



GEAR DRIVE



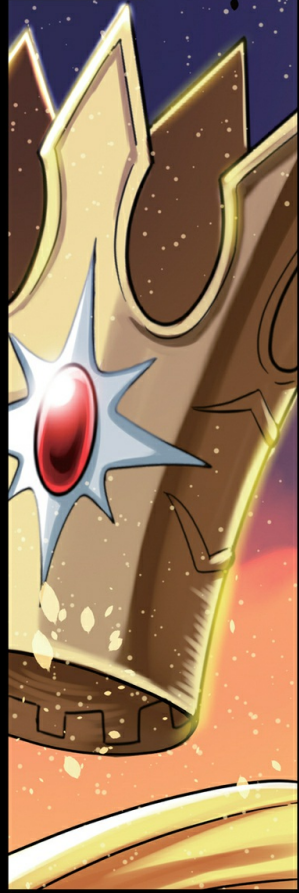
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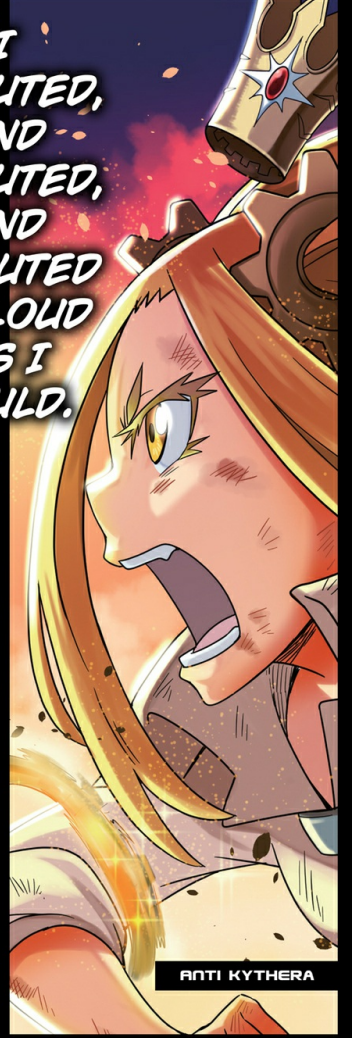


CROWN GEAR



"SOMETIMES...
WHEN SOMETHING'S GOTTA
BE DONE, YOU CAN'T JUST
GIVE UP BECAUSE IT'S
DANGEROUS... OR YOU
DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO...
OR YOU TELL YOURSELF YOU
CAN'T DO IT!!!"

I
SHOUTED,
AND
SHOUTED,
AND
SHOUTED
AS LOUD
AS I
COULD.



ANTI KYTHERA

*IT WAS QUIET, SO THE SOUND OF
THE GEARS KEEPING ME AFLOAT
REVERBERATED THROUGH THE AIR.
THE NUMEROUS LITTLE FLAMES SHINED
IN THE DARKNESS OF THE ABYSS.*



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Skill Bestowal My 15th birthday: the day of my Skill Bestowal ceremony. The last bastion of salvation for the magicless.

Needless to say, I got my hopes up a bit.

I may have been the only one in my class who couldn't use magic, but God would grant me salvation. Or at least, he was supposed to.

The stained glass of the church in the neighboring town sure was pretty. The motifs, which were modeled on old legends, sparkled like the sun. I'm not a particularly spiritual person, but even I could appreciate how beautiful and sacred it was.

"Are you ready?"

A kind-looking priestess was looking right at me, smiling. I had been completely distracted by the stained glass.

"U-um, what exactly... should I be doing...?"

Ah, I'm probably coming off as suspicious, aren't I...?

The priestess looked as if she was staring at some charming little animal. Is this how things go when hopeless kids like me show up?

"This way. Please kneel here."

I did as I was told and entered what looked like a magic circle made of... stone, I guess? Here and there, the tops of the white rocks had been cut into, and magical stones were embedded into them.

Warm, noontime sunlight shone in through the stained glass I mentioned earlier.

"Please exhale slowly and concentrate on emptying your mind. Well, I suppose 'concentrating' and 'emptying your mind' don't go together..."

What a charming priestess. Is this the sort of woman guys like?

Dressed all in white, with eye-catching chestnut-colored hair... Must be nice.

My hair's just a pale blonde. The color's nothing special, and it's thin and hard to wear up. There's no curl to it, and it just hangs straight down to my hips.

As I knelt right now, though, it naturally flowed over my shoulders.

"Oh, my..."

"Huh?"

The priestess reacted strangely for a moment, but it was almost noon: time for my Skill Bestowal. That was when the sun's power was at its strongest, and this wasn't an opportunity I could let pass me by.

I ignored her reaction and simply brought my hands together in front of my chest in prayer.

"Well, then..."

The magic circle started to glow. It may have been midday, but it felt as if a dim darkness was spreading outwards.

The magic stones glowed faintly...

Ah, wait, I'm not supposed to open my eyes!

Concentrate, concentrate...

Ah, but after this, I'll finally be able to use magic. What type will it be, I wonder? I'm really excited to see!

Fire would be awesome, since it's strong.

Oh, but Dark magic is cool, too.

I'd be kinda disappointed with Earth magic.

And Water magic just seems like it's only good for everyday stuff, y'know...

Honestly, I just hope I get something really flashy that'll blow everyone's faces off back in class! They all made fun of me way too much yesterday, after all.

"My magic will send you all to hell!!"

Ah, that's going too far. Whoops.

And so, I make this request to God.

Please, please, give me some super amazing, ultra special magic that'll make them sorry they ever mocked me!!!!

As I was desperately offering up my prayers, I didn't notice the priestess's warm gaze on me, nor that she was breaking out in a cold sweat...



S-she's got a really desperate look on her face, doesn't she...?!

This girl with the pretty blonde hair was the first to come for a Skill Bestowal in a while, and was praying like she was begging for rain to come end a drought...

Ahaha... While I watched the girl in front of me give off that desperate aura, a *crackle* came from the magic stones embedded in the floor. Suddenly, mana started to leak from the magic circle, and the light from outside winked out.

Normally these things ended much more calmly, but...

"I-is it over?" the girl asked, coming back to her senses and looking at me with her orange eyes.

"Y-yes, that... should be the case."

"...! T-then, I f-finally...!"

"A-ahaha. Well then, allow me to check your status to determine which sort of magic you've been granted. It's on the house this time since you're in for your Skill Bestowal, but from now on you'll need to pay a fee whenever you want an evaluation. Got it?"

Hmm... just what *was* that? Did everything go alright? In my three years as a priestess, this is the first time that I've had anything like that happen. But I've never heard of a Skill Bestowal failing...

Even those granted weak power can at least use Water magic in their everyday lives. At its worst it would be something like that, and she would still be able to make a living. Every journey needed a Water user, after all.

Now, then...

"Status!"

Anti Kythera Human (♀) Age 15

Skill: Gearcraft Lv. 1

Gah, how do I explain this...?

“Um, Madame Priestess...?”

“...”



Huh...? The priestess lady froze up.

She did evaluate my skill, right?

Her reaction is kind of making me nervous, though...

“Um, so did I end up with weak household magic, then?”

“Ah! Um, you see... how should I put it...?”

“It couldn’t be... that I’m still magicless, right...?”

“N-no! You have a skill! You do! The Skill Bestowal was successful! You aren’t magicless!!”

She didn’t need to put so much emphasis on the ends of her sentences...

“So what sort of skill is it?”

“...”

“Huh...?”

“...”

“Um...”

The priestess took glancing looks at my face.

“Hah...”

S-she just sighed!

“This way, Ms. Anti.”

“Right...”

She led me through a door to the right, down a hallway. Along the way we

passed another priest, who took her place manning the church.

Eventually, we arrived at a small room with a desk and two chairs.

What's this? An interrogation...?

"Please take a seat."

She pulled out the chair for me, and then took the other one herself.

"Um..."

"Ms. Anti."

"Yes?"

"I, Amarron Glacé, have been a priestess for four years now. Well, to be accurate, it has been three years and three months. I may still be a novice, but I believe that through my studies up until now, I have become capable of serving as a proper priestess."

"Right..."

"What a half-hearted response..."

Well, that's true...

I've got no interest in your personal history, lady. I just care about my skill!

"Ahem. In other words, I'm a splendid priestess who tries to be just and sincere."

...Should you really be calling yourself "splendid"?

No, wait... maybe she's had her share of troubles, being such a young woman in this line of work?

"As such, I want to be up front and tell you what I just saw... There is no need for mercy!"

No mercy?! This is a church, right?! This should be the most merciful place around, shouldn't it?!

She didn't seem to notice my reaction, and instead smoothly wrote something out on a piece of paper.

She geeeently handed it to me, looking like she was leaning out over an

abyss...

Anti Kythera Human (♀) Age 15

Skill: Gearcraft Lv. 1

“Wha...?”

“(Yup, yup)...”

...What is this? Gear...?

“Gear ‘craft’? What’s magical about a ‘craft’?” I asked.

“I couldn’t say, Ms. Anti.”

“No, but you see...”

“Allow me to explain what’s so odd about your status results.”

Hey! Can you maybe not ignore my question?...

“Firstly, I’m unable to gauge your physical strength.”

“Huh?”

“Please look at this paper. This is the entirety of the information I received by checking your status.”

“Um, so what’s weird about it?”

“It *is* weird! Normally, you can see things like physical strength, mana, and agility! Don’t make light of us priestesses!”

“Huh? But this...”

“That’s right. I cannot see any such things for you. All that’s there is your name, age, sex, and this strange skill.”

D-don’t call it strange!

“Furthermore, I can’t see your experience value.”

“Experience value?”

“As you grow, you consume the mana stored within your body. It’s also called your level. Please have a look at your status results. The level of your strange skill is displayed, but your own level is not.”

C-could you *please* stop calling it strange...?!

“Finally, about this bizarre skill...”

T-this priestess really *is* merciless... sniffle.

“Please don’t cry. In a certain manner of thinking, it’s something to be proud of! It’s likely the first time this skill has been seen in the whole of the history of magic!”

“B-but it doesn’t even have ‘magic’ in the name. It’s just a ‘craft’...”

“...”

Say something, please!

“...At any rate, I have some level of interest in a never-before seen skill. Could you try using it? It may actually be an amazing skill.”

What do you mean “some” level?! What, so you’re only as interested as if you heard your uncle was getting remarried and you were like “Hmm?”?!

Grr, she’s mocking me, just like everybody from class...

Just you watch! Maybe it really is something amazing!

If I give up here, I’m just guaranteeing my own failure! But I’m ready to keep on picking myself back up!

The priestess lady stared at me, puzzled.

Oh, just you wait. I’ll wipe that puzzled look off your face!

“Come forth, Gearcraft!”

“Wow... she actually shouted it...”

...

.....

.....

Nothing happened.

Well no, *something* did.

A disk appeared before my eyes, floating in midair. It looked to be made of a

The Gear Girl Afterwards, the priestess lady tried to cheer me up, saying things like, “I’m sure things will turn out alright” and “Let’s have tea sometime.”

The priestess’s reactions were half the reason I was so depressed. But now that I’d dipped a toe into this unknown realm of gears, I didn’t have the energy to point that out.

I stayed the night in the neighboring town, and then returned to the town of Cardiff by carriage.

The time was just before noon.

A day ago, I’d been so full of hope.

The familiar old-timer manning the gate called out to me.

“Hey there, Annie! How’d it go?”

He was asking about the Skill Bestowal, right?

As I was now, I didn’t even have the mana in me to force a smile.

“Yeeeah. I’ll see you at the shop later, alriiiight?”

“...? R-right.”

After exchanging that vague greeting, I headed towards my house.

How will I explain things to Dad and everyone...?

I walked down a path that veered away from the center of town for a bit. Before long, I saw a line of people and smelled a delicious smell wafting through the air.

The shop that everyone was lined up for had a flashy orange sign hanging up in front of it.

“Proud to boast the greatest taste in all of Cardiff! The Kythera Eatery.”

I was home...

As I entered through the rear entrance, I heard the voices of the customers yelling out their orders.

“Pops! Two of the ‘makes ya’ dizzy’ specials! That round chicken dish!”

“I want a heading helping of the rice ‘kaboom!’ special over here!”

“Coming up!”

A musclebound blond man called out from the kitchen while waving around a pot. Ah, that’s my dad.

“Ooh, Annie, welcome back!”

That came from a woman calmly chopping vegetables at high speed: my mother.

“Waaaaaah, Boss, I’ve forgotten how to prepare the meeeeat!”

“Shove it into the wheat, you idiot!”

“B-but the eggs....!” Pryce, the assistant, yelled out. He was four years older than me, but he still had a long way to go when it came to stuff like cutting up meat.

Haaaah... good grief. I guess I’ll have to descend upon the noontime battlefield myself, huh?

“Then you’ll be fine if I crack the eggs for you, right?” I asked.

“Y-young miss!!”

“Don’t call me that!!”

I quickly threw on an apron, washed all the way up to my elbows, and headed into the kitchen.

“You’re a lifesaver, Anti!”

“I’m glad I gave birth to you!”

“Yeah, yeah. Should I go with fifty to start?”

Crack, crack, crack...

I cracked the eggs in a practiced motion. Using both hands, naturally.

It sure would be nice if I could be this skilled at using magic...

Ugh... I had finally started to forget, but now I'm feeling down in the dumps again.

"You'll have to tell us all about your magic later, alright?"

Gah. I know you're just being considerate, Mom, but that's the worst thing you could have said right now.

Ugh, what'll I do? They paid so much for my tuition, and yet...

Gears... Gearcraft... what even is that...?

"Uuuuuugh..."

"Hey! What's the matter, poster girl?!" "Yo, Annie, yesterday was your birthday?!" "Yeah, but she's still positively shining today! Just like the shop's sign itself!" "Huh? Yesterday was her Skill Bestowal?!" "That's amazing! Our little poster girl's a full-fledged magician!" "What do ya think she learned?" "That's obvious! Magic that'll help her cook a delicious meal!" "Bwahaha! What's that about?!" "Hey, you all are making a ruckus!" "Phew, finally done the morning shift! Is there any of the daily special left?" "Hey, could I get some raw egg on top?!"

"Agh, you're so loud! Here!"

Fwoosh!

I tossed the contents of the egg while cracking it, and it landed into the customer's small bowl.

"Ooooooooooh!!" "That's amazing! It's magic!" the customers yelled out excitedly.

Oh shut up, you don't even understand how I'm feeling! I'm the gear girl special!

Damn... how'd it turn out like this, *sniffle*?

The noontime rush caused me to forget my gear-driven sadness for a bit. However, time is a cruel mistress. Once those stalwart men were stuffed, they all returned to their jobs or headed back home.

The last customer for the day departed just as it was getting dark. It was dangerous at night, so the restaurant didn't stay open. The Kythera Eatery was only open for breakfast and lunch.

After Pryce tottered off back home, the topic was broached at last.

"So, how'd it go?"

"Gah."

Dad brought out some bar munchies after he finished tidying up the plates. He may not have been a big drinker, but he sure loved his snacks.

"Still, to think that my daughter's finally a magician!"

My warm and gentle mother was drinking from a mug.

Mom, you really should make sure you've got something in your stomach. Filling it with nothing but booze is bad for you.

"..."

"...?"

"...?"

H-how should I explain?

"I learned Gearcraft. Look at it spin!"

...I-I'm doomed...

I may have gone to school, but I didn't have even a tiny hint of magical talent to show for it.

Even after I finally reached the age where God would take pity on me, all I got was magic (ish) to make a dinky little gear spin...

I'm pathetic...

I've got no excuses for my parents, who worked so hard, or anything to repay them with.

"U..."

"U...?" both of my parents repeated.

“Uwaah!”

“Hey, hey...”

“Oh, my...”

“Uwaaaaaaaah!!”

I finally broke down crying.

“There, there. Just calm down.”

“Would you like some hot milk, Annie?”

Mom held up her hand, and a small flame appeared beneath the pot.

Dad and Mom both used Fire magic. It was an ideal match for running a restaurant, even if it wasn't useful for much else.

In comparison, I...

Dad saw where I was looking and gave a slow sigh.

“Listen, Anti... It's true that Sola and I can both make fire. But that's all. Even people without Fire magic can do the same with a Fire magic stone and oil.”

“That's right, Anti. There's more to you than just magic. I mean, look at all the eggs you cracked during the lunch rush. Even some big-shot magician from the royal court couldn't do that!”

“Hahaha, that's for sure!”

She placed the hot milk on the table in front of me.

I understood what they were saying, and that they were trying to cheer me up, but...

“So, what kind of magic did you get anyway?”

“...It's not magic.”

“Hmm?”

“How do I explain it? It's got a different sort of feel...”

“Is that so?”

“It's really, really, super odd. The priestess said she'd never seen it before. It's

an abnormality, she said.”

“It’s that unusual?”

“She said you could normally see a level or something, but she couldn’t for me. So she didn’t know if I’d become strong or not.”

“You don’t really *need* to become strong,” Mom said with a smile.

“Right. You already help us out a lot around the restaurant,” Dad said kindly, his arms folded.

But, but...!

“But, you guys worked so hard to earn that money! So that I could go to school! But I’ve got nothing to show for it!”

“Anti.”

“I know how hard it was to pay off the tuition with the earnings from the restaurant! If... if I knew this was going to happen, I’d never have gone, and just worked here the whole time instead!”

“Annie...”

“I’m a good-for-nothing! I’m useless, just a joke for my classmates to laugh at! If... if I had at least been born normal...”

“Anti!!!!” Dad shouted.

“...!! Ah...”

“Anti, don’t just stand there. Have a seat,” Dad said, pulling out a chair.

I looked over at Mom. Normally she always had a smile on her face, but now her expression had gone serious.

“A-are you... mad?”

“Yeah, we are. Sit down.”

Right. That made sense.

They worked so much every day so their daughter could go to school, so of course they’d be angry...

It was just like they’d tossed that money straight in a ditch...

My shoulders sagged as I took my seat.

As I stared at the steam coming off the hot milk, I felt like my heart was being crushed.

“Anti.”

Yes, what is it? Sorry you ended up with a daughter like me.

“What?”

“Look at me.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Just look at me.”

“What is it?”

“Just look at my hair and eyes.”

...? His hair and eyes?

“Why do you want me to do that?”

I couldn't tell what Dad was thinking.

“Anti, my eyes are brown, but my hair's a shining blond, right?”

“Huh? Y-yeah.”

“When I was young, I worked in a mine on the outskirts of Cardiff. I dug up coal and magic stones and the like.”

I had heard just a bit about this, back when I was little. When the town was just getting started, coal and magic stones were an important source of funding, and he helped out with that.

“Magic stone ore reflects light really well, you see. So my light blond hair showed up in them real well. My buddies would say, ‘It's great digging alongside Derek, because it makes finding the stuff go so much quicker!’”

...That's true. Mines are dark, so a bright color would stand out, wouldn't it?

But why is he talking about that now?

“Your mom was the one who carried lunches to us miners.”

“R-really?”

“Hehehe.”

“Anti, look at your mom’s eyes.”

I did as I was told, turning my whole body towards Mom, who was giving off a kind, gentle impression. Her hair was black, and her eyes were orange.

“...I fell for those eyes and that smile of hers. I didn’t know such a beautiful color could exist. Like a fool, I’d thought my hair was the greatest gift in all creation. But I had just been conceited. Sola’s eyes were the color of the sun, shining like it does when it rises in the morning, and burning the same way it does at sunset. The second I saw that brilliance, Dear, I fell for you completely!”

“Oh, my, Dear! I’m blushing!”

I love Mom’s eyes, too. There’s a depth to the orange of her eyes, sort of. Like there’s all sorts of emotions imbued in them, and like they’re not just one single color.

“And then? Well, I wooed her, and then we were blessed with you!”

“Hehehe, Derek was so cute back then!”

Wow, so Dad talked her into it, huh...?

I guess he was just as straightforward back then as he is now.

“And then, there was a certain thing we discussed when you were in Sola’s belly. I said I wanted my kid to have Sola’s eyes.”

“And I said I’d be glad if my child was born with Derek’s hair.”

“Of course we said we’d love you if you had either of them, or neither.”

My face went beet red. Being so open at a time like this just wasn’t fair.

“Then a bit later, you were born. I remember it like it was yesterday... After Sola had some time to rest, I got to meet you. I held you in my arms, and we both looked at you. Your blond hair was just like mine.”

“We were both grinning from ear to ear when we saw you.”

“And then you opened your eyes for the first time, and you looked at me. I

can still recall how I felt then.”

“I said, ‘Oh, so that’s what the color of my eyes is like?’ didn’t I? It was totally different from looking at myself in the mirror.”

“My hair, and Sola’s eyes. I didn’t believe in God, but at that time, I sure did thank him. I mean, it was just the best, wasn’t it? The absolute greatest? There was no way that I, that we, wouldn’t love this daughter of ours. To us, you’re a blessing from God. It was like we were being told ‘Keep going for it, living like you are!’”

“Before we knew it, both of us were crying. That seemed to surprise you, and it was just so cute!”

I... I started crying. And it wasn’t like those tears from before.

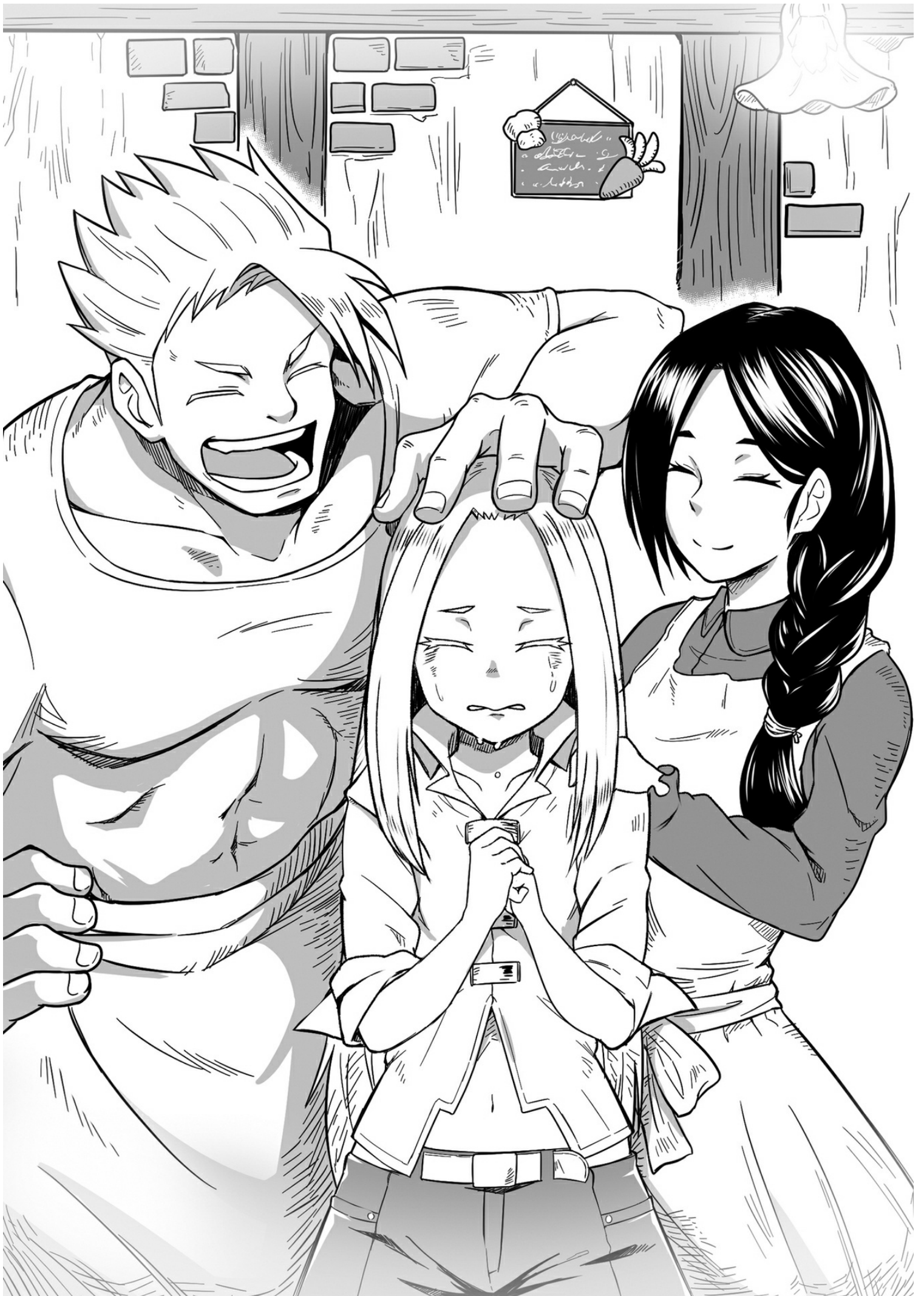
These two really are the best parents a girl could have.

I really am loved.

“You’re a full marks, 100/100 daughter. I won’t let anyone insult my daughter, even my daughter herself!”

“Saying it would be better if you were born different is the dumbest thing anyone’s ever said!”

...I’m glad... that I’m their daughter...



“I’m sorry, and thank you... Dad, Mom...!”

The best parents in the world kindly waited for me to stop crying.

At this point, I was sitting on my mother’s lap. I was small for 15, you see.

“Annie, your hair sure has gotten long, hasn’t it?” Mom said, running her fingers through it.

My hair was the same as Dad’s, which he was so proud of: a light blonde, but very thin. If I tied it up with a ribbon, it would soon slip out of place, which made it tricky to deal with.

“Is it about time that I cut it?”

“That’d be a waste!”

“But if I can’t put it up...”

When I was seated, my hair reached all the way down to my knees. Mom had kept me from cutting it until now and it had kept on growing, but it seemed to be at its limit. Even if I didn’t go a lot shorter, I’d probably need to at least maintain the length.

“And so, my beloved daughter! What sort of bizarre magic did you come up with?”

“I-I didn’t come up with it!”

Don’t talk about it like it was my idea, geez!

...But after hearing that story, I couldn’t keep on hiding things from them. I worked up my nerve and said, “Gearcraft...”

“Gearcraft?” they both asked.

“It’s a skill... to create... gears...”

“Ooh, what’s that?”

“Sounds interesting, doesn’t it?”

“No it doesn’t...”

I raised my hand, palm upward.

Just above it, a metallic disk suddenly appeared.

“Ooh!”

“Oh, my!”

Sproing, sproing, sproing.

Spin, spin, spin.

I had made an impressive gear.

“It’s so pretty, isn’t it?”

“Ahahaha! Hey, it’s spinning! Amazing!”

“But the way it came out all gold-colored like that sure is mysterious, isn’t it?”

“You wouldn’t call it a pale orange?”

“Then it’s golden-orange? It’s so cute, isn’t it?”

“No, I think it’s weird to call a gear ‘cute’...”

I was shocked that they would accept it so easily...

I feel like an idiot for getting so worried.

“So, how many can you make?”

“Huh? I-I don’t know...”

I faced the palm of my other hand upward.

Fwoosh.

Sproing, sproing, sproing.

Spin, spin, spin.

...And now there were two.

“Ahahaha! Great! That’s just great, Anti!”

“Hey! Don’t make fun of me! This is hardly better than a party trick!”

“Ah, it got bigger just now!”

“Huh?!”

“When you yelled, Annie, the gear got bigger for just a second.”

“So you can change the size, too?”

“U-um...”

Woosh!

“Ooh, it expanded!”

“It sure is spinning!”

Oh, I changed the size...

I’d been too depressed to actually try anything before.

Ah, it went back to normal.

“Oh, that’s it! I was wondering where I’d seen that before!”

Mom suddenly lowered me down off her lap and headed off to the second floor. When she returned a bit later, she had a picture book in her hands.

“That’s...”

“You used to love this picture book, didn’t you? *The Medium of the Sun.*”

Wow, I hadn’t thought of that book in ages! I used to read this all the time...

To sum up the story, *The Medium of the Sun* went off on some sort of journey, and was helped out by all sorts of people, and protected peace with the power of the sun in some way or another.

“Here, look at this page.”

“I see! It really does look just like it!”

The page Mom had opened to was the last scene. The illustration was of a woman holding up one hand, with a distorted sun above her. The color and shape almost made it look like my gear.

“Wow, it really is similar, isn’t it?”

“Maybe the medium from this book was actually *The Medium of the Gear* all along!”

“W-what are you saying?!”

“But look, when you put them side by side, don’t they look identical?”

Just as Dad had implied, the official title of this book wasn't actually *The Medium of the Sun*. The book was apparently originally found as images in some ruins, which were then studied and finally sold by the publishing guild, becoming a rather famous picture book. The size of the small gear spinning in front of me now and the sun (?) in the picture book were practically the same. Lining them up, they really did look identical.

"But I can't do anything with this magic!"

"That's not true at all. You could scramble up some eggs with it, I'm sure."

"Hey!"

"Ahahaha! Well, I was half-joking there, Anti. But I don't think it was a mistake that you ended up with that magic."

"W-why's that?"

"Well, I can't really explain it well, but it's gotta be the color!"

"C-color...?"

"The color of those gears really makes me think of your hair and eyes."

"That's true! It really does!"

"So that's the only reason...?"

"But still, it just looks fitting somehow, having that gear spinning next to you. It's definitely your skill."

Hmm, I get the feeling that I'm being coaxed in a weird way...

"And also, Anti, you said that you can't do anything with your magic, but come over here for a minit."

"Hnm?"

I followed him outside, through the entrance to the shop.

It was just between between sunset and nighttime. That made for a wonderful sight, but there were people hurrying around to get home before the soon-to-come darkness.

"Take a look at that."

“...The kids?”

Were they heading back home? They were holding pinwheels made of straw paper.

Spin, spin, spin.

“They’re spinning, right?”

“Yeah? R-right...”

Those are just toys, right?

“And look at that.”

“Alright.”

A carriage? It looked to be in a rush because of the impending darkness.

The wheels screeched a bit as they headed off into the distance.

“They’re spinning, too, aren’t they?”

“Huh? Um, yeah.”

“And then there’s this.”

Dad pointed to the gear spinning by my side. Even now, it was spinning happily along.

“What’re you trying to say?”

“Listen, Anti...”

He had a look on his face that seemed to say “Good grief...”

“Anti, pinwheels spin to bring children joy. Carriage wheels spin to carry people along.”

“...”

“‘Spinning’ brings about different types of power. I was kidding before, but if you stuck that gear into some eggs, you’d have them scrambled in no time. There’s sure to be plenty you can do with it.”

I understood what Dad was trying to say. He meant that it was possible that this power would be of some sort of use.

“I’m happy to hear you say that, Dad. That really may be the case. But I don’t think I’d be able to keep up with the lessons in school with this skill.”

“Ah, right. You’re 15, after all.”

“Yeah. Since all the students in class are 15 now, the lessons will all be about practical skills, and the lectures are getting switched out for self-study. I could make it through with bare minimum honors if I just ace the exams covering our lectures. But I could never go on to higher learning or get a magic-related job.”

“Listen, Anti... The truth is, your mom and I didn’t get you into school because we wanted you to become good at magic.”

“Huh?”

“Back when we were kids, this town wasn’t around yet, so there weren’t many places for kids to meet.”

“We wanted you to make a lot of friends your own age.”

“...”

I wouldn’t call them “friends” so much as “nasty brats” and “mean girls,” but.....

“Ahaha, I’ve got no idea who’s got you making that face, but most of the kids in your class come to eat at our place, right? That makes them a pretty good group, wouldn’t you say?”

“I mean, maybe it’s just because I hate them, but I don’t see it that way...”

“You always look like you’re having so much fun when you’re squabbling with everyone, Annie!”

I mean, I’d say the fact that we’re squabbling means that we’re not getting along, though...

“B-but Dad, Mom... I feel bad for you two, but I get the feeling I’m destined to just be the poster girl for the restaurant...”

“Then here’s what we’ll do, Anti.”

“...?”

“This may not be the right way to phrase it, but we don’t care how skilled you

are at magic. You're still a good daughter. And if you're working in the kitchen, it'd be a huge help!"

"In that case..."

"However, Anti, you can be our poster girl whenever, right?"

"Right. So why not try out other things first?"

"What do you mean?"

"We mean finding out what your little partner spinning by your side can do, and what you can do with that skill."

"Hehehe."

This thing is... my partner?

But... that's true. I've got the opportunity, so I should at least give it a bit of a shot.

"Alright... I'll try things out, at least a little."

Dimension Stone and Analyze Card I had decided to see if my power was actually good for anything.

I was super lacking in confidence, though, since all I could do was make gears.

On top of that, I decided to give up on my magic lessons. I mean, I couldn't imagine lessons about magical techniques would be of any use to me. My parents, by the way, just shrugged the matter off with a, "Well, guess there's no helping that."

As long as I at least took the monthly exam, then I would still be able to graduate.

I asked if they were okay with me not helping around the shop anymore. What I got back was, "Leave the shop to us! We told you you're free to become our poster girl full-time whenever you want, right?"

"Get out there and do everything you can while you have the time!"

My condolences, Pryce...

"In that case..."

"Hmm?" Mom and Dad were both attentive.

"In that case, I want to try going to the adventurer's guild in the neighboring town!"

"Ooh..."

"So that's what you're going for, huh?"

"You know why I said I wanted to go to school, right?"

"Umm, if I recall right, you said it was because of that... Purple Lightning magician?"

"No! Purple *Lightning*! The Purple Lightning! What're you saying, Dad?!"

Right, it happened back when I was a kid, when I absolutely adored that

picture book.

Some monsters got into town: forest wolves that slipped in while our fence was being repaired. They were just wolf-types, but they were a serious threat to Cardiff back then.

See, Cardiff was so small that our adventurer's guild was just an intermediary. The closest adventurer's guild or church was one town over in Donius. So we all evacuated to the upper floors of the buildings while we waited for someone to come take care of them.

The adventurer who came to take care of them was known as the "Purple Lightning." She happened to be in Donius at the time, and came to Cardiff in an express carriage. And when she arrived, I saw her carry out the extermination.

She was a girl with light purple hair. The surprising thing, though, was that she seemed to be about my age. This was four years ago, so I must've been around 11 years old.

The girl held up her hand. Light seemed to flow out of it, and lightning struck the wolves.

It had just taken an instant. That was all it took for her to become my idol.

Afterwards, I asked around (mostly customers) how I could be like her. In the end, I figured going to school was my best bet. In retrospect I made that decision pretty lightly, but my parents still happily gave their permission for me to enroll.

"If I'm going to test out my power, then I'd like to follow my dream and become an adventurer. I-I've got no intention of taking on dangerous monster extermination jobs, though..."

My parents thought it over.

"Hmm, well, you've got a good head on your shoulders, so I'm sure you won't do anything reckless..."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Adventurers gather herbs and do deliveries, too, right?"

"And if we tell you not to go, you'll just regret not taking the opportunity... Alright, Anti! Go ahead and give it a shot!"

I was shocked. “Really?!”

“Just make sure you’re prepared. If you’re going to go to the adventurer’s guild, that means you’ll be based out of Donius, right?”

“Ah!”

T-that’s right. You don’t just go to the adventurer’s guild to get registered... If I want to take on jobs, then the intermediary in Cardiff wouldn’t cut it. I’d need to be in Donius at least part-time.

“Well, you’ve gotta come back once a month for your tests, so it may end up being a pain! Ahahaha!” Dad laughed.

Mom cut to the chase. “You’ll have to at least earn enough for a round trip between Cardiff and Donius once a month.”

“If that’s all the money we’re talking, then shouldn’t we just give it to her?”

Cardiff and Donius weren’t all that far apart. If you left by carriage early in the morning, you would arrive before noon. As the bigger of the two towns, Donius was equipped with all sorts of facilities. Cardiff was a nice place to live, but since there was an adventurer’s guild so nearby, they didn’t go out of their way to build a proper one of their own. All we had was a simple altar and an intermediary here.

“...No, I want to try to earn my own way as best as I can.”

“I see. Alright, that’s the spirit!”

“Hehehe.”

Now that I’d decided to challenge myself, I had to aim to at least be able to support myself.

Aim to be as good as the Purple Lightning! ...would be impossible, right? I can only make gears, after all...

“Oh, Dear, what about that?”

“Hmm? Oh! That!”

“...?”

What’re they talking about?

Dad brought out a little wooden box.

“What’s that? It’s sure is a pretty box. It looks like a treasure chest...”

“That’s because it is one. I happened upon it while digging a long time ago.”

“Huh?! What?! You’re telling me the mine you worked in was a dungeon?!”

“Well, to be more accurate, the mine I worked in turned into a small dungeon!”

“W-what’s that mean...?”

“Man, it sure was crazy! The walls of the mine suddenly started moving, like the whole place was alive!”

“A-and then what happened...?!”

“I dug and dug and kept on digging!”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, I didn’t even know where the exit was! And all I had on me was a boxed lunch from Sola and my pickaxe!”

“I remember being so worried! But you sure did it!”

“Huh? What did he do?!”

“I smashed the dungeon core! Used my pickaxe to do it!”

“With your pickaxe?! S-so wouldn’t that make you a dungeon clearer?!”

“That’s right! If you look up the official list of dungeon clearers in the capital, you’ll see my name! Ahahaha!”

“Seriously...?”

To think... Dad, a dungeon clearer...

“And so back then, the government gave him a bit of reward money. That turned into the capital for starting our restaurant.”

“S-so that’s how it went, huh...?”

The history of my household...

“Well, it was still a brand new dungeon, and monsters hadn’t popped up yet,

so I got lucky there! That meant the reward money wasn't all that great, though! So, this is the treasure chest that I got at the time!"

I looked at the wooden box again. It wasn't anything flashy, but the carvings on it sure were pretty.

Wait... a treasure chest?

"So what sort of treasure was in here?"

"Open it up and see!"

Huh?! He just left it in there?! They didn't sell it off or anything...?

"Um, well then..."

I reached out and opened the lid of the wooden box.

Squeeeeeeeak...

Inside was a red gemstone wrapped in cloth, and a transparent, light blue card.

"What's this?"

"A dimension stone and analyze card."

Dimension stone and... analyze card...?

"A 'dimension stone' is one of those gems you use in item bags and the like, right?"

"That's right. Watch this!"

Mom reached out the palm of her hand towards the red gemstone.

She moved her other hand as if to cover it and...?! H-her hand disappeared up to the wrist!

"Hey! Are you alright?!"

"I'm just fine. You can put items in and pull them out of the space inside like this. Living things get pushed back out, though!"

Amazing! I'd learned about them at school and seen the one they had on hand, but I never thought my house would have one!

“How much stuff can fit inside?”

“I don’t really know, but 15 of Sola’s boxed lunches fit in there.”

“...Why did you put so many inside?”

“Man, this thing sure did help make my work go smoother!”

“We never really tested how much could fit inside, did we?”

Hey, you really should have. That’s kind of important. I don’t really know all that much about it, but item bags are worth a lot, aren’t they? I’m sure it’d be a valuable treasure for an adventurer. Just using it to store boxed lunches from your lover... And Mom must have been amazing back then, too, to make 15 of the things... Well, then again, she’s running a restaurant *now*...

“This doesn’t look like much, does it? But it’s an analyze card!”

I’d never heard that term before.

“So what does it do? It’s a treasure, so it must be something special.”

“It gives you a basic stat readout. Well, I suppose it *is* special, but it’s a strange tool. Anti, try holding this card up towards me and yelling ‘Analyze!’”

“...? Alright.”

Now that I’d picked it up, I felt how thin the card was. It looked light blue, but it would probably be nearly invisible with light shining through it.

“Analyze!”

[—Analysis complete. Derek Kythera Human (♂) age 38. Status: Healthy.]

I-it spoke?!

“W-what is this thing?!”

“Ahahaha! So you heard it? Whoever’s holding it can hear that voice. Now, take a look at the card.”

I looked at the surface of the analyze card in my hand, and found that the same words I had just heard were written there.

“What’s this...?”

“Apparently ‘analyzing’ is like a downgraded version of status display magic.

You can use this to figure out whether or not a target is healthy.”

“Whether or not they’re healthy...”

I-I see. Compared to the dimension stone, it’s really not all that impressive.

“But still, isn’t it a good thing, being able to know the state you’re in? When you’ve come down with an illness, it’ll say ‘Status: Sick.’ And I’d use it to check on my work buddies when they looked tired, and Sola when she was pregnant. I hope you’ll use it on yourself whenever something feels out of sorts. Don’t push yourself, and rest up when you’re sick.”

“Dad...”

Am I tearing up a bit...?

Mom smiled. “We’re giving both of them to you, Annie.”

“A-are you sure?!”

“We decided a good while back that we’d give that treasure box to you when you became a magician.”

“They should save you the trouble of lugging everything around, and also help keep tabs on your health. I’m sure you’ll find them helpful.”

“Mom...”

“Well, I can’t say we expected you to learn magic like this. But anyway, the time has come for our one and only daughter to leave the nest. Go ahead and use those however you want!”

“...Thank you. I’ll treasure them.”

I’d shifted into full Polite Mode without even realizing.

This treasure was filled with thoughtful consideration from my parents.

“Haha... well, I don’t know when you’ll be heading out, but you’ll need to prepare a bit first. Make sure you’re good and ready, alright? And be sure to come back for a meal every now and again! We’ll whip you up something, no matter when you show up!”

“Hehe, look at you, Dear, trying to act cool!”

“H-hey!”

Alright. I don't know how things'll turn out, but I'll give it my all! If I don't, then I'd probably be too disappointed in myself to even enjoy a tasty meal. I need to make sure to do my best, so I can enjoy their cooking with pride.

Even though I can only make gears...

I climbed the stairs while holding the two treasures my parents had given me.

When I reached my room on the second floor, I thought back over the events of the day. Everything already felt a little distant, which helped me get my head straight.

Atop my desk were the red gemstone and transparent card.

I needed to start thinking about how to use my skill, so as not to waste these gifts...

I tried making a gear.

Swoosh.

Sproing, sproing.

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

...It sure can spin. Hmm, I dunno...

Just what exactly can I do with this little guy?

Dad said that “spinning brings about some sort of power.”

...It really does seem like it'd be good at scrambling eggs.

“Haaah... try out all sorts of things, huh?”

Ka-klunk.

The gear stopped and fell onto the desk. The dimension stone and analyze card were inside the hole in its center.

Hehe, it was like a ring toss.

My golden gear, the red dimension stone, and the analyze card. Right now, those 3 things were all I had.

At any rate, I suppose I need to test out my power. I don't even know how many gears I can make...

Yaaawn... I'm feeling a little tired...

I did cry an awful lot, after all...

...

.....

.....

Zzz.... zzz....

— — — Vrrrrrrrrrrrrr...

[— —]

[— —]

[—Status analysis, on.]

[—Receiving interference from skill.]

[—Receiving interference from skill.]

[—Receiving interference from skill.]

[—Unusual status detected. Commencing troubleshooting.]

[—Analyzing.]

[—Analyzing.]

[—Nearby items: 2.]

[—Attempting to share status.]

[—Commencing status sharing.]

[—Analyzing.]

[—Analyzing.]

[—Item link established.]

[—Error.]

[—Request for synchronization received from skill.]

[—Issues in status after synchronization: unknown.]

[—Analysis impossible.]

[—Analysis impossible.]

[—Analysis impossible.]

[—Analysis impossible.]

[—Analysis impossible.]

[— — —Permission to synchronize?]

“Hrggh... you’re so loud... just do whatever you want...”

[Permission confirmed. Status: —beginning synchronization.]

Crown and Twintails Chirp, chirp, chirp...

There was a little bird chirping outside my window, but this was no time for that!

They're gone! Gone!

Why?!

They were right there, on top of my desk!

Was it you, little bird?! Are you a chirping little thief?!

No, the window's still closed!

C-c-calm down. That would be impossible, anyway.

Let's just check under the desk one more time and...

They're not there! Why aren't they there?!

And of course they're not in the drawers, either!

This... this is impossible!

I lost the dimension stone and analyze card!

Stomp, stomp, stomp...!

"Waaaaaaaah! Moooooommy!!"

"Hmm? Good morning, Annie."

"What is it, my beloved daughter?"

As I came running downstairs, I found my parents doing the morning preparations for the restaurant. It was early in the morning, so the light was still dim. There was still a bit of time until opening.

"Okay, so, like... I know this is all kind of sudden after yesterday, but....."

"Hey, Anti..."

"I left those treasures you gave me out on my desk overnight....."

"Annie..."

“And they were there when I fell asleep, I *swear*, but when I woke up this morning...”

“Anti!” they both yelled out.

“Gah, sorry!”

“No, it’s just... what’s that thing over your head?”

“It sure is cute!”

“Huh?”

A-above... my head? What?

Both of their gazes were fixed above my head.

“It’s spinning.”

“It sure is, isn’t it?”

...?! What’s spinning?!

“Anti, go look in your mirror.”

...

The matter of the missing treasures was put on hold for the moment. I returned to my room and looked in the mirror. And then...

“A crown...?”

Spin, spin, spin.

What is that?

There was a small crown floating over my head, and it was rotating.

I’ve seen that movement and color somewhere before...

“Hey, it’s a gear!”

There was no mistaking it. It was made of that now-familiar orange-gold metal.

This thing was made with my own gear skill...?

Twinkle!

“...!”

There was light reflecting off the spinning crown. It looked like there was a gemstone or something in it... Hmm? A gemstone?

“It couldn’t be...!”

I grabbed the... gear crown (?) with both hands.

Hup!

“Ah, it came loose.”

I was able to pull it free from its resting place atop my head. Then I took a long, hard look at it.

This thing really is a gear.

The teeth were pointed upwards, and were long and thin, making it look like a crown. This thing was floating above my head...?

What really caught my eye, though, was the red gemstone embedded in it. And when I looked closer, I saw a transparent plate surrounding the gemstone. The design of the plate radiated outwards, with the red gemstone at its center.

“...”

Um, so in other words...

“...Analyze.”

[—Analyzing.

Name: “Crown Gear”

(Skill medium/Item) Synchronized items -Item storage -Analyzer Status: Synchroshift.]

...It talked. And it did an analysis.

What does “synchronized” mean?

And... hey, wait. It can analyze things, too?

H-how did things turn out like this...?

I tossed the crown away — and it ground to a halt in midair. Then it switched

directions, resuming its perch atop my head.

Spin, spin, spin...

“Uh... huh...”

I descended the stairs, now in a bit of a daze.

“Hey, so you got a look at it?”

“Hehehe, you’re just like a princess, aren’t you?”

I wanted to just hold my head in my hands.

Just what is this Gearcraft skill of mine?

“...They seem to have gotten stuck to it.”

“Huh?”

“The dimension stone and analyze card you gave me yesterday...”

“Yeah?”

“They seem to have gotten stuck to my gear...”

“R-right.”

“Oh, my.”

After that, I ended up helping out around the restaurant.

Mom and Dad said not to worry about it, but I asked them to let me for today. After all, there was a looooooot of stuff I didn’t want to think about, and chopping up vegetables into little pieces was an ideal solution for avoiding reality. I was free from other thoughts as long as my hands kept on moving.

Pryce showed up in the morning, before opening. “Y-young miss, that’s...” he started to say, but the glint in my eye shut him up. But sure enough, once the customers started streaming in, there were people who noticed the thing floating above my head...

“Hey, Annie, you’re looking beautiful as always today!” “What’s that over your head?!” “What a cute little princess!” “It’s spinning around.” “Hahaha, a princess in an eatery!” “Is that the magic you learned?” “Hey, princess! Where’s my steak?!” “Mommy, I want a crown like that, too!” “Oh, my. She’s a cute

cook, isn't she?" "Anti, you've finally evolved from poster girl to poster princess, huh?!"

T-t-they're just going off!!!

As I gave into my anger and chopped the vegetables down to almost nothing, my long hair slipped forward over my shoulders.

Swoosh, swoosh. Swoosh, swoosh.

Agh, it keeps on getting in the way! Did I let it grow too long? But if I cut it, Mom will get all depressed...

I was in a daze when I came downstairs before, so I forgot to grab my hair tie from my room. I wanted to go get it, but trying to slip out during peak times like this would result in quite a lot of lost time.

Swoosh, swoosh. Swoosh, swoosh.

Argh!! This is so irritating! Don't I have anything that I could loop it through?! I don't care what it is, I just need something to tie it up...

[—Crown Gear has completed analysis of the situation.

—Rectifying problem.]

"Huh? ...Hey, wait!"

The analyzer suddenly talked!

No sooner had I had that thought than two golden gears appeared, rotating in midair!

Why did these things just appear on their own?!

As I stood there in shock, the gears grew a little bigger, then moved down near my hips. They spun upward on either side of me, my hair passing through the holes in the middle of each. Once the gears were up above my ears, the holes in the middles shrank.

"Oh, my. Annie, that hairstyle is so cute!"

Wha...?

Hesitantly, I reached up and felt my hair.

Ooh, it's tied up nice and neatly...

In no time at all, I was sporting twintails.

My hair was thin but there was a lot of it, so normal ribbons and hair ties slipped right out if I moved around. That was all the more true when helping out around the restaurant. Normally I tied it up behind my back. But now, my hair was firmly held in place by the gears. It didn't seem at all like it would come loose, even when I touched it. Apparently the gears on both sides of my head were fixed in place.

[—Solution confirmed.

—Status: Twintails.]

I-it *was* true that my hair wasn't getting in the way anymore.

It's better, but what was that just now?! My skill fixed the problem that I was thinking about?!

My skill is just way too mysterious... I mean, it's even talking like it's perfectly normal!

Umm, I guess should I say thanks for now?

[—Crown Gear: Gratitude has been accepted.]

“Been accepted”...? What is this, a government office?!

“Hey! Is my meat still not ready?!”

“Ah, I'm coming!”

I'd been thrown off because of the sudden change in hairstyle, but the customer's demand got the gears in my brain moving again.

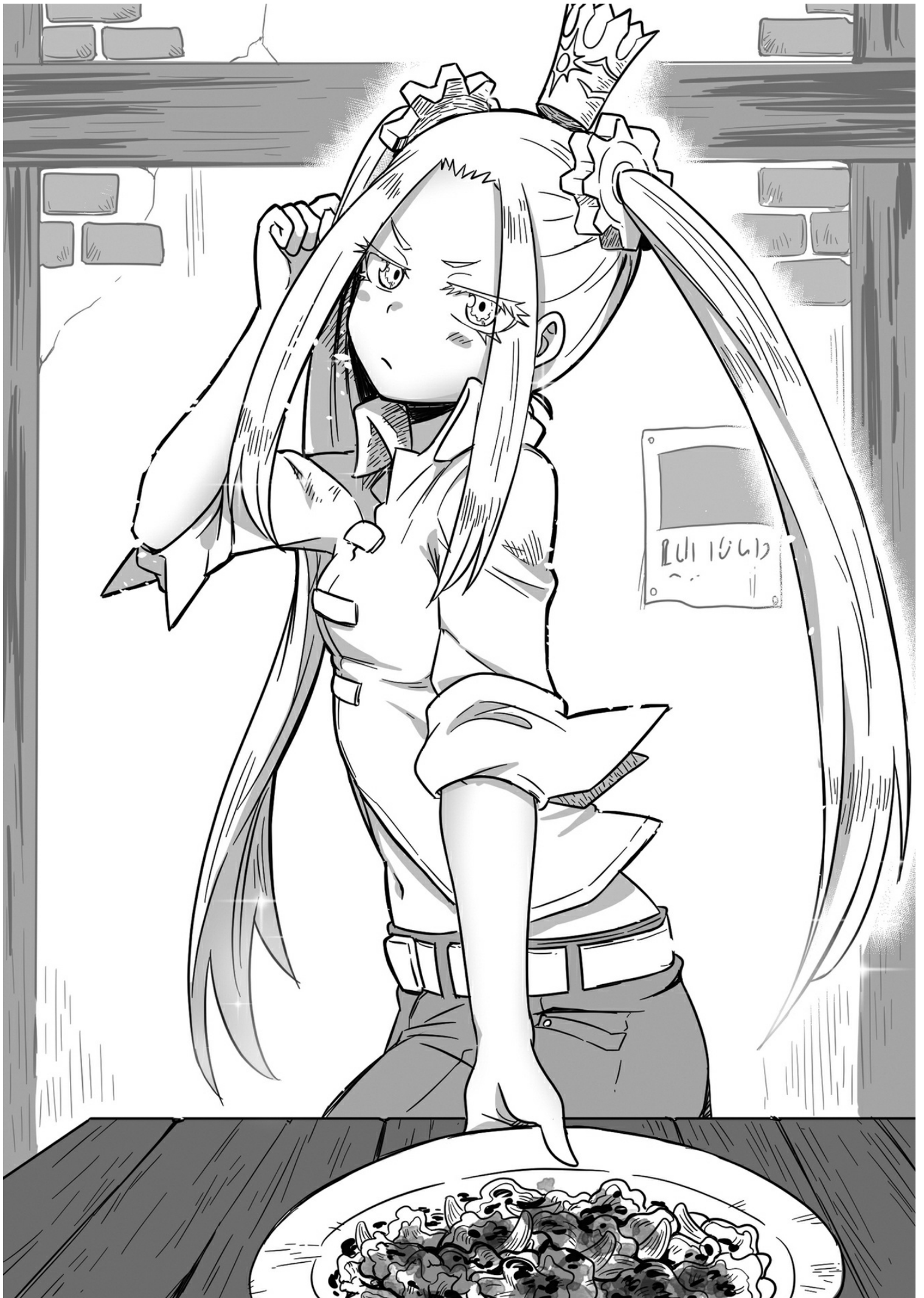
“Ah, that's the stuff! This is really tasty! Hey, little miss, that hairstyle really suits you!”

“Oh, t-thanks...”

Having thin hair means I can't change up my style much, so his praise really did make me happy. More than that, though, I mostly felt embarrassed.

I kept on helping out around the restaurant throughout the day until just

before closing time, getting teased about the crown above my head and my new hairstyle all the while.



After closing, I explained to Pryce that I wouldn't be able to help out around the shop much anymore. He said, "Young miss, you caaaaan't!" but Dad talked him through it.

Dad also pressed the point to me that he let me help out today thanks to the way things went, but for Pryce's sake, it was best that I didn't help out *too* much. Apparently, Pryce wanted a shop of his own someday. It was true that he'd at least need to get his act together enough that a peak rush like that wouldn't do him in.

I kept the twintails, by the way. My hair always hung down behind me before, but I liked the feeling of nothing covering my neck.

That may have been the first time I actually appreciated this power. Though I did wonder how it was going to look, coming in with a hairstyle skill when everyone else was all *bang, bang!* with their magic.

Back in my room, I took the crown off again and gave it a look. There was no mistaking it: my parents' treasures had somehow become absorbed into this gear. The red gemstone and transparent material were just too familiar to be anything else.

"Can they... be separated?"

[—Analyzing.

—Due to conceptual link, physical separation has been judged impossible.]

This little one's getting aaaall chatty again...

The transparent plate (?) that reminded me of the analyze card floated before my eyes, with the words "Separation impossible" written on it. It had also said "Status: Twintails" on it earlier, but it didn't seem like my parents or the customers could see that. Was it some sort of magic only I could see? And this voice ringing in my head was the same as the one from the analyze card. Now that I calmed down and listened, I noticed it sounded like a girl's voice.

"...I've got a question. Are you my skill?"

I felt a little strange talking to a crown, but for now I figured I may as well give it a shot.

[—Explaining.

This unit, “Crown Gear,” was created through the synchronization of a unique skill and items. The skill Gearcraft Lv. 1 is reflected in the results of this union.]

Um, the wording there is a little complex, so I don’t quite get it...

“In other words, part of you was made by my skill, right?”

[—Affirmative.

An exemplary answer.]

Thanks for the praise.

“I don’t really get the whole item synchronization thing, but how exactly did you get stuck together?”

[—Explaining.

—Due to unique conditions, synchronization entered the realm of possibility, and permission was granted.]

“Permission? Who gave you that?”

[—Anti Kythera.]

“Wait, it’s because of me?! I don’t remember that at all!”

[—Permission was granted the previous night.]

“L-like how?”

[—“You’re so loud... just do whatever you want...” was the response received.]

“Hey, hold on!!”

It’s only a vague recollection, but I actually do remember that!

The night before, I dreamed I was being bombarded by an annoying question like, “Impossible, impossible, what should I do?” ... And then I got really annoyed and just yelled at it to do whatever, I think... But that had just been a dream.

So that was totally just me talking in my sleep, wasn’t it?!

“Aaaaagh, that’s ridiculous...! Hey, wait, are you... like... sentient? You’re

talking really fluently...”

[—Explaining.

The unique skill Gearcraft cannot be analyzed, but the item effect “analyzer” was able to open a channel with the unique skill via the item effect “item storage.” Under a request from the unique skill, a synchroshift was carried out. The analysis channel formed within the storage at that time possessed a skill assistance ability, and vocalization of text is possible via the analyzer.]

I-I see... I pretty much didn't get any of that...

In other words... three elements that shouldn't have gone together were all combined and ended up like this...?

“...! Right, the item storage from the dimension stone! Can you put things away and pull them out?”

[—Confirmed.

—Core functions of each component have not been lost.

—Please specify a corresponding item.]

“Huh? Um, hold on a second...”

That came out of nowhere... Then, then...

“Then, my bed. Heh, just kidding...”

There's no way it could put away something that big, right?

[—Ready.

—Carrying out given order.]

“Huh?”

Vwrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

Gah! A golden gear just popped up out of nowhere in my room! And it's huge...!

That ring shape with the teeth coming off it looked like the one from yesterday, but this was *way* bigger.

The hole in the middle must've been as wide as I am tall!

The angle of the massive gear slowly shifted, and it moved until it was hovering over my bed. W-what was going to happen?

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

Like some odd game of ring toss, the gear descended upon my bed.

...It's gone. My bed just disappeared... no way!

Right now, there was just the massive gear, which had fallen to the floor where my bed had been.

[—Storage complete.]

“...”

Huh...? I-it really fit...

So if I ring toss my gear over something, it'll disappear completely...

[—Explaining.

—Due to dimensional shift, no substance has been lost.

—In order to withdraw, please designate an item.]

“Oh, ah, then... ‘Bed.’”

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

The gargantuan gear rose up off the floor. Then, in the next instant...

Kabaaaaaam!!!!

“Gwaaaaaaaah!!”

H-hey! You just dropped my bed from about as high up as I am tall!! And this is the second floor, you idiot!! If you do that...!

“Anti!! What happened?! What was that noise just now?!!”

“Are you alright, Annie?!”

See!? Both of them just came running!

“S-sorry! I'm fine! I'm totally alright!”

“I se— Hey, what's that giant gear?”

“My, it sure is big, isn’t it?”

Afterwards, I apologized, giving them a full explanation of what happened with the item storage and my bed. In response, I got, “Wow, amazing! It’ll store something that big?!” Give me a break... this is going to be the death of me.

“...Hey, the next time you bring something out, do it so it’s touching the floor.”

[—Order accepted.

—Crown Gear offers an apology.]

“...Apology accepted.”

The Gears Start to Move

Anti Kythera, 15 years old, here. Today, I've come to the outskirts of Cardiff to test out what I can do with my skill.

By the way, the crown spinning above my head is embarrassing, but apparently I can't put it away. According to the headgear itself, [Storage of the integrated gemstone entity has been judged impossible.]

I thought I could put it in my pocket when I'm out and about, but whenever I addressed it, zip, it was back over my head. No idea why. I finally just gave up. So it just spins away up there, even when I'm bathing or asleep.

When I asked how much stuff the item storage would hold, the response I got back was [—Unknown.] What do you mean, "unknown"?! At the very least, it seemed like it could hold a whole lot more than I had expected. I also asked Dad how long those 15 boxed lunches he'd stowed in there lasted before they started to go bad. All I got back was, "There's no way I'd leave any of Sola's boxed lunches just laying around!" Apparently he didn't wreck his stomach in the process, but considering Dad's iron gut, that didn't really give me much to go on.

Apparently those high-end dimension stones they use in item bags actually slow down time. But I'd still need to test that out for mine...

I needed somewhere I could be alone, so I ended up at the site of the old mine on the outskirts of town.

No particularly strong monsters usually showed up around here, but there were all sorts of animals living in the forest. It wasn't the sort of place for the only daughter of a pair of restaurant owners to be hanging out. It was just that the old mine was the only place to practice with my gears without people around. Dad's old workplace was surrounded by rugged rocks, and the ground was covered in sand. The area around the mine was blocked off, so there shouldn't be any monsters wandering in, either.

And so, once again sporting my new twintails, I brought out my gears and started experimenting.

“Hmm, looks like this is about as big as I can get the gears to go, huh?”

[—Affirmative.

—Analysis reveals gear size to be limited by current skill level.]

“But wasn’t the one that picked my bed up way bigger?”

[—Storage deployment span determined to be dependent on corresponding item.]

“Hmm, I’m not sure how I feel about that...”

Over these past few days, I’d grown pretty accustomed to talking to Crown Gear. Apparently it could read my thoughts, but when there was nobody around like right now, I didn’t see a point in not just speaking aloud.

“Hey, Crown. If my Gearcraft level goes up, then could I make bigger gears?”

[—Explaining.

—Due to restricted status, information for analysis is limited.

—Prediction that effect would be had on volume, rotational speed, and form.]

“Rotational speed and form? I see...”

I called forth a small gear. I seemed to still have an upper limit on how many larger gears I could make, but apparently I could summon (?) quite a few small ones.

I pictured a sharp blade in my mind’s eye and began sharpening the teeth of the gear.

Ka-ching.

Alright, that worked well!

“Crown, make it spin as fast as you can!”

[—Ready.]

VRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!

Ooh!! Amazing! It’s spinning so fast that I can’t even see the teeth! It’s like it’s just a ring...

It'd be pretty nasty to be hit by this, right?

I picked up a nearby rock and chucked it at my rapidly spinning gear.

Toss.

Baaaaaaang!!!

“Gyaaaaaaah!!!”

[—Warning: Action not recommended.]

Could you warn me a little sooner? The shrapnel from the rock almost hit my face!!

“Gaaaah... B-but this seems like it'd make a good weapon, right?!”

If I could land a hit, it would definitely cause some real damage.

“Ummm, how do I throw this thing...?”

VRRRRRRRRRRRR...

I-it's too scary to touch it...

“T-that's it! If I could control it and make it fly without touching it...!”

When I practiced yesterday, I was able to make the small gears fly around pretty freely. If I did the same with this...

Creep, creep, creeeeeeeep.

“I-I can't make it zoom around?! Why?!”

[—Analysis complete.

—Current skill level judged to be insufficient for moving gears spinning at high rotational speed.

—Fixated in place depending on inertia.]

“Aw, man!”

So I'd have to either leave it somewhere or move it real slowly...

That may work as a trap, but it won't serve as a weapon...

But I want to be able to do magical attacks! A big, flashy one-shot thing, like *bang!...*

“Ah, that’s it.”

I remembered a few days ago, when my bed was dropped onto my bedroom floor.

My item storage seemed to have plenty of room to spare. If I put some heavy rocks in there and then dropped them, that’d serve as an attack, right?

“Hey, Crown, you dropped my bed before, right?”

[—Acknowledged. Crown Gear offers an apology.]

“Don’t worry about that. Could that be used as an attack?”

I found a perfect-looking cluster of rocks around the edge of the mine.

“Crown! Store those rocks!”

[—Ready.]

Vrrrrrrrrrrrr!

The massive gear suddenly appeared, and in no time at all, the rocks had disappeared.

Alright, now to lift the gear up...

“Bring out the rocks!”

Kwa-BOOOOOOOOM!!!

Ooooh! That was a nice heavy hit!

Being able to change where I bring it out would give me an advantage, right?! First, though, I’ve gotta gather up some more big rocks!

“This would work as an attack, yeah?!”

[—Analysis complete.

—Current actions acknowledged as an attack.

—Shall an attack name be registered?]

“Huh, what...? Okay, how about... uh, ‘Stone Stomp’?”

[—Attack name “Stone Stomp” registered.

—When attack name is input, it shall be activated upon target surface.]

“Ah, right. So just to confirm, what’s the difference between saying that and ‘Rock’?”

[—Explaining.

—In the case of “Stone Stomp,” target will be analyzed, and rock will be released from above.

—In the case of “Rock,” the rock will be released while making contact with the ground.]

...The whole incident with the bed left you with some real trauma, huh...?

Afterwards, I gathered up a nice supply of big rocks, then left the mine behind.

The Bear and the Runts

Hey, wait, isn't it pretty amazing that there's still a bunch of room in my item storage? I mean, I stored at least 10 boulders in there. Well, not that I expect to attack anything, though.

Last evening, Mom asked if I could put the whole cupboard in there since it was getting in the way of her cleaning. I timidly did so, only to find that there was *still* room to spare.

...There's no way all this would fit in the item bag the school had. Now that I think about it, just how is an item bag made from a dimension stone, anyway? Well, in my case it got embedded in a talking crown, so it's not like that's ever going to matter for me...

At any rate, it's really handy to be able to store that much stuff when you're in the process of moving. As an aside, I still hadn't tested the difference in time inside and outside of item storage. I mean, it'd take some serious courage to put a boxed lunch in there and investigate as it rots. But it should be fine if I eat it quick, right?

My preparations for heading to Donius were steadily moving along. I'd thrown towels and other daily necessities and the like into my gear, and more or less had a grasp on my skill's quirks. There may have been a limit to the number of big gears I could summon, but I could make quite a few small ones. The faster they rotated, the less quickly I could move them. And also, I could fix them in place.

It didn't really stand out when compared to Fire and Wind magic and the like, but it seemed like it could do a lot of stuff depending on how creative you got. I could put my hair up in twintails in an instant, and use it to scramble eggs. This morning, I had one of my gears spin in the bottom of a large cup and threw in some vegetables to make a smoothie. It was pretty tasty, too...

Seriously, what the heck am I doing?

Things were strangely noisy when I returned to Cardiff after my secret training at the mine.

A number of merchants and residents had gathered and were talking with gatekeepers, who were clad in leather armor. I spotted a gatekeeper who frequented our restaurant.

“What’s going on, old-timer?”

“Where were you, Annie?!”

“Huh? Um, I was just out at the old mine for a bit...”

“I guess that place should still be fine... But for the time being, you shouldn’t go out of town.”

“Did something happen?”

“The merchants said that they saw a bergbear on their way here.”

“A b-b-b-bergbear?!”

Wolves and goblins were spotted deep in the woods around here now and again, but a bergbear was FAR more dangerous than them. The monster known as a bergbear was a type of bear with cross marks all over its stomach. If a human took a hit from its claws, they’d find themselves on a one-way journey to the afterlife in no time at all.

“Those merchants weren’t attacked. Still, they said there was a big one in the forest off the side of the highway about 400 mel from here. They kicked their horses up as fast as they could go and fled in a panic...”

“Oh, man... that’s right nearby, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s been a real uproar around here for a while now. We’re going to be closing the gate earlier than usual today. And there’s no going outside tonight, no matter what.”

“G-got it.”

This was no joke. As the single daughter of a restaurant, unable to even use proper magic, there was no way I could beat a bear. Fortunately, though, the joined log wall surrounding Cardiff was pretty dang impressive for such a small town. As long as the gate was closed, we’d definitely be safe at night. Like it said in my school textbook, monsters hid in the forest during the day and would only very rarely approach a town. It was nighttime that was scary. When it grew dark

they'd become active and leave the forest, coming right up to the edge of town. There were a ton of scars left on the walls of Cardiff by monsters, some of them still quite fresh.

"I seriously don't want to croak before I even accomplish anything..."

The gatekeepers mused over whether to take the intermediary guild's horse over to Donius to put in an extermination request. Looks like my special training for tomorrow will have to be postponed...

I left the gate behind me and headed into town.

It seemed like everyone had already heard about the bergbear, since they were all talking about it. I don't think I'd heard the town this noisy for at least four years, back during the incident with the forest wolves.

"Being under lockdown for more than a few days may mean the restaurant's shipments can't come in..."

I guess my thoughts were pretty laid-back compared to the people around me...

"There's no way you could ever defeat a bergbear, you dummy!"

"Shut up! You never know until you try!"

"Hey, come on, cut it out, alright?"

I knew the voices of the kids behind the nearby house all too well. I sighed, walking toward the source of the commotion.



“You could never beat it with that wooden sword!”

“Gah, what are you doing?!”

“Hey, don’t fight, okay?”

Toss. Clatter, clatter.

Ah... looks like his favorite sword ended up on the roof.

Pitiful hero, you are now unarmed.

...What am I thinking? I should go break up that fight.

“Hey!!!!!”

“Gah!!!” all three of them yelled out at once.

“Hmph, you need to stop fighting. Ana has been telling you to cut it out, too, right?”

“B-but this loser’s saying he can beat the bergbear.”

“Don’t call your friend a loser. Yuuta is—”

“How dare you do that to a hero’s blade, you jerk?!”

Slap!

“Owww!”

“Not ‘you jerk.’ Logg.”

This trio of runts — Ana, Logg, and Yuuta — were famous around the neighborhood. I guess technically I’m still kind of a runt myself, but it’s especially fitting for these three. Ana was a meek red-haired girl. Logg was plump and looked like a bit of a rich kid. And then there was Yuuta, who was never without his “hero’s blade.”

“Logg! You didn’t have to go and throw it up on the roof, did you? Don’t you feel sorry for him?”

“Hmph! That weapon would just be a toy against a bergbear! He might as well not have a weapon at all!”

“You bastard!”

“Don’t call me a ‘bastard,’ you idiot!”

Slap!

“Ow!”

“Are you alright?”

Ana, you’re spoiling these brats by being so nice to them. You need to find some better friends than this little hero wannabe.

“T-this is nothing for a hero!”

“Hmmm, so should I give you another, then?”

“Gah!”

“Haha, see! You can’t even beat flashy ol’ Anti, so how do you expect to beat a bergbear?!”

“Don’t call me ‘flashy ol’ Anti,’ fatty.”

“Fatty?! Ugh...”

Logg put his hands on his stomach, looking depressed.

“Haaah... Anyway, you’d better go borrow a ladder from the old guy across the street.”

“Ugh...”

“What is it?”

“Um, you see, Logg and Yuuta were playing before, and Logg knocked his sword up on the roof with a plank. So then...”

“Ana, don’t say— grmph!”

I put my hand over Yuuta’s mouth.

“And then?”

“We had the old man from across the street get it for us, and he was super mad!”

I see... So they had a previous offense, huh...?

Yuuta, I’m pretty sure you’re already disqualified as a hero.

“I-I wasn’t scared of that old guy!”

“Yuuta was seriously about to break down sobbing!”

“U-ugh...”

You should probably give him a break, Ana...

The old man with the ladder must’ve seriously chewed them out, judging by the look on Yuuta’s face. They should be playing someplace more open, then... If they keep flailing toy swords around back here, then of course they’ll end up ripping up flower beds and flinging them up onto roofs...

I glanced up at the roof, but I couldn’t see the wooden toy sword at all. It must have gotten pretty far up there.

Hmm, if I could at least see it, I could use a pole or something to knock it down... And I’ve had my own bad experiences with the old man with the ladder, so I didn’t want to go talk to him. A way to climb up without a ladder... that’s it!

“Hey, I’ll use a little magic trick to go get it.”

“A magic trick?” Ana repeated, tilting her head.

“Since when can you do magic tricks?”

“Hey, show me some respect!”

Hmph, I’m Anti the Great, the world’s top Gearcraft user!

...Ugh, well, technically I’m the world’s *only* Gearcraft user...

“C-can you really get the sword back?”

“...Well, just watch.”

Since I already know I can make lots of small gears and fix them in place...

Crown, summon gears in the form of a staircase.

[—Ready.

—Deploying in correspondence with the situation.]

Fwoosh, fwoosh, fwoosh fwoosh.

“Wow!” all three of the runts exclaimed.

A multitude of metal discs appeared before my eyes. The teeth soon grew into them, finishing off my pretty orange-gold gears.

They spun around steadily.

“What’s that?!”

“So cute!”

Cute? I don’t quite get that from them...

My gears steadily rose up. One stopped at a certain height, while the next rose up a little higher before stopping...

“Alright, it’s done!”

“A-amazing!”

I made a gear staircase!

Thankfully, we were right behind the building, so we were probably well out of sight.

...Hey, wait, the gears are spinning. How am I supposed to climb that?!

“Stop.”

All of the gears stopped moving.

“Wow!”

“Miss Ann, you can do stuff like this...?”

“What a shock...”

Right, it is shocking, isn’t it? I never imagined I’d be able to do something like this just a few days prior.

I had more fantastical dreams about magic back then, *sniffle*...

“Hup!”

Wobble.

I-it seemed to have some give. Did I fix them in place properly...? I wasn’t in for a sudden fall, was I? It would be no joke, plunging to my death in a place like this.

“Alright!”

O-ooh, I got on top of it! But it really did seem to be reacting strangely.

The gears themselves were rigid, but it felt like the air beneath them had some give. It was like they were on top of a cushion, making for a bit of a tricky climb.

I ended up having to climb step by step, slowly and steadily.

Sproing-oing-oing-oing.

Gah, that was a surprise!

As I lifted my foot from the “step” behind me, the gear quaked up and down. It looked like it was connected to the ground by an invisible spring.

Wait, ah, that’s scary! I shouldn’t be looking down! S-scary! My footholds are so small, it’s frightening!

I climbed up until I was level with the roof, panicking and trembling internally all the while Ah, there it is, the hero’s blade... stupid little pointy stick... If you could’ve jutted out just a little...

Now to go down and... Ooh, that’s scary...

Huff, puff...

I came down real, reeeeeeeal slowly, seriously wearing myself out in the process. Muscles that I normally never used were aching. In my heart, I swore to myself that I’d never do this again.

“Here. Try to take better care of it from now on.”

“T-thanks!”

“You’re amazing, Miss Ann!!”

“What are all those things...?”

Fwoosh!

Logg tried to touch one of the hovering gears, so I swept them away hurriedly.

“Wow, they disappeared!”

“A-alright, that’s the end of my magic trick!”

“Huh? Come on, do more!”

“No can do. Oh, yeah, you all probably already know, but you can’t go outside tonight, alright? If you do, the bergbear will eat you.”

“I won’t get eaten! I’m gonna beat it!”

“I’m telling you, there’s no way...”

After reminding the three runts not to wander outside, I headed home.

There weren’t as many customers in the restaurant as usual, and the ones we did have were all discussing the bergbear. I asked my parents what would happen if this went on long enough to affect our stock. They just said they’d deal with that when it happened. I guess that made sense.

I looked out beyond the borders of our uneasy town. The sun would set soon.

Nobody realized that in the midst of that sunset, there were children having a secret conversation.

“With this... as long as I have this, I can defeat the bergbear...”

“What are you doing, Yuuta?”

“Gah, Ana! Why are you here?”

“Because you left your house, even though it’ll be dark out soon.”

“Hmph, what, do you think you can beat the bergbear or something?”

“Logg! You’re here, too?!”

“Is there a problem with that, you fake hero?!”

“I’m not a fake!”

“Cut it out! Miss Ann told us not to fight, remember?!”

“Look at this!”

“...? What is it?”

“A Fire magic stone!”

“I’ve seen one of those before!” Ana said. “It’s that thing from the kitchen, right?!”

“Right! That old-timer, the gatekeeper, said the monsters from the forest won’t come near flames!”

“Y-you dummy, you won’t beat it like that.”

“Shut up! As long as I have this and my hero’s blade, I’m invincible!”

“But the gate’s already closed, right?”

“It’ll be fine. They close the irrigation gate last! We’re small enough to get out that way!”

“H-hey, are you actually going? Cut it out! Our moms and everyone will get angry with us!”

“Shut up! I’m not a wimp like you!”

“W-what’d you say?!”

“I’m a hero! Just watch! I’m going!”

“Yuuta, wait! I’m coming, too! Me, too!”

“Hey, hold on, you two!”

.....

“I-I’ve got nothing to do with this. I tried to stop them, so it’s not my fault...”

Night fell fast, and waited for no one.

Bang! Bang, bang! ...Bang!

“...?!”

I woke up to some sort of banging sound.

Bang! Ba-bang!

“Huh...? My door...?”

What do you want at this time of night?! Our restaurant doesn’t even serve dinner! Is this the first customer we’ve had in a while who doesn’t know that...?

I still wasn’t fully awake. I could hear someone shouting something, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. Dad and Mom must be up now, too.

Before long, I heard the sound of a door opening. It must’ve been Dad who

opened it. Hopefully this customer isn't too much trouble...

Ugh, I still can't understand what they're shouting. And it's so noisy. Give me a break...

...Thud, thud, thud.

That was the sound of someone climbing the stairs. From the sound of those footsteps, it had to be Dad.

The footsteps stopped, and a voice called out from the other side of the door.

"...Anti, are you up?"

"I am now. Did somebody stop by?"

"He's still here. Logg, I mean."

"Logg...?"

What's he doing here at a time like this?

"Apparently he's got something to talk to you about."

"Me?"

"Sorry, but could you come downstairs and see what he wants?"

"What does he want, in the middle of the night...?"

"I wasn't happy about it, either. But he started crying and going 'Please, please!' He sounded really desperate."

...? What's going on? Usually that runt is super arrogant. Is it something urgent?

Hmph, guess I've got no choice. I'll give him a chance to tell me what he wants, then give him a scolding.

Dad and I went down to the first floor and entered into the restaurant proper. Mom and Logg were waiting there. Dad wasn't kidding. Logg really had the waterworks going.

"Hey! Did you and Yuuta fight again or—"

"Antiiiiii...!!!"

The moment our eyes met, Logg ran over to me as fast as he could and hugged both my legs.

I-I can't move... And he's seriously sobbing. It's not normal for him to be crying this much. But just what exactly happened?

I tried to keep my tone as calm as possible. "Okay, we'll forget how late it is for now... So, what happened?"

Logg's sobbing slowed a bit, and he looked up at my face with a *sniff, sniff*.

"...went..."

"Hmm?"

"Yu... went..."

"Hey, Logg, you're a man, right? Speak up."

Tears spilled from Logg's eyes. What he said next caused my heart to skip a beat.

"Yuuta and... Ana... they... left... to... defeat... the bergbear...!"

.....

You...

You're messing with me, right...?

If they do that, they'll die, right...?

Clutch!

I grabbed Log by his collar and pulled him closer as hard as I could.

"You mean outside?"

"Eep!"

"Did they go outside?"

"Y-yeah..."

"You... why didn't you stop them?! Don't you get it?! This is no joke!! You know what'll happen if kids go outside now, right?!!!" I pressed him with a tone I would normally never even think of using with a visitor.

Logg was a good bit younger than I was, but that didn't matter right now. Despite the angry look on my face and his trembling, he forced the words out.

"I tried! I tried to stop them! But they didn't listen, and Yuuta... he was all, 'I'm not a fake!' He said he'd beat it... with a Fire magic stone from the kitchen... then he and Ana ran off!!"

"Damn! What about their parents!! Do they know?!!!"

"Things were real noisy... at their houses... so it's probably... already out... that they're gone... I saw that... from up in my room! I was scared, but... I was... I was too scared to tell their parents!"

"You idiot... So then why did you come to me...?"

He was just using a roundabout approach...

"When was this?"

"A-about 3 hors ago."

"The gate was already closed by then, wasn't it?"

"They said... the irrigation gate... was open..."

Damn...! That was some knowledge they would've been better off without...

"This is bad..."

"I'll alert the gatekeepers. Sola, go wake up the neighbors, and let Yuuta and Ana's families know what's going on."

"I'm on it."

"Dad...! I'm coming, too!"

"Me, too...!"

"You two wouldn't be able to do anything!"

"Would *you* be able to just sit and wait at home, Dad?!"

"...Good point."

"Logg! Run like your life depends on it!"

"Y-yeah!!"

The white light of the moon pierced through the deep darkness as the three of us ran to the place where the gatekeepers were on night watch. Logg fell behind, but he ran as hard as he could to keep up.

Of the two people on night watch, one of them was that familiar old-timer.

“Hey, what’s going on, Derek? Annie, and Logg...? What’s up? What are the kids doing with you?”

“Torne, two kids went outside the town walls. Yuuta and Ana.”

“Please... tell me this is a joke, Derek...”

The old-timer’s shoulders sank weakly when he heard Dad’s words. They’ve known each other for ages, so he already knew it wasn’t a joke just from Dad’s tone.

“But the gate was closed! Nobody left!”

“They apparently used the irrigation gate. Logg heard them say so.”

“Damn it!! Konobo, go get everyone from the station! And some oil! We’re mounting a search!!”

“R-right!!”

The other man, a young guy wearing leather armor, took off running.

The number of voices and flames in the dark town behind us were growing.

Cardiff was a small town. The remains of the former village lay before the gates to town, and among those who were in the know, rumors spread fast. It wouldn’t be long before everyone knew the kids were missing.

As the moonlit town grew steadily noisier, an awful, inexpressible feeling welled up inside me.

It was then that it happened.

...Rooooooar...

“Stop...! Just please make it stop... I haven’t even had a drink today...” the old-timer said, as if he was pleading with the darkness.

“...The search has been called off.”

...Huh?

“Tell me why,” Dad said, not wasting any words.

“We’d need to use fire for the search.”

So what? Is that reason enough to just abandon children to their fate?

“What’s the matter with that?”

“If we were just talking wolves or something, they’d run from the flames. But this thing’s different. Fire would just attract him. We’d end up getting eaten before we could ever find Yuuta and Ana, without a doubt.”

“But...”

“So that’s reason enough?!” I shouted out without thinking. “That’s a good enough reason?! There’s two kids! We know they’re out there, and we’re just going to leave the gate closed and go on like nothing’s wrong?! Old-timer! You’re a gatekeeper, aren’t you?! Are you really okay with this?!” I hounded, tears in my eyes.

“That’s not the only danger! The fire would lead it to the village... If we keep the gate closed, we could keep from provoking it. But if people come or go, it’ll learn that there’s food here. And a bergbear *never* leaves a place where there’s food to be had. It would settle down here and target us relentlessly... If that happened, it wouldn’t just be trade that dries up. We wouldn’t be able to travel to the adventurer’s guild. The town would die...”

“So... so that’s enough to—”

Dad’s hand shot out, motioning for me to be silent.

“What do you intend to do?”

“Searching the forest would just provoke it. Besides, we’re weaklings. If we ran into it, we’d just get eaten. We’ll send an envoy to Donius. That roar just now came from the small mountain in the depths of the forest. It should still be far enough from the highway that we can slip by it.”

“Will we be able to send out a search when morning comes?”

“...That’d be difficult. The best armor we’ve got in this town is two partial bits

of orc leather armor. I can't tell my subordinates to head off towards the threat of certain death. We'll just have to pray that Yuuta and Ana can stay hidden until an adventurer arrives from Donius." The old-timer choked back tears. It was true that the thought of going out with Dad to search for them made me want to call it quits. But even so, we wouldn't ever accomplish anything if we just sat around waiting. Even if we just looked around a bit nearby, there was a chance we could get lucky and find them.

"Anti, Logg, go back home."

"But...!"

"Go back!"

I could tell by the look on Dad's face that he was serious, so I silently took Logg's hand and walked quickly back in the direction of our house.

"M-Miss Anti..."

If we used fire, it would endanger the town...

But, the moon's so bright tonight. The old-timer and his group are by the gate, so I can't get out there. Isn't there anywhere to slip out past the walls...?

"That's it...!"

"Miss Anti...?"

I have to get there as soon as possible!

I let go of Logg's hand and took off running.

"Miss Anti! Where are you going?!"

“Ready: Over”

The irrigation gate referred to an aqueduct used to carry water to the fields. It may have been called a “gate,” but it was just a reinforced stream with a simple hanging door that was opened by pulley. Right now there was a wooden latch on it, high enough up that children couldn’t reach it. Yuuta and Ana must have slipped out before it was secured.

So, full disclosure. I, Anti Kythera, am built like a kid.... W-Well, no, let’s say I have a “youthful physique.” I’m about a head shorter than everyone else in my class. And as for my chest, well... it’ll grow in time. My rear... isn’t large.

Uuuuugh.

Grr, in other words, I could fit through the irrigation gate!

Sob, sob, sob...

T-this is no time to be standing around acting like an idiot!

I removed the latch and spun the pulley. With a *plunk* sound, a small hole opened up in the wall.

Well, there was no avoiding getting wet at this point.

My hair was still done up with my gears, so it wouldn’t get caught on anything.

“Hup...!”

My back ended up getting soaked, but I made it through relatively easily.

Once I passed through, I felt a crushing anxiety in my chest...

“Grr, that idiotic hero! Once I find them, I’ll give him a real thrashing, and—?”

I noticed something was out of sorts as soon as my gaze fell upon the forest.

A light was spreading a little ways off, partway up the small mountain.

“It’s... burning...”

The mountain was ablaze.

We called it a small mountain, but people from the big city would probably

just say it's a hill. Though, because of how dense the forest is, it gives the impression of being a proper mountain. Of course, there were monsters there, so that was a place I'd normally never go.

For the people of Cardiff, the northwest forest and small mountain were the most frightening places around. And now, one of them was burning. Why was that happening? Was somebody carrying a torch or something? No, but it was too soon for a search to get that far out... And there's no way they'd go all the way to the middle of the mountain like that, right?

I mean, the bergbear... the bergbear?

"I tried! I tried to stop them! But they didn't listen, and Yuuta... he was all, 'I'm not a fake!' He said he'd beat it... with a Fire magic stone from the kitchen... then he and Ana ran off!!"

"...He said he'd beat it with a Fire magic stone."

Gah... so this is what it feels like when all the color drains from your face...

If our little "hero" started that fire... then this is the worst-case scenario. It would mean he's already encountered the monster...

Agh, that idiot! That dumb idiot!

Before I realized it, I had broken out running like a fool myself. When I got my wits about me, I was surrounded by forest. Amazing, I don't even remember that...

I could hear my lungs go *thump, thump, thump*. Ah, no wait, that's not my lungs... it's my heart!

Ah, if I swing my arms up like this, my body floats up.

Fwa-thud, whack.

I took a serious spill. Did I get caught on a root?

It's so far off... What's that burning, and why won't it stop? And why can't I feel my legs from the knees down?

Haha, huh? Am I having a panic attack?

"C-Crown, analyze the fire."

[--Analysis complete.

--2 kel mels ahead.

--Conflagration range: Average diameter of approximately 8 mel.

--Currently expanding.]

Oh, man. 8 mel? That's bigger than our house. I've got to hurry.

That monstrous bear, and the fire... Those two runts were building up a pretty nasty tab.

It was no good. It wasn't just my knees: my whole body was laughing at the idea.

What should I do? What *can* I do?

I wanted to fly along like *whoosh*, like you could in a carriage. If only I had wheels...

"Crown, attach gears to my feet."

[--Order analysis complete.

--Concept judged to be to increase movement speed.

--Action unadvised, due to terrain.]

"Just shut up and do it, right here."

Two gears appeared beneath each of my ankles. I fixed the gears in place.

"Crown, make them spin."

[--Action unadvised.]

"Make them spin."

[--Action unadvised.]

"Please."

[-- --Ready. Beginning rotation.]

R-r-ruuummmmblllee!!

The gears made an unpleasant sound as they scraped up moss and forest floor.

Ah, see? I'm moving fast, right? The vibration sure is something, though. The ground is really bumpy, I guess.

Ah!

.....

My left shoulder really hurts.

I seriously smacked *right* into a tree.

"How... far... did I... get...?"

[--Analysis complete. 58 mel, 28 celchi.]

"See, that was fast. Let's go again."

[--Dangerous. Unadvised.]

"Let's go again."

[--Dangerous. Unadvised.]

"Now listen here...!!!" My partner may have been trying to protect me from danger, but I flared up. "All I've got going for me is this magic or whatever the heck kind of skill it is!!! So do you think, just because of that, I can just do nothing right now... write the day off, head home, laugh things off... and just keep on living?!"

[---.]

"...Crown, when I saw them earlier today... If I had gotten angrier, like seriously beaten the point into them... then this probably wouldn't have happened. I should've scolded them better! So they couldn't just think I was being a bother! Or that I was just kidding around!" I screamed out into the moonlit forest.

My shouting could've attracted wolves or something, but right now, I didn't give a damn.

"And besides, if I do that... when tomorrow comes, and everything is over with... I'll think, 'Agh, argh, I want to return to last night! I want to go back... and do it all over again!'... right?"

[---.]

“Crown, I won’t always... say stuff like this. Even I’ve... broken a plate... and thought I can just clean it up later, or knocked over the sugar... and said I’ll handle it some other time... so I just sweep it up against the wall. But you know...!” Ugh, why am I yelling this stuff? I’m the only one in this forest. Just me and my skill. “In exchange for those times when I goof off...! For when I’m lazy...! When there’s something that really can’t just be put off for later, I won’t just let it slip on by!!!” I shouted, and shouted, and shouted as loud as I could. “Sometimes... when something’s gotta be done, you can’t just give up because it’s dangerous... or you don’t know what to do... or you tell yourself you can’t do it!!!”

[---.]

“Ugh... T-that’s... now. For me, that time is now. If I don’t do this... then tomorrow I’ll wake up in hell. A hell where I’ll never be able to forgive myself!!”

Everyone would probably forgive me. They wouldn’t blame me for what happened.

But it was something I could never forgive.

“Crown... I’m not the kind of person who can accept comfort. And I’m not some fine, upstanding person worthy of forgiveness. So right now, I can’t let myself give up.”

I was a fool, terrified of that guilt, and so... so...

“Right now, I’m thinking. As fast as I can. I’m 100% willing to do this!”

[---.]

...Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

“You and me, we can do it. Just watch! We went forwards 58 mels in an instant, didn’t we?! That’s no small feat! Just a bit more of a push, Crown!! Right now, you can’t give up... on the potential you’re showing!

Crown! Take me to where that fire’s burning!”

Now, let’s go! My one and only partner!

We’re here now, the both of us!

[--Ready: Over, Anti.

Overwriting entry priority for ordered action.

Self-analysis complete. Standardized conceptions, recomposed.

Pattern frame selected based on past measurements and calculations.

Standing by. --Beginning deployment.]

The Hero's Single Strike

“Hey! Yuuta! Let's head back already!”

“No way! If you wanna head back, then do it on your own!”

A boy and girl walked together through the dark forest. Both hands of the boy walking in front were occupied. In his right, he held a wooden toy sword. In his left, a Fire magic stone meant for use around the house. As a result, he had no hand to offer the girl.

The girl called out to her friend to try to get him to call it quits, having a terribly rough time with the winding roots of the trees all the while.

“Hey, come on, let's go back! They're going to really give it to us if we do this!”

“It'll be fine! If I beat the bergbear, then everyone will be proud of us! And even if I can't beat it, just scaring it away'll be enough!”

“But...!”

“It's fine! I have this Fire magic stone!”

The boy had heard something from one of the customers in a certain restaurant in Cardiff: The monsters of the forest feared fire. That was because beings who could harness it hardly ever came there, and monsters were susceptible to the fear of the unknown. Wolves, for example, would flee.

It would be troublesome if they made it into town, but as long as they were periodically driven away with fire, it never became a problem.

“If I use this to scare away the bergbear, I'll be one step closer to being a hero!”

The boy admired heroes. He'd read of their adventures and legends in picture books.

The Medium of the Sun.

The Chivalrous Thief Kururukan's Journey.

The Legend of the Sealed Spirit of Light.

The characters from those tales all had strong mana and used amazing techniques.

However, it wasn't just their power that the boy admired. All of those protagonists fought to save or protect someone.

The Medium of the Sun sought to protect the land from the star falling upon it.

Kururukan sought to steal a future for poor, needy children.

The Spirit of Light had stopped time for itself in order to heal all people throughout eternity.

The boy wanted to do something like that, to be like them. To give someone a future. To help someone out.

Though he was a child, he realized that was a selfish desire. But if he just sat around town waiting, then what would ever change?! Should he just leave himself to the mercy of the flow of time?! Eating food, sleeping, becoming an adult, finding a job... Is that all his life would be?!

He didn't know. He was still just a kid, so he wasn't sure. But the boy, he wanted to make a change.

"Hey, Yuuta... Look..."

"...!"

The boy felt determination well up in his chest. Ironically, though, it was the girl who spotted it.

"The bergbear..."

There was a round, very large black mass in front of them, moving slightly as it breathed.

Its size was so great that the boy even forgot to inhale. It was like just before a hiccup.

The terror had caused him to go numb, robbing his body of its basic functions.

This is my chance... That was what the boy thought.

Everyone let their guards down when they slept.

If the bergbear hated fire, then if it was suddenly attacked with flame and got all surprised, it might run away.

“Ana, step back.”

“Ah... but...”

He poured mana into the Fire magic stone. That was something even a child could do. With that, the oil on the surface caught fire. It would soon become a fireball, most likely.

There was no turning back now.

“...Hup!”

Tooooooss.

Tmp.

Fwoosh!!

“...”

“...”

The fireball had landed atop the round mountain of fur.

It wasn't moving...?

...That didn't seem right.

At first, it sloooowly lifted its head. Then, it began to get even bigger. Had it been curled up in a ball before? The boy and girl were dumbfounded.

Now that it had gotten up and shifted its posture, it was bigger than a house.

It sluggishly surveyed its surroundings. Was this monster really all that scary?

Everything was terribly silent as its gaze stopped on the burning stone. It seemed that its fur was getting burned.

With its terribly long claws, it grabbed the stone.

Tear, tear, rip!

The flames cast its black fur in an orange light.

Woosh! ...Rustle!

It tossed away the Fire magic stone into the forest.

The boy and girl looked at one another.

It was bright, and there was light coming out of the thicket.

The Fire stone was still burning.

The trunks of the trees were now in full view.

“Grrrrr....”

They were shocked.

There was a monster right now, right before their very eyes, right? Something inhuman, that even the adults were afraid of. A creature that made them close the gates and bolt them.

...Was it alright, taking their eyes off something like that?

They steadily... sloooowly... looked back towards it.

The two of them must have moved perfectly in sync.

It was still quiet all around.

They noticed that the fire off to their side was growing bigger.

The monster's face was illuminated.

It was looking... right at them.

It raised its eyes.

It showed its teeth.

Its white breath was visible.

Ah, it's angry...

“Rooooooooooooooooooar!!!!!”

“Gyaaaaaaah!!!” the boy and the girl screamed out together.

The hero took the girl's hand and ran away, screaming all the while.



Fly, Fly, Fly!

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

The sights of the forest whooshed by me. There wasn't as much shaking as there had been before.

I had numerous small gears fixed to my feet now, and their teeth didn't protrude out as far.

Last evening, when I climbed up to the roof, I set up my gears like a staircase. I had felt a springy elasticity to the footholds just by stepping on them a bit.

When I fixed my gears, it wasn't like they were frozen in space. It was more like the air around it was solidified like rubber, I guess.

And I was pretty sure that right now, that hypothesis was being proven.

Currently, the "wheels" on my feet were set up to absorb the shock.

[--Analysis complete.

--Shock absorption rate: 82 percent.

--Improvement of suspension system advised.]

"Huh?! What's a 'suspension'?! Whatever, I'll let you handle it!"

[--Ready.

--Causing shock absorb effect.

--Extending coil system.]

Clink!

Small gears were added to the ones on my feet. Five gears about as wide as my wrist were lined up in a cylindrical shape. In front of them was a gear the size of my palm. I couldn't feel the shaking at all anymore.

Wherever it contacted the ground, it would either pull back or extend, respectively.

...Amazing.

I never would've imagined I could move through the forest this fast...

I don't think you could do this with any other magic. Not with Fire magic, or Water magic, or Earth magic. Wind magic seems a bit like it could work?

There was a large rock in front of me, acting like a big slope. Could I make it up that?

I leapt into the air with both legs, using the "springs" attached to my feet.

"...! Hup!"

I landed on the rock, almost sliding across its surface before taking off into the air.

It was a long way to the ground... Oof, that's kinda scary.

I saw a tree to one side of me, and reached out with my left hand and the gears on my left foot.

Vrrrrrrrrrrrr!

I took a counterclockwise spiral around the trunk towards the ground.

"Hup!"

Just before reaching the ground, I twisted my body and kicked off with my right leg. I was thrown off to the side, having lost none of my momentum.

I saw a small rock face up ahead, and hit it with a gear on my right hand to get my body back up.

The spinning gears on both of my feet made gentle contact with the ground running by beneath me.

"Ha, haha, ha..."

What the heck was that? This is insane!

I don't know how things turned out like this, but it's completely and utterly amazing!

The ground in the forest was bumpy, and there were fallen leaves all over. The surface was root-covered and corroded, and the elevation past the rocks was all over the place.

This sure wasn't the sort of place your average person could move through easily — hence why we have roads.

Hey, but wait a minit... what does that make me, then? I was magicless up until just recently, so why is it that I'm able to cut through the forest like this, as if I was flying?

I felt like my common sense was crumbling away.

Trees were apparatuses to accelerate. Rocks were launch pads. Huge drop-offs were nothing but shortcuts.

The teeth of my gears dug solidly into the ground.

I had completely forgotten the meaning of the word "stop"!!

There was a fissure in front of me. Actually, I guess maybe it'd be better to call it a cliff. To the side was a rock wall coated in moss.

I plunged towards the wall shoulder-first without hesitation. Normally I would have crashed into it, fallen into the abyss, and that would've been the end of me. But now, I wasn't worried in the least.

The spinning gears on my upper arm and thigh grabbed hold of the wall and pushed me forwards.

It looked at a glance to be about 10 mels to the bottom of the cliff (or whatever you'd call it).

I took a leap, my golden gears kicking up fragments of rock into the air.

The running gears on both my hands and feet roared.

Right now, I had "armor" made of golden gears lined up around my arms and thighs.

Everything that touched them was thrown backwards.

[--Analysis complete.

--Confirming that standard required for order has been achieved.

--Possible to register as standard device.

--Proceed with proper name entry?]

There you go with your tricky words again...

“Whatever, Crown! Why don’t you just come up with something that fits?!”

[--Acceptance confirmed. Converting, calculating...

--Movement device: “Scale Skater” has been configured.]

“Scale Skater?! Hahaha! That sure is something! You kind of suck at naming things, don’t you, Crown?!”

Scale Skater, is it? I’m willing to work with some lame names, but there’s a limit!

[--Crown Gear reports dissatisfaction.]

“Hehe, well, it’s fine. Don’t sulk, okay?!”

Now that I had this thing set up, I’d be there in no time.

Ah, that’s not good. The fire sure has spread...

“How much farther?”

[--Analysis complete. Distance until center of conflagration: 340 meltorte.
326, 312, 298...]

I’d be there soon. It would be dangerous, but I’d already come this far.

Sure, the bergbear might be near the flames, but the same would be true of Yuuta and Ana. If I could just find them first, then I’d likely be fast enough to manage to give it the slip and get them out of here.

I strengthened my resolve and issued orders to my partner.

“Crown, curb our speed. Bring my armor’s spinning to a stop and keep things quiet. And start searching for the two of them.”

[--Ready.

--Deploying search field.]

Crackle, crackle, crackle...

That fire was getting pretty massive. A house or two could probably fit in there...

It took me until I was actually in the area to realize that calling for Yuuta and Ana would probably be a bad idea... There could be a bergbear nearby, after all.

I slowly and quietly moved along, hiding in the shadows of the trees. Right now, I wasn't using my gear wheels.

Ah, it's hot! Gah, looking right at the flames hurts my eyes!

I don't want to even imagine those two kids wrapped up in all this... Though seeing the way this fire is spreading, they may have already run as far as they could.

I didn't know if he really threw it at the bergbear, though. It may have just been wishful thinking, but he could have just dropped the magic stone, and it ignited on its own.

...Tap!

I just kicked something. A minit ago I was zipping through the forest, but look what happens the second I'm walking on my own two feet. How pathetic...

What's this, some chunk that broke off a tree?

"This is...!"

A wooden... sword. Yuuta's hero's blade.

I turned and looked around. I couldn't hear anything around me but the sound of the flames.

Then, I looked down at the ground.

"Crown... this couldn't be..."

[--Comparison complete.

--Conclusion: bear-type monster footprint.]

So... they ran into it.

"Crown! Scale Skater!"

[--Deploying.]

I didn't have time to worry about being noisy. With a *Vrrrrr*, I kicked up the ground.

Those massive footprints gave me an easy trail to follow. If I didn't hurry, then their fates would be sealed.

From behind, I heard the sound of a burnt tree collapsing.

Meeting Mr. Bear

How come things ended up like this?

I was hiding in the shadow of a sort of sunken rock with Ana. She was crying real loud, but I begged her not to, so she was holding back now.

My face was a mess. I was crying without making a sound. I looked like a total wimp.

“N-Ngh...”

“...”

We both held hands.

It was supposed to be pitch black at night, but the light from the fire shining from behind us made the dark sky look a little red.

It’s... it’s because of the Fire magic stone I had.

What... what have I been doing?

I wanted to work hard for something, to be strong and save everyone. That’s what I decided.

But now the mountain was on fire, and I’d made that monster angry, and Ana was so scared...

“Ana, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

I started blubbing again.

Even though she had tears streaming down her face, Ana just gripped my hand back and shook her head, as if to tell me it’s not my fault.

Even though I had done something wrong...

It was just like Logg said. I’m a fake hero. A real hero wouldn’t lose to a monster. And even if I did lose, I shouldn’t be mixing Ana up in it. Plus I dropped my sword...

I was just a kid.

I may have felt real pathetic, but I had to accept that fact. If I didn’t, then I’d

just end up making things even scarier for Ana.

Thud... thud...

The bergbear was walking around. It wasn't all that close, but it wasn't too far either...

I may be a fake hero, but I need to at least protect Ana...!

"Ana... Ana, stay quiet and listen to me."

"Y-yeah...?"

"If we stay here, it'll probably keep circling around. And then, it'll come back."

"O-oh, no..."

Ana teared up again.

"Listen! That's why we've gotta keep going and run away."

"B-but..."

"Ana, I'm sorry... This is all my fault..."

"Yuuta..."

"I'm a fake hero... But even if I'm a fake... I've gotta protect you, even if that's all I can do."

"..."

"So let's make it back. Back to our moms, together. We still have a long way to go, so we've gotta keep going."

"...Mmkay."

I gripped her hand tight.

The town was downhill from here.

Then, the footsteps got the quietest they'd been.

"Let's go!"

"Yeah!"

Zoom! We took off running. It was really scary letting our footsteps be so loud, but we couldn't stop now.

We were definitely gonna make it back!

Rustle, rustle, rustle!

...Thud, thud, thud!

Uh-oh. We were sunk. Even a kid like me knew what was happening.

It had noticed us.

“Rooooooooooooooooooar!”

“Yuuta!”

“Run for it!”

We both ran as fast as we could.

I could hear the trees getting knocked over behind us.

Sloosh!

“Ah!”

“Ana!”

Ana’s hand had come loose from mine as she slipped in the mud and fell down.

“Stand up!”

“...Ow!”

Ana was holding her leg. Oh, no...!

The light from the fire disappeared.

I turned around...

It was right there.

Everything went quiet.

I didn’t have my sword... but I couldn’t run away.

“Rooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooar!!!”

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!” I screamed back.

I was scared, but that wasn’t all.

I wanted to protect Ana. I was no hero. I couldn't do anything but make a big sound by screaming.

And so, I screamed my lungs out.

Its big black arm came swinging down.

I spread my arms out wide like an idiot, not closing my eyes.

.....

.....

...Rrrrrrrrrr...

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!!

...I'm...

...I'm not dead?

Agh, wait, I'm sideways?

Hold on, am I flying? Everything's going by so fast!

It's all just flying by...

Ah, Ana's here, too. She's crying, and she looks confused, too.

I saw a hand and realized we were being held.

"Bwaha! Bwahaha! Bwahahahahahahahaha!!!"

I heard a girl laughing. I knew that voice. And that golden hair, too... She'd just changed up her hairstyle recently.

"I found you!!! I found you, you damn runts...!!!"



How many people out there can say they've run from a bear while carrying two kids? Seriously, you could totally call this a valuable experience, right?

The scenery flew on by around us.

"Roooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooar!!!"

That thing is huuuuuuuge! Seriously, what even is that?!

I thought bears were all little and cute like in picture books! But that thing was the size of a house!

“Crown! Do you have any info about bear monsters rolling around in there?!”

[—Affirmative.

—Initial dungeon monster library present within analyzer skill foundation.]

From the dungeon Dad cleared...?! That’s right... My textbook *did* mention that dungeon cores were full of info on monsters, and they can pop them right out!

Hold on a minit... Info from the dungeon core got transferred into the analyzer card, so...

That makes it a super rare item, doesn’t it?!!! And I let this damn gear eat it!!!

“Gah, whatever! I’m sure glad you’re here now, so it’s all good!”

“U-um, Miss Ann? Who are you talking to...?”

“Don’t bug me right now!”

“R-right!”

“I-I’m scared, Miss Ann.”

“Relax, I won’t drop you!”

Yuuta was covering his mouth with both hands as I carried him. Ana said, “That’s not what I meant...” or something, but I didn’t have time to worry about that!

“Crown, what’ve you got on bears’ weak points?”

[—Search complete.

—Weak point: lower jaw. Elemental weakness: Water.

—Will run from larger entities than itself.]

What’re you, an idiot?! It’s as big as a damn house! There’s no way I could ever reach its jaw!

And Water?! You’re a gear, not a pump!

I can't use aaaaaaaany of that!!

A-anyway, I'm just barely outrunning it.

It'd be nice to slow it down somehow so I could pull away...

"Crown, match a Stone Stomp to its speed! Can you do that?!"

[—Ready.

—Beginning inertial model calculations. Adjusting coordinates based on predictions.]

"Does that mean you can do it, or no?! Just set it up!"

One of the gears equipped to my hand flew off behind me and expanded. It looked like there was a white membrane in its center, like a soap bubble or something.

"Stone Stomp!"

Wha-bam!!

"Roooooar?!!"

Whoa, I hit it!! I hit it, but it isn't stopping!!

Oh, man, all I did was piss it off!

"Crown! I need you to trip it up! Drop two boulders in front of it!"

[—Deploying.]

Another gear flew out and expanded. Looks like I can make two mid-sized ones.

"Stone Stomp Double!" I yelled, getting caught up in the moment. Fortunately, two of them did come out.

The bergbear leapt over the first rock. It then bounded randomly over the second one!

Ah, one of the rocks snagged its right front paw!

"Gwaaaaar?!"

Alright! I threw it off-balance!

I skated through the forest, using the trees like shields.

Yeah, I could do that now!

“Woow!”

“A-amazing!” the two runts yelled out in admiration. No kidding. This sure beats the slide in the park, doesn’t it?

“Crow! Secure these two to my back!”

[—Ready. Carrying out order.]

“What?”

“Wah!”

Three gears each wrapped around Yuuta and Ana’s hips, making a sort of golden belt. I could feel it attach them firmly behind me.

[—Three-unit restraint complete.]

“That’s a big help! Hold on tight, you two!”

We came to an area with all sorts of slopes, with trees that had rotted and collapsed jutting out here and there. These should be a big help!

I grabbed hold of a tree trunk with the spinning gears on my legs and right hand.

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!!

When I reached the tip of the tree, I hit the trunk with my left hand!

Vrrrrrrrrwrrwrr!!

And with that, I took off flying!

“Aaaaaaaah!” the two runts screamed.

I did a full rotation in the air.

Fwoosh... Thud!!!

Oof! It sure is heavy with three of us, huh? Almost didn’t stick that landing...

“M-Miss Anti...”

“The world... it’s upside down...”

Yeah, it sure is...

Now that I couldn't see... the bergbear... the forest fire was worrying me...

It was night, but... the clouds... were a dull red...

"That's... sure spreading out, isn't it...?"

Yeah... that's definitely a full-on forest fire. No other name for it... At this rate it'd spread from the mountain to the forest at large... and then... to the town.

"Miss Anti..."

"...Yeah."

I could see the regret... on Yuuta's face. That was the look... of someone who fully understood what he'd done.

I... was still just 15... so I was a runt like these two... up until just recently. So honestly... I was kind of impressed.

"Don't get all mopey!! Now's the time to run...! I'll chew you out later, alright?"

"Yeah..."

The scenery started flying by again as I worried about the blaze lighting up the night. Please, please don't let that reach town!

"Big Sis! Up ahead!"

"Huh...? Ah, damn! Crown, stop!"

[—Regulating stance. Halting motion.]

Screeeech, clack!

That cliff I had jumped over before was right in front of me. The one that was 10 mel to the other side. The overgrown trees down below sure looked eerie in the dark.

I had made it over before because I'd been on my own, but... damn. Flying over that thing with all three of us would be a tall order.

"Back when we hit this thing, we had to go around to the left..."

"So that means that from this side, there should be a path to the right? We've

got to hurry or...”

I started to take the detour, but just as I went around...

“Rooooooar...”

Thump, thump...

“Gah...”

“M-Miss Anti!”

It was still a little far off, but it was definitely coming around from the right side, wasn't it?

What should I do? Try to plunge forward and slip by it on the side? No, that's no good... If things went badly, it could force me off the cliff.

On my own, I could probably manage to cling to the cliff face. But with the weight of all three of us we could end up falling, which'd be about as bad as things could go...

“Damn it!”

“Miss Ann! That's the wrong way!”

I know. I'm going the complete opposite direction from town.

I'd love to go to the right and get back as soon as possible, but that'd take us way too close to the bergbear. If we ran into it now, I wouldn't be able to out-manuever it.

It'd be a real bad move to approach the enemy.

In that case, the safest route would involve taking a large detour to the left and keeping a reasonable distance as it chased us. It was frustrating having to climb back up the mountain, but still...

I got going to the left alongside the cliff, moving in the opposite direction of that presence I sensed from behind us. We were moving away from the cliff, bit by bit...

Fwump, fwump, fwump...

Huh? What's making these tremors?

Fwump, fwump, fwump, fwump...

I slowly looked to the left, breaking out in a sweat.

“I-it’s rolling after us?!”

A big black mass was coming this way crazy fast! What, so it’s countering my rotations with some of its own?!

M-my eyes won’t start spinning too, right...?

Fwump, fwump... whack!!!

I-it flew!

“T-this is bad!!”

Almost instinctively, I leapt into the air to dodge. That black shadow was closing in real, real fast.

Ka-thuuuuuuud!!!

The bergbear crashed down right where I’d just been standing.

I couldn’t believe what was happening... The ground at the top of the cliff had burst apart!

No way... We’ve got nowhere to land...

“Waaaaaaaah!!” the two runts on my back screamed.

We started to accelerate, downwards, downwards...

There was nothing around.

Well, there *was* a burning mountain.

Man, we’re high up.

“Whoooa!!!”

I wasn’t even entirely sure what I was doing. I fixed some gears in the air below where we were falling. Maybe that’d work as a foothold?

Maybe it was because I was in too much of a hurry, but I just bounced off.

My body was spinning.

This was already my third try. I just had way too much momentum. We broke

on past them and kept on falling.

Ugh, man, it was all for nothing.

The forest below us was wide and huge. I must've been screaming.

I don't want to die in a place like this.

Is that what everybody thinks at the end?

The wind was whipping by so fast that my eyes were stinging. My gears streamed on by overhead.

I struggled and struggled and struggled some more. I wasn't the only one in this mess, after all.

It was then that random chance struck.

I'd been firing off gears all the way down the cliff, and this was a big one. So big that my whole body would just pass through the middle.

That thing wouldn't be any use as a foothold. But I'd been in such a hurry that when I made the gear, I'd ended up with teeth on the inside, too.

When I went to pass through the gear, the inner teeth notched into place with the gear spinning on my ankle.

Whoosh!!!

That big gear was spinning, with my small one as its axis. My body stopped in mid-air thanks to the centrifugal force.

For an instant, we floated.

I spotted a tall tree off to one side. It was too far for my legs to reach, but it was all we had.

"Crown, chain!"

[—Executing predicted desired action.]

A golden chain ran through the air.

"—ss Anti, Miss Anti!"

"Oh, you're up!"

When I came to, I found myself collapsed on the ground.

We were alive...

I did it!

Sluggishly, I pulled myself up.

Kwabaaaaaaam.

Looking ahead, I saw the spot where the bear had landed. He looked to be as furious as ever.

Still at it, Mr. Bear... You're so busy blowing your top that you haven't even noticed. I'm pissed off, too.

"I'm..."

"You're...?" the two runts said in tandem.

"I'm really... really... sick of thiiiiiiiis!!!!"

Clink! Clink!

The golden restraints holding the kids in place came loose.

Thump.

"Wah!"

"Ow!"

The two of them fell to the ground. Well, they landed on their butts, so they should be fine.

"W-why? It's right in front of us..."

Right, the bear was right there. That's exactly why.

And man, you two sure must be cleaning your plates at dinnertime, huh? Because you're definitely heavy.

"Roooooooooooooooooooooooooar!!!"

Man, that's loud. You sure are a noisy one. I'm already used to it, though. And I'm sick of just running away.

Plus, we can't afford to fall back any farther. We're already at the bottom of

the cliff, so we're on the same level as the town.

The gates to Cardiff weren't all that far from here. And there was no way those wooden gates could handle this thing.

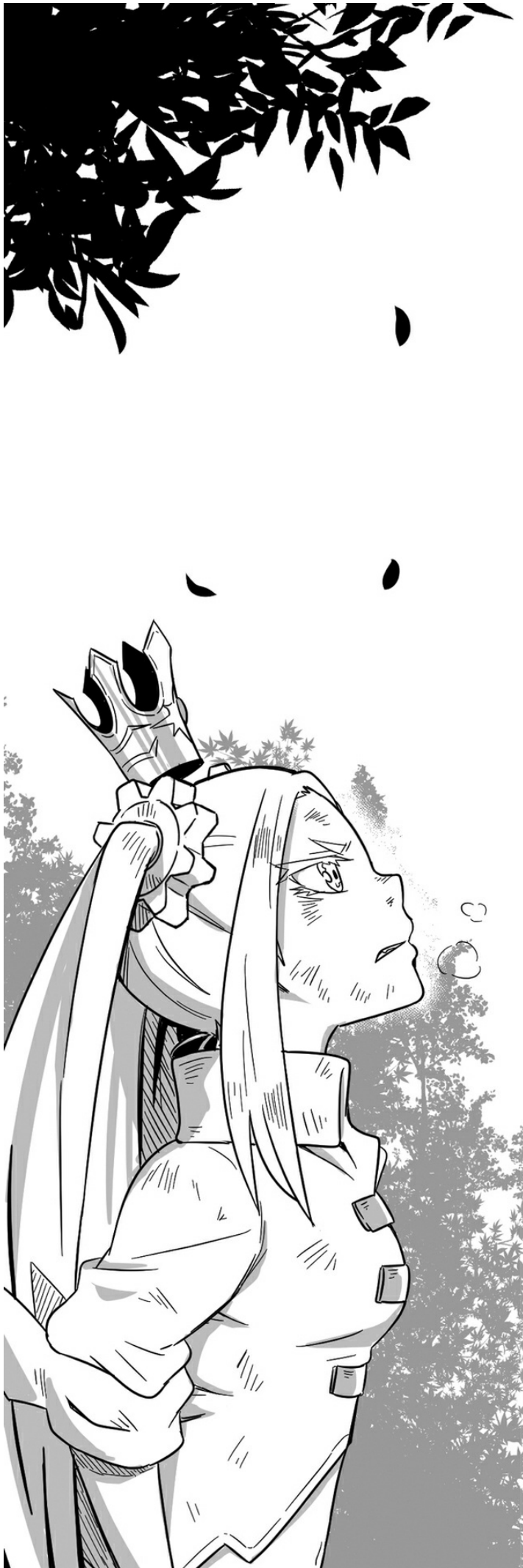
Geez, what the heck even is this?

Everything's been a real mess ever since you showed up.

I got pulled out of bed! And the mountain caught fire! And the runts went missing! And the town had to close its gates! And I hit my shoulder on a tree! *And I fell off a damn cliff!*

And somehow, now it's up to me to protect the town!

Just what do you think you're making the pretty young poster girl for a restaurant go through?! You're a bear, so can I even expect you to pay the bill you're racking up?!



“Grrrrrrrrr...”

The bergbear started moving.

I couldn't let the two runts behind me get wrapped up in this, so I skated across the ground and distanced myself.

I put my hand through the middle of a gear and took hold. Ah, this thing's pretty heavy, isn't it? I always have them float, so I had no idea.

I chucked it at the bear's head and heard a *bonk*.

“Grah!”

“...Bring it on, you bear bastard!”

“Grr...rrrrrr....!”

Hehe, bet that's the first time you've had anyone challenge you by throwing something like that, right? *Tromp, tromp, tromp*.

Oh, yeah, I'd definitely gotten its attention.

I was breaking out in a cold sweat, but I wasn't trembling. A strained smile crossed my face.

This really was a strange situation. I was a poster girl facing off with a giant bear monster. But even so, I had no choice but to do it.

“Let's do it, Crown!”

[—Understood.

—Beginning combat support.]

Thuuuuud!!

The bergbear kicked off the ground.

That sure was some impact, and it was coming this way. Still, running around this forest for the last hor had at least taught me a few things.

I spun my Scale Skater in reverse.

There was a tree to my rear.

Oh man, oh man!!

I flew into the air, using the tree as a launchpad. In the next instant, there was a tremendous sound as the tree was smashed to pieces.

I saw my twintails arc around me as I spun in midair. Then, with a *tmp*, I landed on one foot.

“Wow...”

“It’s like she’s flying!”

I heard those quiet voices of admiration.

Hurry up and get as far away from here as you can, you idiots! If I don’t send you flying, the bear will!

“Graaar!”

It was throwing whole chunks of ground!

I bent my legs and started to rotate. I flew along the ground. Then, instead of moving straight ahead, I started moving in circular motions.

Just try hitting me now!

“Graaaaah!”

It was heading my way.

Now I get it.

This guy could move pretty fast, but it wasn’t good at the sort of tight turns needed for combat. It couldn’t keep up with my speed. The closer I got, the bigger my advantage was!

Hehe, what the heck am I even saying? I should get closer to a bear that’s as big as a house? Haha, I’ve got to be nuts.

“Crown, we’re setting a trap. Let’s start with two quick spinning gears on each hand.”

[—Ready. Request for input of strategy outline.]

“How should I put it...? Land mines?”

[—Response falls within predicted range of actions.]

Having come to a mutual understanding with my skill, I plunged forwards

towards the bergbear.

Ooh, didn't see that one coming, huh? Bet you never expected me to come after you!

The bear's arm came swinging down. Guess that was all it could do.

Vrrrrr!

I thrust one leg out forward and squatted down, only for the bear's fur to fly above my head.

"Here, have a present!"

I twisted my torso around once and left my fast spinning gears in place, equally spaced.

Aaaand, goodbye!

"Gyaaaar!"

When I turned to look back, I saw the gears digging into its belly. I had, of course, made sure to sharpen their teeth into little blades.

Ooh, that had to hurt!

"Serves ya right!"

[—Plan successful.

—Confirmed penetration of 7 celchi below skin level.]

"It's as big as a house, but we only got 7 celchi, huh...? He sure is a tough one, isn't he?"

[—Do you wish to continue?]

"Nah. This guy may make pretty simple movements, but I think it's also pretty smart. If we try the same thing again, it'll see right through it."

When I used my Stone Stomp on it before, it was clearly adjusting to the timing with my second and third tries. It even dodged the second one.

If I dove in the same way again and it happened to catch me, I'd be done for.

"Grrr..."

Huh? The bergbear's pointing in a weird direction. It even took its eyes off of me.

What's it looking at?

I followed its gaze and... that's fire. And it wasn't the forest fire.

Those were torches.

A number of torches had come from town. They'd just given away the location of the front gate!

"Grahahahaha...!"

This damn bear was laughing! I take back my statement that it was smart! This thing is rotten to the core.

I stood... between the bergbear and town.

"Grrrr..."

What, are you threatening me?

I-I'm the poster girl for our restaurant!

A-and I've faced my share of complaining customers!

They'd whine about the types of booze we had and demand more variety, or say the oil we used for frying had gone bad, or tell me that they didn't like the way I cut the vegetables!

So that face of yours isn't enough to scare me!

"Roooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooar!!!"

Its shadow hung over me.

It was raising its front paw overhead.

Man, those claws are huge. They must pack some serious punch.

That's probably all you've ever done in your whole life, huh? Should a bear really be such a one-trick pony?

...Well, then, shall we get going?

"Miss Anti, watch out!!!"

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

Fwoosh!

“Grrrrrrrr...rrr...?”

The bergbear’s raised paw stopped in place, causing the monster to look around in confusion.

It was now wearing a golden bracelet around its arms. Those teeth actually look surprisingly trendy.

Yeah, that turned out pretty well. Go for a ring toss, tighten it, and then fix it in place.

Not bad, right?

“Grah! Grr?”

Thud, thud.

Oh, *now* you want to act cute? Sorry, that ship has sailed.

How about I add a little more?

Bam, bam!

“Grah!”

Bam, bam, bam!

“Graaah?! Rooooooooooooooar?!!”

All four of the bergbear’s limbs were wrapped in gold.

When I saw the orange reflection coming off them, though, I realized something else: the fire. It probably... won’t be possible to put that out anymore...

I didn’t even need to ask my partner. This had already gone past the range of what humans could handle...

This calamity would make it all the way to town.

I stood there, devastated, underneath the night sky burning orange.

We’d had that restaurant for as long as I could remember.

We'd made food for so many people. And they were always there, chatting away day in and day out.

Me and this town, we'd grown together. It was a place that the people all around me had built up together.

And... and... it was going to burn... That precious town, that everyone loved...

And I mean, that was even the reason Yuuta had used the fire in the first place.

I get it. You wanted to protect it, right? For everyone's sake. To help somebody.

But this... this was the result, was it?

We'd have to abandon the town. And then, this is what Yuuta would think: If only I hadn't set the fire...

If only I hadn't gone outside...

If only I hadn't been so damn brave...

He'd be left with such awful regrets.

This fire wouldn't just kill the town, but that boy as well. It was a curse that would steal away his future and taint his past.

If the monster in front of me could speak, it would probably say, "You all are the ones who set the fire. I was just hungry."

I was real annoyed... No, scratch that, I was full-on pissed off.

After all, it was pretty damn hard to forgive that sneer from before.

A boy had tried desperately to protect someone precious to him, his heart trembling all the while.

You've got a pretty huge bill to pay for trying to eat our customers.

The bergbear was quaking. Why? Was it looking at me?

That was when I heard the sound.

All the gold on my body was spinning with a roar.

Rotations, repel the space all around! Shining gold, drive back the flames!

My rage-driven revolutions ate away at the force of gravity.

The bergbear's limbs were perfectly restrained.

Now, time for you to close out.

“Gwaaaaaaaar!!!!”

With that scream-like roar, the bear spat out a boulder.

Oh, so you can still do stuff like that? Not that it matters. I'm already up off the ground.

There was something I'd tried before at the old mine.

“Fast spinning gears can only move real slowly.”

However, they packed one heck of a punch.

They lacked the momentum needed to deal a decisive blow, though. Wasn't there some way I could hit it with one, as hard as I could?

“...I moved fast through the forest.”

...Haha, hahaha, it was so simple!! I just had to plunge right in!

The huge boulder just passed under me, naturally.

I was a quick learner. By 7 I could already mince things, and I hadn't burnt any eggs since I was 8. I was the daughter of a restaurant, after all.

I floated a bit in the air before, right? In that case, why couldn't I do something like this?

Huh? That wasn't normal? Well right now, I'm angry. I've long since left “normal” behind.

You're ready, right, Crown?

[—Redirectory.]

[—▽High mobility armor constructed.]

[—▽Deployed over 62 parcelterge of body surface.]

[—▽Base rotation index: 200 per second.]

[—▽Anti-gravity mechanism developed.]

[—▽ Inertial control unit updated.]

[—▽ Auxiliary shaft power systema “magnilev reformation” online.]

[—▽ Beginning estimated action sequence.]

“She’s floating...” the runts said in amazement, staring up at me. The bear was looking in the same direction.

A golden girl was floating in front of the moon. She had pierced the heavens, with rotations wrapped around her foot. A whirlwind of countless flashes of light surrounded her.

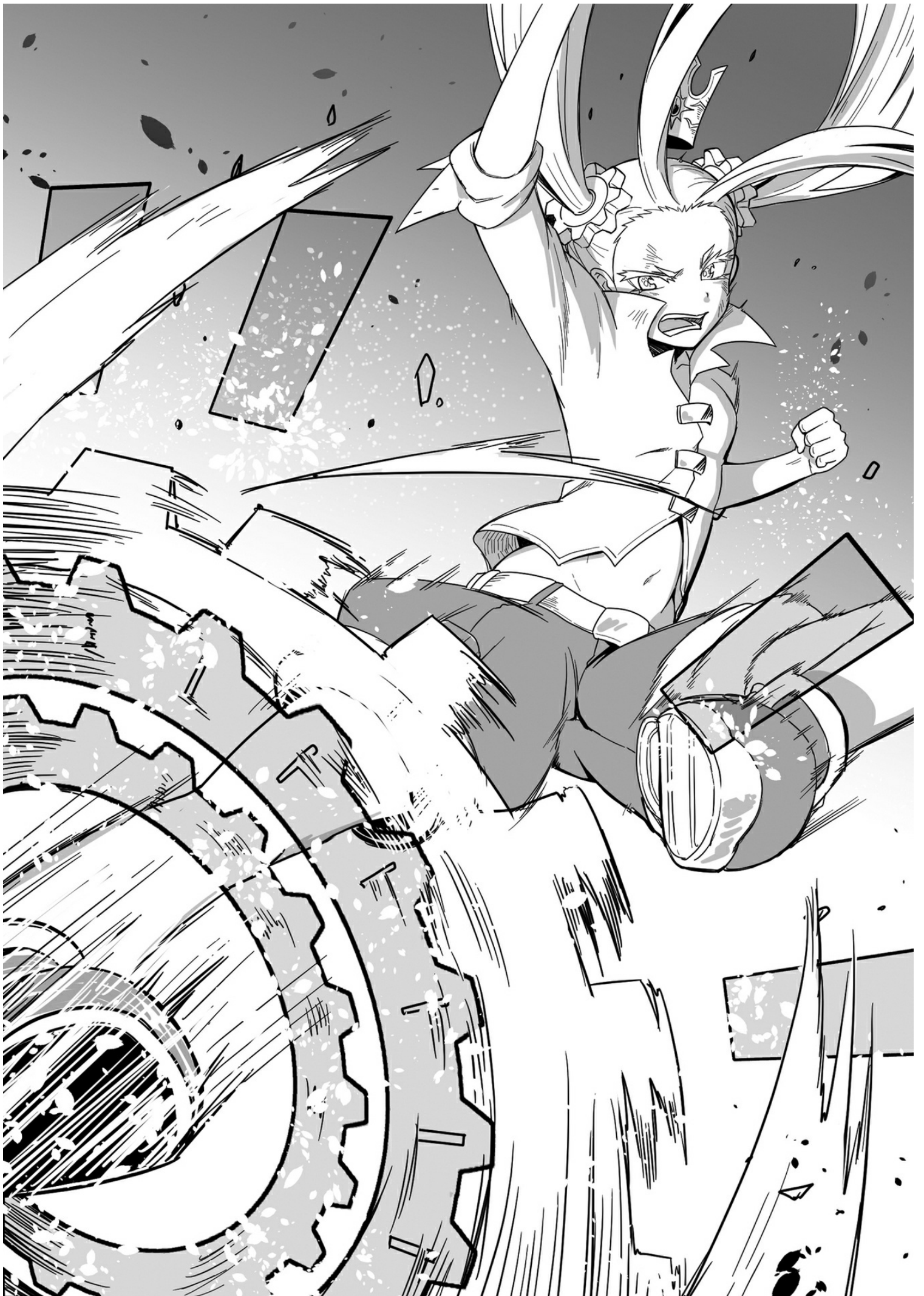
For this moment alone, the moonlight outshone the flames coating the ground.

“Don’t hold anything back!”

[—Executing judgment (Involute).]

It only took an instant for the light to shoot straight through, leaving the girl standing behind the bear monster. Or, to be precise, the now *headless* bear monster.

...I’d won.



Forest Fire Lullaby Thump...

“I won...”

The bergbear and I collapsed in sync: it landed on its back, while my knees collapsed out from under me.

My body was completely drained of strength. I tried to push myself up with my elbows, only to fall back down to the ground.

[—Analysis complete.

—Stoppage of target’s life functions confirmed.

—Status: Overheated.

—Currently proceeding with calculated cooldown process.]

As always, I’ve got no idea what you’re saying...

What about all this is “calculated”...? I just plunged right in and smashed into it, right...?

Hisssssss...

The gears all over my body all suddenly ground to a halt and spewed out white smoke. It was the same sound you hear when you toss vegetables into a heated frying pan.

“Miss Ann!”

Yuuta and Ana came running with a *tmp, tmp, tmp* from their hiding place in the thicket.

...Couldn’t you two have hidden at least a *little* farther out? And, like, not yell like you did earlier?

“You two... You’re not hurt, are you?”

“You’re the one who’s injured, Miss Ann!”

When they went to help lift me up from both sides, pain shot all through my body. My left shoulder and right thigh were bleeding, and I was covered in bruises. Haha, guess that makes sense, what with all the jumping and flying

around I've done. I suppose I should actually be glad I got off this lightly.

Crackle, crackle... Whoooosh...

Ah, there goes another tree.

It was as bright as noontime on the small mountain now. Even though I'd defeated the bergbear, it still turned out like this...

"Don't worry about me. You two just get out of here."

"What're you saying?!"

"There are townsfolk on the way. I saw their torches earlier."

"B-But you've gotta come with us, Miss Ann!"

"My legs... just won't move."

They felt like they were cramping up or something. Whatever the reason, I couldn't move anymore. My gears had stopped cold, too. Did I use up too much power at once?

Man, I'm sleepy. I can't go with you guys.

Ah, Ana's broken out in tears. Yuuta was gritting his teeth.

"Here, this is yours. Take it and get going."

I gave Yuuta back his wooden sword. I'd had it on me the whole time I was fighting the bergbear.

"I don't need this thing...!"

"Huh?"

"I lit the mountain on fire! I'm nothing but a fake hero!"

Hey, hey... We don't have time for this. That bergbear brought down a bunch of burning trees when it busted up the cliff earlier. This place'll be an inferno soon, too.

"Well, duh! You're just a kid! Of course you aren't a hero!"

Yuuta looked dumbfounded.

"You're a child! What you need to do now is accept that! That's more than

enough! And then you just have to eat and sleep and play, and decide what you want to be somewhere down the line!”

“B-But I...”

“Think stuff like, ‘I didn’t want you to have to come stop me! If only I had done this back then! Thank god I didn’t do *that!*’ That’s how you grow up and become an adult!”

“...”

“Knock yourself out apologizing. Apologize, and apologize, and apologize till you feel like you can’t apologize anymore, and then pull yourself together. You can just go ahead and apologize for your own sake, so you don’t have any regrets. So you can keep on moving forward... So... So run away. The townsfolk are coming...”

Please, just hurry up and get away from here.

“You’re lying...”

“Wha—?”

“W-Well it may not be a lie, but you’re not telling the truth!”

“Yuuta...”

“I get it! It’s because we’re kids! But the fire will be here soon! If... If we run away now, then you’ll die! Right?!”

Oh, you figured it out, huh...?

“But we can’t! You saved us! There’s no way we can just leave you! I’d definitely, *definitely* regret that! Forever and ever!”

“I don’t want Miss Ann to die, either!”

Ow, could you two not cling so tight? I’m hurting all over, remember?

“I’m staying with you till the townsfolk get here!”

“Me, too!”

You dummies. You’re just runts... What’re you trying to act cool for? It’s 10 years too soon for that...

Man, but still, what am I going to do? If I die here, this two are gonna have a real dark future. There's no coming back from something like that...

Seriously, give me a break. It was doomed from the start. If I die, then I'll be dragging them down with me.

Hey, can you hear me up there, partner?

I reached my right arm up to the sky.

"Crown... My power's stopped right now, yeah?"

[—Affirmative. Gearcraft mechanisms are currently undergoing a calculated cooldown period.]

Yeah, that's right. But even so... I can't go dying right now...

"We've got nothing to lose, so I've got a request... I want to protect these kids' futures, and make sure they still have a home to return to. And to do that, we've got to get rid of this fire. I know it's a lot to ask... But, but still, Crown..."

Somewhere in the middle of saying all that, I broke out in a smile and started crying.

I knew it was impossible. I mean, I knew I don't even have a skill to get rid of a forest fire to start with... But still, I wanted to keep on struggling... along with this strange partner of mine.

And so...

"Is there any way we can use our power... to get rid of the whole Cardiff fire situation?"

[—Ready.

—In accordance with leveling up of Gearcraft, foundational skills have also been strengthened.

—Continuous use of fundamental skills deemed possible.

—Releasing upper limit of item storage function.]

"Wha...?"

Swoosh! Baaaang!

The gear around my wrist suddenly grew bigger, then flew off into the sky. I thought there had only been one of them, but before I knew it, it had split into five. The gears overlapped each other slightly while remaining somewhat separate, like the petals of a giant metal flower.

Vrrrrrr...!

Vrrrrrr...!!

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr...!!!

They all started to turn, and then kept on going. It made a huge, flower-shaped gate...

The first thing to change was the breeze.

“T-The wind!”

A roaring gale whipped up, blowing towards the gate. Wait, it wasn't blowing, it was getting sucked in!

H-Hold on a— Gaaaaah!

“Waaaah!!” the two runts cried out.

“Ah, Ana! Yuuta!”

Phew, I managed to grab hold of their clothes!

It was like some sort of flying saucer was sucking up everything! Seriously, I would've believed that's just what it was, if I didn't know flying saucers were an urban legend started by the Publishers' Guild.

Ack, now I'm starting to float, too!

I wrapped my arms and legs around a tree limb, holding me and the kids in place.

Gyah! This is seriously scary!!

When I finally somehow managed to force my gaze back to my gear gate, I couldn't believe what I saw.

Ruuuuuuuumbble!!!

The fire... was getting sucked up...!

The blaze had turned into countless whirlwinds and was being pulled up off the mountain. And the destination for all those flaming tornadoes was my five gears.

It was almost like a gate to the afterlife.

Ugh, this damn skill... Gah!

Ruuuuuuuuuuuuuumb!

“Ahhhhhh!”

“Hold on tight, you two!!” I warned the two panicked runts. I looked away from the sudden apocalyptic scenery back up to the sky. Now the gate looked like a giant flaming pinwheel...

Huh? Was that a headless bear that just went through? No, I must be seeing things...

And then, suddenly, it was over.

With one last doofy *whoomph* sound, the area was returned to its normal nighttime darkness, with the light of the moon gently shining down.

[—Item name: “Cardiff Fire,” storage complete.]

“Wait, a forest fire can be an item...?”

The wind stopped and the big branch we clung to bent down, plopping us back on the ground. Fortunately, we hadn’t been all that high up.

Oof, thank god we didn’t get sucked up...

“...—ti!”

Oh, a voice. That’s...

“He— ti!”

It’s a search party from town.

Thank god. It’s finally over...

“Miss Ann...” Yuuta started, just as I was about to shut my eyes.

“Hmm?”

“Are you a hero?”

“...”

I brought up my index finger in front of my mouth.

“Hehe, that’s right... Let’s keep it a secret from the townsfolk though, alright?”

[—Overheat line updated.

—Placing temporary freeze on skill.

—Entering cooldown time.]

With that, I lost consciousness.

Thank You, My Gears The first thing I saw when I finally opened my eyes was my mom's kind expression.

She was always saying stuff like "Oh, my" or giggling at things. However, now she just sat there silently and stroked my face, smiling. It was a strange feeling.

Thud, thud, ker-chak.

"She's awake? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Ooh, Ann! So you're finally up?!"

Dad and the old-timer gatekeeper had come on in.

"She only just opened her eyes."

"Ah..."

I tried to sit up.

My left arm was wrapped in bandages — which explained why it had felt weird. It actually hurt less than I'd expected.

Still, my body felt heavy.

"Hold on, it's still only dawn. It hasn't even been 5 hours since we carried you back here."

"Yeah, don't push yourself, little miss."

"What about the shop...?"

"It's closed for the day, you dummy. You really think we'd be open after all that commotion?"

Mom supported me and gently laid me back down in bed.

They carried me back...? Then I guess the cat was out of the bag in terms of me sneaking out into the forest.

"I'm sorry..."

“For what?”

“For going off into the forest.”

“...”

I'd been expecting to get chewed out super hard, but they hadn't reacted at all. Dad and the old-timer just stood there, as though trying to think of what to say, but Mom kept smiling at me.

“You're not mad...?”

“...We're just at a bit of a loss.”

“A loss?” I raised my head slightly from my pillow.

“What you did definitely was foolish. One misstep and you'd be dead.”

“I'm really sorry...”

If I had died, what would've become of my parents...? I couldn't even imagine.

But I mean... if they were never able to smile ever again... The idea alone was enough to make a feeling of dread well up inside me.

I almost changed their entire lives, and not in a good way. What a horrifying thought...

“I'm... really sorry.”

“See, that's the thing.”

“Huh...?”

“You may not be an adult yet, but you're not a kid anymore, either. You're 15 years old. I'm sure you understand what you're doing, and you're aware of the consequences.”

“...”

“I'm your dad, so of course I'd love to get mad and yell at you to never do that again. But looking at you as a fellow human being, I want to respect your decision... I honestly don't know if it's alright to get angry at you or not.”

“That's... I...”

I really am an idiot daughter. I went off into the woods when a bergbear was

around. I didn't deserve to be told stuff like that.

"I'm just..."

"And I mean, I'm not too smart, but I know deep down... If you hadn't done what you had, Ana and Yuuta probably would have died."

Fwap! I shot upright in bed. "...! What happened to them?!"

"Whoa there, little miss..."

Oww! Hey, I wasn't hurting before...!

Mom put her hand on my shoulder to support me. The old-timer breathed a sigh of relief.

"They're alright."

"Yeah. And it's all thanks to you, little miss. Ana got a bad scolding. And Yuuta's mom hugged him tight and then started crying so loud, it sounded like she was screaming."

"The two of them may still be kids, but they've got a lot of thinking to do."

"Did they say anything...?"

"Miss Ann saved us."

"..."

"They didn't tell us anything else, no matter how much we asked."

"It was like they were conspiring together or something."

Huh... I guess they must've listened when I asked them to keep it a secret before I passed out.

I mean, I beat a bergbear, and then I followed it up by wiping out a forest fire. That wasn't normal. It was full on weird.

And Dad said just now that he respected me...

So I didn't want them to think I'd go charging headfirst into danger with this kind of power. I didn't want to make my parents cry...

And so, I wanted to hide that power.

“Sorry, Anti...” Dad started.

“W-What for...?”

“I just need you to tell me one thing.”

“What’s this all of a sudden...?”

“Did you run into the bergbear?”

It felt like time stood still.

Dawn had broken, and a gentle light was shining in through the window. Dad, Mom, and the old-timer were all silently staring at me.

I didn’t want to cause these people to worry. They were being so considerate, and I didn’t want to betray that.

There’s no way I’m going to just go, “Yep, that was me! I beat it! Cool, huh?!”

“...I saw something that looked sort of like it in the distance, and ran away with Yuuta and Ana in a panic.”

“...”

“There’s no way an innocent little 15-year-old girl like myself could beat a bear, right?”

“...Yeah, that’s true...” Dad said with a small chuckle, and then gave a sigh. The old-timer shut his eyes, his expression suddenly serious. Mom continued to smile.

“Now get to sleep, already.”

“Huh...?”

I thought for sure they’d grill me more over last night. Like asking about Yuuta and Ana, and the bergbear, and the forest fire...

Mom and the old-timer got up and left the room. For some reason that made me feel weirdly lonely, like I was being abandoned. But Dad wiped that misconception away immediately by coming over and sitting next to me.

“Anti... you’re my daughter, so I can tell. It’s written all over your face: you think you screwed up everything. I know that face all too well. It’s the same one

you made when you were six years old and burned the eggs to cinders.” With that, he placed his hand on my head with a *pat*. “But this time, you *didn’t* screw up, right?”

“H-Huh...?”

Pat, pat, pat.

“I mean, you did it, didn’t you? You protected everything and everyone.”

Eh?!

“Take a little pride in that.”

As I sat there dumbfounded, Dad left the room.

...

It couldn’t be...

They didn’t know, right...?

I sat there in the sunlit room, jaw stupidly agape, then flopped down on my bed and stared at the ceiling.

The white curtains swaying in front of my window caused the light to flicker.

...I protected them.

That’s what Dad had said. I’m sure it bugged them how I went off into the forest on my own, but still...

It was true, I had protected them... Those two little customers of ours. And I protected the town from that fire, too.

He said to take pride in that, but I’m not really sure I can...

I mean, how did I know I hadn’t dreamed it all? Maybe there was never a forest fire. Or a bergbear. Or even gears.

...!

...I’d hate that.

Feeling anxious, I reached up above my head. I didn’t want my partner to be gone.

I closed both my hands and, sure enough, they wrapped around something metallic. Slowly, sloooooowly, I brought it down in front of my eyes. And there it was: a small golden crown, its beautiful red gemstone facing me. I guess it had been spinning above my head today, too.

“Haha, what’s with you, anyway...?”

I sure ended up with a weird skill. It spins around, and talks, and sucks things up...

Not too long ago, I really longed for proper magic. Using fire, manipulating the wind, fighting in armor made of lightning... That was what I wanted my life to be like.

But if I had a different skill, I never would’ve survived the night before.

Would Fire magic have let me fly through the forest that fast?

Would Wind magic have beaten that bergbear?

Could Lightning magic have put out that forest fire?

I was able to do all that *because* this was the skill I had. I’m so glad it’s the one I ended up with.

I hugged the crown to my chest.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, Crown. I’m so glad to have you. If it weren’t for you, I never could’ve done this. Because I met you...

“I’m so glad it was you, Crown...”

I didn’t know if I just thought that, or muttered it in my sleep, or even if it got through, but that was how I felt.

Then again, who knows if a “skill” can understand feelings? Haha...

I fell asleep in the bright room, tears streaming down my cheeks, the refreshing wind and sunlight still pouring gently through my window.

Vrrrrrrrrrr...

[—.]

[—.]

[—Situation analysis, on.]

[—Outbreak of unidentified error confirmed.]

[—Beginning search for solution to problems caused by abnormal status.]

[—Analyzing.]

[—Analyzing.]

[—No impairments to functionality detected.]

[—Result of self-analysis: favorable.]

[—Unable to improve status.]

[—Malfunction in status: unknown.]

[—Source of error: unknown.]

[—Unknown.]

[—Unknown.]

[—Unknown.]

[—Unable to restore to previous status.]

“Hngh... Goodnight, Crown...”

[—...]

[—...]

[—...]

[—Crown Gear will postpone resolving error.]

[— —...Goodnight, Anti.]

Today, instead of darting back above my head, the crown stayed where it was.

Snoore...

The Old-Timer Gatekeeper

The name's Torne Krieger. Everyone here in Cardiff just calls me "that old-timer gatekeeper," though.

If somebody says "that old-timer," you think Torne, and if they say Torne, you think "oh, that old-timer."

Hmph!

I'd been living in this town for a long time, and this was the biggest incident since its founding: the arrival of a bergbear.

Four years ago, there was a big panic when some wolves snuck into town. But the men of Cardiff got some help in from Donius, so we wiped them out pretty quickly. Well, I say "we," but we didn't do much. It was mostly that girl and her lightning.

We needed to be a whole lot more vigilant this time around, though. Wolf-type monsters may be weak, but they're dangerous. It's *because* they're weak, really; they form packs, and that makes them more trouble.

A bergbear was different, though. Those things never formed packs, because they were *strong*.

It was enough of a terror that it'd take a whole party of C-rank adventurers to bring one down.

Let me put it this way: I'm one of the strongest guys in town, and I'm just below D-rank. You see? Yeah. That's the problem.

Apparently the bergbear was spotted near the northeast entrance to the forest, off in the thicket alongside the highway.

...Hey, hold on, that's only 400 meltortes away, isn't it?

It wasn't long before an order came down to close up the gates 2 hors ahead of schedule.

This was sure to be an all-nighter, what with watching the gate and dealing with the merchants who were just passing through. Damn, I couldn't make time

earlier, but I still should've gotten in a meal at Derek's place...

Derek and I have a history — him and that flashy gold hair of his. We'd been pals since back when he made his living down in the mine. Never would've thought back then that he'd end up winning over Sola... I'm his friend, so of course I was happy for him, but I couldn't help feeling like he'd gotten away with the better wife. My missus was on the chubby side, like a slime or something... Well, even so, she was a good, charming woman in her own way.

Ah, speak of the devil. Here comes that flashy-haired father and daughter now. Derek was coming right up to me.

Normally he'd either be in bed or chowing down on his pub snacks at this time of night. And he should've been done stocking up, too. It sure was rare, catching a glimpse of him outside this late in the day.

Jeez, the moonlight really was making that blond hair of theirs stand out.

He had his daughter Annie with him and... who was that? Whoever it is, they sure are in a hurry...

"Hey, what's going on, Derek? Annie, and Logg...? What's up? What are the kids doing with you?"

"Torne, two kids went outside the town walls. Yuuta and Ana."

"Please... tell me this is a joke, Derek..."

My mind went blank when I heard Derek's words. He'd never lie about something that serious, so I knew right away that he wasn't kidding around.

...Even so, considering what he was saying, I couldn't help but flare up at him.

"But the gate was closed! Nobody left!"

"They apparently used the irrigation gate. Logg heard them say so."

W-What...?!

"Damn it!! Konobo, go get everyone from the station! And some oil! We're mounting a search!!" I called out to my young trainee.

Come to think of it, the irrigation gate was the last place we checked when locking up. They must've slipped out before we got around to it!

Still, it should've been 3 or 4 hours now since we did our first check. Damn, they may be pretty far out by now...

...This is no time to be standing around thinking.

...*Roooooooooar...*

That was... the bergbear...

“Stop...! Just please make it stop... I haven't even had a drink today...”

This was a nightmare.

“...The search has been called off.”

“Tell me why,” Derek demanded.

“We'd need to use fire for the search.”

“What's the matter with that?”

“If we were just talking wolves or something, they'd run from the flames. But this thing's different. Fire would just attract him. We'd end up getting eaten before we could ever find Yuuta and Ana, without a doubt.”

“But...”

“So that's reason enough?!” Anti shouted, butting into the conversation.

“That's a good enough reason?! There's two kids! We know they're out there, and we're just going to leave the gate closed and go on like nothing's wrong?! Old-timer! You're a gatekeeper, aren't you?! Are you really okay with this?!” There were tears in her eyes as she yelled.

She'd grown up to be real earnest, just like her pa.

But even so, I was a gatekeeper. I had to be willing to harden my heart and make tough choices for the sake of everyone living here.

And so, I laid things out. How the bergbear would find the town if we used torches. And the fact that if it ever found out a place had food, it'd hunker down there.

At any rate, when morning came, it'd be sure to see the gate and at least some of the people flowing in and out...

“So... so that’s enough to—”

“What do you intend to do?” Derek cut in.

“Searching the forest would just provoke it. Besides, we’re weaklings. If we ran into it, we’d just get eaten. We’ll send an envoy to Donius. That roar just now came from the small mountain in the depths of the forest. It should still be far enough from the highway that we can slip by it.”

It had wandered towards the northwest part of the forest since we spotted it...

Now might be our chance to send out a messenger without it noticing the entrance to town...

“Will we be able to send out a search when morning comes?”

“...That’d be difficult. The best armor we’ve got in this town is two partial bits of orc leather armor. I can’t tell my subordinates to head off towards the threat of certain death. We’ll just have to pray that Yuuta and Ana can stay hidden until an adventurer arrives from Donius.”

Even I thought I should be ashamed for saying that.

I’ve served as a gatekeeper for so long, protecting this town. For me to say all we can do is pray...

What a disgustingly pathetic, cowardly excuse...

I am a weakling.

Derek must’ve picked up on my frustration, as it wasn’t long before he called out, “Anti, Logg, go back home.”

“But...!”

“Go back!”

Ann seemed to want to say something, but when she saw the look on Derek’s face, she took Logg and left.

“Derek, I’m sorry. I...”

“Torne, I trust your ability as a gatekeeper. You’re the reason that nobody died on that day four years ago. You led the wolves away and set up an

evacuation route. And you made sure everyone knew how to stay hidden. Everybody in this town is grateful to you.”

“ ... ”

“There are some things... we just can't control...”

Derek was close to Ana and Yuuta. They'd grown up alongside Anti since they were babies, and they were practically siblings.

They were like family to him. Damn it... damn it...!

“I'm sorry...”

“Let's send someone to Donius...”

I was powerless. Back when I was a youngster still aiming to be an adventurer, I traveled all over. All I found, though, was failure. To be honest, I may have just been running away from it all when I came to this town.

But even someone like me, whose dreams had come crashing down, had still learned things along the way. And still had people he wanted to protect...

“Torne...”

“What is it, Derek?”

A man my age should know better than to let himself get this wrapped up in his own pity.

I needed to hurry up and decide who to send to Donius.

It was then that Derek pointed and said, “Look, over there...”

“It's... burning...?!”

I could see a fire in the center of the small mountain. The sight of it, shining out through the dark of night, made me want to break down in tears.

We'd been discussing the threat of a forest fire for a while now. Everyone knew that around here, the higher up you went, the drier everything got. That was true not only of the trees, but also of fallen branches and leaves. Our neck of the woods was moss-covered and damper than the surrounding areas, but it wouldn't be strange at all for a fire to break out on the mountain up above us at any time.

There was a plan to fell the trees surrounding town, but all the moss actually worked to our detriment there. It made it easy to slip, for one thing. For another, it provided plenty of water for saplings, so it wouldn't be long before new trees sprang up. And as you went further in, you ran the risk of running into wolves and goblins. All that made felling the trees a tricky prospect.

“But still, why did it have to be today of all days...?”

“Torne... Yuuta had a Fire magic stone on him for backup.”

“So that was what started it...?! But that's...”

“Yeah, it's right in the center. That's pretty far off... I heard Yuuta had been saying he'd defeat the bergbear.”

“That damn fool...”

It was far off, but it was definitely burning. Had Yuuta run into the bergbear? In that case, things were looking hopeless... Why did this have to happen...?

Konobo finally made it back, bringing some others along with him.

“Captain! That's a fire...!”

“Yeah, it's really going...”

“What'll we do?! We need to pick someone to go to Donius! Oh, and I brought the oil for the search!”

Konobo was a pretty clever youngster, but he still lacked experience.

“We won't be sending anyone out.”

“Captain?!”

“Konobo, those flames are gonna move fast. They may be all the way out there now, but they'll reach this town before the break of dawn.”

“T-That can't be...”

“Konobo, have everyone here gather up all the folks from around town. Have them get together their belongings, too. In the worst-case scenario, we may have to abandon the town.”

“Are things really that bad...? But what about sending someone to Donius?”

“If we end up needing to evacuate, then we’ll have to get everyone to the highway by dawn. We’re just plain lacking in guards. I mean, the fire could end up driving wolves or goblins out of the forest. And if our luck is bad enough, it’ll drive out the bergbear, too.”

“...”

“I want to use everyone we’ve got to protect the townsfolk. You’ve got to understand, Konobo.”

“You have my utmost respect, sir...! I’ll make the rounds as soon as possible!”

“I’m counting on you.”

My other subordinates who overheard the conversation dispersed throughout town. They were better men than I deserved.

“Derek, I’m sorry, but your shop...”

“Torne, I’ll say it as many times as it takes: I trust your skill as a gatekeeper. It’s true, it’ll be a shame losing the shop and the town. But no one cares more about the life of this town than you! I’ll do whatever you ask.”

“Derek...”

Afterwards, I got wagons moved to the gate, discussed matters with the townsfolk who had gathered, and helped load everyone’s luggage. Not everyone believed the fire would make it to us at first. But when they saw it continue to spread across the mountain, more of them started packing up and helping out.

“Derek, we’re good here!”

“Got it! I’m going to go find Anti and the wife. My girl must be back home by now...”

“Yeah... Hey! Hold on, look there!”

Just as Derek was about to go, I spotted Sola darting about between the wagons. Yuuta and Ana’s parents were with her.

“Sola! What’s going on?”

“Dear, Anti never came back!”

Derek and I both froze.

“She couldn’t have, but...”

“There’s no way... I mean, she didn’t pass through the gate.”

“She’s so slender, though. She could squeeze through the same places as any kid.”

“The irrigation gate...?!”

“Sola, that fire will be here soon.”

“I know. I passed by someone from the guard station about 30 minits ago.”

“Damn... At any rate, we’d better go check the irrigation gate!”

A group of us adults headed off for the irrigation gate.

...The latch was off. Damn, looks like she really did it.

“...”

I couldn’t look Derek in the face.

Earlier, I said I was willing to abandon Yuuta and Ana. And now, Anti was being added to their number.

Couldn’t I even save my own friend’s daughter?

“Torne, make sure everyone makes it out of town...”

“Derek!”

“...”

Sola was never without a smile, but now her face was serious and tense. That... that was the face of someone who had accepted that her daughter may well be gone for good.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry, Sola...! Because of our son, your daughter...!”
Yuuta’s mother said, begging Sola for forgiveness.

Damn it... god damn it! How could I let something like this happen?

Was I really going to run away and leave those kids behind?

Like hell!

“Derek, I’m heading out to look for them.”

“But Torne...!”

“I may be a gatekeeper, but I’m a Cardiffer first and foremost!”

“Torne, you...”

“I’ve got to pay you all back for the delicious food you’ve fed me over the years!”

“You old fool...”

“Yeah, I *am* a fool!! And a first-rate one, at that! You’re coming along with me, right, Derek?!”

“Sola, I’m sorry, but I...”

“Take care, Dear.”

We hurried on back to the guard station and grabbed torches.

Then, I gathered up as many men as I could.

I ended up leaving the town to Konobo, and then we headed out to try to find them before the fire came.

The mountain was already completely red.

Heading off with torches into a forest with a bergbear in it was practically suicide. As night fell, fire was sure to act as a guidepost to lead it towards human settlements. That was why everyone had to be careful when it grew dark.

But now, there was a huge forest fire. Maybe that’d help to camouflage us.

I’d find them. Yuuta, and Ana, and Anti...

I was the old-timer gatekeeper for this town, after all.

“That fire sure is spreading fast...”

The sound of the flames seemed to grow all the more vivid as we passed through the gates. I hadn’t imagined it had spread this far while I was running around back in town...

“Let’s go!”

“Yeah!”

Now that we’d gotten moving, all my hesitation was gone.

We’d keep on looking for them until the last possible second.

We trudged through the damp moss, clawing our way up through the forest.

There were a good number of men who came with us, and all of them found it a struggle, getting tripped up by this slippery ground. But there was no time now to wait around for them.

Derek, though, had enough stamina to keep up with me. Maybe it was all that work down in the mines when he was younger.

...I smelled wood and water through the darkness. The fire was surrounding even this damp, mossy area.

We need to hurry up and find them, fast. I suppressed my panic as best I could and took one step forward. Then another.

That was when I heard it.

“Rooooooooooooooooooooooooooar...!!!”

W-What was that?!

“...Torne!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

It had come this close to the base of the mountain...?

Derek and I hurriedly hid ourselves by crouching in the shadow of a tree. Of course, that wouldn’t stop it from seeing the light from our torches...

“What’ll we do, Torne...?”

“...”

It hadn’t even been 30 minits since we entered the forest. But even so, the two of us may have already advanced a full 700 mels.

We couldn’t go any further, though.

Both Derek and I had wives. I’d said those harsh words before, and for what?

I wept silent, bitter tears.

“...You’ve done enough, Torne. Thank you.”

What’re you thanking me for? We didn’t find any of them.

And if that damn bergbear finds us before we make it back, we’ll end up dead.

I’m a real idiot.

I couldn’t protect the kids, and all I’d done was put my friend in danger.

“Ugh...”

I wanted to keep on going, but my legs wouldn’t budge.

If I turned around now, it would mean giving up on everything.

And so, in my frustration, I let out a pathetic wail.

All my experience was telling me to flee. But I felt like if I turned tail and ran now, I’d be a failure — not just as a gatekeeper, but as a resident of my town.

That was when it happened.

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr....!!

“Wha?!”

“That sound...”

What was that sound? It sounded like metal rubbing together.

It wasn’t coming from far off, either. It must’ve been 60 mels, no, 50 meltortes at most.

“W-What is that?!”

“Torne! Over there!”

The source of the sound was moving upwards, climbing into the sky.

The leaves and branches blocked my view, so I couldn’t get a good look. However, I could tell that whatever was giving off that strange metallic sound seemed to be clad in light.

Both of us looked up, dumbfounded.

Just what *was* that?

Maybe it was a spirit or something?

Whatever it was, it gave off a sparkle, then came flying down towards the ground.

It almost looked like a shooting star.

For that one instant, the flames coming off the mountain were outshone.

Neither Derek nor I could move.

Countless drops of sweat dripped down on the leather armor around my thighs.

The light died down, and I could see the raging flames again. All I could see of the trees surrounding us were black silhouettes, lit by the fire.

By this point, it was all but certain that we'd have to abandon the town.

On the one hand, I *had* to find out the source of that light. On the other, we had to run. Now.

"Go ahead and resent me, Derek."

"Don't be stupid!"

I stood up, finally able to move again.

And then, I noticed something was off.

"...Wind?"

In the next instant, a sudden gust blew through the forest! Ah, no, this is more than just that!! It's not stopping at all!!

"Whoooooaa!!!"

"Derek! Let go of your torch and grab onto the tree with both hands!!"

"But...!!"

"Hurry up!! This is no normal gust!!"

"...Alright!!"

Our two torches were swooped up into the sky.

What's with this wind?! It's blowing straight up into the air!!



I looked up through the fluttering leaves.

“The flames...!”

The flames... were gathering up in the sky. Was I going crazy or something?

Still, Derek was right there alongside me, just as much in danger of getting sent flying. He was looking up at the sky in shock. And I’m betting the look on my face wasn’t much different from his.

All those whirling flames seemed to be gathering in the same place. It was late at night, but it was bright enough to be the middle of the day!

All we could do in the middle of this flaming storm was cling tight to the tree.

And then suddenly, all of the light disappeared.

Well, the moonlight was still there, but that was all...

The wind stopped, and Derek and I both hit the ground rear-first.

“Owww...”

The pain in my rear kept my mind from going blank.

I looked around.

“The fire... it’s gone.”

“Yeah...”

Could something like this really happen? It was a miracle. An impossible, brilliant miracle.

I mean, you can’t just put out a blaze that size...

Did a fire spirit save us...?

Something like that was too impossible to even imagine, but...!

“Ah, we can keep searching!”

“Torne...!”

“We’ve got to see this thing through, Derek!”

“...Right!”

We started moving again, heading towards the landing site of that sparkling light. The place where all the flames had gathered.

“Heeeeeeeeeeeey!!!”

“Heeeeeeeeeeeey!!! Is anyone there?!!”

We yelled as loud as we could.

“Here!!! We’re over here!!!”

We broke out running, paying no heed to our ages, right in the direction of where that light had landed.

I wasn’t scared in the least, though. Rather, I was smiling and thanking God as I ran.

Once we were out of the forest, we found Yuuta and Ana waiting for us, alive and well. And between them, a girl was collapsed on the ground.

It was Anti, sleeping away in the middle of the clearing.

The pale moonlight reflected off the girl’s signature blonde hair, and even her eyelashes seemed to be shining, despite it being the middle of the night. Now, looking at her sleeping face clearly for the first time, I could see her mother’s charming features. All that, combined with the little crown floating above her head, made her look almost like a princess. Truly, it was a fantastic sight.

The little lady was injured all over, but she was still breathing.

The golden-haired father picked up his golden-haired daughter, cradling her gently in his arms.

He said nothing, but I could see the tears streaming down his cheeks, and the smile on his face.

“Good grief... I didn’t realize we had such a lovely moon out tonight...”

“Um... Old-timer, you see, I...”

...Slap, smack!

“Ack!”

“Ooow!”

“We’re heading back, you runts! Don’t let your guards down till we make it back to town!”

There may have still been monsters lurking around.

We may have lost our torches, but thanks to this moonlight, I could just barely see my feet.

I could also see that a bergbear had definitely been here not long ago.

...Actually, I’m not sensing anything, now that I think of it. Just where did it...?

And then, I saw it. The tree next to me was covered in claw marks... and blood.

I held my breath. It was close... no... it was *here*.

“You kids... are alright...?”

“Um...”

I knew it was a strange question even as I asked it. I mean, they were obviously alright. They were right here, alive and kicking. But I didn’t know *how*.

“It was Miss Ann...”

“She saved us!”

“What...?”

What... are you two talking about...? What could a delicate little thing like her do against a bergbear? There’s no way...

...

That light, like a shooting star...

Whatever it was that sucked up all the fire...

But it couldn’t be...

I looked over at Anti, and met Derek’s eyes as he stared silently back at me.

That snapped me out of it. I cleared out all the ridiculous thoughts floating around in my head, and got us back on track toward town.

The trip back to the gates of Cardiff went so smoothly that it almost felt like a

let-down. Even though carrying Anti and the kids slowed Derek and me down a bit, we still didn't run into any monsters. Though considering how fast that fire moved, it may have taken out the monsters' dens... Either way, it was a happy miscalculation.

We passed through a door to the side of the main gate. On the other side, we found nearly all of the town's residents waiting for us.

"Hey, Torne's back! And he brought the kids!"

"The kids are alright!"

"That's Torne for ya! He's not the captain for nothing!"

"Is Ann okay?!"

All the townsfolk were shouting at once, causing quite a ruckus.

"Now hold on! Calm down, everybody!!" I yelled out, climbing up onto a wagon beside me and raising both hands. Everyone went silent. "First off, the kids are all safe! Little Miss Anti secured them!"

"Wow!"

"Good going, little lady!"

"So she's sleeping now? Is she alright?!"

"Yeah, she's just tired, that's all! We're going to let her take it easy and keep an eye on her!"

The townsfolk breathed a sigh of relief. The kids her age may have made fun of her for being magicless, but all the adults frequented the Kythera Eatery. Naturally, a good number of them had gotten attached to the place's poster girl in the process.

"Torne, what happened with the bergbear? And why did the fire just...?"

The fire, huh...?

Everyone started talking at once again.

"What could you all see from here, Gramps?"

"The fire got sucked up into the sky."

“I saw it, too.”

“The flames got ripped up out of the forest and off the mountain, and flew up into the air.”

“Then it all got bunched up into one spot.”

“It sure made for a strange sight...”

So that huge gust of wind really did round up all the fire? And it wasn't blown away... it was sucked up?

It was almost like an act of God...

“...In regards to the bergbear, we went 700 mels into the forest! We found traces there, but didn't sense it anywhere nearby!”

“Ooh...”

“That sure is scary, isn't it...?”

“Just to be safe, we're going to keep watch from the lookout tower during the day! But given all those flames, it may have run well clear of here! We're going to restrict usage of the gate for the time being, but try not to get nervous without reason! After all, if anything happens, I'll be sure to let you know!”

“You guys were really on the ball today.”

“Yeah, everyone from the station did a real good job.”

“Next up, about the forest fire! To be honest... I don't really know myself! I may have played at being an adventurer in the past, but I've never seen anything like it before! I mean, a blaze like that just up and disappearing...”

“Hahaha! If the guardian deity of Cardiff doesn't know, then nobody will!”

“That was no act of man!”

The townsfolk were all hooting and hollering, but it didn't seem like anybody was trying to shoot down what I'd said. They were all good-natured folk.

“...It may have been a fire spirit that saved us.”

“What?!”

“Are you serious?! That's amazing!”

“Looks like we’ve got a *real* guardian deity!”

“Maybe it saved Anti, too!”

“She’ll have to give thanks to the god of the flames!”

Phew... somehow, I managed to get the discussion going in the direction I wanted. I sure was nervous. I mean, I figured it was best to hide the fact that we found the little miss right where all that fire disappeared. We needed to let her rest up proper, after all.

“Sorry for making you all pack up for no reason, but go ahead and head on back home! And make sure all your loved ones are accounted for!”

“Got it! And don’t worry about it, Torne!”

“Yeah! I mean, even our good captain couldn’t have predicted a fire spirit getting involved, haha!”

“Right, let’s get this all cleaned up, everybody!”

“Yeah!” all the townsfolk yelled out together, then scattered.

Ana and Yuuta’s folks were scolding them and crying. Haha, I sure am glad I got to see this sight, though...

Then I saw a familiar woman pushing her way forward through the crowd.

“Sola...!”

“Derek! Anti...!”

...That may have been the first time I’d ever seen Sola cry.

Just as I was about to pitch in and help clean up the town, Konobo stopped me.

“You still haven’t had dinner, right? Please, go eat.”

Oh, so that’s how it is? Good grief. I don’t need your concern.

Along the way I ran into my wife, but she just said she was fine and I didn’t need to worry. Women sure are tough.

I was worried about Anti, and Derek and Sola *did* invite me, so I took them up on that offer and stopped by their place. He just told me, “We’re taking today

off anyway, and it won't even take a single minit to make enough for one person!"

There's no way you could do it in a minit...

To my shock, though, it really did come in a single minit. Once I finished eating, Sola came down from the second floor. Apparently she'd finished treating the little miss.

"How'd it look?"

"She had some minor cuts, and it looks like she took lots of small blows all over. Her left shoulder looks pretty banged up, too. I don't think there'll be any scars, though."

"I see! Thank goodness...!"

"Torne, we can't thank you enough for this."

"Oh, what's all this about..."

"Yeah, we're super grateful...!" Sola said, moved to tears even as she smiled.

Oh, cut it out. I didn't do anything...

"Give it a break. I couldn't even do anything that'd be worth your gratitude."

I gulped down water, emptying my glass.

I didn't do anything. Nothing at all...

"That's not true at all! I mean, look at the way you handled the townsfolk, and the decision to mount the search. We were relying on you this time, just as we always do."

"I was going to leave Yuuta and Ana to die."

"Give me a break. That was the first time I'd ever seen you that distraught. The two kids heard about it, but even they know blaming you would be misplaced resentment."

"...Hmph."

"Hey, how about a drink?"

She placed a bottle down in front of me with a *thud*. Hey, come on now,

Sola...

“Haha, come on, just a bit.”

“Hmph, good grief... I just can't beat you, Sola.”

“Hehehe.”

We ended up having a light drinking party before dawn.

Once we'd emptied a few bottles, Derek let slip, “I'm thankful for a whole lot of stuff with this incident, but there's one thing I'm grateful for above all else.”

“Huh? And what would that be?”

“You explained things to everyone around town, right?”

“Eh...? Yeah...”

About the bergbear and the fire, he means? Why is he thanking me for that?

“You did a real good job keeping things vague.”

I slapped my glass down atop the desk with a *clang!*

It couldn't be... What did he mean by that...?

“W-What're you saying?”

“When you said ‘maybe a fire spirit saved us’ or whatever. And the way that you avoided mentioning that light that came shooting down.”

“Derek, you couldn't mean...!”

“Torne, we're the only ones here. Go ahead and tell me what you're thinking right now.”

What I'm thinking...?

“Derek, so you realized...?”

“Torne, I wanted to confirm it. Not with anyone else, but with you.”

“...”

Just before dawn, a strange silence fell over the shop, lit only by a small Light magic stone.

What... What I'm thinking?

Yeah, that's right, there is something on my mind!

I mean, I studied as hard as I could to be an adventurer once. I was a weakling, after all, so I tried to make up the difference with knowledge. That's why I knew. The three of them being there like that was strange.

"..."

"It's fine, Torne. We're talking about my daughter, after all."

"Sola..."

"Please, I want to hear."

I can't win against these two.

And so, I decided to speak openly...

"...What I say next may make you all disappointed in me."

"It's fine. Just get on with it, man."

"Hehehe."

"Hmph... First off, the place we found them was strange."

"The place?"

"Yeah. Do you remember where we first spotted the fire coming from?"

"The middle of the small mountain."

"That's right."

"Huh? What's strange about that?"

"We found them about 700 mels from town."

"Eh...?"

"Even at the shortest, it should be 2 kel mel... 2000 mels, to the center of the small mountain... It's just too far away. How did the three of them move 1300 mels that fast?"

"But there's no guarantee that they were there when the fire... Ah."

"That's right, Sola. Yuuta's Fire magic stone. When you put it all together, Yuuta had to be the one who started the fire, likely to attack the bergbear."

“The... bergbear...?”

“That’s the next thing that’s odd.”

I took a sip of booze, then continued.

“There were bergbear claw marks and blood where we found Anti and the kids.”

Sola’s expression changed to one of shock and disbelief. It was rather strange, seeing her with anything other than a smile.

“That can’t be...”

“First off, a bergbear wouldn’t let one nearby prey animal escape, much less three kids. There’s no chance it would choose not to eat them.”

Sola gripped her skirt tightly over her knees.

“And secondly, that blood wasn’t Anti’s. It was from the bergbear. Bergbears get around by rolling around mountains. Their bodies are coated in long, hard fur that normal trees or even swords can’t pierce... If it was bleeding, it had to be from someone attacking it.”

“What are you trying to say...?”

“And lastly, there’s the case of the disappearing forest fire.”

“...”

“Do you really think a fire spirit would just show up on cue like that?!!”

Oh, boy. Looks like the booze is hitting me harder than I expected.

“Derek...”

“It’s alright. Everyone’s safe as a result.”

“Yeah, that’s right. And there’s one person who happened to be there for all of this.” At this point, Sola must have reached the same conclusion. “I mean Anti, of course. Damn, I can’t believe I’m saying something so ridiculous... But everything fits. How did she get from the mountain to town so fast?! And with two kids! And that bergbear must’ve been after them, so what happened to it?! We’ll keep looking, but... I get the feeling we won’t ever find it. And then there’s the flames. Just how... How did they all just disappear?”

I ended up throwing out every dang question that came to mind as they sat there and silently listened.

“Sorry...”

“Ah, no... It just sure must be something for you to say all that, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Still, are you sure you’re not making some kind of mistake? I can’t imagine our girl being wrapped up in all that strangeness...”

“Sola, I understand how you feel...”

“Derek...”

“But try thinking about it. Why did the kids move all that distance? Why is the bergbear gone? Why did all that fire disappear?”

“...To protect us all.”

“That’s right, Sola.”

None of us had a clue how she’d done it. But it was clear as day *why* she’d done it.

She wanted to protect everything and everyone.

In order to protect the kids, she moved them.

In order to protect us, she drove away the bergbear.

In order to protect the town, she extinguished the flames.

“...”

I picked up from where Derek had left off.

“There was a strong will to protect at work there. And aside from the runts, the only one there who’d feel that way was...”

“Anti.”

Right, it could only be her.

“The little miss did it. That’s the only thing I can think of it. I must be nuts.... I’m a failure of a gatekeeper. Why is this the only thing that comes to mind?”

“Stop making that face, Torne.”

“Hey, the little miss had her Skill Bestowal just recently, didn’t she? What sort of ability did she get, Derek?”

“Torne.”

“If she got a skill strong enough to let her take down a bergbear on her own, then she may end up getting ranked gold in the future! Unlike me...!”

“Hey, Torne...!”

“Ah...! Sorry...”

I really spoiled the atmosphere, there. Damn, looks like I let the booze get the better of me...

“Sorry... I went too far, there.”

“Speaking hypothetically...”

“Huh?”

“If my girl *did* have that kind of power, what sort of future would she have?”

“Her future...? You mean, the sort of work skilled adventurers handle? Right...”

I switched over from booze to water.

“Haa... There’s all sorts of stuff, like getting employed by the royal court or hired by nobles. I don’t really know, but she definitely wouldn’t be hurting for money, at least.”

“I don’t think Anti would be interested in things like that.”

“Ah...”

“Right. But still, I want to ask Anti.”

Yeah... That’s right.

What did the little miss want to do? That was what mattered most.

What was wrong with me...?

“I sure am jealous of Anti, having parents like you two.”

“Wha...? Haha, what’re you saying?”

“Hehehe.”

“I’m serious. You see, my folks...”

All the awkwardness washed away after that, and I ate until dawn broke. It was the most enjoyable meal I’d had in some time.

Not long after, Anti woke up.

She looked to be doing well, the little tomboy.

Apparently she was concerned what we thought of her running off into the forest on her own. But I knew. If she hadn’t gone, we would’ve lost a whole dang lot. I was confident of that fact.

“I just need you to tell me one thing.”

“What’s this all of the sudden...?”

“Did you run into the bergbear?”

The little miss’s expression froze when she heard Derek’s question. Somehow, though, she managed to get the words flowing again.

“...I saw something that looked sort of like it in the distance, and ran away with Yuuta and Ana in a panic.”

“...”

Just what do you think a bergbear is, you dang fool? The second you saw something that “looked sort of like it,” you were already done for.

And then, she added, “There’s no way an innocent little 15-year-old girl like myself could beat a bear, right?”

The question was just if you’d ran into it, little miss, so why is your response about whether or not you’d beaten it?

Seemed she was still just a child in a lot of ways...

“...Yeah, that’s true...”

Derek looked somehow relieved and satisfied with that answer. And Sola was all smiles, too.

There were two things I learned from that exchange.

First off, the bergbear had probably been defeated, and the little miss was also the one who put out the flames.

Secondly, she wanted to hide that fact. She didn't want to be famous. She had just wanted to protect everyone.

I slowly closed my eyes.

I was real grateful, and proud of her, too.

She had power, but she didn't let that make her arrogant. Instead, she was hiding it and trying to protect others.

That was how I'd wanted to be when I was young.

If it weren't for the little miss, the townsfolk would've ended up drowning in sadness and grief.

But the little miss, this golden-haired girl, fought all on her own and protected us all.

And now, she was making it clear she wanted to keep her power secret.

As if I'd ever say a word. My lips were sealed.

I was real, real proud of her.

With that burning heart, she protected everything.

She really was the best poster girl in the whole damn world.

A few days passed, and sure enough, we didn't see hide nor hair of the bergbear. And so, the gate started closing at the normal time again.

Thanks to the forest being burnt, monster sightings ground to a halt. This may actually give us a chance to expand the town...

The eatery was open today for Anti's farewell party. Apparently she was going to try her hand at being an adventurer in Donius.

To be honest, I was kind of looking forward to it. Unfortunately, though, I ended up being on duty.

Damn you, Konobo... I won't forget this!

Apparently everybody from her school was really getting into their magic training, so hardly any of them were coming. I understand, but that's still damn insensitive. I mean, if it weren't for the little miss, the whole town would've been wiped off the map.

Of course I wouldn't say any of that, though.

Tomorrow morning, the little miss would pass my station. I had to think about how I'd greet her then...

After all, those were the words that would see the hero who saved the town off on her modest journey.

The name's Torne Krieger. Everyone here in Cardiff just calls me "that old-timer gatekeeper," though.

In Order to Become a Real Fake The town was still working on becoming its usual, calm self again.

A ferocious monster had appeared nearby, and it had been exposed to the flames of a forest fire. But that was all in the past now. Today was just a nice, sunshiny day.

A boy who used to brag about being a hero was seated on a bench.

“Haaah...”

Despite the dazzling, pleasant sunlight shining down upon him, there was a dark mood around the boy.

He had been confronted with his own weakness and foolishness.

He was the one who tried to drive away the monster.

He was the one who set fire to the mountain.

He was the one who was so weak that he couldn't do anything.

“Haaah...”

He was a fake hero. He'd finally accepted that.

But still, what should he do about it? He was just a kid, so there wasn't much he *could* do.

Frankly, he didn't really know how to recover from such a big screw-up.

“What even am I...?” he said to himself, looking at the ground.

“Don't ask weird questions. You're a hero.”

“Logg...!”

“...Here, take it.”

“Ah, this is...!”

Logg held out a wooden sword. In his other hand was a wooden shield.

“Your mom said you forgot it...”

“ ... ”

His hero's blade was right there in front of him. His old partner, and the symbol of his foolishness.

Yuuta continued to hang his head in shame.

They remained silent for a moment, only for Logg to place the toy sword on the bench with a *clunk* as he sat opposite Yuuta.

“So you're going to quit being a hero...?”

“ ... ”

Since Logg had brought that wooden shield along, he must have come to Yuuta's house to invite him to play. That fact alone made Yuuta feel both embarrassed and pathetic. After all, he had called his friend a weakling. The thought depressed him now.

“I was just a fake...”

“Yuuta...!”

“You were right, Logg. I couldn't beat the monster... And that wasn't all. Ana was so scared, but she had to stay quiet when she cried. The mountain was burning, and it looked like everything was going to be ruined...”

“ ... ”

“I'm just a kid...”

It was the first time he'd felt this much regret.

He had almost wrecked everything. If his friend hadn't gotten help...

“Logg, I've got to thank you...”

“T-Thank me...?”

“You're the one who went to Miss Ann, right?”

“Y-Yeah, but...”

“I knew it... Thanks, Logg. I called you a weakling and said all that horrible stuff. But if it weren't for you, me and Ana would've died...”

“You’re...”

“You’re a good guy.”

“You’re wrong!!”

Yuuta was shocked into silence by Logg’s sudden outburst.

“You’re wrong...”

“L-Logg...?”

Logg’s eyes snapped shut, and his hands trembled as they rested on his knees.

“Logg... I knew it, you *are* mad at me.”

“I-I’m not... It’s just, I’m not a good guy...”

“Huh...?”

Logg strung out the words with tears in his eyes.

“Yuuta, three hors passed since you two left the village... What do you think I was doing for those three hors?”

“What...?”

“I was hiding and shaking in my bed. The whole time.”

“Logg...”

“For the whole dang time. I just hid in my room being a coward and acting like it had nothing to do with me.”

His arms were trembling as he remembered how he felt at the time.

“After about two hors, things started getting crazy at your place. I could see it out my window... Your mom was screaming.”

“...”

“And then they realized Ana was missing over at her house, too... I felt like I was going to throw up.”

“That happened...?”

“I had to tell them, right away. But I was scared. I was really, really scared of telling your folks... I thought they’d ask me why I didn’t stop you.”

“...”

“I finally did it because I was just so scared that I couldn’t stand it anymore... That’s why I told Miss Ann...”

“B-But...”

“Yuuta, you were right... I *am* a weakling. A big, stupid weakling...”

Yuuta noticed that Logg had broken down sobbing. He hesitated.

He’d thanked his friend, expecting to get blamed and teased, but Logg was still suffering. Even though *Yuuta* was the one who’d done something wrong...

Yuuta hadn’t wanted Logg to end up with such painful memories.

“But you still spoke up, right, Logg?! You’re not a weakling!”

“You’re wrong! You went off to face the bergbear! You’re brave! I’m just a real coward!”

“If that’s what you’re gonna say, then... Then I’m a real fake hero!”

There was one thing the boy could do now, and that was to accept his own weakness.

“A-A ‘real fake hero’...?”

“That’s right. Listen, Logg... I ran into the bergbear.”

“R-Really?!”

“Yeah. I’m definitely, never ever going to tell you a lie ever again. I cried and ran away with Ana.”

“A-And then what happened?”

“You can’t tell *anyone* what I’m about to tell you, Logg.”

“G-Got it!”

“Alright... Miss Ann saved us.”

“B-But how?”

“Okay, well... the truth is... Miss Ann is actually really strong. She’s been hiding it, but she’s a hero!”

Logg looked shocked.

“Remember how she brought out all those gold gears when she climbed up onto the roof and got my sword?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Those are her weapons, as a hero.”

“What?!”

“They can spin around really, really fast.”

“R-Right...”

“She can use them to fly along the ground, and she can make them super-sharp to cut things. They’re shaped funny, but they’re just like a hero’s blade.”

“Huh?!”

“You don’t believe me, do you...?” Yuuta asked, sounding a bit sad.

“No, I do. I mean, you made it back safely, after all!”

“...Yeah!”

“So, Miss Ann is strong?”

“Really, really strong!”

Yuuta told his story. About the bear monster they met, and the spreading flames, and the golden hero who came running through all of that. The sparkle in his eyes soon lit up in Logg’s, too.

“W-Wow! Miss Ann sure is amazing!”

“She sure is! But you’ve got to keep it a secret! The thing that I thought was most amazing wasn’t her skills or power, though...”

“What do you mean?”

“It was her eyes...”

“Her... eyes?”

“Yeah. Her eyes when the bergbear caught up to us, and she turned around and looked at us.”

It had been dark, but the shine he saw then still remained in his heart.

“Those eyes said, ‘I’m definitely going to protect you.’”

“...”

“I didn’t know she was strong back then. But even so...”

That golden shine came from a person who was determined to protect them.

“When I saw her eyes, I felt safe. Those were the eyes of a real hero.”

“I see, so she protected you...”

“She protected us...?”

Right, she had protected them. Why had she done that, going so far as to risk of her own life?

The boy tried voicing the answer to that question.

“Because... we’re precious to her...”

“Yuuta?”

“Logg, I get it...”

“Get what?”

“You can’t go forgetting that people care about you.”

“Huh?”

“If you forget that, you’ll be no good. Even if you manage to become really brave and really strong.”

“Why’s that?”

“Mad Silver Ochsenfeld didn’t have anyone who cared about him. That’s why he went crazy. But the Chivalrous Thief Kururukan knew he was important to people, so he kept on fighting to the very end. And that’s also true for Miss Ann. People care about me, too. And that’s what it means to be a hero!”

“T-This is a pretty tricky topic...”

“No, it’s simple! If I had thought about how people cared about me, none of this would’ve happened...”

Yuuta thought back on that night, when they returned to town. His mother got really mad at him, but she also hugged him tight and cried.

“And Ana’s mom cares a lot about her, too. Is that what you’re talking about?”

“That’s right! And the same’s true for you, too, Logg!”

“And that’s... important for being a hero?”

The boy stood up and looked at his friend.

“Yeah! Seeing how the people who care about you are precious, and protecting them... That’s what it means to be a hero.”

“...I see!”

The boy had realized it when he was just a child. That utterly natural feeling that was passed down to him. The boy’s mother felt that way, and her mother, and their family even further back.

To have someone care about you, and to return that feeling, and then pass it on down the chain.

That was what he did. That was what everyone had done.

If you forgot that, then you couldn’t protect anything.

He really had been a fake.

“From now on, I’m a real fake hero!”

“W-What?”

“I’m a fake! That’s why I’ve gotta aim to become the real thing! And before I can become a hero, I’ve got to treat the people who care about me right! So that’s what I’ll do!”

A determination welled up inside the boy.

His words were clumsy. He was full of pure foolishness.

But that was the instant a shining light was born inside him.

“No fair, trying to do that all on your own!”

“Logg?!”

“In that case, I’m a real weakling! That makes me an ally to a fake hero! I won’t be a weakling forever!”

“Hahaha, so you’re going to team up with a fake, Logg?”

“That’s right! That makes us the Fakers!”

“F-Fakers?”

“Yeah, like someone who fakes something. I’ve heard my dad call people that before when they try to sell him knock-off stuff.”

“The Fakers... So that’s us, huh?!”

“That’s right!”

Yuuta picked up his sword, and Logg held his shield aloft.

“We’re the Fakers!” the boys yelled out together.

“Ah! No fair! Don’t leave me out!” Ana shouted, leaping out from behind the bench.

“Gah!”

“A-Ana...”

“Ana, where did you pop up from...?!”

“That’s an awful thing to say! I’m a Faker, too!”

“Huh?! No, but...”

“Ana, you see, we were...”

“Yuuta has his sword. Logg has his shield!”

“Hey...” the boys said in sync.

“And I’m the magician!”

“Y-You can use magic?”

“I’m learning!”

“That’s ridiculous...”

“Shut up! Golden Kiiiick!!”

Bonk, bonk.

“O-Owwwww!”

“Now let’s do that one more time!”

“That’?” the boys questioned.

.....

...

“U-Umm...”

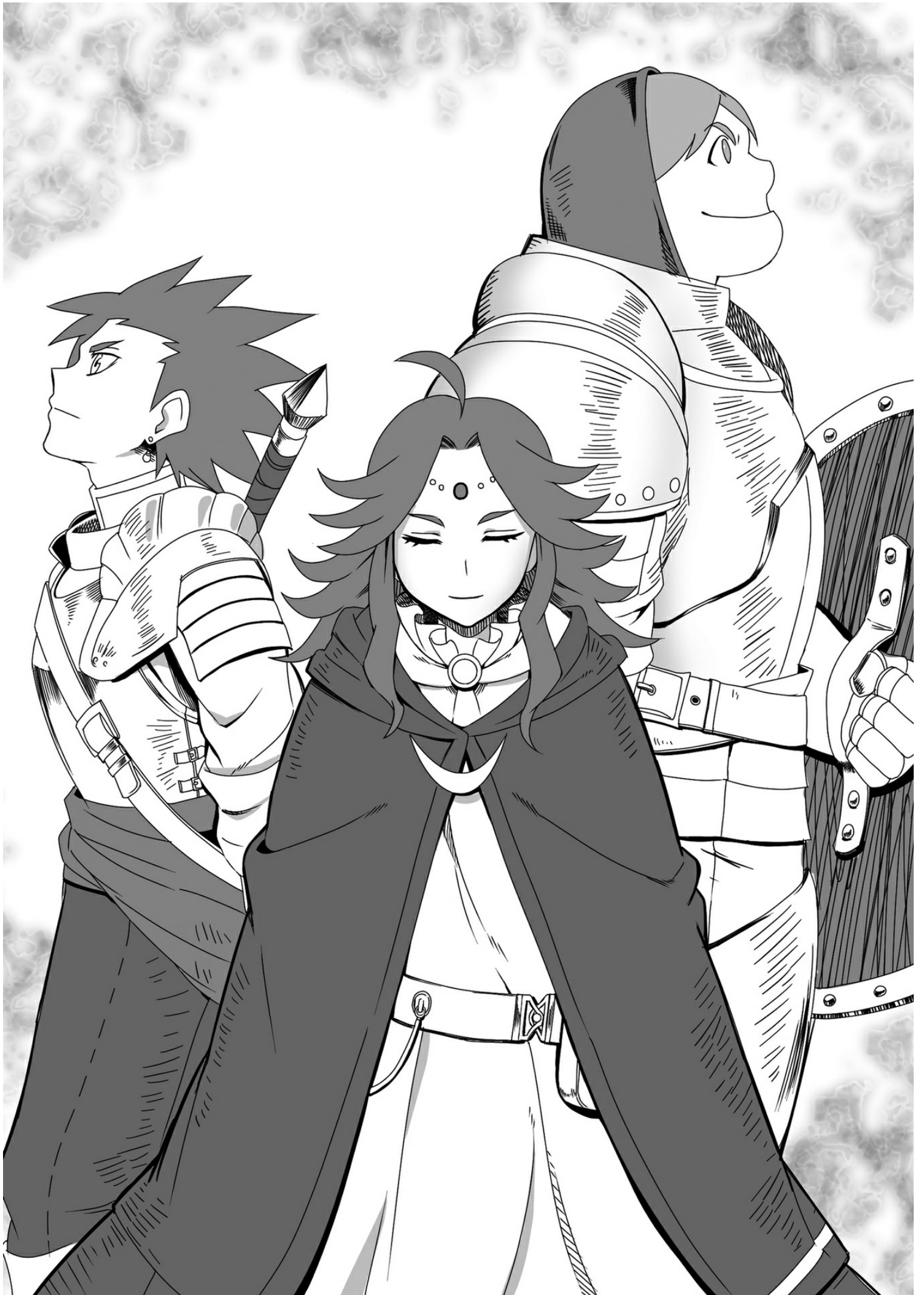
“We’re the Fakers!!!” the three friends shouted out together, striking a pose.

These three children were often seen around the town as calm and tranquility returned to the place. One held a sword, another a shield, and the third a staff. Rather than just pretending to be adventurers, though, they would pick up all the litter in the neighborhood, or help an old lady carry her luggage, or water all the flower beds around town.

Even today, the townsfolk watched over them, their precious little band of heroes. Yes, even today...

The Fakers, those who aim to become real, had come again.

Yes, on that day, a name was granted to a clan that would remain together for a long, long time...



???

Two men had run off into the forest. The path was dark and hard to see, but they were still moving quickly. These were men accustomed to fleeing in the dark.

However, they were fast approaching their limits.

“Haah, haaah, we’re done for!”

“Just shut up and run!”

They kept on pushing through the tall grass, not even stopping as branches cut into their skin.

Their lives were on the line, after all.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaarh!!”

“Gyah!”

“Damn!”

A monster was closing in on them from behind. For some reason, though, they didn’t so much as look back.

The man running in front was holding a bag. It was made of a beautiful, pale beige silk, a strange match for the filthy men. A ribbon they had stolen from a merchant tied it shut. There was nothing else binding it, though.

The bag itself would have been nice enough to sell on its own, but its value must have paled in comparison to its contents.

There was no way he was going to drop it.

“J-Just get rid of it already! That thing really is cursed!”

“Don’t be stupid! How many of our allies do you think have died up until now!?!”

“T-That’s exactly why you should chuck it! That thing is something that should never, ever be touched!!”

“Shut it! If this thing is for real, it’ll earn us a fortune!!”

“B-But...!”

“Just a little further, and then we’ll reach the highway! Then we’ve just got to steal a carriage!!”

The thieves, blinded by greed, didn’t realize. They had no idea that their lives were on the verge of being snuffed out.

But the moment still came.

Woosh!

Thud!

“Agh!”

“Gah!”

Vines shot out toward them from behind, wrapping around their legs. Their bodies were lifted off the ground — and they were powerless to stop it.

“No! It was just a little further! We were almost there!!!”

“G-Gyaaaaaah!!!”

Were those teeth, or were they stakes?

The struggling thief finally threw away the bag. That silk bag tied with its high-class ribbon, unsuited to the filthy men.

It was already too late, though.

“Aaaaaagh...”

A merchant carriage was moving along the highway. The horse was tired, so its owner was currently leading it on foot at a slower pace.

Something hit the ground nearby with a *thump*.

“Hmm...?”

The merchant turned around, and found that a silk bag tied with a pretty ribbon had fallen to the ground.

“Ah, that’s no good. Looks like some of the luggage fell, huh?”

The merchant headed around back, picked it up, and threw it into the wagon.

Even though he had already received the job, if he lost anything, it'd make for a real hassle later.

There were a lot of packages and gifts in this delivery, so it was probably one of those.

“Are they having a party or something in Cardiff?”

The merchant hopped up onto the carriage and set the horse running, figuring the beast should be rested up about now.

There was no breeze blowing that day. As a result, the smell of blood from the nearby forest didn't reach the merchant. The monster was also focused on eating its prey.

That was all very fortunate.

By the time the monster noticed the sound of the horse's hooves, the carriage was already quite a distance away.

The Cursed Mask

The restaurant was reserved for my farewell party for the day.

Normally the shop always closed before dusk, but today the plan was to keep on partying it up through dinner. Plus, most of the regulars said they didn't mind us being closed the next day. Mom and Dad usually believed in staying open no matter what, but since they wanted to see me off, they took the opportunity.

The restaurant was full of conversation from all sides.

"Still, to think that little Ann's gonna be leaving us..."

"Hey! Don't spoil her big journey be getting all maudlin!"

"Bring back a husband who can cook or something!"

"Pryce'll work hard, so things'll be fine here!"

"H-Huh?! What about getting someone new?! Y-You *are* planning to hire someone, aren't you?!"

"Don't be so soft, you dang fool!"

"Gwahaha! Looks like you won't be opening your own place till the little miss comes back!"

"No waaaaay!!"

I-Is it just me, or is this turning into a party for Pryce? I thought I was the star here!

Evening came, and still not a single one of those jerks from school had dropped by. Apparently they'd started studying practical skills with their magic. I get that that's fun and all, but from what I'd heard, they were practicing to failure, going home to collapse only once they'd run out of mana. Well, I guess once you learn magic, you want to use it as much as you can...

Running out of mana, huh...? Do I even have a mana limit? That priestess had said she couldn't see that or stamina or anything like that for me...

Was the "overheat" thing Crown had mentioned my version of that...?

I don't really get my Gearcraft...

"Miss Ann..."

"Oh, you guys."

While I was busy pondering my weirdo skill, Ana, Logg, and Yuuta had wandered up to my side. Ah, that's no good. The star of the day can't be going all absentminded like that, right?

All three of them had prettily wrapped boxes.

"This is for your new... new... departure!"

"Yeah, your departure!" the boys chimed in.

"Hehe, thanks."

I held the presents from the three runts with both hands. I never imagined I'd be receiving so many gifts today. Guess that just went to show that I was one lucky poster girl.

"The Fakers are always your allies, Miss Ann!!" the kids all shouted together.

"T-Thanks."

Apparently, these three had started going around doing good deeds for people. What did "Fakers" mean, though? And hold on, Ana... Why do you have that wooden staff? Shouldn't you be getting angry with Yuuta and Logg?

"Anti..."

"Ah... Thanks."

It was Yuuta's mom. I could see Ana and Logg's parents behind her, too. Come on, don't look at me like I'm some sort of goddess or something.

"Thank you so much for everything you've done. This isn't much, but..."

"Ah, a towel!"

"Hehe, you can never have too many of those, right? Take it with you, if you want."

"Thank you!"

I could fit a crazy amount of stuff in my gear item bag (or whatever you

wanted to call it). I mean, heck, I had a whole forest fire stowed away in there. I'd jammed a whole lot in there as part of the preparations I was doing up until yesterday, too. And I even intend to put my whole bed in there tomorrow morning after I wake up. I mean, they say you can never be too prepared. Plus, I'm so glad I can bring along all the presents I got today, my good Madame Lady Queen Crown.

[—Unable to determine reason behind excessive use of titles.]

Just as my partner shot back with that quip, someone burst out in song. Gradually, everybody else started to join in. And they were all looking at me.

It was an ordinary song, the sort of thing people usually sang before someone headed out on a journey.

But still... This just wasn't fair...

Just hearing that was enough to get the tears flowing. So this is what it's like when a song really moves you, huh?

Everybody there was thinking of me when they sang that song. And to think... if I hadn't done what I did back there, I'd never have experienced this feeling.

"T-Thanks, everybody...!"

They applauded.

I swear, I'll try my hardest, everyone! I'll become the best gear-slinging poster girl in the whole dang world!

By the time night fell, I was lost in thought in my room.

Guess I can kiss this desk and chair goodbye for the time being...

Ah, wait. I have my item storage. I'll just toss them in later.

...The forest fire in there wouldn't burn everything up, right?

"It won't, will it?"

[—Affirmative. Each item is separated into a unique space.]

"Thanks, Teach!"

[—This unit has no record of having worked in an educational capacity.]

Oh, so you're my straight man now?

It seems like you're kind of loosening up. Maybe I'm just imagining things... I *did* feel like I was hearing a bit of emotion there, though.

Well, you did get all scared when I got angry at you for dropping my bed, so maybe you'd always been that way.

[—Crown Gear expresses dissatisfaction.]

“Ah, are you reading my mind again? So I can't even hide in there, huh?”

There was a mountain of small packages and wooden boxes in my room. Everyone really went overboard, didn't they? Normally you wouldn't give someone this much stuff the day before they were heading off on a trip. Seriously, what would I have done with all this if I didn't have my item storage?

“Well, I can bring it all along, so it's fine. Hmm...?”

There was one package there I didn't recognize.

That's odd. I should've either opened everything up or at least been told what was inside.

It was a pretty, beige silk bag tied with an orange ribbon.

“Who gave me this...?” I pondered, standing up and picking it up.

I went ahead and untied it.

Man, this sure is a nice ribbon... You are *so* going in my gem.

“Huh? That's a strange shape...”

The thing inside the bag looked to be shaped sort of like a plate. The bag was just made of too nice a material, though, so it slipped right out of my hand.

“Ah!”

In a panic, I reached out and grabbed a corner of the falling bag.

Aah! The contents are falling, now!

Snatch!

Somehow... I managed to grab it before it hit the ground.

Hmm? What is this thing...?

“Is it actually a plate? Ah, but there’s a hole. No wait, two of them...”

[—Warning: Indicated item is in a cursed status.

—Curse is continuously spreading with contact. Analyzing danger...]

“Wha...?!!!”

W-W-What did you just say?!

“C... C-C-Crown! Analyze!!”

[—Analyzing.

Name: Cursed Mask

(Skill medium/Item)

Status: Curse

Target: Anti Kythera

Unique factor: Vector designation

—The curse remains active.]

...Huh?

What’s going on here...?

I... I saved the town, right...?

So... why should I end up cursed...?

Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!

This was the first time I’d had anything like this happen.

I was cursed.

“Noooooooooooo...!!!”

When you’re really scared, your screams come out all quiet, because you sort of stifle them in your mouth like you’re trying to drown them out. Well, okay, I can’t speak for others. But it’s what I do, because I don’t want to worry the neighbors.

“This isn’t the time for thinking about that, it’s not the time, just not the time...”

① Raise a scream (stifled)

② Throw the mask (towards my desk)

③ Pull up the covers over myself (leaving my face sticking out, to keep watch)

← I am here.

All that took about one second.

Tremble, tremble, tremble, quiver, quiver...

Why, why is this happening...?

Ah, I think I just heard the mask I threw land on the desk.

Before I was looking at it from behind, so it just sort of looked like a plate. But now the moonlight was illuminating it.

U-Ugh... This is scary!

I don’t wanna be cursed...

I was on the verge of tears by this point.

Could this be a prank from the other students...? No, that’d be too malicious, even for them...

To think that you can get cursed just by touching something...

“Crown... What’s gonna happen to me...?”

[—Analysis complete.

—No signs of abnormalities in status can be detected.

—Curse is likely to have a directional trigger.

—Predicting that movement not following the indicated vector will result in activation of the curse.]

“I don’t get it! Make it simpler! I mean, what’s a ‘vector’...?!”

[—It is possible that moving in a direction other than the one provided will activate the curse.]

“What...?”

You can't just go saying that on the night before I head out on my trip! And how am I supposed to know which way a mask wants to go in the first place? Ugh...

Scratch, scratch...

Gah!

“What was that just now?!”

...

“...”

...Scratch, scratch.

“Gah!”

I-I-I-It's moving it's moving it's moving the mask is moving ah it's moving that way towards the window yeah it wants to go that way doesn't it I'm scared scared so scared why is it moving I hate this I wanna go home oh wait this is home though I guess it'll change tomorrow ugh what should I do...?



“Uuuuuuuugh...”

Now I was full-on sobbing.

...*Kachunk*.

The mask had moved to the place where my desk and the wall met.

...*Rattle, tap*.

...*Rattle, tap*.

It couldn't make it any further.

...*Rattle, tap*.

...*Rattle, tap*.

...If I have to hear this all night, I'll end up going nuts.

The direction my window was in... Donius was that way.

...*Rattle, tap*.

...*Rattle, tap*.

Ugh, this is scary. Just *way* too scary.

I can't stand it any longer.

“...Mr. Mask.”

Rattle!

“Ah!”

...

“Mr... Mask, please listen...”

...

“I'm going to Donius tomorrow.”

The noise had stopped.

“It's the same way that you want to go.”

I'm talking to a mask. I must be going nuts. Yeah, it's crazy, but...

“I don’t know how far I’ll be able to take you. But it’ll be in the right direction.
So could you please just be patient until tomorrow...?”

...

.....

.....

I-It had stopped.

I fell asleep cradling my knees.

Starting a Journey with a Curse Wow, the weather sure is nice. Perfect for setting out on a journey...

Except for the mask sitting atop my desk, that is.

Hehehehehe...

“There’s just no way...”

People could sleep pretty well, turns out, even when thrust into the depths of fear. Heck, I’d actually overslept a little.

Judging by the position of the sun, I’m guessing it’s noon already. Looks like I’m having breakfast for lunch, then.

The shop was taking today off.

I looked over at the mask again. The one that had been moving all on its own yesterday...

Just seeing everything in the light of day made it all a lot less scary.

Now that things were a bit calmer, I had a chance to look my new little friend over. It was a partial mask, the type a noble might wear at a dance party; if I put it on, it’d cover everything except the very bottom of my face. It was orange and glossy, sparkling in the midday sun, and accented with yellow lines. All things considered, it was a very pretty mask.

You know, except for the whole curse thing.

“If only it weren’t cursed...”

I looked at the mask, which was pointed straight towards me.

Maybe I was just imagining things, but it kind of felt like it was expecting something...

“Ugh, alright, I get it, I get it. I’ve just got to take you along, right?”

I put the mask away, along with the entire desk and chair. Then I headed

downstairs to eat a late meal, having already put my bed in the item storage.

“You don’t look so good, Anti. Did you catch a cold or something?”

“Hmm, she doesn’t seem to have a fever.”

“Hahaha! So you’re just nervous before heading out on your big journey, are you?!”

“Oh, my.”

Sorry, Mom and Dad. Sorry for zoning out while I eat, I’m just a little cursed is all. And after you went out of your way to see me off right...

I stepped out of my warm and cozy home, only for Dad to call out, “This is as far as we’re going, Anti.”

“Hehe.”

“Huh?! Um, why...?”

You’re not going to see me all the way to the gate...?

“Look, Anti.”

“What? Um... Ah.”

I understand what Dad and Mom wanted to say.

Dad, and Mom, and the eatery behind them... And that stupid, big, flashy, orange sign.

That was my home. Yup, that’s right, it’s right here.

“This place’ll be waiting for you to return.”

“Yup, and we’ll be right here waiting, too.”

“So this is the place where we’ve got to see you off,” they both said in sync.

Right, this was the sight that I needed to burn into my eyes. So they were right; this was the place to do it.

I hugged Dad and Mom tight.

“Thank you... I’m off!”

“Yeah!”

“Take care!”

Hehe, that’s right. This *was* the place where they always saw me off, wasn’t it? It never changed. It was always right from here.

I felt really relieved.

“Well, you’ll be back in a month for the test, though.”

“Dad, you’re ruining the mood...”

A whole lot of regulars called out to me on my way to the gate, telling me “Take care” and “Are you sure you’re taking enough?” and the like. I couldn’t exactly say I’d shoved everything into my crown, so I just told them I’d sent everything ahead.

Sorry for lying.

When I made it to the gate, the old-timer was there waiting for me.

“Hey there, little miss!”

“Heeey, good morning!”

“It’s finally the day, huh?”

“Yeah!”

“...Give it all you’ve got!”

“...Right!”

The old-timer kept on waving the whole way to the carriage stop.

We only exchanged simple words, but it was still nice, somehow. It was like the warmth of the sun had reached the depths of my heart!

...I was super cursed, though.

The carriage was there waiting, so I hopped on in. There were several other passengers in the carriage, but it actually wasn’t very crowded.

The weather was nice, so we’d probably make it to Donius in four or five hours.

Now, then... I was heading east, but there was one single question on my mind: Was the place the mask wanted to go Donius, or no?

All the other passengers were acting unfriendly, maybe because I'd made them wait past noon.

I carefully pulled the mask out of my gear, doing my best not to draw attention to it.

Shine!

Ooh... It sure is shiny... It's positively sparkling, isn't it?

Looking at it now, it doesn't seem like a cursed mask at all... You'd think something like that'd be more black or purple or whatever...

Tremble, tremble.

Huh?! Am I going crazy or something? I could've sworn I just felt the mask trembling for a second there. But there's no way... Just no way.

And now I'm doubting my own senses.

Crown. The mask's... vector, or whatever it's called... That shows the way it wants to go, right?

[—Ready. Commencing display.]

A thing that looked like a sort of invisible sheet appeared beside the mask. It seemed to be made of the same stuff as the analyze card.

...It was shaped just like an arrow.

Ah, I get it. If I don't go in that direction, I'll get cursed, right?

"Come on, cut me a break..."

"Huh? With what?"

"Ah! I-It's nothing...!"

That was a close one... The passenger across from me was awake.

Man, that must've looked like me talking to myself, right? I-I've got to watch out for that...

Sure enough, the arrow was pointing towards Donius.

Now just don't go moving on me...

All I could do was pray.

Clickity clack, clickity clack.

Clippity-clop, clippity-clop.

Two hors later, though, tragedy struck.

The direction of the arrow changed.

“...This is the worst.”

Haah...

Without even thinking about it, I let out a sigh.

“What should I do...?”

The arrow indicating where the mask wanted to go just *had* to up and move... We'd both been going east, but now... Yep. Now it wanted to go north. Right into a forest. Not the sort of place you send an innocent young maiden...

...Hmm?

Sob.

Grr. I-I may have just been imagining things, but it kinda felt like the mask was looking at me with teary eyes. It's “eyes” were just holes, though, so that didn't make any sense...

Sob sob sob sob sob sob sob sob.

“...I'm getting off!”

“H-Huh?!!”

The driver was looking at me like I was a real weirdo. He tried his best to talk me out of it, but I ended up getting off the carriage.

“I know it's not very ladylike to say this, but... if I don't get off now, something's going to leak out!” And with that, I disembarked.

With a look of pity on his face, the driver told me that I could get on the next carriage that passed by. I felt so embarrassed I could cry.

Sniffle.

I smacked myself in the face.

Gah, now that it's come to this, I've just got to do it!

I had plenty of food in my item storage, including dry goods and bread, in case time passed differently inside. So I didn't have to worry about going hungry. Plus, I had my bed!

...I seriously hope I don't have to sleep on my bed in the middle of the forest, though!

Man, this arrow really wants me to go right into the deepest part of the woods...

"Crown, Scale Skater!"

[—Ready.

—Deploying movement device: Scale Skater.]

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

The rotating gears on both my feet kicked up the earth.

Honestly, at this point I'm not sure whether I'm super lucky or super unlucky. But if nothing else, I can't think of many people who'd be able to catch me when I'm speeding through the forest like this!

"Hup!"

Vrrrrrrrr, Vrrrvrrrrrr!

Ka-klunk! Hop!

What's with all this bumpiness and branches? Either way, I skated along and hopped over what I needed to.

Ugh, who'd have thought it'd be coming in handy now? Guess that's why it's good to have all sorts of experience, huh? But I'd prefer to avoid dealing with any more bears...

Whoosh, whizz, fwoosh!!

Hey, I'm pretty deep in the forest... Should I be worrying about monsters and stuff?

...

Is this bad? This is bad, isn't it?

I'll be alright though, right?

[—Analyzing. Enemy presences detected ahead. Seven in number.]

"I'm not alright at aaaaaall!!"

[—Identification complete. Enemy determined to be forest wolves.]

"Huh?!"

Forest wolves...?

Like the ones that came into Cardiff four years ago...?

"Does it look like we can go around them?"

[—Contact with enemy will occur in 10 seconds.]

"Gwaaaaah!"

Damn! Why does this have to happen to me?!

I'll remember this, you dang cursed mask!

Ah, there they are!

They were tree monsters in the shape of wolves — for now, just two of them.

After those monsters had entered the town, I looked into them in the school library. Forest wolves actually weren't animals, but plant monsters using mimicry. They were treants that copied the shapes of wolves in order to move. That was the most accurate way to describe them.

"Never would have guessed I'd end up having to wipe some out..."

Jeez, it's all this selfish mask's fault...

Naturally, I was feeling a little nervous. I mean, these things were an object of terror back in the village four years ago. Would I really be alright? Frankly, I was feeling a little scared, since I didn't want to get hurt.

I should be faster though, right? Maybe I can shake them off...

"Whoa...!"

Something that looked like a leaf just went flying past me! No, wait, it *was* a leaf! No doubt about it! I managed to dodge it, though!

Okay, let's try and shake these guys...

Ah, no good! They're just running after me, and there are seven of the things! Looks like they must've done a pretty good job of mimicking wolves...

Ack! That was a close one!

I weaved in a zigzag pattern, dodging the leaves they were firing off. None of them made it to me, getting stuck in tree trunks and the like instead.

With a smooth half-rotation, I turned around. Yeah, I was flying along while facing backwards. That actually sounds pretty dangerous, doesn't it?

It looked like there were vines trailing along behind the forest wolves. Ugh... Just imagine how much trouble it'd be to get caught up in those...

Launching an attack while running away and dodging leaves...

Alright! Looks like I have a plan!

Apparently I don't have any sort of "level." But my skill does!

Right now, if I analyze myself, it comes out like...

Anti Kythera Human (♀) Age 15

Skill: Gearcraft Lv. 2

Yup, my skill went and leveled up.

"Crown! Give me chakrams in both hands!"

[—Ready. Processing.]

This was something I'd tried before.

Gears spinning fast can only move slowly.

I found a solution, though.

So I put them on my body and plunged forward.

Still, now that my skill had leveled up, my gears had a bit more freedom to them.

and keep on breaking!

Ah, it chopped right on through!

[—Others approaching. Five in number.]

“Wha?! All at once?!”

Gah! I’m getting surrounded here!

W-What should I do?

Ack, I suddenly stopped without thinking. This... could be bad...

“Roooooar!!”

“Gyah! Crown! Give me a *big* chakram!!”

[—Deploying according to predicted intentions.]

A large two-part gear appeared around my hips.

“E-Expand it!!”

[—Progressing according to predicted intentions.]

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!

My gear roared as it spun, its outside covered in sharp teeth. Thanks to my skill leveling up, it was bigger than the ones I used to be able to make. That’s cool and all, but when am I going to start getting to the size of the ones I’ve used for item storage...?

The instant the five forest wolves leapt at me, my gear expanded with a *woosh!*

Ooh... With a yelp, they were all split in half... like a baguette being sliced for a sandwich...

“W-We won, just as planned...”

[—.]

“W-What is it...?”

[—Current actions acknowledged as an attack. Shall an attack name be registered?]

“Huh? U-Um, how about ‘Hooper’...”

[—Attack name “Hooper” registered. When attack name is input, it shall be deployed around your hips.]

I’d beaten all those forest wolves. It was kind of a strange feeling, somehow. They were the exact same type as the ones that had terrorized the town four years back, and I beat them, all by myself.

It really was an odd feeling.

Though I was kind of freaking out a little when all five of them attacked at the same time.

Still, to be honest, they were really, really weak compared to the bergbear. Like, seriously.

I’d been magicless until just recently, but now my common sense had crumbled to bits and was getting reformed.

Yeah. This Gearcraft of mine may be a pretty crazy skill. I mean, if just anyone could beat forest wolves this easily, there wouldn’t have been such a big panic in town back then.

Yup, this was kind of out of the ordinary, I’d say.

You could do all sorts of stuff with this skill, depending on how you used it.

I had definitely wanted power. I mean, everyone had made fun of me for so long. But now, I was seriously hesitating. This power that I’d gotten my hands on...

What could I do with it? What *should* I do with it?

I had no idea. But still, I wanted to find out.

If I used this power, would I end up famous? It was definitely possible.

Would I be able to show up my old “friends” who had made fun of me? Yeah, maybe.

Would I beat another bergbear?

I could probably earn a lot of money... But that would be all.

I had no idea what would come afterwards.

Things would just end with that... And I'd hate that.

Man, I was thinking some foolish things.

Was there some way to live my life that only I could pull off?

I didn't care anymore if people made fun of me and called me a "gear girl." If I worked hard, I should be able to earn some money. And it's not like I want to become some adventurer who does nothing but fight monsters.

How could I live so that the people who've supported me would be proud?

That was why I left town, to find that out. It was my goal.

But I still hadn't accomplished anything...

[—We have arrived.]

"Huh?!"

Ah...

I think I may have just been spacing out as I walked...

So what? We're there?

"This is the place...?"

[—To be precise, the vector now points downwards.]

"Downwards?"

It was a clearing in the trees, where fallen leaves seemed to like to gather up.

What does "downwards" mean here...? Is there something buried?

"What am I supposed to do...?"

[—Suggesting action causing impact.]

"You mean fire off one of those 'Involute' attacks?! That'd be dangerous, wouldn't it...? Plus there's a chance I wouldn't be able to move afterwards, isn't there?"

[—Affirmative. Unable to deny possibility.]

"Geez... Alright, let's ask the source! Crown, bring out the mask!"

[—Ready.]

A gear appeared in front of me and dropped out the mask.

It was night when I first saw it, and that incident with it going all *scratch, scratch* on top of my desk seriously freaked me out, but somehow... I actually felt kind of numb to all that now.

I picked it up using both hands and said, “See, I took you where you wanted. Is this good?”

Can I just go ahead and leave you here?

[—Request for synchronization received from item: “Cursed Mask.”]

“What?”

[—Status after synchronization: Unpredictable.]

“W-What’s that mean...?”

[—Permission to synchronize?]

Hearing “synchronize” was making me think of how the dimension stone and analyze card got stuck in Crown... I probably wouldn’t be able to take it back, but...

“Hmm... Alright, permission granted. I don’t want to leave things unsettled...”

[—Ready.]

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr...

Gah! Wait, I’m synchronizing it with a cursed item! What was I thinking?!

“H-Hold on a—”

[—Synchronization complete.]

“Man, you work fast...”

U-Ugh... Please tell me that didn’t strengthen the curse...

Sigh...

“Wah! Crown, hold on! Don’t come any closer! The mask! It’s coming right for me!”

[—Confirmed.]

Wait, aren't you going to stop it?! That thing's the source of the curse, isn't it?!

Fwip!

Ah... Now I'm wearing it...

“Am I going to live to see my golden years...? Hmm...? Oh, hey!”

I was looking through the mask at that pile of leaves from before. Only now, I could see something that I couldn't then.

“A-A magic circle?”

There was a shining pattern floating above the fallen leaves.

“This is amazing...! It's so pretty, isn't it? Wait, Crown, can you see it?”

[—Affirmative. Observation is possible as a result of skill synchronization.]

“But still, what is this magic circle even for?”

There was clearly some kind of meaning behind the shape of the thing. And it was big. Like, it must have been a perfect circle with a diameter of about 10 mels.

The pattern was shining... a sort of yellow-green, I guess? From the location it wouldn't be a Wind one... Earth, then?

I'd done my homework in magic school. And I prepared for all the lectures. So if nothing else, I knew my stuff.

This was an Earth magic circle for sure.

Man, what's with this thing? It's way too complex.

But still, I could more or less tell the meaning of the pattern and how to start it up by looking at the shape of the thing.

“That's 'seal' and 'center'...”

This curved pattern wasn't meant for sealing away monsters. It was probably to hide the place.

There should be a way to activate it right in the center.

“This is it...”

I accidentally brushed my hand up against it. As I did, it felt like the mask heated up a bit.

Then, it happened all of a sudden. Like, seriously, out of nowhere.

Fwoom...

“Wha?”

A whole 10 mels in diameter had opened up beneath me.

Gravity sure is amazing, isn't it? It means you'll always—
Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah...!

I was falling. This wasn't a test or something. I was up against physics, and not just as a school subject.

I was literally, physically falling.

Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!

“C-C-C-C-CROOOOOOOWN!!!”

[—Anti-gravity mechanism deployed.]

★Alright, everyone! The anti-gravity mechanism is real simple!

①Have a small gear act as an axle for a large gear to rotate around!

②Make the large gear bigger when it's rotating up, and smaller when it's rotating down!

③Slap a whole lot of them on your body!

Got it? Great! Now let's give it a try!

Twinkle!

Uuuuuugh...

...I stopped in midair.

I must've fallen about 30 mels, but it was still a long way down.

“Ha! Haha... hahaha... haha...!”

Tears started to stream down my face.

[—Gravity value ± 0 . Position stabilized. Currently 38 mels, 56 celchis from upper entrance.]

If this hole had been 20 mels deep, I would be dead...

“U-U-Ugh...”

[—No external injuries detected. Awaiting input.]

“I-I wanna go hooooooooome!!!”

I didn't wet myself. Not at all. Not even a little, uh-uh...

“S-Sniffle...”

[—Crown Gear requests encouragement.]

“Uuuuuuuuugh...!”

Sorry... Just give me a minit here to get my emotions out...

Haaah...

“... Let's go. Crown, I want to do something about the darkness. Got any ideas?”

[—Recommendation: Employ “Cardiff Fire.”]

“T-The forest fire?! You can do that...?”

[—Using a limited deployment.]

About 10 itty bitty gears appeared in the air around me, then fire shot out of them with a *fwoosh!*

O-Ooh! That's amazing... So I can split the flame up like that, huh?

It was like I had my own floating candles.

Huh...? Wait... Can you *usually* store fire in an item bag? Oh, well, I put an entire forest fire in mine, so I guess so...

“Well, whatever... Thanks, Crown. Let's get going.”

[—Beginning low velocity descent.]

Vrr, vrr, vrrrrrr!

My body slowly and steadily lowered towards the bottom of the hole,

accompanied by the floating candles.

The special attack that beat the bear, Involute. I don't know why it's named that, but still... For some reason, it allows me to float in the air. According to Crown, it's "a quasi-anti-gravity device, utilizing rotational centrifugal force."

It wasn't perfect, though. To put it simply, moving up and down with it is easy, but moving forwards and backwards or side to side is still tricky. And it's tricky to maintain my balance, too.

So I couldn't exactly fly freely through the skies like a bird. I wonder what would happen if my skill level went up more, though... I'd probably be able to just keep on going up, but I'm not really interested in being up among the stars.

For now, though, I was doing the opposite and steadily drifting downwards.

"It's so deep... And dark..."

When I looked down I saw a big, biiiig cave stretching out beneath me. It was scary, but it wasn't *too* bad since Crown was lowering me down pretty slowly.

...Was that out of consideration for my feelings?

The walls looked like they were made by piling up stones... Yeah, like a big well.

It was dank and uncomfortable, but the space was so wide open that it also strangely had a bit of a mysterious feel to it.

It was quiet, so the sound of the gears keeping me afloat reverberated through the air.

The numerous little flames shined in the darkness of the abyss.

[—Bottom detected. 102 mels, 87 celchis.]

"Seriously...? I didn't think 100 mels would look this deep..."

I sloooooowly touched down on the ground.

The little lights lit up the area around me. I could only see one big path leading ahead. Amazingly... it actually looked to be paved.

Thanks to the sudden drop in air pressure, the mask had slipped loose around my forehead.

...Can I just leave it like this?

“Crown. You’ve got the knowledge of a beginner dungeon in your head, right? Is there any chance this place is...”

[—Analyzing.

—Affirmative. This terrain shows the foundations of a dungeon.

—Perceived mana outside of mana circle up above: zero.

—Predicting that dungeon core has been eliminated.]

“So it’s the ruins of a dungeon...”

That’s a shock. I never imagined there was a place like this between Donius and Cardiff.

The mask beckoned me into the now-pointless labyrinth.

This cave... The way it was paved made me think of an irrigation channel. It reminded me of a school field trip back in Cardiff.

“I’m heading in. If anything moves, tell me.”

[—Continuing search.]

I walked onwards, sending the little fire gears out ahead of me. Yeah, it was no shock, but I was scared. It’s real dark, after all. I mean, there’s pretty much no light down in this cave...

Or so I thought. There were actually little shining spots scattered here and there on both sides of the path.

The mask heated up a little again.

“Light magic stones... Are they reacting to you?” I asked, tapping the mask on my forehead.

I wouldn’t have seen that magic circle from before if I didn’t have this thing on, either. It must have been set up so that the person wearing it could see the path forward.

...Just what exactly was hidden here?

I was worried monsters may have settled down here, but fortunately I didn’t

run into anything. Here and there, though, there were places where it looked like a path had been caved in.

Somebody had made sure this path was the only way forward.

Finally, I arrived at the end.

The ceiling was a bit high here. When I illuminated the space with my flames, I saw furniture.

This place is...!

“A... room?”

There was a room in the depths of these hidden labyrinth ruins. It... didn't feel like a boss room, though. Then again, I've never been in a dungeon before so what do I know?

There was a desk and a chair, as well as a lamp and a map. Yeah... Feels like somebody had been living here. Was this where the owner of the mask on my forehead had lived?

“If they were holed up in a place like this, were they some sort of big bad guy...?”

...

“Well, whatever. So, what now...? Am I supposed to take care of some unfinished business? Destroy the ‘special books’ in the sock drawer or something?”

Hopefully it's not too big a job for a restaurant owner's daughter.

Shake, shake, shake...!

“Gah, it's shaking! Crown, the mask is shaking!”

[—Crown can confirm.]

“Hey, you! Don't you have any sense of danger?! Ah...!”

Fwip!

Ah, the mask went ahead and re-equipped itself.

“Seriously, you're cutting off the circulation in my... Ah!”

It was shining! The desk! The drawer of the desk was shining!!

It was the same sort of yellow-green pattern that I'd seen with the magic circle at the entrance.

So this mask really *does* have the power to see hidden magic!

"That *has* to be this thing's objective, right...?"

[—Direction of vector is a perfect match with the indicated point.]

"Should I open it...?"

Just don't let it be pictures of naked ladies...

When I grabbed the handle, that yellow-green light seemed to burst apart, then disappear.

Clack. It was open.

I pulled, and it slid out with no trouble. Whoever made this seriously did a good job.

And inside...

"A knife and... a letter?"

There was a letter inside an envelope. All that was written on the outside was the recipient.

"To Basseley."

That's a woman's name, right...?

Who is it? Your lover?

"So should I just burn this...?"

Shakeshakeshake!!

"Hey! It's shaking again! Way too hard, actually!"

[—Crown can confirm.]

"You dummy!! I-I can't get it off?! This thing really *is* a cursed mask! Gah, it's itchy! My eyes are feeling itchy!"

Shake...

“Ha... haha... I-It stopped.”

Hey, what're you doing? I was just talking about burning a love letter from your one-sided crush, right?

“You... don't seriously want me to deliver this, do you?”

...

...This time, it wasn't shaking. S-So did this silence mean that was right?

“Come on, give me a break...”

[—Reporting. Vector direction confirmed to be linked to one more item.]

“Huh? To the knife, too?”

So this letter and knife were a set?

“This knife... it's completely clear...!”

Normally, a knife's handle and blade are made of two different things. But this one seemed to be made entirely of crystal.

It was amazingly clear, like ice.

Ah! There's some sort of plant inside...!

“That's a bud... Is it a flower?”

[—Unable to find corresponding information.]

“Huh?! If it's some plant that even you don't know, it must be pretty rare, right?”

Crown had the information of a freshly created dungeon core packed into its head. That was a trait of the analyze card it had absorbed. So shouldn't it have info on plant and animal type monsters?

Well, there may be all sorts of plants that can only grow in a dungeon.



“So, what am I supposed to do with this...?”

[—Update: Vector direction has shifted.]

“...Huh?”

Whaaaaaaaaaat?!!!!

“Hey, hold on! You don’t mean...?!”

[—The curse’s target direction has changed.]

“Aaaagh, so it’s telling me to go off somewhere else, now?!!!”

I’m not your gofer!

Even back in school, I never gave in to that sort of harassment!

Damn, if you weren’t cursed, you dumb mask, I would totally just ignore you! Wouldn’t even give you so much as a glance!

You’re just wasting my life away, seriously! But I guess I can’t just go and dare it to make the first move...

“Alright, this way next!” I guess...?

Pryce was always getting tricked into doing stuff for my mom because he couldn’t bring himself to turn her down...

Tumble.

“Ah!”

The mask came off all of a sudden, but I caught it midway through its fall. I looked at it as it lay in my hand.

...It was a strange feeling, like we were locking eyes.

Ah, well this is a pain... I get the feel that if I make a move without thinking, I might not be able to refuse it again. I mean, I got that, somehow.

This mask was asking for my help right now. Like it was saying, “Please.”

“Haah... Playing to my good-natured side, are you?”

I’ve defeated a bear and wiped out a forest fire. So why not listen to a request from a cursed mask?

“Crown, let’s work under the assumption that we have a place to deliver this.”

[—Request accepted. Registering guidelines for action. Beginning support.]

I grabbed the flowered knife and letter, and prepared to take off into the air.

Afterword

Thanks so much to all of you who picked up this story.

Those of you who followed the original version probably already know this, but as the author in charge of painting out this story with my words, I prioritized what I found fun above all else. It's just that because of all the people who supported this freewheeling work of mine, it came together in this form and you all saw it. Read it. Experienced it. I realize just how lucky I am for that to have happened.

I wonder, can you picture Anti sparkling and beaming in your heart now? I hope that the gears of this story have given birth to some sort of power inside of you, too.

My deepest thanks to my editor, my illustrator Mr. Sugi, and everyone involved with this story. I sincerely mean that. Seriously. A whole lot.

I would also just like to say that I have included one more extra story here, to accompany this adaptation.

Well, then, Gear Drive is starting up, starting up...

Kabayakidare

The Golden-Ringed Eclipse/ The Purple Lightning

It all began around when warmth had slowly begun to creep back into the northern town.

I had already gone into retirement, only for a messenger from the guild to show up before me. He said that Blake was calling on me personally.

I'd known the man since back before he became guildmaster. Both of us had aged enough to be called old geezers by this point, though. That damn tea-lover... Just what does he want with me? Oh well, guess all I can do is go and find out, huh?

What's that? I'm supposed to take my gear with me?

There was no helping it. I grabbed a sword and some light leather armor befitting someone of my years, then headed off for the guild.

...There's no way you're planning on thrusting a quest on an old-timer like me, right?



That turned out to be just what was happening.

It was a job where I was asked for by name, to be precise.

It was true that these old muscles still had some strength in them yet, but I was a lot smaller now than I was back in my youth.

When I entered into the room, I spotted a very familiar tea-loving old fart seated on the sofa opposite me. Hmm? There was a small girl who looked to be about 10 years old sitting next to him.

And then to the side were two folks dressed in an unusual manner, with the upper halves of their faces hidden by masks. Judging by the outfits, were they magic researchers working directly under the Partridge Church...?

Blake was the same as always, but I felt some tension coming off the two folks

standing there. Well, I may just be an old bag of bones now, but I used to be an adventurer. As if I'd be overwhelmed by something like that.

Anyway, my attention turned to the girl seated beside Blake.

This was the guildmaster's office for the Partridge Guild. What was a small girl like her doing in a place like this?

"Sorry for calling on you like this. Come, have a drink."

...Clink.

He offered me a cup of tea. It sure did smell good.

Blake was dressed in a suit, and his long hair flowed down his back. He still had an elegance about him, even as an old geezer. It was hard to read his expression when he narrowed his eyes like that, but he looked to me like he was a bit on edge.

The two magic researchers standing there with an overwhelming presence, and the little girl... Good grief, there was clearly something unusual going on here.

"Is she your grandkid...?"

"Heh, of course not. I haven't seen you for a while, but you're the same as always, aren't you?"

"So why did you call for me?"

"...You were the only one who met the qualifications we needed."

"Hmm...?"

"I want you to escort this girl to the western city."

"To the west? You mean Donius...?"

"Yeah."

"Just me and that girl?"

"That's right. We don't want you to stand out."

"..."

I cast a quick glance to the side at the magic researchers.

Hmph, they aren't budging even a celchi. That gives me a chance to give them a rough look-over.

"I think I get why you chose me..."

"..."

"I'm someone you've got a certain degree of trust in. And if it came down to it and you had to get rid of me, my disappearance wouldn't stand out much."

"I see you still just lay anything and everything that comes to mind out there..."

"Would it be better if I didn't? Cut that crap out. It's important to make sure everything is clear and precise."

"...Sorry about that."

Blake chose me out of trust. The ones who did it because I'd be easy to dispose of were those magic researchers. Damn bastards.

Well, whatever. My better half passed on before me, so all I'm doing now is just steadily piling up the years. I'd get to help out an old friend by protecting this girl. And as long as I kept their secrets, it may not even be that dangerous. So why not go ahead and accept the job?

"Hey, you two there..."

"..."

"As an adventurer, I'll never betray my client's secrets. But if all you're willing to give me is vague information, then I won't accept the job."

"..."

Hmph. They were staring straight at me through their masks. They really were a damn pain... Felt like they were evaluating goods or something.

Hah. As if I'd just leave things be at this point.

"Blake... Is there something unique about that girl?"

"Oh, so you'll accept? Then let me tell you."

Apparently the girl was called the "Purple Lightning." It seemed she was still

just 11 years old. Her hair was white and light purple, like the lightning that came down on the night of the full moon here in the town of Partridge.

“You see, this girl underwent a Skill Bestowal as a baby.”

“Huh...?!”

A Skill Bestowal. That was the ceremony held in the church for those who still couldn't use magic at the age of 15, in which God granted them an ability. Whether the ability they got was great or small, their natural magic affinity was wiped out in the process. That was why it was normal to wait and see until the age of 15, and only perform it on those who still couldn't use any magic. And yet he was saying it was done to this girl when she was still just a baby.

“This girl needs to go to Donius in order to carry out an experiment on her power. That's because the guild in that town has a White Cube.”

“I see... Do they know about this?”

“I told the guildmaster in Donius the simplified version via crystal ball.”

“Hmph...”

I looked again at the girl. She was fiddling with her long hair, which flowed down all the way to her waist. She seemed to be a very quiet child. It was like she was the very incarnation of that cold, unfeeling lightning that flashed across the moon.

“...Alright. I'll accept.”

“I'm in your debt.”



We departed a few days later by carriage. The Purple Lightning and I didn't speak a word to each other, even in there. Unfortunately, I wasn't clever enough to come up with any topics such a small girl would enjoy discussing. Haah... If only my wife were still alive, she'd have some good ideas.

She did look ever so slightly excited by the scenery streaming by outside the carriage, though.

After a few days, there was less snow coating everything, and we started to

spy some green. Hmph, guess seeing the changing sights of the world around you was more interesting than looking at an old geezer like me.

Currently, we were to the northwest of the capital. Had she never left the north before? I suppose it was possible she hadn't had many chances to even go outside in general. This very well could be an extremely precious trip for the girl.

I thought about this girl called "the Purple Lightning." A Skill Bestowal... This moonlit girl, said to have gone through that when she was just a baby. Yeah, that may well have been an inconvenient fact that the folks from the Partridge Church wanted to hide.

And those magic researchers belonging to the church... Was she a regular research subject of theirs? That was a despicable thought...

She was a real quiet child, but now she was staring so happily out the carriage window. I had no idea what her power was, but it must really have been something. When you performed a Skill Bestowal on a baby, was it just a given that they'd end up with some sort of amazing power? If so, I could definitely see those magic researchers wanting to hide that fact from the churches in other towns, and even the capital...



A massive man in a suit came to greet us when we reached the western town, Donius. He had messy black hair and a moustache. He really was a big fellow. Must be about three meltortes tall. And that sure was a moustache... He was the guildmaster of Donius, by the name of... something or other.

After giving me a nod, the massive man crouched and patted the Purple Lightning on the head.

"Thanks so much for coming. I'm sure you must be tired out. Your town's guildmaster said to start right away, but will you really be alright doing it without any rest?"

"Yeah..." she replied with a nod. She really is as shy as I'd thought.

I was relieved to find that, despite his big body, the Donius guildmaster was actually rather gentlemanly on the inside. Still, I was told to keep the matter of

her Skill Bestowal a secret from the Donius side. I figured they must have said she was just a girl who happened to naturally have a rare and unique sort of magic.

There was a White Cube below the Donius guild. It was a room where the walls, floor, and ceiling were all pure white. And I hear it was built to be incredibly sturdy.

What I saw next, however, made me doubt my eyes.

...Kwa-BOOOOOOOOOOOM!!!



The four of us exited the White Cube together. Aside from the girl herself, three of us, myself included, had seen the Purple Lightning's magic. One of them was a receptionist there, who said it had apparently broken their records.

"I never imagined her magic would be that powerful..."

The guildmaster with the moustache, whatshisname, was left speechless.

The purple lightning she had let off had distorted the surface of the White Cube's wall, like movement disturbing the surface of a lake. I suppose that definitely would be considered out of the ordinary.

When I glanced over her way again, I found the Purple Lightning happily discussing something with the receptionist. Well, no, it seemed like the receptionist was the only one talking. She was actually a pretty young receptionist, now that I looked. I suppose that young girl may not have had many chances to talk to anyone near her age. Despite being able to let off that powerful of a volley of lightning, she was apparently no match for the receptionist's uninhibited nature.

Haha, it made for a charming sight.

Suddenly, things grew frantic around the guild's entrance.

"H-Help us! Forest wolves, they... they snuck into our town, Cardiff!!"

The young receptionist's expression instantly grew serious as she listened to the details from the man who had come running in. From what I overheard, there was a town called Cardiff to the west of here, and apparently several

forest wolves had slipped past their barrier fence. Those things were way stronger than normal wolves. When there were more than three of them in a pack, their teamwork got to be real troublesome.

“This is bad, Guildmaster... It’s been getting warm lately, so all the adventuring parties are out on campaigns. It’ll be tricky trying to find someone to take such an urgent quest. Let’s put a call out for solo adventurers and try to build a party!”

“H-Hey! Please, I’m begging you! There’s lots of the things, and they’re huge! We can’t do a thing about them! You need to hurry! Please!”

“Calm down and listen. There’s a lot of people out on a quest to handle some goblins, and it’s really far from here. Even if we were to call them back, it would take some time...”

“T-That can’t be...”

“Should... I go?” the girl (who at some point had wandered over beside me) suddenly eked out. “If it’s just forest wolves, it’ll be easy. I could blow them to pieces... really quickly.”

“W-What’re you saying, little miss...? The wolves that came into our town are *thiiiiis* big, and there’s a number of them! Seriously, that joke’s in poor taste... Just head on back home, little miss...”

This man from the neighboring town had no idea of her power. But even the teamwork between forest wolves that would normally take several parties to overcome would be nothing in the face of her lightning.

No, wait, there was something that bothered me, though. When he told her to “head on back home,” the Purple Lightning’s expression clearly grew cloudy.

“I... don’t... want to... go back...”

She said it so quietly, only I could hear her. But that was enough for me to tell.

This girl had been enjoying our trip. It was nothing but a round trip north and west in a carriage. When I took this girl back north, I’d likely be returning her to days of being treated coldly as nothing but a rare test subject. She may not even have another chance like this to so much as go outside. Alright...

The old me never would have done something like this. But when you get to be an old geezer like me, you're supposed to be at least a bit of a softy, right?

I practically threw some money at the driver, got atop a horse, and ran, ran, ran to the west. The little girl in front of me looked surprised by the shaking she could feel from atop the creature's back. I gripped the reins and yelled, "Your trip isn't over just yet!"

"...!"

As the scenery flew by around us, she turned back and looked at me with her shining, light purple eyes.

When we made it to Cardiff, I could hardly sense anyone around.

The town was right near Donius. It couldn't have been more than three or four hors since the forest wolves snuck inside...

It took a few hors to get from Cardiff to Donius, even on horseback. But I could see some simple wooden barricades here and there throughout town. The entrances to the buildings were crudely barred.

I see, so they evacuated up to higher ground... Looks like there was someone in this small town who knew what they were doing when it came to monsters.

I got down off the horse, then helped the girl to the ground. It would've been nice if we hadn't come on an unfamiliar horse, but we did what we had to.

"There's... nobody around... Were... they eaten?"

"Don't just go saying stuff like that. They're hiding up above and being as quiet as they can. That was a good call."

"...Right. Let's look... for the wolves."

We walked along through the town. It was so silent, it felt like time was standing still.

Baaaaaaaaaaaaam!!!

"Huh?!"

All of a sudden, the Purple Lightning took off running in the direction of that loud sound, and I followed. We arrived at a building and found the forest

wolves gathered around it, trying to climb its walls. A flame-wielding woman looked to be fighting back from atop the roof. And there were a lot of places on that building for the wolves to use as footholds. The woman was using some splendid fire magic, but the wolves were still going to be able to rush her. In other words, this battle was proving one-sided. And there probably wasn't anyone else skilled with magic in this tiny town.

The woman wore a look of disbelief when she noticed me and the girl approaching. Taking advantage of her momentary shock, one of the wolves leapt up the building. A look of shock mingled with anger crossed the woman's face as she fired off as much flame as she could. The wolf, however, made a mesh out of the vines coming from its body and warded off the attack. It had lost a good bit of the branches composing its body, but the forest wolf was still alive. It was sent flying and landed with a *thud* right beside the Purple Lightning.

“Watch out!!!”

A young girl's voice rang out loudly, and it wasn't that of the Purple Lightning. There was a little blonde girl leaning out of an upper-floor window of another building. Her hair shined like the rays of the sun. Now that I looked closely, the concerned residents of Cardiff were peeking out of other windows, too.

The forest wolves shifted their attention to the prey that had suddenly appeared: me and the Purple Lightning.

The woman on the roof was chanting a spell, a pained expression on her face. I drew my sword.

All that, however, was for naught.

The Purple Lightning lifted up her fair-skinned little hand, and...

“...Goodbye.”

Booooooooooooooooooom!!!!!!

The lightning fell down upon the forest wolves with a thunderous roar, and in an instant they were reduced to nothing but a pile of twigs.

Silence fell over the scene, and I felt the warmth of the sun's rays... That was splendid...

For a while, time seemed to stop for all who had seen that sight, myself included.

And now, the Purple Lightning was surrounded by the people of Cardiff. It sure was a crowd. Guess that was only natural, though. I mean, that little girl had gone and saved their town, after all. It was like the place was positively sparkling, overflowing with their smiles.

But the star of the show, the Purple Lightning herself, looked so panicked that you couldn't help but pity her.

Hmph, aside from that power of hers, she was just a normal, shy little 11-year-old girl. It may have been just a small town, but she still wasn't able to handle all the sudden praise from almost the entire population at once.

Just as she dashed around behind my back, trembling, the blonde girl appeared.

“Haah... haah... Um...! U-Um...”

I had already noticed back when she screamed out that warning, but this girl had some seriously beautiful golden-colored eyes. Golden hair, and golden eyes... If you were to call the Purple Lightning the moon, then this girl would be the sun. And they looked like they must have been just about the same age, too.

I went and gave the girl hiding behind me a gentle push on the back, bringing about a meeting between the sun and the moon.

“...! U-Um...”

“T-Thank you so much!! You're, like, seriously amazing!!”

“Ah...!”

“You're about my age, but you saved everyone just like that, and it was so incredible!”

“R-Right...”

The Purple Lightning stopped trembling and opened her eyes, fascinated by the blonde girl with a smile that seemed to almost sparkle. A girl like the sun, and one like the moon. Both were blushing.

The blonde girl reached out and grabbed the Purple Lightning's hands.

"Thank you. I'm so glad you came here..."

"Right..."

It was like the two girls holding hands were etching the colors of each other's eyes into their hearts.



The Purple Lightning ended up staring out the window again on the carriage trip back. In my hand, I held the data on her magic that the receptionist from the Donius Guild had measured. Huh...? Unable to detect any mana? That can't be... What does it mean?

"It was... pretty..."

"...What was?"

"That girl's hair... and her eyes..."

"Ah, yeah. That's for sure."

"I wish... I had asked her name..."

"...!"

This girl... She may have just wanted a friend...

"The people of that town aren't likely to forget their gratitude to you anytime soon. You can just go ahead and go back there when you're bigger, and ask her what her name is."

"...! Do you... really think I can...?"

"I'm sure you will, someday."

"I'd like... to meet her again..."

You've got an old bag of bones like me rooting for you at least, girl. So hopefully one day, the sun and moon will get to meet again.

The scenery outside the carriage steadily shifted from a vibrant green to the pure white of snow...



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Gear Drive: Volume 1

by Kabayakidare

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