She probably thinks of her roommates as servants."

* * *

"Attention, please! This is a vine that just recently turned into a magibeast," Professor Elyena called, pointing to a potted plant.

We were in a forest close to academy grounds, attending a class titled magibeast studies. The plant had a twenty-centimeter-long vine growing out of it that writhed like some sort of newborn worm. It induced visual disgust among the students.

"As I believe you all know, magibeasts are plants and animals that have been cursed in some way. For the sake of this lesson, we used a traditional Vesta curse."

Vesta... Where have I heard that before?

As I searched through my memories, Professor Elyena continued her explanation.

"Vesta the Witch of Pestilence specialized in crafting curses. She would curse food with magic, and any who ate that cursed food would be turned into a magibeast under her control. There remains many cursed goods throughout the continent."

Professor Elyena placed the potted plant on the ground and spread her arms wide.

"Now, everyone, come take a closer look. There is no need to be

afraid. This magibeast is only a grade one. Any of you could exterminate it with your miracles."

So she said, but nobody came any closer. They all just looked at it from afar, a sickly pallor on their faces.

"Just as spirits have grades such as Grand and Great, so, too, do magibeasts. They begin at grade one, then two, and so on. Grade tens are maximum power. That said, if a grade ten magibeast were ever to appear, we could consider the world to be on its last legs before utter destruction. I myself have never seen anything more than a grade six."

"Excuse me!" a student called, raising their hand. "How does one determine the grade of a magibeast?"

"Excellent question," Professor Elyena said, smiling beneath her large, pointed hat. "The grading system is a human invention. They do not have their grade emblazoned on them, or anything of the sort. Instead, they are ranked according to how many cursed goods they consumed. The only way we can judge this is by simply throwing miracles at them. A magibeast that perishes from a miracle of a single element is a grade one. However, this means that a grade two or above magibeast would not be impacted by your miracles."

That seemed to annoy the students who were confident in their miracles. Quinza opened her mouth, but the professor continued.

"I know that some of you possess a spirit of nobility, or in other words, a Greater Spirit. Even so, the beginner miracles learned by a first-year will, at most, be able to defeat a grade one. We are talking about magibeasts here, everyone—they are beings of *magic*, do not forget." Professor Elyena put on a thin smile and looked to the sky. "Magic is a force that distorts the world... In other words, it rewrites the fabric of reality itself. In the past, magic killed countless billions and upended culture itself. Our rules do not apply to magic. Its power is overwhelming, to the point that Goddess herself forbade it. Do not forget that magibeasts are beings of magic."

Silence fell over the forest. I felt like the humidity around me rose just a bit.

"Now, as you can see, some magibeasts look quite cute as they move..."

Not noticing that every single student said "In what world is this thing cute?" the professor continued.

"As you feed them more cursed goods, they will change further and further. I have some of Vesta's cursed goods with me, so I shall feed some of it now."

Elyena's far-too-long robes dragged against the ground as she went and picked up a basket placed in the shade of a tree. The basket was filled with pitch-black strawberries.

"Afterward, I shall have all of you make your own magibeasts, but one must not feed them too much cursed food at once. We do not want them abruptly rising in grade, after all. Take great care to feed them one after— Eek!"

Professor Elyena tripped on her robes and fell. The basket filled with cursed food went flying, raining strawberries down on the plant.

"GRAAAAAAAAAH!"

"EEEEEK!"

The screams of the students overlapped with the magibeast's roar.

For some reason, eating the massive amount of food had turned the vines into a giant centipede. The students sensed it was far too powerful for them and scattered.

Stella ran too, but the centipede curled around to get in front of her.

"Ngh!"

A gleaming black torso loomed over her. Stella faltered before the monstrous magibeast, her lips trembling as she looked up. The fear must've gotten to her so badly she couldn't even move. The centipede opened its sharp jaw and leaped forward.

Stella!

It was just as I started to charge up my divine power that Professor Elyena stood up and gripped her staff. "Ohnononononono! *Terararia Sein, Ignaria Sein, Luxsaria Sein!*"

With an explosive boom, the centipede's head popped into a billion pieces. The now-headless creature crumpled into a pile.

The students all froze. Stella, who had almost been eaten, was on her butt in a daze.

As the students were distracted by the massive centipede corpse in front of them, Professor Elyena forced a smile. “Um, that would be an example of what *not* to do. Aha!”

* * *

Class ended up being mostly free time with the task of making a magibeast out of a plant of the students’ choice. They were given tiny pouches with cursed food from the professor, then scattered into the forest.

Stella walked between the trees, looking for a plant to turn into a magibeast, but her mind was elsewhere. “Did you see the miracle Professor Elyena cast? That magibeast was huge, and it just went, *POP!* It was incredible!” she exclaimed, completely enthused. “When are we going to learn crazy strong miracles like that? I want to know about them right now.”

“Well, it was a good reminder of how fucked up miracles are...”

“You mean how awesome they are. It’s only sometimes, but Professor Elyena casts some insane miracles every now and again. She’s not just clumsy after all.”

Farther into the forest, we found an unusual structure.

“Wait a second, isn’t that Feena?!” Stella asked. In the middle of the otherwise normal forest, an iron box stood. It stuck out like a sore thumb.

“That does look familiar. Feels a bit too early to say Feena made that, though.”

“What are you even talking about? Not just anyone can make metal walls like that.” Stella walked over and knocked on a wall. “Feena, what’re you doing?”

“That voice... Stella, is that you?” came the response from within the box.

“Uh-huh. Did some deadly magibeast pop up or something? I can go call the professor if so.”

“No, one didn’t... Um, is Lady Quinza out there, by chance?”

“Quinza?” Stella asked, looking around. “Nope. Nobody else is here at all.”

The walls melted into nothing, revealing Feena. She sighed in relief, placing her hands on her chest, which was visibly sizable even in her uniform. "I thank you. If you had not come, I would have spent the entire day within those walls."

"What happened?"

"Um, well... I displeased Lady Quinza, and..." Feena trailed off.

But with my keen intuition, I filled in the gaps myself. "Could this be about Stella?" I asked.

"Ngh... I suppose I can hide nothing from you after all, Master Otaku. You are correct. She demanded to know why Stella still had her staff..." Feena explained, shrinking. No doubt a sizable fireball had been sent her way.

Stella shrugged. "Well, Quinza's gone, so how about getting back to your classwork? Can't make a magibeast inside those walls. Later."

She started to walk off, only for Feena to jump after and cling to her from behind. "Um! Uh, excuse me, but, um...my bag of cursed goods was taken by Lady Quinza, who said I was so unskilled in miracles it was pointless for me to participate in class."

Stella and I exchanged looks. (If you were there you'd know how that makes sense.)

"If I may be so bold, might I ask to join you in your classwork?"

* * *

"This way, Stella! There's an entire field of flowers!" Feena called from some distance, her robe fluttering. We followed after her and found ourselves surrounded by what looked like pansies.

"How are these? Flowers shouldn't turn into particularly nasty magibeasts," Feena said. She was sweating—she'd been running around to find an ideal plant for us.

Stella looked at the yellow-and-black flowers and nodded. "Agreed. I'll turn these into magibeasts."

"Let me make a hole for the cursed food, then," Feena said. Before Stella could reply, she hurriedly used her bare hands to dig out a hole. "Go ahead. You may put the cursed food here."

"Ah... Um, right."

Despite looking a bit unsettled, Stella dropped a single black strawberry from her bag into the hole. Feena swiftly covered it back up.

"Now we just need to wait. Ah, one moment, I shall make a chair for you."

"A chair...?" Stella asked.

Feena, rather than answer, chanted, "*Terararia Sein.*" An ornate throne of stone formed in front us.

"Do sit here. A table will follow shortly, so—"

"H-Hold on a second. Why are we even thinking about tables?"

"Apologies. Would you have preferred the tea, first...?"

"TEA?! Are you pulling my leg here?"

"Eeek, eek. Too early for teatime, I see. I shall prepare a colder beverage, then, and—"

"WROOONG!" Stella roared, then stuck a finger at Feena. "Why are you suddenly acting like my maid?! That's the problem! You and I are classmates! Equals! Why are you trying to suddenly do everything for me?"

"A-Apologies. Lady Quinza always makes these demands of me, so..." Feena faltered.

Stella fell silent, unable to say anything more.

After a pause, Feena said, "Oh. The flower turned into a magibeast."

At some point, the middle of a pansy had split open like a mouth. The flower used to be palm-sized, but now it was about twice as large.

Stella murmured to herself as she watched the pansy wriggle about like it had a mind of its own. "Mm, this is better than the vines Professor Elyena made, I guess?"

"Hardly could be called cute, but indeed..."

"Anyway, let's sketch it."

The classwork was specifically to sketch the progression of the stages of evolution for magibeasts. Stella and Feena sat next to each other and got to work. Stella took it seriously, but she ended up drawing something unrecognizable. Feena drew the flower in a cute fashion, but that meant it wasn't very accurate. You could really see

their personalities there...

When they were done, Stella grabbed the cursed bag again. "Need to feed it more."

"Quite. Allow me," Feena said, extending a hand and staring at Stella. "Um, it would be better for me to do this, given the danger, yes...?"

"Agaaaain! Why are you thinking like that?" Stella asked, puffing out her cheeks. "We'll take turns and do our equal share. Got it?"

Leaving no room for argument, Stella dumped some cursed food onto her hand. Feena saw that and tilted her head.

"Wow, Stella... Your bag is certainly filled to the brim with those."

"How many did your bag have?"

"I do not quite remember, but... I believe it was less than ten."

Stella had nearly twenty in her palm.

"It's Professor Elyena we're talking about here; she probably just put them in the bags randomly."

Stella and Feena split the cursed berries between them and stood in front of the pansy.

"One by one," Feena repeated.

"The professor said she didn't give us enough to make a grade two, but better safe than sorry."

It was hard not to be cautious after seeing that giant centipede. But once they started taking turns feeding the beast, I suddenly found myself doubtful.

"Those berries were made by Vesta the Witch, right? I'm surprised it's been over a thousand years and they still haven't gone bad."

"Why would something made of magic ever rot?" Stella asked as if it were obvious.

"Is that how it works...?"

"Didn't you listen to Professor Elyena's lecture? Our rules don't apply to magi— Eek, what's happening?!"

The pansy they were feeding suddenly grew in size. Its petals grew alongside it, and a mass of vines sprouted from its stem.

Stella instinctively jumped back from the pansy, but...

"EEEEK!" Feena cried, caught by the magibeast.

The pansy's vines wrapped around Feena's entire body and tightened, pushing out her busty chest even further. This was basically like something out of a porn game... Seriously?

"Feena!"

"Ngh, stop iiit! I'm not giving you any more fooood...!"

Apparently the magibeast was trying to nab the cursed food from Feena's hand.

"Feena, throw them away, hurry!" Stella yelled.

"I-I caaan't! It's got my aaarms!"

"Then cut the vines off. Hurry!"

At Stella's prompting, Feena began to chant.

"O Spirits of Fire, fulfill your contract in the name of the Goddess supreme... *Ignaria Sein!*"

With a pop, little sparks appeared and disappeared.

"Wha?" Stella blinked. I was confused too.

Not a single vine had been cut, and Feena remained captured by the magibeast. The miracle had clearly failed.

"Feena, what was that...?"

"I-I'm bad at miracles! I fail whenever I try anything but Earth..."

So that's a thing that can happen?

"Stella, let's do it ourselves."

"Right. A hundred days of unending sun cracked the earth, and ended all life. *Luxsaria Sein!*"

Light?! I thought for sure she was going to blast out a Fire miracle too, so I ended up delayed in my response.

Light spirits! Uuuh... What do I want here?

The goal here was to cut vines and free Feena. I knew that much, but I couldn't imagine any way in which light could cut vines.

"What?! Why isn't a miracle happening? A hundred days of unending sun cracked the earth, and e—"

"Wait, Stella. Why are you trying to cut vines with Light?!"

"Excuse me?! We're dealing with a plant here! They'll obviously wilt if you shine sunlight on them for long enough."

"You want me to like...simulate dry weather with sunlight?"

"Don't you know about deserts?! Visualize..."

"EEEK! DON'T GO IN THEEERE!" Feena wailed as the vines began

to infiltrate her clothing. Her cheeks were getting red; this was bad in more ways than one!

"Anyway, I want light to dry up the plants. Got it?!"

"Roger."

"A hundred days of unending sun cracked the earth, and ended all life. *Luxsaria Sein!*"

O Spirits of Light, light up the pansy magibeast like the desert sun and dry it out...!

There was a flash of radiant light. The spirits were gathering above the magibeast and shining. Within moments, the pansy began flopping about, then collapsed.

Feena crawled out from among the vines and ran our way.

"Are you okay, Feena?! You're not hurt?!"

"Sorry for taking so long to help—"

"I am fine. However..." Feena, fidgeting, looked up at Stella...then showed the empty palms of her hands. "Um... It stole my share of the cursed food..."

With an earsplitting explosion, the earth erupted. Earth and plants rained down around us while Stella and Feena used their arms to protect their eyes.

"Wh-What...?"

A bizarre creature now stood where the pansy magibeast had been. Its head was a pansy while its torso was a giant snake. Sharp teeth lined the center of the flower's mouth.

The pansy had not, in fact, died to the might of a few seconds of sunlight. And now it reared its head back before lunging toward Stella.

"Ngh!" In an instant, Stella tossed aside the cursed food in her hand. The magibeast turned its head to follow, and Stella took that opportunity to chant.

"O Spirits of Fire, grant me blazes to burn mine enemies away. *Ignaria Sein!*"

All right, now we're talking. Spirits of Fire, make a fireball!

As per my mental image, a fireball began to form at the tip of Stella's staff. Seeing that, Stella balked.

"Why only one?! Is this the limit of my Fire miracles...?!"

"I mean, I only imagined one fireball. Did you want more?"

"You again?! Lots, I want lots! This is based on when a rain of meteors crashed into a city worshipping the witches. It's obviously not a single fireball!"

"Stella, the magibeast...!"

The magibeast finished eating the cursed goods and turned back this way.

Stella swung her staff with a battle cry and launched the fireball. The pansy chomped on it, then swallowed.

"Um," Stella said. "The miracle didn't work...?"

"Wow, magibeasts can eat fire. Neat," Feena said in a daze.

The magibeast gnashed its sharp teeth and rushed at them.

"RUN! *Winaria Sein!*"

Feena nodded and began chanting too.

O Spirits of Wind, take Stella high in the sky where the magibeast can't reach!

With a woosh, Stella's robe fluttered with the wind. She sat on me with her legs hanging on one side as she was launched high into the air.

"Heh?"

We were in the sky far above the forest; so far above that there wasn't even a bird in sight. Stella let out a gargled yelp.

"'Sup?" I asked.

"Don't 'sup' me! Why are we this high?!"

"The magibeast can hardly reach you up here, can it?"

Stella face-palmed. "ARE YOU STUPID?! That magibeast is way above a grade one. It's beyond us to take down. If we don't tell the professor fast, the other students are in danger!"

"Oh, I see. You wanted me to fly in the direction of the professor," I mused, then had the spirits lower us down. "Which way was she again, anyway?"

"That way, come on! Jeeeez, why do I have to specify every little thing for my miracles to work right?!"

That would be because the miracles had absolutely no connection to her mental image whatsoever. The spirits utterly ignored Stella's prayers and listened exclusively to me, meaning that whenever we

had different ideas, it would never go the way she wanted.

We began flying about in search of Professor Elyena. Before long, Stella shouted, "Wait! Feena is over there...!"

I looked where she was pointing and saw Feena flying with the pansy magibeast chasing after her. It was about to catch up to her. I shifted the direction of our flying so we could line up to her.

"Stella! I'm so glad to see you. I thought something had happened when you suddenly disappeared..."

"Forget about that, are you okay?! It seems like you're flying kind of weird..."

Feena was flying in kind of a massive zigzag. Her height was going up and down with no stability, making us feel uneasy just watching her.

"It's not weird... This is just what always happens when I fly."

"Whaaat..." Stella said, disturbed. "Speed up a bit! The magibeast is gonna catch up!"

"Ngh, I'm going as fast as I can...! I'm at my limit. I just can't use Wind..."

"Feena!"

She began to plummet to the ground, as if her engine had run dry. She fell to the ground, grasping at her chest and gasping for air.

"What are you doing?! The magibeast is coming!"

"Stella, please summon the professor. I will be a decoy until then."

"A decoy?!"

"I'll be fine," she said.

Stella almost said, "You obviously won't be," but stopped.

Feena lifted her staff and chanted. "Iron wall! *Terararia Sein.*"

The earth responded to her call, morphing into iron and engulfing her from all sides. "Go forth, Stella!" she called from within her fortress. "It shouldn't be able to tear through metal quickly."

"Ngh, fine! I'll be right back with the professor...! We're going full speed, Otaku. *Winaria Sein!*"

I called to the spirits at once.

Stella was visibly anxious. We had just learned our miracles wouldn't work on a grade two or above magibeast. There was no

proof that Feena's walls would actually last.

Please. Make it in time...!

We blasted over the forest at speeds never before seen. A roar resounded from behind us, prompting Stella to glance behind her.

"No way. It's chasing after us?!"

The magibeast slithered this way, its snake torso twisting. Behind it was Feena.

"APOLOGIES, STELLAAAA!" she called, cupping her mouth. "I WASN'T EVEN A GOOD DECOY! IT IGNORED MEEE!"

For a moment, Stella was taken aback by this development...and then, she laughed. She whispered with relief one wouldn't expect from someone being chased by a giant monster. "As long as you're okay."

* * *

"It's finally down... Ahh, jeez, I'm at my limit..."

The pansy magibeast lay defeated on the ground. Stella was sprawled out next to it with her arms and legs spread as if she were making a snow angel.

Feena peered down at her. "Stella, would you like some cold water?"

"I hate to encourage you, but yes."

Feena formed a cup with an Earth miracle, then drew water from a nearby stream before handing it to Stella. She gulped it down, then let out a lengthy sigh.

"What in the world was Professor Elyena thinking, leaving in the middle of class like that?"

What we'd found after retracing our steps to class with the magibeast hot on our heels was a single sheet of paper: *It's a bit early, but I'm off to have some tea! I should be back by the end of class. Elyena.*

In the end Stella'd had to take down the magibeast (which, in reality, meant me stealthily using my divine power—Deus est mors—to take it down). I managed to mix in the beam with one of her miracles, so she probably didn't notice.

“My apologies, Stella!” Feena exclaimed with an abrupt bow of her head.

“Wh-Where’s that coming from?”

“The magibeast grew because it stole the cursed food from me...”

“There was nothing you could’ve done about that.”

“And on top of that, we did not even finish our sketches, nor do we have any food remaining to try again...”

“That’s all the professor’s fault for giving us way too much.”

“If I had not asked to accompany you in class, your work would not have—”

“Aaah, jeez! I don’t think it’s your fault, so lift your head already!”

Feena timidly looked up and instantly trembled upon seeing Stella tilting her chin away with purposed lips. “I-I knew it, you’re angry...!”

“Excuse me? No I’m not.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Feena. Stella’s just too embarrassed to smile. Gotta see through the act.”

“Y-You truly are not angry, Stella...?”

“That’s what I’m saying. Drop it already.”

“The truliest of trulies?!”

“GAAAH! It’s true! I swear on the Goddess!”

“I’m so relieved...” Feena said, placing a hand on her chest. “You truly are magnanimous, Stella. If it were Lady Quinza, she would have torn me apart for causing her to fail.”

“Don’t compare me to that toad. Anyone would look nice compared to her.”

“Well spotted, Feena. Stella is a kind girl at heart,” I added.

“She didn’t call me deadweight and leave me behind when I was being chased by the magibeast, after all...” Feena said.

“I-It would just be my responsibility if someone got hurt in the middle of me doing my classwork. I don’t want another penalty.”

“Guess what, Feena? When she saw the magibeast run past you, she—”

“Sh-Sh-Shut up! Why are you even forcing yourself into this conversation?!”

Stella swung me about to silence my truth. I decided I’d tell Feena what happened when Stella wasn’t around.

"Anyway, Quinza's a tyrant. I'm surprised you hang around her at all."

Feena paused, then said, "I am grateful she allowed me to be her roommate. Due to my lack of ability with miracles, I cannot complete my classwork without the aid of her and her friends."

Stella's eyebrows shot up. "Hey. Do you actually think you're bad at miracles?"

"I was thinking the same thing," I said.

"Wh-Wha...?" Feena stammered. "Of course I'm bad... Lady Quinza is always yelling at me, and even you said my flying was weird..."

"You may not have a knack for Wind, but your iron walls were clearly something special. I've never seen anyone else make metal walls with miracles."

"B-But that's the only thing I can do... Iron wall." She was suddenly engulfed in dark gray walls. "You're just overestimating me... They may be strong, but all they can do is hide me. They can't protect anything, nor can they serve any offensive purpose."

"You're just being defeatist. If I could make walls like that, I'd be able to crush people with them."

"How so?"

"I mean, just throw them at your foes. It's that simple."

Holy cow, so violent...

Stella was giving a smug look of triumph, but what she described was basically a "physical" attack, as it were. That was probably an idea only she'd have, as someone who spent most of their life unable to use miracles.

The walls remained standing in silence. Eventually, Feena let out an amused giggle. The metal melted into the ground, revealing Feena again. "You are so strange, Stella."

"Excuse me? You looking for a fight?"

"I'm just moved. That is quite the eccentric idea; one that no normal person would ever have conceived!"

"Okay, you have to be making fun of me!" Stella said, her eyes narrowing, but Feena just looked confused. She sighed. "Listen. Nobody who can make metal walls like that could possibly be bad at

miracles. If you call that bad, what would you call me when I couldn't use any miracles at all?"

"Extremely bad, perhaps? The utterly worst anyone has ever been?"

"Gaaah! You SURE talk big, Feeeena!"

"Eek, that was not said to be insulting, I assure you...!"

Stella began chasing Feena around in a circle.

Ah, youth...

What a precious sight. Seeing one page in the life of my idol's youth was healing to one's heart.

And it was then that distinctive, high-pitched laughter resounded through the forest.

"Ooooho ho ho! So there you are, oh Feena the shut-in!"

Speak of the devil. The villainess rich girl Quinza came strutting out of the forest with two lackeys. One of them was holding a big umbrella over Quinza. She wouldn't even deign to carry it herself...

"Lady Quinza..."

"I was looking for you. As you gave your cursed goods to us, you hardly had any for yourself, no? You must have been unable to finish your sketches for class."

"Gave" them to her, eh? We heard you took them.

Feena shrank a bit, now stiff on her feet. "Indeed."

"We have made a magibeast for you. Sketch it."

The lackey carrying an umbrella placed a small cage in front of Feena.

"What?!" Stella cried. "That's a rat...!"

Or more precisely, rat magibeasts. The things in the cage were clawing at the bars with grotesquely enlarged front teeth and claws.

"The professor said to turn a plant into a magibeast. Animals are more likely to escape and end up making a nest in the forest."

"Silence, Stella. When did you become high and mighty enough to critique me?" Quinza demanded with an upward tilt of her chin. "If you have not finished either, I will allow you to sketch the creature as well."

"No way. Rat magibeasts wouldn't count."

Feena, however, obediently took out her drawing utensils. She

couldn’t resist Quinza.

“Feena?!” Stella cried. “There’s no point drawing that thing.”

“It would be beyond me to disrespect Lady Quinza’s kindness, so...”

“It’s not kindness, it’s malice! You should be able to tell that!”

Still, Feena started sketching and didn’t stop. Stella gritted her teeth in irritation.

“The classwork required multiple sketches, no? Here, have some cursed food. Feed it yourself.”

“Ngh...”

Quinza threw cursed food at Feena. Several blackened fruit hit her as she tried to sketch.

“What’re you doing?!” Stella barked, but Quinza ignored her.

“The bars must be obstructing your view. Let’s open it so you can see better.”

“Wha—?! No!”

Before Stella could stop her, a lackey opened the cage. The rats charged out like a flood, bolting to the cursed food. Stella and Feena were right there in danger.

“Iron wall! *Terararia Sein!*”

Walls of iron formed in an instant to protect Feena. That meant she was safe—the problem was Stella.

“O Wind, take me to the heavens! I offer this victory and glory to the Goddess. *Winaria Sein!*” she cried.

Another chant I didn’t know! I couldn’t get the spirits to act if I didn’t know what Stella wanted.

In that time, several of the rats had reached Stella and started gnawing at her robes.

“Ngh! Why didn’t it work... Otaku! This is your fault!”

True. This was indeed because I was unfamiliar with the holy scriptures that the prayers were based on.

“That was a miracle for blowing things away... I wanted to blast the rats far away, but jeez, now they’re too close!”

Stella grabbed the rats to toss them aside. Quinza and her two lackeys cackled at the sight of her struggle.

“I made these magibeasts for Feena the shut-in, but this is more

than entertaining enough."

"So many rats, pfff...!"

"Rats are a good fit for a commoner... Filthy..."

"You guys...!" Stella barked as she struggled against the rats. "Aren't you roommates with Feena?! Why are you cruel to her?!"

"Because she's weak. I am not being cruel. This is a fitting punishment for her—punishment for disobeying me despite her lacking ability with miracles."

It was such a blunt answer that Stella faltered. "Excuse me...?"

"You may not know this as a commoner that got into Antohsa by luck, but the affairs of the academy are determined purely by merit. It is tradition for students unskilled in miracles to wait upon the honor students. It is forbidden for students to disobey their superiors." Quinza pointed an ornate fan at the iron box—at Feena. "That girl is furniture within my room, yet she did not obey my instructions. That is why I am giving her a natural punishment. She must learn to obey the traditions of this academy."

"You're insane...!" Stella pulled a rat off her and slammed it onto the ground. "I reject everything you just said! Quinza, it's about time you got what you deserved! We're attacking. *Winaria Sein!*"

Roger. But just as I was calling to the spirits, one of her lackeys started to chant.

"The road turned to a bottomless swamp, stalling the magibeast's chase. *Aquaria Sein!*"

Stella's body plopped down.

"I'm sinking down...?!" Stella ended up buried to her knees, as if trapped in a swamp. She couldn't even lift her legs. That, in turn, meant she'd hardly be able to fly.

The horde of rat magibeasts leaped now that Stella couldn't move. "Ngh, these stupid rats...! Ow! Don't pull my hair...!" They were thronging all over her.

Unforgivable!

I moved to activate my divine power, but I noticed a critical problem—the rats were attached to Stella, which meant my beam would likely end up hurting her. That was probably why she hadn't tried shooting out fireballs.

Quinza cackled. "Oooho ho ho! 'What I deserve,' you say? It is *you* who are getting what you deserve, Stella! How dare you—a commoner without any political support whatsoever—oppose one of the ducal houses such as myself? I shall teach you what happens when you do not know your place!"

Gah, what do I do?! I need to at least get rid of this swamp...!

I started to plan, and that's when a girl cut through the corner of my vision. It was Feena.

She had dissolved her iron walls and was running toward Quinza. Due to all the magibeasts swarming Stella, she wasn't in any danger.

Quinza looked at Feena as she might a meddlesome bug. "What? Hurry and sketch the magibeasts. Now is your best chance with Stella distracting them."

"Stella has nothing to do with this," Feena grumbled, practically growling as she faced the ground.

Quinza lips curved into a malicious grin. "What was that? You are talking back despite being capable of only the most meager of miracles?"

Feena looked up. She was trembling and pale, but even so, she spoke.

"...Iron wall. *Terararia Sein!*"

A thick iron wall appeared over Quinza's gang. It was far wider than usual. It was more of a box than a wall. Feena swung down her staff with determination.

"HYAAAH!" she cried, and down came the chunk of metal.

Quinza's gang balked. They raced away and fell onto their butts, but several more walls appeared in the air and rained down on them.

"Eek!" cried one of the lackeys.

In that moment, the swamp keeping Stella trapped disappeared. They'd lost their focus, which left them unable to maintain the miracle.

"Good job, Feena!"

Stella, now freed, ran with the horde of rats clinging to her. She ripped one off and threw it at Quinza as hard as she could. It hit her fan with a *thunk*.

"Listen up, 'cause I'm only gonna say this once—roommates aren't your slaves. Just because you're good at miracles doesn't mean you get to bully students who aren't."

Rat after rat hit Quinza and her lackeys. They shrieked in fear and disgust as the creatures hit them.

"I don't care about status, tradition, whatever. Just try and bully me or Feena after this. I'll go a lot further than throwing a few rats at you!"

Stella panted heavily from throwing all the magibeasts. The rats were slumped on the ground, exhausted from being thrown.

And while both Stella and Feena felt like their job had been done, Quinza slowly rose to her feet. "You two... Do you think you can go back home alive after doing this to me?"

Her fan was in tatters, and her uniform was covered in mud. Her previously well-coiffed red hair was all over the place, leaving her almost unrecognizable. But despite that, her eyes burned with clear malice.

She threw aside her fan and lifted her staff.

"I shan't hold back this time. O Spirits of Fire, grant me blazes to burn mine enemies away. *Ignaria Sein!*"

Everything lit up red. An uncountable number of fireballs filled the air, blocking out the sky.

I see... So this is how miracles are supposed to look. Good to know.

Stella and Feena both balked at the extraordinary number of fireballs.

"Say hello to the Goddess for me, you two," Quinza said, expression murderous, then swung her staff down. The fireballs rained down...

"Run! *Winaria Sein!*" Stella hopped onto me. I started to do my thing, but then I noticed her extending a hand to Feena.

"Wha?" Feena said, looking between Stella's hand and face.

"Grab on already! You're not good with Wind, right?"

"Right!" Feena exclaimed, grabbing Stella's hand.

SPIRITS OF WIND! GOOOOO!

Once Feena was on me with Stella, I launched up into the air. I

dodged fireballs for a bit, then ended up high in the sky, far above the forest. Feena spoke first.

"Ah, um, um, um, Stella. I can go on my own now. Lady Quinza's miracles aren't following us."

Feena had been pale for a while now. Apparently flying this fast was scary for her.

I lowered my speed while Stella raised an eyebrow. "Won't you fall if you let go of my hand here?"

"It's not as if I cannot fly at all. O Spirits of Wind, grant me wings in the name of the Goddess supreme... *Winaria Sein!*"

Feena let go of Stella's hand as soon as she finished chanting.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"I told you!"

Feena's height plummeted, and she began zigzagging side to side. On instinct I called to the spirits.

Support Feena too, O Spirits of Wind!

"Oh? The wind has suddenly gotten kinder... Is this your doing, Master Otaku?" Feena asked, looking at me once she stabilized.

"Most likely. Didn't know I could impact people other than Stella like that."

This was a new discovery. Feena giggled with a smile as she straddled her own staff.

"You were right after all, Stella."

"About what?"

"I can just throw my walls at people."

"Hmph," Stella sniffed with pride. "It was nice seeing them freak out."

"Still, with this I will soon be expelled from Antohsa."

"Wha?" Stella glanced to the side.

Feena was facing straight forward, a peaceful breeze blowing through her hair. "With Lady Quinza so angered, I will surely be removed from her room, and I have no hope of keeping up in class without their aid."

"Just move to another room. There's gotta be someplace better than Quinza's group."

"You do not understand Lady Quinza's influence, Stella. Anyone

who welcomes me into their room will incur the same wrath she now directs at me. No room would welcome me with such a risk."

"One would... It's mine, though."

This time, Feena looked our way. Stella was looking away. "Wait, does that mean... There would be no problem with me moving into your room, Stella?!"

"Of course there'd be a problem! I've had the room all to myself up until now. Everyone just left because they didn't want to room with me."

"Of course, my apologies... I would not like to burden you fu—"

"Hold it, Feena. You have to listen to Stella all the way to the end," I interjected hurriedly. I had seen this pattern countless times before. Everyone would always leave before Stella could finish.

"Since Quinza's had it out for me to begin with, that risk you're talking about is nothing to me. If you desperately want to come to my room, I-I mean, sure, I can be generous and let you come. I've got a whole bunk bed ready and waiting. But it's not like I kept it clean hoping I would get a roommate someday, okay?!"

Stella managed to say all that while maintaining a wondrously sour pout.

Feena abruptly hugged her. "Stellaaaa! Thank yoooouuu!!!"

"Eep eep, not while we're flying!"

Fear not. I had been yelling at the spirits to protect this scene with all their might!

"There's nothing you need to thank me for. I-I'm just saying this because I need your Earth miracles too. That's all there is to this!"

"Aha ha, if you insist." Feena let go and looked at Stella. "You yelled at Lady Quinza for my sake, no? I would like to use my miracles for your sake in turn."

Stella inhaled sharply. She turned away from Feena's smile and shrugged. "Do whatever you want."

"Indeed I shall."

"Otaku! Let's go back to the professor already. Full speed ahead! *Winaria Sein!*" Stella declared with a point of her finger. It seemed she was so embarrassed she wanted away from Feena as soon as possible.

I understood this completely, so I...slowed her down considerably.

"Huh?! Why are you going so slow?!"

"I've gone full speed too many times today. Dang, I'm just so tired..."

"THAT'S OBVIOUSLY A LIEEE!" Stella bent her mouth into a frown while Feena smiled on.

There was no sight more dazzling than the two of them flying together in the big blue sky.

Chapter 4 — The Water Has Overflowed, Said ***

The Month of Light went into the Month of Fire, the Month of Water, the Month of Wind, and finally the Month of Earth. Together, they made one year on the continent.

Antohsa was enveloped in a tense atmosphere as soon as it became the Month of Earth...because the end-of-year exams were coming.

"O Spirits of Fire, grant me blazes to burn mine enemies away. *Ignaria Sein!*" Stella chanted in the corner of a garden.

I visualized the miracle Quinza had cast some time ago—the sky filling up with fireballs—but only about ten arose.

Stella crossed her arms and looked up. "The fireballs themselves are too small. Make them bigger...wait, not that big! Aaah, jeez, they fused together!"

We were mostly just practicing aligning our mental images. I didn't understand the prayer, so I couldn't cast miracles in their proper form. Whatever I did tended to create was different from what Stella wanted...so we discussed how to solve this. Our answer was daily practice after class.

Feena, who was nearby, tilted her head. "Um... Master Otaku. I have found it curious for some time now, but I must ask—do you not hear the voice of Stella's heart?"

"Say what?!"

"Th-The voice of my heart?! No way am I letting Otaku hear that...!" Stella shouted with a fervent shake of her head.

"Feena, details," I said.

"Um, normally, the guardian spirit within a staff is connected to the heart of the staff's owner. If that were not the case, I would need to specify the number of walls I wanted each time I cast a

miracle...”

Now that she mentioned it, it was true. Feena would always just say “iron wall,” singular, and yet multiple would come out.

“And Stella; do you not feel Master Otaku’s emotions?”

“I can tell he’s a pervert from what he says.”

Feena looked confused. “Could it be that there is no need for your hearts to connect since Master Otaku can speak...?”

Our pondering was interrupted by a sudden shriek.

Out of nowhere, a pitch-black wyvern appeared above the center of the garden. It was surrounded by what looked like older students.

“Oh no, a crow got the cursed food...!”

“That’s a grade three! First-years, get out of here!”

Apparently, they had accidentally let a crow eat some cursed food.

Some students began casting miracles, while others fled from the garden. The wyvern dodged the miracles and flapped its way up into the air.

“That’s dangerous,” Stella observed. “Letting an animal steal cursed food is no good.”

“Stella, let us depart as well. It is a blessing that we have older students capable of fighting a grade three here.”

“Right,” Stella said, nodding, but her eyes remained locked on the magibeast. It howled a roar that could shatter the heavens, then seemingly looked our way.

“Ngh!”

“Stella!” I shouted, feeling that something was off. That was when the wyvern came shooting in our direction, its sharp claws aiming for Stella...

“Eek!” cried Feena, rather than Stella.

Stella had used her abnormal reaction time to dodge the wyvern. She rolled on the ground, then murmured, “Wh-What in the heck?” as she looked up at the winged lizard in a daze.

“It’s not finished yet,” I said. The black wyvern spun like a tank and locked its sights on Stella once again. She had nowhere to hide.

I started to chant on reflex. “*Deus e—*”

I couldn’t even finish before I was suddenly enveloped in a white

light.

What the...?!

I felt like all sound had evaporated. And in reality, every single student in the garden had stopped praying. Stella let out a little yelp. "The Goddess...?"

A sparkling phantom of the Goddess appeared. Her translucent arms enveloped me. It was an incredibly divine and mystical sight, but I knew the Goddess was Stella's enemy.

What're you planning, Goddess...?!

The Goddess turned her head and peered at me from up close.

"Kill Stella the Witch," came a sweet, sensual whisper. She was smiling so close our foreheads were nearly bumping. And then she repeated herself in a quiet voice only I could hear, as if casting a curse. "Kill her kill her kill her kill her kill her kill her kill her kill her!"

"GAAAAH! *DEUS EST MORS!*"

I instinctively shot out a beam that pierced the Goddess's face and hit the wyvern dead-on. It was flung back and collapsed. At that point, the Goddess vanished.

I panted heavily. That was close. The Goddess was so evil I was seeing red; if the wyvern weren't so massive I might've missed. One wrong move and my idol would have perished...the worst possible result.

As I broke out into a cold sweat, I heard someone say, "It's a miracle..." The students were circling Stella from afar, wearing stunned expressions.

"The Goddess appeared with an avatar of light... That was a miracle directly from the holy scriptures."

"The Goddess slew the magibeast with her holy power!"

"Praise be! Let us pray in appreciation for our all-knowing, all-powerful Goddess of compassion!"

The students clasped their hands in prayer one after another. The atmosphere became solemn all at once.

"Stella...!" Feena rushed over. Stella was still sitting on the ground.

"That was the Goddess," she said, her voice shaking. "She embraced my staff."

"I saw the same thing. The Goddess protected you, Stella!" Feena exclaimed, taking Stella's hand. "Let us pray. The Goddess is watching."

Stella nodded and stood. The two girls took each other's hands and closed their eyes. Stella whispered to herself as she prayed. "Oh Goddess, I thank you for protecting me."

Don't think you've fooled me, Goddess.

I glared up at the statue of the Goddess, which was built to look down over the garden. It felt as if she had just told me to my face that she wouldn't miss any chance to kill Stella.

* * *

Due to the wyvern incident, Stella instantly became known throughout the academy as the student who had been blessed by a miracle from the Goddess. She hardly had time to revel in her fame, though.

Back during midterms, she'd still lacked the ability to cast miracles, which had resulted in some apparently wretched scores. Stella was now holing up in her room—despite it being the weekend—to try and improve her grades during the finals.

"Stellaaa, I have brewed tea. Shall we take a break?" Feena asked, entering the room with a pot and cups in hand.

I looked her way and instantly grunted like a caveman.

Feena was wearing a classic-style maid outfit. She wore a long-hemmed black dress and a white apron. She even had a ruffled headband on.

Stella furrowed her brow. "Liiike I saaaid! Why do you keep brewing me tea? You're even wearing a servant's uniform."

"You were so focused, I thought it best to brew tea myself. And as for this outfit, I was instructed by Lady Quinza to—"

"This isn't Quinza's room! Go get changed, now."

"WAIT!" I declared. Both Stella and Feena looked to the staff holder where I was. "I like it."

"Excuse me?"

"Is it law that only maids can wear maid outfits? Absolutely not!

Only a shallow mind would think wearing a maid outfit makes one a maid, and there is no rule that others shouldn't be allowed to wear such clothes. In short, I define maid outfits as glorious fashion that should be open to all beauties who wish to don them."

"There he goes, ranting like a madman again..." Stella groaned, slapping a hand on her forehead. "Listen. This isn't Quinza's room, and I think roommates are equal. Feena wearing a servant's uniform will make it seem like I'm treating her like a servant."

"Hm. Sounds like you just need to wear a maid outfit yourself, Stella."

"EXCUSE ME?!"

"Then you'll be equal, right?"

"How do you even come up with thi—"

"Brilliant!" Feena exclaimed with a clap of her hands. "I happen to have a spare. You can consider it yours, Stella."

"Good job, Feena!"

"Don't just decide that without me. Feena getting changed is the obvious solution here. Why do I suddenly need to get changed?"

"BECAUSE I WANT TO SEE YOU DRESSED LIKE A MAID, OBVIOUSLY!"

"...How in the world do you have a thing for servant uniforms? I just don't understand perverts," Stella said, the dubiousness on her face making it clear she had no appreciation for the concept of tsundere maids.

Feena swiftly brought the change of maid clothes. "Stella, allow me to help you get changed."

"W-Wait! We need to cover Otaku's eyes first!"

A robe was thrown over me. I could hear the sound of rustling clothes beyond my sight. There was nothing to do but inhale deeply and wait.

"Aaand now! It is time for the big reveal," Feena announced, removing the robes.

Before me was a silver-haired maid with puffed-out cheeks. The dress was poofy and certainly looked like someone else's clothes that she was just wearing. She was shifting uncomfortably, likely due to the pure white apron and headband.

Stella crossed her arms and gave a sneer no maid should ever give. “Hm, satisfied? Be grateful I’m playing along with your freakish taste at all.”

“AAAH! Long live tsundere maids! Long live tsundere maids!”

“Y-You like it that much?”

“Please, Stella. All I ask is that you pour tea while wearing that.”

“Excuse me? Why would I ever—”

“Please! I would kneel and press my face against the ground to demonstrate the sincerity of my request if I had a body! But I don’t! So you have to imagine it!”

“Fine,” Stella eventually said, heading to the pot. She poured a cup of tea and dropped it in front of me with a loud clink, spilling some. “There you go, tea. And you can’t even drink it. So stupid.”

“Gaaah! TSUNDERE MAIDS! ARE! LIFEEE!”

“Wh-What in the...? You’re actually kind of grossing me out at this point...”

Stella was genuinely cringing. She looked at me like I was walking garbage... In other words, she was the model tsundere maid.



Feena tilted her head curiously. “Are you pleased by servant uniforms, Master Otaku? That is a rather refined palate you have.”

“There isn’t an otaku in the world who hates maid outfits. Still, if I could be greedy, I’d say I prefer short skirts over long ones.”

Feena pinched the bottom of her dress and lifted it. “Like so?”

“Shorter. I like them above the knees.”

“Above the knees... This much, then?” The hem of her skirt went higher. This exposed the thin socks she wore up her calf, on top of her garter belt and the infamous “absolute territory” it crea—

“HYAAAAH!”

Out of nowhere, Stella threw me into the wall. I hit it and plopped down to the ground. She then turned to Feena, who was now panicking. “Feena, you don’t have to listen to everything that pervert says.”

“But...”

“Aah, now my throat’s all dry. I’m gonna get some tea,” Stella said, cleaning up her desk.

Feena crouched down next to me, then leaned forward to whisper, “I shall shorten the hems later for next time.”

Was she a deity?

* * *

At Stella’s firm request, the two of them changed before teatime proper.

The delectable scent of black tea filled the room. It was an elegant way to spend an afternoon, but they’d been talking about nothing but exams for a while.

“Feena, how much of the scriptures have you memorized? You said before you barely had any of it down, right?”

“Ngh... I feel that I have memorized a bit more than before, perhaps?”

“Try to recite the second chapter of Revelations from the top.”

“A-A pop quiz?!”

Feena set her cup down and gave it her best shot.

“She who kills is a calamity! She who steals is a calamity! She

who violates is a calamity! The heavens punish those who aid witches. Those who seek magic will be...um, what was it?"

"Burned in the hottest of hells, remember?"

I snorted. Stella looked at me. I was already back in the staff holder.

"What?"

"Nothing. By all means, continue."

"Come on. Now I'm curious," Stella said, pursing her lips.

"It was just funny for the scriptures to disapprove of murder."

"Why?" Feena asked.

"Murder is the greatest sin of them all. The Goddess would never forgive a murderer," Stella added.

I couldn't bring myself to say that the very same Goddess was trying to murder her specifically.

"Hey, I've got a question," I said after some hesitation. Both Stella and Feena faced me. "What would you do if the Goddess appeared in front of you and told you to kill someone?"

The people of this world had an intense and passionate belief for the Goddess. I wondered if they would just blindly obey anything she asked of them.

However, their answers surprised me.

"She'd never do that."

"I must agree with Stella. There is no world in which the Goddess would demand such a thing."

"I'm talking theoretically. A pure hypothetical. If something like that were to happen—"

"There's a negative eighty percent chance of that ever happening, so thinking about it's a waste of time. Like...the most I can say is that if the Goddess told me to kill someone, that's just not the Goddess."

Oho.

"I must echo this. The Goddess is a deeply compassionate lover of peace. She would never, under any circumstance, drive another to commit murder."

"You wouldn't believe her even if she looked exactly like the Goddess."

"Nope, not for a second. That'd be some monster disguising themselves as the Goddess."

"In that case, what about if the Goddess told you to kill a witch specifically?"

Stella and Feena both exchanged looks...then burst into laughter.

"A witch? Those all died out long ago."

"Master Otaku, witches are a thing of the distant past. They are not in the modern era."

The girls giggled and sipped their tea.

Well... Now I understand why she picked me.

It all came together. The Goddess gave me this "divine power" because she liked me? As if. I never believed that for a second. In reality, there was just nobody but me she could order to kill Stella. I wouldn't notice the inconsistency since I wasn't from this world.

Still, that didn't necessarily mean Stella was safe as long as I didn't touch her. As unfortunate as it was, this world had Goddess statues placed all over the place. She could genuinely appear whenever and wherever she wanted. It was possible she could appear and cause trouble like she did the other day when Stella was in danger.

What I know from the wyvern incident is that the Goddess has a sense of urgency about this, to the point that she's appearing in front of the masses and performing a miracle. And I'm starting to reach the limit in how I could hide this too.

There was a knock on the door. It opened, and a professor called Feena's name. Feena accepted a slender box from her and returned to her seat.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A package from House Serdia."

"Ah."

"That must be a new staff," Stella said.

"You can tell? How astute."

"Anyone could tell from a box shaped like that. But... Aren't you going to take it out?"

She must have been hesitant opening it in front of Stella. Only at her urging did Feena open the box.

Inside was a new staff and a letter.

"Wow, what a cute color...!"

The new staff was a faint pink that suited Feena well. She read the letter, then beamed.

"It says, 'May this staff bring you good luck on your final exams.' It seems father and the rest are finally supporting my becoming a saint."

"Did they oppose you going into Antohsa?" Stella asked.

"It's less that they opposed it and more that they did not believe I could succeed. Antohsa is generally attended only by the mightiest of miracle users and wealthy daughters of historically powerful houses. In comparison, my lineage is poor and has produced no miracle users of note..." Feena said, then caught herself. "Eep! I had no intention of scorning you just now, Stella...!"

"It doesn't bother me. I know as well as anyone that the nobility have houses that produce generations of successful saints," Stella said, shrugging and eyeing Feena over. "Mm, but it is news to me that your parents aren't miracle users. Why did you decide to try and be a saint?"

"W-Well... I thought that I could protect my family if I did..." Feena said, lowering her gaze and fidgeting after noticing that we were watching her. (How she knew I was looking at her when I was a staff with no eyes or ability to turn my head was one of life's great mysteries.) "Nobody in my family can cast miracles, and so when our land is attacked by magibeasts, we rely on the royal army's aid. Sometimes, though, they arrive late, and... If only I were a saint, and could build greater walls of iron, perhaps I could defend my land, my citizens, and my family... I, um, I-I know this is far too grand of a dream for one of my stature, but—!"

"Sounds fine to me. It's hardly ill-fitting for you." Feena looked up with shock. Stella continued, wearing her usual unperturbed expression. "Make sure you accomplish that dream of yours. Otherwise sucking it up as Quinza's servant for a year will have been pointless."

"Ehe heh," Feena laughed, breaking out into a smile. "Let's become saints together, Stella."

"Obviously?"

Feena, now smiling, picked up her new staff and held it up to the light. That was when I finally noticed something. "By the way... You can just change staves?"

"Yes. The staff I have been using is one of the free ones lent to students by the academy. Some commission new staves upon special occasions like advancing grades."

"Doesn't your staff have a spirit, though? If you change staves, what happens to the spirit in your old staff?"

"That is nothing to worry about. We are bound to our spirits through our mana. *Luxsaria Sein*," Feena said, chanting with her new staff in hand. A small orb of light appeared at its tip. "See? My spirit has now inhabited this staff."

Her miracle functioning was proof the spirit had moved to her new staff.

"But now I must go return my old one," Feena said, picking up her other staff and standing up to leave.

"Wait," Stella said, stopping Feena. "Can I borrow your old staff for a second? I want to test something."

"Certainly. Here you are."

Despite looking confused, Feena handed over the staff.

The staff Feena had been lent from the academy looked identical to me. Stella must have borrowed hers too.

With the other staff in hand, Stella's expression darkened. She gave a solemn chant. "*Luxsaria Sein.*"

No light appeared. Stella's miracle hadn't worked, and I remained in the old staff.

"Looks like it doesn't work," I said.

"Hm? How strange. Master Otaku should have moved to this staff after you gave your chant," Feena said, and she was right. If spirits were bound to their master by mana or whatever, I should have moved to Stella's new staff too.

"Perhaps you should try again, Stella. It may be that the Light spirits were merely feeling uncooperative."

"One try was enough. Here's your staff back," Stella said, forcing it into Feena's hands. Feena was unable to push the subject, so she

backed down at once. She left to go return the staff.

The door shut with a thunk, leaving the two of us alone.

"I mean, duh. I knew this wasn't normal. I just didn't want to face reality," Stella said, sitting back down and muttering to herself with a dark expression.

"What's up?"

"This just proved it. You reincarnating into my staff was something that never should have happened."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, isn't it obvious?! You entering my staff didn't follow the same rules as getting a spirit. Our mana isn't linked, so neither are our hearts. That's why miracles don't work like I want them to, unlike everyone else's."

"S—" I began, but Stella interrupted me before I could apologize.

"Not to mention, you're a human, not a spirit. You reincarnated into that staff and can't move to any other staff. That staff may as well be your real body. At this rate, I'll have to keep using a borrowed old staff for the rest of my life. How awful is that?!"

People couldn't change the body they're in. Unlike spirits, I couldn't move to another staff.

"Sorry for being an inconveni—"

"Why are you apologizing? It's not your fault that you ended up in a st—" Stella clamped her mouth shut mid-sentence, then looked at me awkwardly from the corner of her eyes. "It's just...not normal for a conscious human to end up stuck in a staff working as some kind of replacement spirit. This is just wrong."

Her face twisted the moment she said that. And then, before I could say that all's well that ends well, she abruptly stood up. She turned, silver hair flowing behind her, and strode to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"It's got nothing to do with you."

"Yeah, it does. I'm your staff. Where you go, I g—"

"Bathroom!" she barked, and then she disappeared on the other end of the door.

It must've been my imagination, but her expression looked like

one of pain.

* * *

Exam day came in the blink of an eye.

Final exams were split over two days. The first day had the written exam, while the second day had the practical one.

And so, on the morning of the written exam...

"Feena, hurry, hurry!" Stella turned on the path to the school building and gave a big wave.

Feena ran after her, groaning. "Slow down, Stellaaa! I didn't get enough sleep!"

"Why are you two in such a rush?" I asked, interjecting from Stella's back.

She ignored me, though, and when we arrived, the building was packed with a massive crowd. Stella's shoulders slumped sadly. "We were too late..."

"For what?"

Stella, once again, just glared at the crowd and didn't answer.

Feena answered in her stead. "It is an old wives' tale. They say if you tap your staff against the Goddess statue on the morning of an exam, you won't fail."

"A nonsense rumor, eh...?"

"Well, looks like we have to line up. Let's go, Feena."

"Right."

Stella and Feena joined the crowd, which shook me. "Wouldn't it be more constructive to use this time to go over your notes? Stella, you haven't finished memorizing the lines yet, right?"

No reply.

"Fear not, Master Otaku. We can look over our notes even in line."

True, but still.

Feena promptly took out a notebook and rolled it into a tube, then pressed one open end against me. "Master Otaku, have you still not made up with Stella? Will everything be well for tomorrow's practical exam?" she whispered.

Stella had stopped speaking to me after learning she couldn't change her staff. There was a high likelihood of her totally ignoring me no matter what I said.

I could understand Feena's concern, given that they lived together, but she was misunderstanding things. "Feena, this isn't a fight. I don't recall fighting with her whatsoever."

"What is it, then?"

"I'm guessing it's a new, cutting-edge form of prickliness."

Stella's shoulders jerked a bit.

"Cutting-edge...prickliness?" Feena asked.

"Indeed. A tsundere is defined as such precisely due to their epitome of prickliness. It's only natural there are as many ways to be prickly as there are stars in the sky. Honestly, there's no form of prickliness as clear and obvious as the cold shoulder."

"Um... And what exactly do you mean by 'prickliness,' pray tell?"

"What is a tsundere but a prickly girl? If you say 'someone who has a mean attitude,' then you should restart your tsundere studies from the beginning. After all, such an answer reflects an understanding of tsundere so shallow and surface level it reveals utter ignorance. The true answer should come if you consider what will naturally follow when a tsundere wishes to act prickly. This is my answer: Prickliness, the 'tsun' of tsundere, is a reflection of a sense of embarrassment too great to contain," I concluded.

Stella's entire body was trembling.

Feena fell into thought, deadly serious. "Embarrassment... Ah! That would mean Stella is ignoring you out of some kind of shyness. She is just so lovey-dovey head-over-heels for you that she is too embarrassed to speak a single word. At last I understand!"

"Heh, sounds like you finally get why tsunderes are the best. I'm glad my righteous proselytization is finally bearing fru—"

"Don't use my silence to just say whatever you want, you GIGA-PERVEEEERT!" Stella, having run out of patience, threw me with all her might. I flew over the heads of the students and soared until I slammed into a statue.

Instantly, everything went dark.

Ngh... What the?!

The chatter of the students poofed away.

For a single moment, I experienced what it was to be in total sensory deprivation, and then I opened my eyes.

"Here again, huh?"

Walls towered on every side, covered with monitors streaming video of the world. It was an oddly futuristic space that was ill-fitting of a fantasy world.

The divine throne.

I stretched, now a human again. It felt freeing despite the black chains around my wrists. Being a staff encouraged a sedentary lifestyle, so I needed to get in exercise where I could.

I lifted an arm and twisted to the side, and...

"You understand why you have been summoned here, I imagine?"

The Goddess, enveloped in divine light, was standing in the far end of the throne room. She was smiling, but her eyes were certainly not.

I paused my stretching.

Looks like she's finally losing patience...

Her intentions were not unclear. I remained silent, prompting her to step closer, each clack of her shoes resounding through the space.

"I instructed you to slay the witch, yet you have done anything but. Each time my eyes fall on you I see you providing her aid, not judgment. Do you think you can claim to merely have poor aim after having pierced my forehead through?"

Uh-oh, she's pissed.

Shooting the wyvern through her had been a bad move. My excuses wouldn't fly any longer.

The Goddess arrived in front of me and lifted a staff. "You have no need of my divine power if you do not intend to slay the witch. I shall have you return my gift."

"Ngh!" I grunted, recoiling on instinct.

The Goddess narrowed her eyes. "O human of another world..."

"Of course, I intend to slay the witch so that I can return to my home. There's just one question I have... Is Stella truly a witch?"

"What...?"

I can't let her take back her divine power. If I lose it, Stella won't be able to cast miracles.

That would leave her helpless during the upcoming final exams. Given her poor grades during the midterms, her only choice was to bet everything on her finals.

"While living in this world I have learned that witches went extinct a thousand years ago, so none live today. Is Stella truly a witch? I haven't seen proof of that."

"The chains binding you are proof. They prove Stella is a witch," the Goddess said after a pause.

"Do you have proof these belong to Stella? I have been with her constantly, and yet have never seen her form chains like this. It's said witches use magic, but I have yet to see her use magic a single time."

"I am the Goddess, and I declare she is a witch. If you do not believe my words—"

"*She who kills is a calamity,*" I said. My firm voice echoed throughout the throne room. "That's a line in your holy scripture. Without proof that she's a witch, by your own laws I cannot kill her. It would be unforgivable to murder an innocent by accident. As the deeply compassionate Goddess, it is surely not your desire to kill an innocent. If you wish for me to kill Stella, please first prove she is a witch."

I observed the Goddess grinding her teeth together.

Now, your response?

Truth be told, I didn't care whatsoever about whether Stella was a witch. But it was true I hadn't seen Stella use magic, which left me an opening to claim she wasn't one.

"Very well," the Goddess said. My finger twitched. Was she actually going to bring out proof that Stella was a witch?

As I held my breath, the Goddess turned and left me. With her back to me as she watched the monitors, she said, "The finals tomorrow will prove to you Stella is a witch. The pieces have all fallen into place for me."

What's she mean by that? The pieces have fallen into place...?

A sense of unease spread through my chest. The Goddess just looked at me with a smile—one clearly identifiable as a sneer.

"You will kill Stella upon confirming she is a witch, yes?"

"Yes," I said after some hesitation. I had no other choice.

The Goddess licked her red lips. "She who deceives a deity shall be granted eternal torment... This, too, is a line from the scripture. Remember it well, human from another world."

She stabbed my chest with her staff, and I fell from the throne room.

* * *

Before I knew it, I was in the classroom, placed in Stella's staff holder. The written exam had begun at some point. Stella was silently facing her desk just like everyone else.

Did Stella notice I was unconscious? Probably not, since she's so focused on her exam. But that's something I'm more worried about...

What in the world is going to happen during tomorrow's exam?

* * *

"How strange that the captain of the Opti Baculus wishes to observe final exams for the first-years."

It was the second day of exams, and Hamiel was visiting the principal's office of her alma mater.

An aged woman—long silver hair almost completely covering her face—sat upon a gaudy sofa. She looked unusual, but Hamiel was familiar with her.

Hamiel smiled. "How many times have I asked you not to call me by my title, Principal? Call me Miss Elise like you did in my school days."

"I could never! How disreputable it would be for me to address a member of the kingdom's mighty Opti Baculus so lightly!" The principal stood so swiftly it put her age to doubt, then she turned to the window behind her. Professors were flying about in the garden

below to prepare for the exam. “The daughter of House Frantzbelle is among the first-years; are you here to see her?”

“No... I am not here for anyone in particular. My curiosity was simply struck. May I have the honor of watching the exam?”

“Oho ho, of course, of course,” the principal said. She didn’t dig any further.

Hamiel, appreciating her consideration, left the room. She looked at the staff in her hand on her way to the garden where the exam was going to be held.

She had, in fact, come all this way because she was curious about a student—Stella Millesia, the student that had faced her down at the Descension Ceremony. Hamiel still couldn’t forget the moment she’d grabbed her staff.

Fear.

I want to run from this monster’s eyes. I have to put everything aside to run.

It didn’t take long for her to realize those weren’t her own feelings.

A spirit is linked tightly to their partner through mana. The fear from the Grand Spirit of Wind in her staff had entered her heart all on its own.

Hamiel herself would never fear a first-year. Which meant...

The Grand Spirit had been afraid. Afraid of Stella.

That is abnormal. This Grand Spirit has faced down a grade eight magibeast, which was on the level of a natural disaster; an ancient-era weapon, which we were ordered to destroy under top secret orders; and even a witch, who should have died a thousand years ago. Never once did it feel any fear. Why, then, did it fear that girl? I heard she was hated by the spirits, but does it truly end at hate...?

No matter how much she gripped the staff, the Grand Spirit of Wind did not reply to her.

* * *

The signal for the first-year exams to begin resounded. All the first-years were gathered in the garden for their exam. Professor

Speranza, head teacher of the first-years, stood before them and looked over their tense faces.

"You will now be challenging a dungeon with magibeasts," she announced. The students listened—though they had been informed ahead of time—while clumped up in groups. "The dungeon has only grade one magibeasts. You will earn one to five points for each magibeast you slay, depending on its strength. Professors will be observing the inside of the dungeon through miracles, and so there will be no need for you to report anything."

I felt a gaze on us mid-explanation. It was Quinza's group. They were whispering among themselves and glancing Stella's way. It felt nasty.

"Furthermore, we will award points based on the order in which you clear the dungeon. First place will earn twenty points, second fifteen, third ten, and any subsequent students will each earn five points. You will need to earn a total of fifty points to graduate; anything less and you will fail."

In short, the faster you were, the better your chances would be. Those in the front would have more magibeasts to defeat, and they'd be rewarded for reaching the end first.

With her explanation concluded, Professor Speranza turned, and the professors stationed in the corners of the garden began chanting. A rumbling resounded almost at once. The earth of the garden rose up, forming the shape of a square building. It was like the entry to an ancient ruin that had been hidden underground.

The dungeon opened its mouth as if it were a gate to hell. And with that gate behind her, Professor Speranza lifted her staff. "The first-year practical exam shall now begin. *Ignaria Sein!*"

Fireworks shot out of her staff. All the students—except Quinza—instantly began casting Wind miracles.

"*Ignaria Sein!*" Several fireballs in the sky appeared and rained down on Stella.

"Eeek eek!"

Stella interrupted her chanting to dodge the fireballs.

"Iron wall! *Terararia Sein!*" Iron walls popped up and blocked the fireballs, which exploded and dispersed into the air.

Stella sighed in relief, but by that time, the other students had all gotten a head start and raced to the dungeon. Quinza turned and held a seemingly newly made fan to her mouth. "Ooooho ho ho! Today shall be the day you learn your place. If luck favors you, perhaps there will be one or two magibeasts left for you to defeat!"

Her high-pitched laughter grew distant as she plunged into the dungeon. Feena shrank. Stella gritted her teeth, then immediately pleaded with Professor Speranza. "You saw that, right?! She attacked me! I request we start the exam over!"

"Denied," Professor Speranza replied without even a flicker of her expression. "Obstructing others is not against the rules in this exam. It is modeled after real conflict; no matter what may happen, it is part of the exam."

Every syllable she spoke was cold as ice. She stared down at Stella with an intense gaze. "Do you have the time to waste standing here?"

Stella groaned and turned back around. "Let's go, Feena. We won't let Quinza get away with this! *Winaria Sein!*"

"Right. O Spirits of Wind, grant me wings in the name of the Goddess supreme... *Winaria Sein!*"

Spirits of Wind, take Stella and Feena into the dungeon, fast!

The two of them, now on their brooms, rode the wind into the dungeon.

"Getting held back at the start hurts... Might be best to give up on those twenty points. Which means we'll need to hunt more magibeasts," Stella said, muttering to herself while sitting on me such that both legs hung over one side.

Feena lined up next to Stella and smiled. "Relax, Stella. We did more than enough practice for today."

"True. The battle's not over yet."

The pitch-black dungeon lacked a single source of light. Neither Stella nor Feena panicked—instead, they formed orbs of light and used them like lamps.

They advanced down the hall together. Suddenly, Stella screamed, "OW! Something just poked my foot... Can't see. *Luxsaria Sein!*"

Spirits of Light, brighten this place up!

Several orbs of light formed in the air. Apparently, we had entered a broad room at some point. Sharp conifer trees were lined up and growing on either side of the path, their thorny branches wriggling like gross tentacles.

"Eek! So many magibeasts...!"

"No, this is good! It's our chance!" Stella cried. Unlike Feena, she was determined. "O Spirits of Fire, grant me blazes to burn mine enemies away. *Ignaria Sein!*"

Stella chanted while I visualized big balls of fire. A good number of them formed in the air, only for water to spray out from the tops of the trees, extinguishing the fireballs.

"Hey! Shooting out water is no fair!" Stella cried.

"Stella! Look out!"

Needlelike leaves shot straight toward Stella. I blasted us up close to the ceiling to dodge, but more and more leaves were launched at us.

"These guys are persistent...!"

"Iron wall! *Terararia Sein!*"

Iron walls formed like shields; the leaves thunked against it one after another.

"Feena, thanks for the assist," Stella said.

"It was nothing."

"That thunking doesn't sound like leaves... Just how hard are those things?"

I went out of range of the trees and touched the ground. The two girls jumped onto the floor.

Stella put a thoughtful hand on her chin. "Mm. They'll just extinguish any fireballs with water. If we get close, they shoot freakish needle leaves at us..."

"We've learned my iron walls can block the leaves. I can form them on either side of the path so we can pass through here."

"Excuse me?" Stella asked.

"Um..." Feena faltered. "I believe that is what everyone else did to pass through here."

"Pass through?! Don't be ridiculous!" Stella barked, pointing a

finger to a tree. “Five points.”

“Hm...?”

“These magibeasts have to be worth five points. The fact everyone passed them by and left them behind is more proof than anything. We’ll get five points for each of these. Why pass through?” Stella began counting the conifers, pointing at each one in turn. “One, two, three... There’s ten of these, so fifty points for all of them. We can pass just by clearing out this room!”

“Eeeh...” Feena said. “But, Stella, how would we even hope to do that?”

“I have a plan. Feena, you handle defense.”

Stella left it at that and charged into the room. I could hear Feena hurriedly chanting behind us. Iron walls formed all around Stella.

“What’s the plan here?” I asked as leaves thunked against the walls all around us.

Stella didn’t answer. It seemed like she was still giving me the cold shoulder.

She chanted in the middle of the room. “A hundred days of unending sun cracked the earth, and ended all life. *Luxsaria Sein!*”

Right. Fire wasn’t the only kind of miracle for taking down plants. Understanding Stella’s intentions, I called out to the spirits.

O Spirits of Light, make a ball of light hot enough to dry these plants out! I called. The spirits responded to my call and gathered above our heads. The temperature in the room rapidly started shooting up. The magibeasts squirted water at the pulsing ball of light, but extinguishing light with water was a pipe dream.

“Mmm,” Stella murmured, looking up at the sun. She seemed satisfied.

“How’s that? Just what you imagined, right? I’ve been studying the bible myself, y’know.”

Feena had read the scriptures aloud during her study sessions. That had helped her memorize it, so it had been two birds with one stone. We were getting the fruits of that now.

Stella’s expression, however, remained clouded. “You don’t need to memorize it anymore,” she muttered.

“Huh?”

Stella, leaning on one of the walls, didn't even try to look my way. The slamming of the leaves against the walls was all I heard.

"How can I understand your prayers if I don't have the scriptures memorized? I need to if I want to—"

"It's fine. After all, I've decided today is the last day I'll ever use this staff."

Say what?!

That shocked me so much I nearly forgot to maintain the orb of light. It shrank a bit, prompting me to hurriedly grow it back out.

"Or more precisely, until the end of this exam. I'm never using this staff again once I finish this practical exam."

"But why? You already know that you can't use miracles with any other staff."

"There's not a saint out there that can't change staves. I should be able to do it too!"

"But I mean... Why am I not good enough? If you have any problems, say so. I want to stay as your staff."

"Are you even listening to yourself? If you do that, you'll be stuck as my spirit forever. You won't be able to go back to your world."

"Obviously! As an otaku, there'd be no greater joy than staying by my idol's side f—"

"Quit joking around!" Stella screamed, her voice going hoarse. She clenched her fists, and her face twisted tearfully. "You said it yourself. You said you want to return to your old world! Otaku, you must have had things you wanted to do back there."

"That's..." I said, then trailed off. I *had* said I wanted to go back. There wasn't anything I could argue with there.

Stella used my silence to steel her resolve. "There's something I have to apologize to you about, Otaku. Before we met, I had a one-on-one meeting with Professor Speranza."

A one-on-one meeting... Professor Elyena had alluded to something like that.

"She told me flat out I'd be expelled if I didn't pass this year's finals. She said Antohsa doesn't need a student incapable of casting miracles. Obviously," Stella said, sniffing with self-derision. "But I can't let that happen. The town I grew up in and the orphanage that

raised me are both gone now. A magibeast destroyed everything. If I'm kicked out of here, I won't have anywhere to go."

It felt like I was only just now understanding her wish to join the Opti Baculus and destroy all magibeasts on a real level.

"Wanting to avoid expulsion at any cost, I put my all into a wish: Any spirit will do, just let them inhabit my staff." Stella looked up, regret pained on her face. "All that about me wishing for a Grand Spirit was a lie. I told the Goddess I just wanted a spirit."

Her voice was shaking. I couldn't bring myself to tell her I knew that.

"I never thought it'd end up like this... I didn't think my wish would come true at the expense of someone else. It's my fault you came to this world, Otaku. It's because I wrote that wish that the Goddess put a human like you in a staff. It's the only thing that makes sense..."

It was guilt. Stella had deduced she was responsible for my reincarnation, and the guilt was killing her.

"I won't blame you for hating me. But I promise you this—no matter what happens, I'll get you to the Goddess. So that you can go back to your world..."

"And that's why you want me to stop using me as a staff."

"That's right."

Her cold shoulder hadn't actually been an advanced tsundere technique. She had resolved to stop using me and therefore was distancing herself. Her refusal to use this staff was a reflection of her resolve—that one day, no matter what, she'd send me back to my world.

The sphere of light I made was steadily doing damage to the magibeasts. The leaves had stopped hitting the wall a while ago.

"I understand your perspective now, Stella. But let me just say one thing," I spoke up. Stella tensed up as if she thought I was about to yell at her. "If I hadn't come to this world, I never would have met you. I'm grateful to fate for bringing us together."

"Ah..."

"I don't consider myself as having been sacrificed for your sake, so please. Don't feel any guilt on my behalf, Stella."

"B-But..." she stammered, unwilling to accept that.

Naturally. No doubt she'd feel she had done something wrong until I was back in my old world. That was just the kind of girl Stella was.

"Let me take this opportunity to say something. Back in my old world, I thought my childhood friend was a tsundere, only for her to actually reject me. That happened right before I came to my world."

"Um...?"

"And what do you know, this world has my ideal tsundere. I'm talking about you, Stella! I've already found an idol in this world, and what I want most is to rise to the top of the Opti Baculus with you."

"But that's my dream, not yours..."

"An otaku's dream is their idol's dream! An otaku is happy when their idol is happy! This is a law of reality. An otaku's meaning in life is to support their idol," I declared. Were I in a human body, I would dramatically clench my fist for more emphasis.

Could Stella feel my passion? The burning, flaming fervor that otaku only ever directed to their idol?

I heard the sound of cracking wood. The conifers had dried out, and they were collapsing onto the ground. Stella poked her head out from the walls to confirm, then instantly switched modes.

"Okay, let's finish this in one go!" she called, lifting me high. "O Spirits of Fire, grant me blazes to burn mine enemies away. *Ignaria Sein!*"

Spirits, give it all you've got. Rain fire through the whole room and burn all the magibeasts.

The ceiling was engulfed in red light. The light morphed into countless blazing fireballs, which rained down like meteors.

Stella smiled with satisfaction. "Not bad."

"I'd say the same for your strategy."

"This is what you want your dream to be?"

"What could be better? I get to live the dream by my idol's side."

The conifers burned up, filling the room with the sound of crackling firewood. The swaying flames made for a dreamlike sight amid the dark labyrinth. Stella cast her eyes down shyly and hugged me to her chest.

"I see. W-Well... Thank you for...being my spirit, Otaku."

And just as I was thinking Stella's face was oddly close, I felt something wet and soft. I didn't even have time to gasp. She immediately pulled back and put me on her back. Looking at her showed me nothing but a field of silver hair. Her hands were hot.

Is this a dream? Am I in a world of fantasy?

My daze was interrupted by Feena calling out. "Stellaaa, are you okaaay?"

"I'm safe! You can come on over. I killed the five-pointers."

Seemed like magibeasts were just points in her mind now.

Feena came over and looked at the magibeasts-turned-piles-of-ash. "Incredible! You actually slew them...! Now our graduation won't just be a dream!"

"Your expectations are too low, Feena. I'm aiming to be top of our grade after this exam. Now, let's keep up the pace! *Winaria Sein!*"

The two of them got back on their staves, and we advanced farther into the dungeon.

* * *

It happened when we were midway through yet another turn. Stella slammed into someone head-on.

"Owww!"

"Be more careful!"

It was none other than Quinza. She and her gang flew past us with curses...going in the direction we'd just come from.

Not long after, several more students came running past Stella and Feena. Stella adjusted her position in the air and watched them go, confused.

"Are you okay, Stella?" Feena asked.

"Yeah, but what was with them...? Why are they going backward?"

A beast roared. Stella looked forward with a start. The passageway was engulfed in darkness, but several eyes gleamed within it. Wolves. They came rushing toward Stella as fast as the

wind.

"*Ignaria Sein!*" Stella chanted at once. A fireball slammed into the lead wolf's snout. I thought that would do it, but my relief shattered at once.

"What?! It didn't work!"

The fireball hit the wolf and vanished. It didn't even slow the thing down.

The wolves barreled toward Stella, ignoring her miracles.

"Iron wall! *Terararia Sein!*"

An iron wall appeared between Stella and the wolves. But it turned into dust as they slammed into it.

"No way!"

"M-My iron wall..."

The wolves, having broken the wall, moved to bite Stella.

"Stella! Wind!"

"*Winaria Sein!*"

Stella's chant lifted her up. The wolves chomped at empty air.

"Are these five-pointers too?! O Spirits of Fire, grant me blazes to burn mine enemies away. *Ignaria Sein!*"

Fireballs formed in the air and rained down on the wolves, but they didn't seem bothered whatsoever. In fact, more wolves were coming out of the passageway one after another.

Stella and Feena turned right around.

"I can't believe they broke your wall, Feena. Something's wrong with these magibeasts."

"It seems as if our miracles have no effect on them, but that surely could not be the case... The professor said there would only be grade one magibeasts here."

This was certainly strange. Quinza had even turned tail and run despite being at the front and everything.

I suddenly remembered the Goddess's prediction.

The finals tomorrow will prove to you Stella is a witch. In other words, she claimed Stella would cast magic during this exam.

Magic. I had no idea what that would entail. According to what Stella and everyone else had said, magic had twisted the world and ended entire cultures. The Goddess had told me Stella would end up

forced to use it for some reason.

Is this it, Goddess? Is this the situation you predicted that would force Stella to cast magic?

I glanced at the magibeasts and noticed something strange. They were biting at Stella and only her—they didn't even look Feena's way.

And you know what? This isn't anything new. Magibeasts always target her.

The pansy magibeast had ignored Feena for some reason in order to keep chasing Stella. The rats Quinza had made had done it too. The wyvern had ignored all the students to aim for Stella. What did it all mean?

"Eek!"

Stella fell from me with a shriek. One of the wolves had leaped up and got her.

She hit the ground and rolled, while the wolf quickly pounced on top of her.

"Stella!"

"*Deus est mors*," I chanted as I hit the ground. Using my divine power wasn't wise since the professors were watching from afar, but this was an emergency.

I thought the black beam would've hit the wolf, but it sensed something and twisted to dodge. Tch. It got away.

"Are you all right, Stella?!"

"I'm fine. It didn't even scratch me," Stella said, sitting up. It looked like the magibeast had just ripped her skirt. I was glad her pale thigh was unhurt, but ripping a girl's skirt up was pretty pervy. I looked to the magibeast and ended up stunned.

The magibeast was evolving. It was undergoing a transformation so dramatic it could only be called evolution.

The muscles across its body bulged up with impossible speed, and its limbs all stretched outward. It got a head taller, and finally stood on two legs.

"GRAAAAH!" it roared, loud enough to pierce my ears.

"Um...?"

"Eeeek!"

Stella froze while Feena wailed.

At this point we were facing not a wolf, but an overgrown werewolf. It stood on two legs and towered over us at roughly three meters tall. With bulging muscles, it lifted a massive battle-axe that had seemingly appeared out of thin air.

How did this happen?

The magibeast had evolved into something impossibly violent. It didn't make sense. It just wasn't logical. Why did the magibeast evolve out of nowhere, and right after ripping up Stella's skirt? Wh—

With a start, I looked at Stella again and checked where the wolf had gotten her.

I get it! So that's why...! I understand everything now!

Why did magibeasts only ever attack Stella? Why did the magibeast evolve out of nowhere? All the mysteries aligned and guided me to the answer—one I'd been seeking this entire time.

"Stella, Feena! Get away from the monster!" I yelled, hoping to snap the girls out of their frozen stupor, but it was the magibeast that reacted instead. With its battle-axe at the ready, it took heavy, loud footsteps toward Stella.

It swung its blade, and in that moment Stella lifted me up.

"*Deus est...*"

I can't make it!

The last thing I saw was the rusty axe zooming right up to my face. I heard a crunch, and with that I fell unconscious.

* * *

"Huh?"

The noise I made sounded like it belonged to someone else.

Before me was my staff. The staff, having taken a blow from a magibeast's battle-axe, had been split in half. The pieces hit the ground and rolled. Each sickening smack resounded in my ears.

"Hey," I said, my voice trembling. I called to him, the guy inside the staff. "Hey! Answer me!"

But I didn't need to hear anything to know the truth. This was something I had explored already.

Unlike a normal spirit, he had reincarnated into the staff itself. The staff was his flesh and blood. That was why he couldn't move to another staff when I used it to pray.

A human with their body split in half couldn't survive. He was dead.

"Iron wall, iron wall, iron wall...!"

Feena was chanting prayer after prayer to stop the magibeast, but it was a high-grade monster; it tore apart the iron like paper.

Still sitting, I looked up at the empty air. The world was dark. It was like I was lost again, as I had been before I met him. This was just going back to how things had been, but for some reason, it was far darker than before; I couldn't see anything.

"Give...back..."

Words came bubbling out of my throat. I could still hear his voice ringing in my ears.

An otaku's dream is the dream of their idol! An otaku is happy when their idol is happy!

We had just decided to be together forever.

He was the first person to say he liked me.

He was my first spirit.

He was my first...

"GRAAAAAAAAAH!"

The magibeast lifted its axe in the air. Feena, her knees weak, collapsed and hugged me.

"I'm sorry, Stella... My walls can't do anything..."

The thick blade was coming for my life next.

But I wasn't scared.

My head was filled with hot sparks.

I glared up at the magibeast and made my demand.

"**Give him back.**"

Loss became despair, despair became grief, grief became rage, and rage became prayer...

The world was to be twisted beyond all forms of reasons...

The wrist holding the magibeast's axe was blown off.

Not even the magibeast understood what had happened. A moment later, it roared out in anger.

But that was wrong. I was the one who was angry.

"**Give him back, give him back, give him back**...!"

I screamed as my rage demanded. This was a chant. What was once a mere phrase became cloaked by intense wishes, which in turn transformed into raw power.

Fists which came flying exploded.

Legs which came stomping exploded.

Heads which came chomping exploded.

Explode. Explode. Explode.

The chunks of blood and meat rained down, dyeing everything red.

It took mere seconds for all the magibeasts to perish.

"I-Is that a high-level miracle...?! You saved us, Stella! Now the professors will surely come to rescue us!"

Feena's joy reached me, but I didn't respond.

After all, he wasn't coming back.

What did it matter that the magibeasts were dead? That didn't mean anything to me.

I grabbed and hugged the pieces of the broken staff, now empty shells.

I could see black chains. They multiplied from my hands like disgusting sins being committed one after another.

I couldn't stop my overflowing wish.

"Give him back, give him back, GIVE HIM BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACK...!"

My screams echoed through the labyrinth, shattering its ceiling, walls, and floor.



* * *

At first it was just the sound of crumbling.

"What's that sound...?"

The first-years were having their final exam. Hamiel was mingling with the professors on the edge of the courtyard and watching footage of the inside of the dungeon, only to suddenly hear what sounded like collapsing stone.

She had seen the object of her curiosity, Stella, slay the tree magibeasts with miracles. She even had made a friend to fight alongside. In other words, she had gotten a spirit like everyone else.

That was a relief for Hamiel.

The fear she had felt back must have all been an illusion. She had just felt a bit overwhelmed by the girl's intensity. Running with that conclusion was the safest option.

Now, though, a terrible chill was running down Hamiel's spine.

The ground creaked as if screaming, and the sturdy outer walls of the dungeon began crumbling into dust.

Speranza was the first to cry out. "What is happening?! The dungeon is collapsing! We must maintain—"

"I can't...! The spirits, they aren't responding!"

The dungeon was made through several professors casting high-level miracles together. Losing control of the spirits meant the dungeon would collapse in no time, putting the students within in danger.

Hamiel took her staff and stood.

"May holy winds come with the grace of the Goddess. *Winaria Sein...!*"

She planned to mobilize all the Wind spirits to contain the destruction of the dungeon. That'd be simple with the power of a Grand Spirit...or rather, it should have been.

Hamiel looked up at the sky in a daze.

There wasn't even a light breeze.

"Impossible. What's happening?"

She couldn't use any miracles. That had never happened once in

Hamiel's entire life.

No... It had happened once before—when Stella had grabbed her staff. The same thing was happening now, right before her eyes.

There was nothing more powerless than a saint with no control over a spirit. The professors panicked and floundered every which way, but time marched mercilessly on with no resolution in sight.

Amid all of this chaos, a single, small-framed professor gazed at the dungeon in delight.

"At last...the cup has overflowed. Aha!"

Finally, the dungeon collapsed in an explosive cacophony.

* * *

Where do people go when they die? In this world, at least, they go to the Goddess.

The moment the battle-axe hit me, I knew I was dead.

The sensation of Stella's hand gripping me vanished. When I came to, I was sprawled out on a cold floor.

"Stella!" I jerked my body up.

But the dungeon was nowhere to be seen. I was a human rather than a staff, and I found myself in a now-familiar space filled with monitors.

Knowing this was the divine throne filled me with despair.

What happened to Stella and the magibeast? Without me there—

"Have you awoken, oh human of another world?" the Goddess asked, standing to my side and looking down.

"What happened to Stella?! You have to know!"

"Calm yourself. Look, and behold your answer," the Goddess said, pointing with her staff. A monitor there depicted Antohsa's garden.

"Stella...?" I asked, wobbling my way to the monitor.

The dungeon that had been in the garden looked like it had exploded. There were scattered bricks and magibeast corpses. Girls in uniforms had collapsed all over. The dungeon must've just recently been destroyed, as a thick dust was still floating in the air.

And in the midst of that, black chains were radiating outward in all directions.

Countless chains extended like wriggling snakes, multiplying at a rate that would soon devour the entirety of the academy's grounds. It was a disturbing sight that genuinely unsettled me. And at the root of the chains was a silver-haired girl—Stella. For whatever reason, she was hunched over, immobile.

"Do you understand now? What you see is Stella the Witch's magic," the Goddess called from behind me. "Those chains are manifestations of Stella the Witch's magic. As it stands, there remains not a single professor capable of using miracles or rescuing the students from the collapsed dungeon. And the reason is that her chains are binding all the nearby spirits."

"She's...binding the spirits?"

"It is just as the chains once bound you. Stella the Witch aims to bind all spirits and make them hers."

I returned my eyes to the monitor with Stella. "The chains do look kind of terrifying, but is it that big of a deal for the spirits to be bound?"

"But of course. What do you think will happen if Stella the Witch unleashes her power across the entire continent? All the spirits within will be bound by her, and the power of miracles will be lost."

"So what? Is there a problem with losing miracles?"

"This world is built atop miracles. Without them, how will the people defend themselves from magibeasts? What will light the nighttime roads? How will the economy recover? Where do you think everyone gets their clean water?"

"I came from a world without miracles. People won't need them to—"

"Furthermore, it is not just spirits that Stella is binding," the Goddess said, pointing at me. "She binds the souls of men too. Would you tell me to ignore cities overflowing with the limp corpses of those who had their souls stolen?"

I couldn't argue.

The Goddess's lips curved up with triumph. "And now you understand that Stella is a witch. I kept my promise."

Even now, the dark chains were multiplying. That had to be the work of magic. Otherwise, the magibeast would've killed Stella.

"It was only through your death that you came to this throne. As it stands, you will be unable to slay Stella. But fear not—I shall reincarnate you," the Goddess said in a coaxing tone, lifting her staff. A black hole began to form at its tip. "What shall your body be this time? Something with an exceptionally short lifespan will do. After all, your only purpose will be to kill Stella the Witch. Even a maggot should d—"

"*Deus est mors!*"

Unlike when I was a staff, I felt energy build up in my hand. I thrust out my palm and shot out a black beam of light.

It headed straight for the Goddess, only for her to sniff. The light was sucked into the black hole, and vanished like nothing.

Giggling resounded through the throne. The Goddess was cackling like a predator that had pinned down her prey.

"Why do you resist reincarnation, human? You swore to slay Stella upon confirming that she is a witch, no? Do not tell me you intend to violate this oath. I just informed you that those who lie to a god are cursed with eternal torment."

Get real. At first I was just hoping for a living creature, but miss me with being a maggot. Why did all of my reincarnations have to be so awful?

"Goddess, what is this power you gave me?"

"And by that you mean..."

"The element. Which spirits combine for it? According to the scriptures, the Goddess was the first saint. The divine power you gave me must be a miracle, then, right?"

The Goddess narrowed her eyes. "I do not have to answer that."

"Why not just say you can't? Reason being, this power isn't a miracle at all. I've never seen a saint say the prayer it needs."

This had been on my mind for a while now. When I'd taken a class with Stella, I'd learned that there were only five patterns that miracle chants followed. Even the high-level miracles used by professors were just combinations of those patterns. The only thing that changed was the prayers attached to start or end.

"Cease your foolish speculation, human. There is nothing unusual about a divine being's power having unique qualities."

“A divine being’s power, huh? It’s simple to just say that. But I know an even simpler explanation,” I said, acting haughty. The Goddess’s brow twitched. “Y’know, Miss Goddess. You’ve been around since Pandemonium a thousand years ago, right? You’ve lived an eternity, and have incredible power distinct from miracles. Do you know what that kind of being is called in this world...?”

“SILENCE!” the Goddess roared, and at once a beam that dwarfed the power of mine shot from her staff.

“Ngh!”

I had no time to dodge. It wasn’t a direct hit, but the force still blew me back. I sprawled out on the floor ingloriously, the long chains binding me crashing and clanging about.

“Watch your mouth, human. I am a god. None may refute my words. As I alone sit in the divine throne, I alone rule this world!” she roared. Her mask as a compassionate goddess had finally been ripped off.

She stepped toward me, her gaze cold. “If you will not kill Stella the Goddess, I will reincarnate you over and over until your soul has been ground to shreds. Over! And! Over! You shall crawl on the ground as a maggot and regret your deeds as you are crushed beneath my feet!”

Just before her staff touched me, I made my move. I grabbed onto the tip of her staff with both hands.

“Now, let’s see if you can manage that, Fake Goddess.”

The beam of light shot out of the staff, but I kept my hands locked in place. If I were to let go here and get hit anywhere else, it’d be the end for me.

“How can a mere human resist my power?!” she barked. She stopped her attack, confused.

“That’d be because I’m using magic to block it.”

After getting knocked on the floor, I wrapped my hands in the chains. They were made with Stella’s magic—if the Goddess could cut them herself, I never would’ve ended up in Stella’s staff to begin with.

“Let’s make a trade,” I smiled, still holding the staff. “Don’t ever try to involve yourself with Stella again. No plans to kill her. You’re

worried about miracles vanishing from the world? Forget about it. That won't destroy this world of yours. My world didn't have miracles or magic, you see."

"Do not speak beyond your place, ignorant human!"

"Which of us is the one who doesn't understand, I wonder? Stella isn't the type to wander about stealing souls. It was just a coincidence I ended up in her staff, wasn't it?! It's wrong to try and call her an evil witch!"

"Well-spoken for a victim of hers. You bark well for a dog that doesn't know the true nature of witches."

"Like it matters! If you're stuck on Stella, I've got plans of my own. What will the people think when they learn those slips of yours are cursed goods?"

That was the answer I had arrived upon.

Stella had sewn the slip from the library into the pocket of her skirt. The magibeast had bitten off the part of her skirt with the slip.

Why did magibeasts only go for Stella? Why had the magibeast suddenly evolved in the dungeon? Everything made sense if the slip was a cursed good.

"You may have gotten the slip to her in hopes she'd be eaten by a magibeast, but it backfired. Thanks to that, I realized their true nature. I was suspicious ever since hearing they're kept under such heavy scrutiny despite being used only once a year."

"That was not m—" the Goddess began, but I cut her off.

"What would happen if the people learned their Goddess is actually a witch, eh? Witches are evil beings that destroyed civilization itself. Your statues will be torn down, and the Descension Ceremony will never be celebrated again. Nobody will write any wishes onto their slips either."

"YOU BASTAAARD!"

It was as I had imagined.

The Goddess used her statues to monitor the world. The slips, as cursed goods, were probably some other tool she used to rule the world. There was no way this blackhearted fraud was granting people's wishes out of the kindness of her heart. She had to get something out of so many wishes being written on slips.

"You would dare threaten me, puny human? Me, a *god*?!"

"It's not a threat. Like I said: I want to make a deal."

She and I faced each other down, my hands still on her staff.

"You want to rule this world and be worshipped. Yeah, sure. Do what you want. I don't care about any of that. I have only one request! Don't lay a finger on my idol. If you can do that, I won't tell anyone about who you really are. What else could an otaku ask for?" I scoffed.

The Goddess, however, maintained her furious expression. "And leave Stella the Witch to her devices? Absolutely not. Why must I let her go after driving her into this succulent corner? Do you understand how much ef—"

"You drove her into a corner?" I asked. That wasn't something I could just shrug off. I brought my face right up to hers. "What do you mean, you drove her into a corner? All you did was put that slip in her path, right?"

"Hah!" the Goddess sneered. "Of course not. It is essential that any bug threatening to damage my world must disappear. I set magibeasts upon her home and orphanage so that she would die a dog's death on the road. But alas, she is a roach, so she has managed to survive until now."

I felt something snap in my head.

"All right. Seems like overlooking your sins is not an option."

I tugged on the Goddess's staff, and once it was in my possession, I started a chant. "O Spirits of Fire, grant me blazes to burn mine enemies away. *Ignaria Sein!*"

In the process of Stella's practice, I ended up learning the prayers myself. A mass of fireballs formed by the ceiling of the throne room. There were less than what Stella made, but they were still more than enough to blast this piece-of-shit goddess.

The Goddess looked up at the fireballs and sneered. "Not bad for a human from another world. You shall have this deity's praise."

"Enough with the deity stuff. You did something nobody should ever do. You're just pretending to be a god, AMANDA THE WIIITCH!" I roared, then swung down the staff.

The Goddess bellowed back as the fireballs rained down. "DO

NOT CALL ME A WIIIIIITCH!”

There was a loud rustling sound. A bunch of paper came flying in from nowhere and gathered before the Goddess. Oh no. Those were slips...the cursed goods.

“**Bind**,” chanted the Goddess.

The slips erupted into black fire and morphed into grotesque beams of pitch-black light. Then they erupted, shooting to the ceiling and hitting each fireball.

“Disappear, human!” the Goddess declared, pointing a finger my way. New darkness formed and rushed toward me.

By the time I recoiled, I was already being yanked back by some powerful force. It was the chains I was wrapped in—they were pulling on me.

Both the beams of light trying to swallow me and the enraged visage of the Goddess began to move farther and farther away. I was being pulled down out of the divine throne.

Stella and I weren’t bound by mana. We were bound by magic...dark, black chains. And hey, what could be better? They were a lot sturdier than red string or whatever. I got the feeling these chains would never get cut.

And indeed, not even death had kept us apart. Despite going to heaven, I was now back on the ground—as a staff snapped in two.

This is...Antohsa’s garden. This sure is a sandstorm...

I looked around as best I could from the ground.

The limbs of magibeasts were strewn all about. The walls of the dungeon had collapsed. A sandstorm raged. Chains writhed about like snakes on the ground, forming what looked like a dark pattern. There was a girl collapsed nearby—Feena. She seemed to have fallen unconscious.

And sitting right next to me was a girl with silver hair.

“Give...ck...taku...”

She was muttering something under her breath with a hung head and an expressionless face. Pitch-black chains were spewing from her palms like a faucet.

Her disturbed state was enough for my heart to hurt.

“Stella,” I called, but she didn’t respond. “Stella! There aren’t any

magibeasts anymore. Calm down!”

It was no good. She didn’t move an inch.

And what could I do as a staff to wake Stella out of her stupor? Only one idea came to mind. I inhaled deeply, and yelled...

“STELLA, I LOVE YOU MORE THAN ANYTHING IN THE UNIVEEERSE!”

“BWAAAH?!”

Stella’s face flushed and she came back to her senses. The chains disappeared, and the sandstorm stopped just like that. Whew. Success.

Stella, looking around, picked me up. “W-Was that... You’re alive, Otaku?! And wait, what’s a ‘universe’ anyway...?”

“It means my feelings for you are too vast for a single world like this.”

“Excuse me?! D-Don’t be stupid! You and I are...”

The way she turned her chin away with reddened cheeks was Stella as usual. I sighed in relief.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Stella. So glad.”

“Ngh,” she grunted. Tears started visibly building up in the corner of her eyes. “You idiot, you big dumb stupid idiot! I...thought you... BWAAAAAAAH!”

I stiffened up when she hugged me. Or... I would have, anyway, if I wasn’t a staff. Y’know.

Stella rubbed her cheek against me as she sobbed. It was ticklish and warm. And with that, I finally felt like I was back.

“Sorry for worrying you. I won’t leave you again,” I said. I knew saying that would get her to drop me, but I couldn’t help myself.

Her reaction, though, was not what I expected. She gave a loud sniff and tightened her hug. “Obviously... You belong to me.”



Interlude

There was trouble with the final exams for first-years, but all other grades went off without a hitch.

And then, night came...

Elyena had been summoned by Speranza, head professor of the first-years.

A knock resounded on the meeting room door.

"Come in," someone said.

With that, Elyena opened the door. What she saw was a group of royal soldiers, so she blinked in surprise.

The walls of the meeting room were blocked by rows of armored soldiers. In the middle of the room was a large desk, with one-eyed Speranza looking at her sternly from the other end.

"Is something wrong, Professor Elyena? Do come in."

"A bit of an unsettling ensemble. Excuse me."

Elyena moved to sit down in a chair, only for a soldier to step forward. "Your staff, please."

That indicated she was going to be detained. A saint could do nothing once their staff was taken. Speranza watched carefully to see if Elyena would do so.

She relaxed when Elyena did without a fuss. "I have summoned you here today, Professor, for no reason other than the incident this morning with the first-years' final exam."

"That was quite the shocker, wasn't it? To think we would lose the ability to cast miracles and the entire dungeon would collapse! Have we figured out what happened yet?"

"The principal is leading an investigation into that matter. An incident of that nature must never be allowed to happen again. It was by luck alone that the students all emerged safely."

"And what a relief that is. The Goddess was surely watching," Elyena said with a smile.

Speranza did not smile back. “I questioned one of the lesser-hurt students, and as they would have it, the dungeon had magibeasts of grade two and above. As you know, the magibeasts of the dungeon were formed by giving plants a precise quantity of cursed goods. We create dungeons suitable for the students by releasing them inside, and yet...”

“The wrong magibeasts were sent in?”

“That would be impossible. I observed the magibeasts sent into the dungeon myself. The only possibility I can conceive of is that cursed goods were planted into the garden ahead of time, such that they would end up within the dungeon after it was formed. The magibeasts would have eaten those goods and reached levels beyond our intentions,” Speranza said, leaning forward. A shadow fell over her face. “Professor Elyena. You took a large quantity of cursed goods for your latest class, no?”

“Aaah, about that, you see, by complete accident I stumbled and __”

“You would claim to have an accident every single time you hold a class?!”

“Aha ha, as embarrassing as it is...” Elyena laughed, unperturbed by the vein bulging on Speranza’s forehead.

“Enough, Professor Elyena. We will be detaining your person,” Speranza declared. Soldiers stood on either side of her.

“Heh? Detaining me...?”

“You unleashed grade two and above magibeasts in a dungeon for first-years. That may as well have been attempted murder. Had things gone wrong, all of the first-years would have perished.”

“Very true. I am impressed they all survived if the dungeon was filled with high-grade magibeasts.”

“How shameless...! Professor Elyena, I am enraged. The saint candidates are the future of the country, and it is our duty to nurture them. Any strictness in our instruction is purely to prepare them for the multitudinous darkness that awaits them in real life. And yet you wished them dead with sincerity... No matter what your motivation may be, that is not to be permitted.”

“Do you have any proof I did what you claimed? Did the principal

approve this arrest?”

“The dungeon magibeasts were my responsibility as head professor of the first-years. I will investigate this matter and report it to the principal when my report is complete. Soldiers, take her away!”

Soldiers on either side grabbed Elyena’s arms...prompting her to smirk.

“Acting alone, then? How convenient... **Obey.**”

Elyena’s eyes were instantly dyed ebony.

That was magic. It was a force that could bend the world in any direction regardless of rules, physics, or common sense.

The soldiers next to Elyena instantly pointed the tips of their staves to their own heads. “*Ignaria Sein.*”

The soldiers blasted their own heads with Fire miracles, then collapsed, having been burnt to a crisp. Elyena chanted again before anyone could parse what had just happened.

“**Obey. Obey.** Aha! **Obey...!**”

Each soldier hit by Elyena’s magic blasted their head off one after another. The room filled with the heat of flames and the foul stench of burning flesh. Elyena, having long missed the smell of war, could hardly contain her grin. The witch chanted with sadistic, taunting glee.

“Aha! **Obey!** Aha, aha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

The room echoed with the sound of laughter and crumbling armor. Soon, the only survivor left standing was Speranza. She had her staff readied, but no chants came out of her parched mouth.

“Impossible... That incantation! You are Liliana the Witch of Submission!”

The cruelest of all witches. The most infamous, and the most horrible...

Elyena picked up her own staff and pointed it at Speranza, cackling with pitch-black eyeballs. “Let me think of a story. You misjudged how to feed the magibeasts and unleashed grade two monsters—impossible for first-years to beat—within the dungeon. You killed the soldiers who pointed that out to silence them, but your good conscience could hardly bear this act of evil, and so you

thought it best to join them in the afterlife. How does that sound?”

Speranza’s lips trembled. She educated with a firm hand, but that was merely a reflection of the care she felt for her students. The role Elyena envisioned for her suited her nature perfectly, but Speranza did not seem fond of it.

“What are you planning? How dare an evil witch hide themselves among the professors of Antohsa?! Goddess, give me the strength to spite her! Ignar—”

“**Obey.**”

Speranza’s head exploded in flames, and she collapsed.

Elyena, now alone in the room, mumbled to herself. “All I wish to change is this world, now dominated by the Goddess. I must guide Stella the Witch of Shackles properly for this.”

It was all as Speranza had imagined. Elyena had swiped cursed goods to make magibeasts within the dungeon too powerful for first-years to slay. And that was not all—she had hidden a slip in the library book and arranged for it to fall into Stella’s hands. She also gave extra cursed goods to her in class on purpose.

All to drive Stella into great danger and have her awaken as a witch.

“The body is a vessel, and our wishes are water. No matter the time and place, witches are born only from the most hellish of circumstances,” Elyena said, opening the door to leave the room. On the way, she glanced at a relief of the Goddess on the wall. “These past one thousand years have been oh so boring, Amanda. Soon I will have a witch capable of killing you ready; just sit tight and wait, aha!”

The door to the meeting room shut, leaving only silent corpses.

Epilogue

"I'm back! Ah, Stella!" Feena cried, full of joy the moment she opened the dorm room. She dropped her sizable traveling bag and rushed over to hug Stella. "You're well! I heard you wouldn't wake up after the exams, so I spent my entire time home worried..."

"Mnnn, wh-what the... How can something be so soft..."

Stella seemed shocked about something else entirely as Feena hugged her tight. Her expression went entirely flat, and she pushed Feena off to the best of her ability.

"I-It wasn't anything major. I just used too much mana or something? Nothing scary."

The final exams had proved problematic. Stella, after destroying the dungeon with magic, had returned to her senses only briefly before falling into a coma. That was probably the rebound from using magic for the first time. Stella had slept for about ten days, and in that time the academy'd had a long-term holiday.

Outside of significant extenuating circumstances, students tended to go home during such long-term holidays. They would come back at the start of the month when classes resumed.

Feena's eyes fell on the new staff in Stella's staff holder.

"How wonderful that you got a new staff for yourself as well, Master Otaku."

"Yeah."

Truth be told, Stella falling into a coma had been quite the ordeal for me.

When the sandstorm had ceased, the professors had regained their ability to cast miracles. They'd managed to save the students, but I was still broken in half. In other words, I was garbage, and nobody was about to carry me out.

It was pure luck that Hamiel had been the one to come rescue Stella. I'd played the part of a "second Stella" and called out, asking

for her to bring the broken staff with her. Hamiel had been exasperated, thinking that Stella was a ventriloquist even in her sleep, but she'd added me to Stella's stretcher.

Once Stella had woken up, she'd worked on repairing me, and now I was reborn in a stitched-up staff.

"Ehe heh, Stella, we still haven't celebrated, have we?"

"Hm? Celebrated what?"

"Us advancing a grade!"

Due to all the trouble, the exam was waived for all students, meaning the two of them had technically passed.

Feena opened her traveling bag and produced a box from within. "Ta-da! I bought a berry pie on my way to the dormitory. Shall we eat together in celebration?"

"A berry pie?!" Stella exclaimed, eyes sparkling. "F-Fine, if you insist. I'll have some, but only because I don't want it going bad."

"The key point here is how she's saying that while drooling," I noted.

"Shut up!"

"I shall go prepare tea," Feena said, stepping out of the room. When she came back she was in a maid outfit. And her skirt was shorter!

"UWOOOH! A MINISKIRT MAID! ABSOLUTE TERRITORY! GARTER BELT!" I roared.

"Come on, Feena, you don't need to listen to what this creep wants."

"A shorter skirt makes it easier to work. You would understand if you wore one yourself, Stella."

"Hah. As if I would ever—"

"We're equal in this room, are we not? Let's get you changed!"

"Eeek eek, don't strip me out of nowhere! Otaku, no looking!"

A robe was thrown over me.

And not long after...

"Ngh... Why would I ever wear something like this..."

Thus came the explosive birth of the silver-haired miniskirt maid. It was good to be alive.

Stella was desperately pulling the hem of her skirt down, no

doubt embarrassed about her exposed thighs. “Th-This skirt is way too tiny... I can’t wear something this lewd!”

“Aaah, Stella! Don’t take it off!” Feena cried, stopping her. “I went out of my way to make this for you, and I am sure Master Otaku would like for you to remain in it longer.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t mind if she never took it off.”

“See?” Feena smiled.

Stella scowled as if a garbage can had just been tilted over onto her floor. “F-Fine, but just this once. I’m never wearing this again! Got it, Feena?”

“Certainly. I will keep it in your closet so you can change into it whenever you wish.”

“You’re clearly not listening!”

Two beautiful maids poured tea and cut up a berry pie. The two of them clasped their hands together in premeal prayer beneath the gentle afternoon sunlight.

Stella took one bite of the pie and instantly grabbed her chest. “Ngh, it’s too good...! The sour berries and sweet cream are just a perfect combination...!”

“Aha ha, I’m glad. I was worried about the exams, but sweets after passing taste the best of all.”

Stella paused. She set the fork down, then looked at Feena hesitantly. “Um... Feena. Do you remember who slew that werewolf magibeast?”

“Hm? A professor, no? Though I didn’t see which one,” Feena replied, tilting her head with her fork in her mouth.

Stella lowered her eyes and stared at her palms. After some hesitation, she agreed, “You’re right. It had to be a professor.”

Apparently Stella’s memories after I’d been broken were vague.

As for me, I wasn’t planning to tell her about the black chains. Stella had a strong belief that witches were evil. She would surely be profoundly hurt to learn she was a witch herself, and no otaku out there would go out of their way to make their idol sad.

I hadn’t seen the Goddess since. She wasn’t even showing up as an illusion. As long as she didn’t try to interfere with Stella or myself, that was fine. But if she tried to kill Stella again...

I looked at the relief on the wall. Its face was still blackened out.

"Tomorrow, we'll be second-years," Feena mused. "I hope we get to be in the same class again."

"Doesn't matter to me," Stella said.

"Inside scoop, Feena. While you were gone, Stella wrote a series of letters to the academy staff pleading to be put in the same cl—"

"Hey hey hey! Don't just go and say that!" Stella exclaimed, slapping her hands over me.

Feena clasped her hands, moved. "Stella... To think you would go so far for my sake..."

"Y-You have the wrong idea! It's not that I want to be in the same class as you, it's just this way will help my grades, so..."

"Isn't it cute how Stella can't be honest?"

"Aaah, jeez, just shut up!"

Stella chugged her tea to hide her reddening face. I was used to her hiding her shyness like that, so I just watched on warmly.

Afterword

"Is it just me, or has there been a lack of tsundere heroines lately?"

It was about two years ago, when I was finishing up my previous series *Konkawa*. My editor mentioned the lack of tsunderes in a meeting, and with that, this series was born.

I don't want to compare the present to the past too much, but not long ago there were countless light novels starring tsunderes as their main heroines, and I remember several of them getting anime adaptations that turned into major hits. Now, though? It's rare to see any tsunderes in light novels at all. And if they do exist, they're side heroines, not the main heroines. They're barely present compared to the tsundere golden age.

Why did tsunderes fall out of favor? It could be that they were so numerous that readers grew bored of them. Maybe readers nowadays prefer stress-free, lovey-dovey heroines. There could be plenty of reasons, but to be honest, I don't understand how it happened. And how could I understand? Both then and now, I've always loved tsundere heroines.

The problem is that shouting all on my lonesome about how much I love tsundere heroines won't change anything. Although it hurts to say, books are presented to the world as products, so they're intrinsically linked to sales. And on top of everything, it seems like this work is receiving more marketing than usual... When the editor sent me the details, I was nearly left speechless. Well, to summarize, books need to sell.

In the end, will a tsundere heroine be a hit in the Reiwa era? Even as I write this, I find myself incredibly anxious. All I can do is pray that even one person discovers a love of tsunderes through reading this.

Anyway, I received a lot of help writing this volume. There are my

editors, who have been supporting me since *Konkawa*. There's Kasu Komeshiro-sensei, who provided beautiful illustrations for the book. There are the designers. And there's Takuma Sakai, who went out of his way to write an endorsement for me despite being busy with the anime adaptation of his work *Butareba*.

And finally, I would like to offer my highest gratitude to anyone who has taken the time to read this book.

Thankfully, there will be a second volume. Stella and Otaku's school life has only just begun. Please continue to look after this Reiwa tsundere heroine.

Nagi Misaki


01
Nagi Misaki
Illust. Kasu Komeshiro
The Goddess Says, "Kill the Tsundere Witch!"

Stella the Tsundere Saint's

CUTENESS CORNER!

~A Cuteness Guide by Her Fans~



Overwhelming Beauty!

Peak aesthetics! Her sharp eyes and glamorous silver hair leave a lasting impression!

(17 years old * Male * Staff)



Fatal Social Awkwardness!

It's precisely because she can't be honest that glimpses of her kindness hit so hard!

(17 years old * Male * Staff)



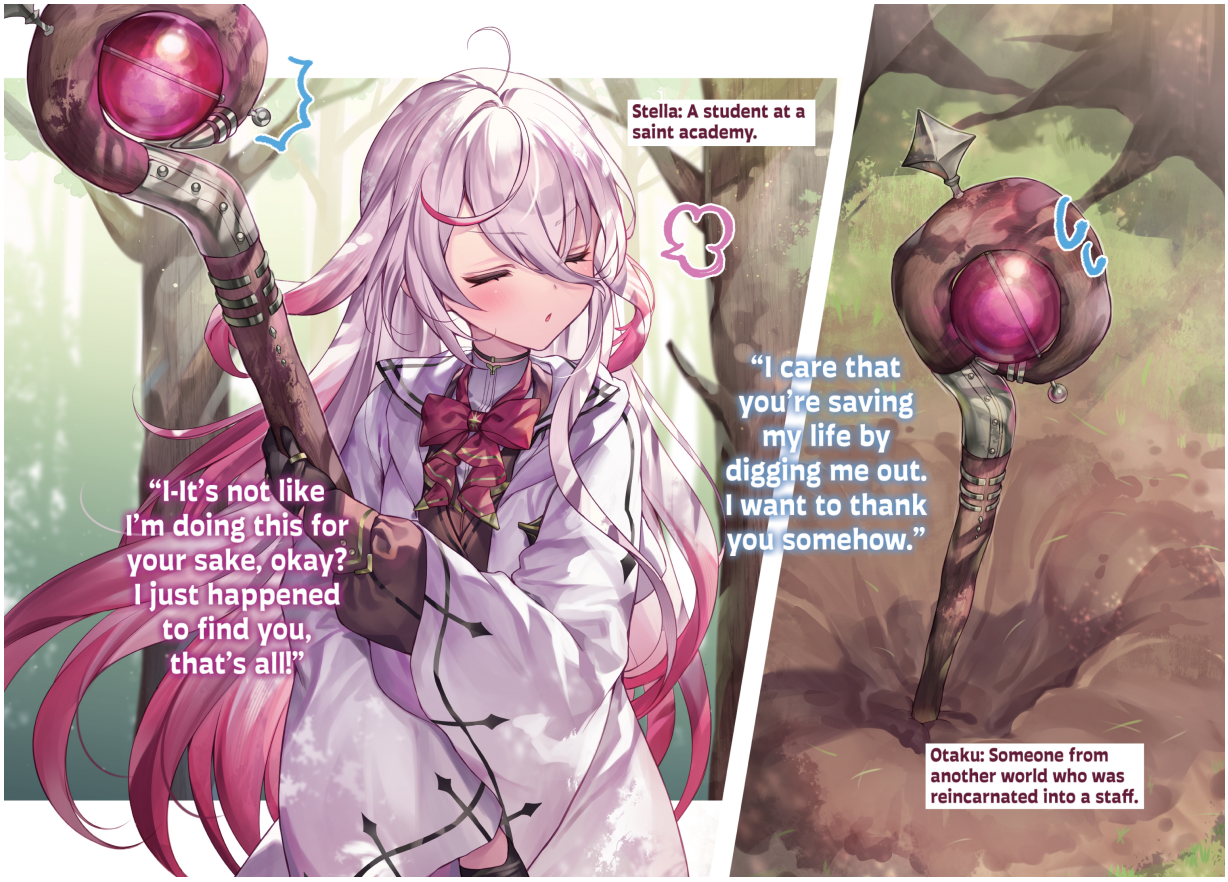
An Honest Hard Worker!

She aims to be the strongest saint to stand against the magibeasts that stole her parents and home!

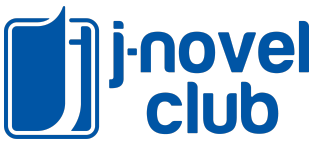
(17 years old * Male * Staff)

How cute Stella is!




Stella: A student at a saint academy.
"I-It's not like I'm doing this for your sake, okay? I just happened to find you, that's all!"
"I care that you're saving my life by digging me out. I want to thank you somehow."
Otaku: Someone from another world who was reincarnated into a staff.


That was an incantation, but unlike when the villainess chanted it, nothing happened. Stella's voice was getting tearful. She rubbed her cheek against me, trembling, and repeated the incantation as if praying.
"Wh— Ah!"
What looked like a light bulb floated between us. Light shone upon Stella's face and lit her up.
"O Spirits of Light, fulfill your contract in the name of the Goddess supreme: Luxsaria Sein!"



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The Goddess Says, “Kill the Tsundere Witch!” Volume 1
by Nagi Misaki

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