Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio
6
Average of 25
× 365 days
× 300 years
× (2+2 EXP)
Level 99
I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level

I'VE BEEN KILLING SLIMES FOR 300 YEARS AND MAXED OUT MY LEVEL

– Slime Taoshite 300-nen, Shiranai Uchi ni Level Max ni Nattemashita –

- VOLUME 6 -

-AUTHOR-
Kisetsu Morita

-ILLUSTRATOR-
Benio

[Yen Press]

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I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level
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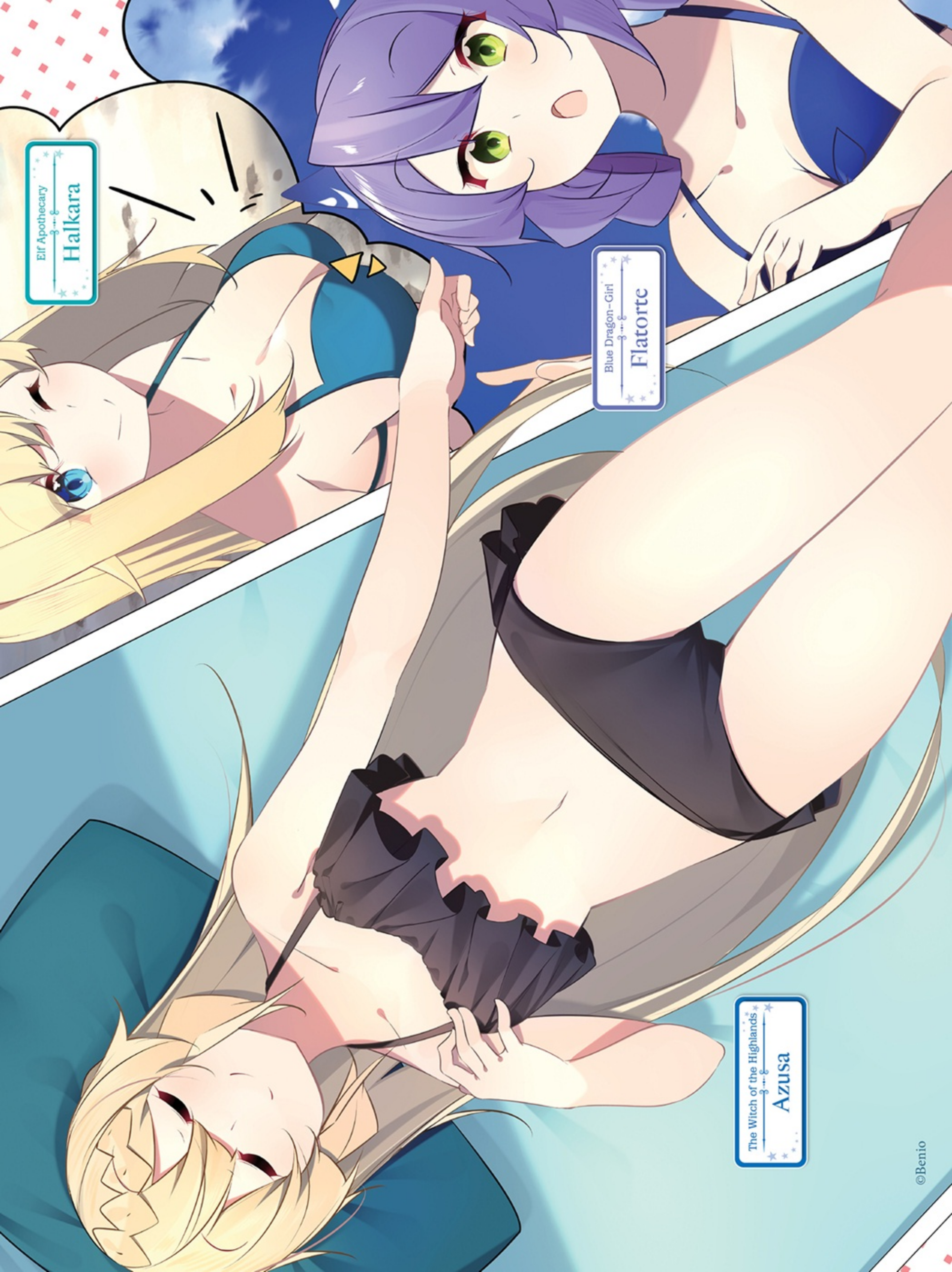
It was tough to put on, but it was worth it if it makes you this happy, Mom.
Thank you, Mommy!
You're both too cute! I'm not the strongest at all—YOU are!!


Elf Apothecary
Halkara
Blue Dragon-Girl
Flatorte
The Witch of the Highlands
Azusa
©Benio

This beauty treatment will make me glow like never before...
What a shockingly delicious flavor!
CURRENTLY CONDUCTING GOVERNMENT INSPECTION
This juice is the real thing!
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I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1,500 Years, and the Demon King Made Me a Minister

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Story by Kisetsu Morita Illustration by Benio

She slaughtered slimes for 300 years...

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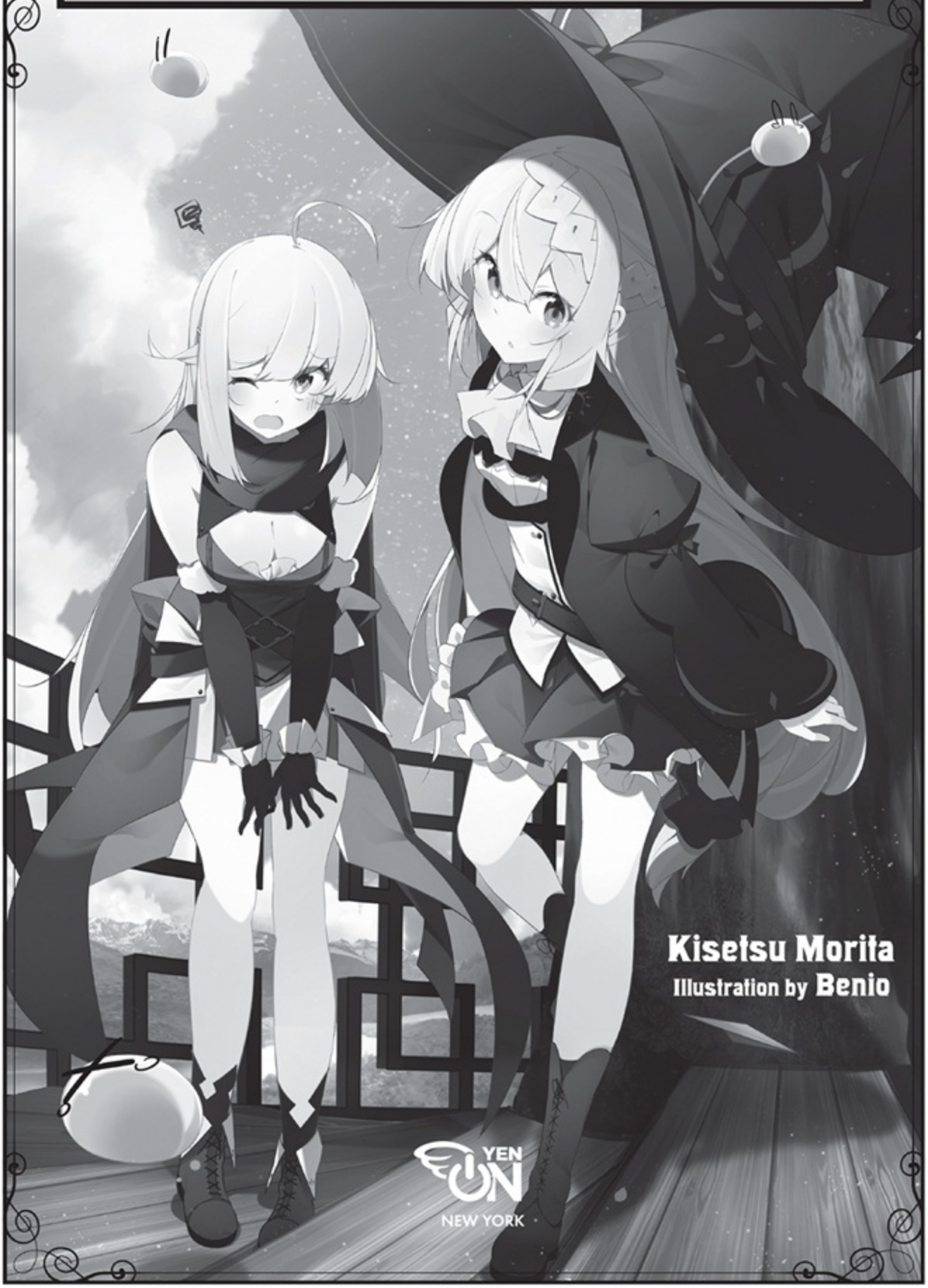
I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level 6



Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio

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NEW YORK

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I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level, Vol. 6
KISETSU MORITA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt and Taylor Engel
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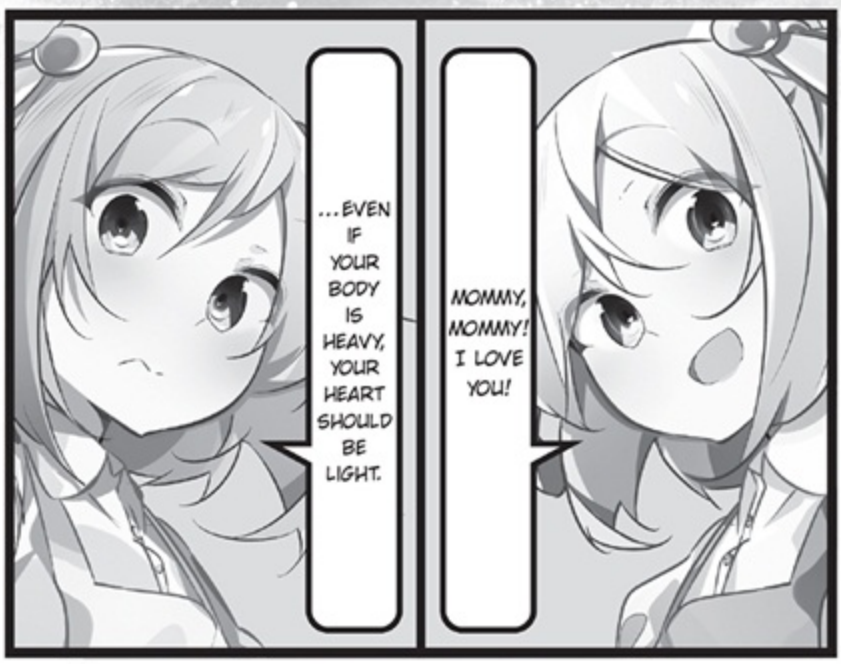
Yen Newsletter

AZUSA AIZAWA

The protagonist. Commonly known as the Witch of the Highlands. A girl (?) who was reincarnated as an immortal witch with the appearance of a seventeen year old. Before she knew what was happening, she'd become the strongest being in the world. Although she's had some rough times, it has ultimately given her a family, and she's delighted about it.

BEELZEBUB

A high-ranking demon known as the Lord of the Flies and the demons' minister of agriculture. She frequently shuttles between the demon realm and the house in the highlands. She's Azusa's reliable "big sister" surrogate and the protagonist of the spin-off in this book, "I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1,500 Years, and the Demon King Made Me a Minister."



FALFA AND SHALSHA

Spirit sisters born from a conglomeration of slime souls. Falfa, the older sister, is a carefree girl who's honest about her own feelings. Shalsha, the younger sister, is considerate and attentive to others. They both love their mother, Azusa.

LAIKA AND FLATORTE

Red and blue dragon–girls who live in the house in the highlands. Laika is Azusa's apprentice and a good, hardworking girl. Flatorte is a cheerful, energetic girl who obeys what Azusa says. They tend to compete with each other as fellow dragons.

HALKARA

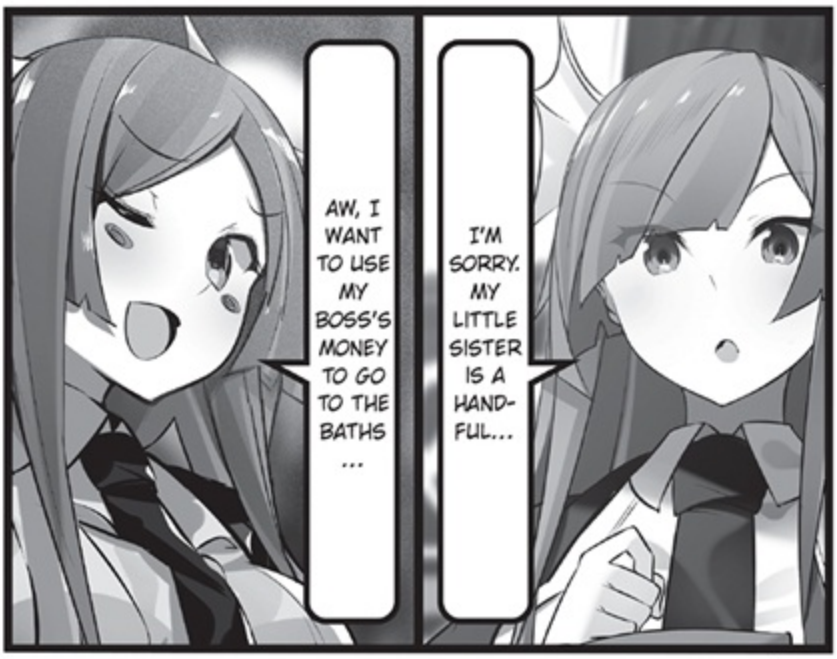
A young elf woman and Azusa's second apprentice. Everyone in the family (particularly Azusa) admires her periodic bouts of maturity and her enviably perfect looks… That doesn't change her role as the family member with a knack for screwing up.

PECORA
(PROVATO PECORA ARIÉS)

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

FATLA AND VANIA

Leviathan sisters who work as Beelzebub's secretaries. They can transform into giant dragons, and they transport Azusa and company to the demon lands as well as look after them. The elder sister, Fatla, is a stable and capable girl. The younger sister, Vania, is ditzy but a good cook.



FIGHSLY

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

SANDRA

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

ROSALIE

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

YUFUFU

A droplet spirit (a variety of water spirit). She has a magnanimous personality that can win over even Azusa—she's everyone's momma who pokes her nose in everyone's business.

"Hmm~ I see, I see. So the test run at school didn't go so well~"

"It just taught me all over again how incredible both Falfa and Shalsha are. As a parent, I'm extremely proud of them, though."

I reported on how things were going as I lounged on the couch and let out a yawn. I had to say, I was really relaxed.

The couch I was on belonged to the droplet spirit Momma Yufufu.

That's right—I was in the middle of a relaxing visit to Momma Yufufu's house.

As the maternal figure in my life, she was the only person I could talk to about child-rearing. That being said, it felt less like talking to a fellow mom and more like talking to my own parent.

There was only one place I could let loose and laze around as someone else's daughter, and that was Momma Yufufu's house.

"And you have another girl now, Sandra, was it? Your hands are quite full~"

"You say that, but she's a mandragora, so she can feed herself. She gets all her nutrients from the ground. Plus, my other girls help her with studying, so I don't really have to be so hands-on with her."

"But won't there be more fights with more people now?"

"Hmm, well, I guess Sandra only really sticks with me and my daughters… And she's probably older than I am… She never really fights with the other family members, but there are times I wish things would go more smoothly…"

Still, time could solve those issues, and I was sure that Sandra would be a pea in our pod before long. After all, she was already a plant.

Either way, Momma Yufufu's house really calmed me down. I was amazed at how much

it felt like my parents' house.

"How is that waterfall doing?" I asked. "Are any tourists coming?"

Near Momma Yufufu's house, there was a run-down town called Bugabee. I had suggested that they use the waterfall in the area as a draw for their tourism.

"You can't get there without hiring adventurers, so civilian tourists aren't coming in droves from what I hear, but highly skilled adventurers do come from time to time and say it is a superb view. I suppose word of it is spreading slowly."

"So I guess things aren't going so badly, huh?"

"What do you want for lunch, Azusa? Is mushroom spaghetti okay?"

Momma Yufufu made lunch for me like it was the most natural thing in the world. This place is the best!

"Sure, I'll take you up on that."

"Why don't you take a nap on the couch in the meantime? I'll wake you up when it's ready."

"Thanks. I'll close my eyes for a bit, then."

As I was starting to doze off, Momma Yufufu covered me with a light, terry-cloth blanket. "Here, Azusa, be sure to keep warm."

Man, this is the life!

I recently started coming out to Momma Yufufu's house and loafing around as her daughter. In my mind, I was calling these trips my homecomings.

Yes—the one thing I was lacking in my three hundred years living in this other world was a place to go home to. My original home hadn't burned down or anything—I'd been reincarnated in another world, so I'd spent my whole life here in the house in the highlands.

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Now, with another place to go home to, I could finally say that my slow and relaxing life had reached peak quality!

I could hear Momma Yufufu cooking in the kitchen. *Siiigh*~ So calming.

"Oh, yes. I have this watermelon, so maybe we'll have it for dessert."

Watermelon for dessert! It really is like home!

"Perhaps I should add extra vegetables and mushrooms since they're healthy."

She's worrying about my health! Just like home!

I drifted right off to sleep until the food was done. It was pure bliss, and that wasn't an exaggeration.

"All right, Azusa. Food's ready," said Momma Yufufu, waking me up to some steaming mushroom spaghetti on the table. "I don't think it'll be as good as a restaurant's."

"It's fine; that's fine! Homemade food doesn't need to taste like restaurant food! I'd never compare them anyway!"

In fact, if the food I ate at home tasted like something from a restaurant, *that* would be the problem. It's like mixing the wrong categories together. You don't want to find a full-grown lion in a cat café; I'd be terrified.

"It's very humid around here, so all sorts of mushrooms grow nearby. That's what I used to cook today."

"Huh, you're right—I see red ones, black ones, all different kinds."

She sprinkled some powdered cheese on top.

Wow, it tasted exactly like it would at home! This was what I'd been looking for! She hadn't added any white wine to spice things up, and… it wasn't like there were layers upon layers of flavors, either. But it was good and tasty. It was as if the main spice was a mother's love.

"Gosh, Momma Yufufu, you're such a mom~"

“I’m so happy you’re calling me a mom, too, Azusa~ Now, eat as much as you like. And please feel free to have seconds.”

I really thought I was going to break into a huge smile. In fact, I think I may have a little bit.

I’m just gonna say it: People need moms in their lives.

When I was living in Japan, I knew many wives couldn’t stand having a momma’s boy for a husband, among other things. Like, I get it, but hold on a sec. No matter how old you get, your mom’s still your mom. She doesn’t suddenly turn into your dad or your big sister when you turn twenty. But what if the wives got overly attached to their mothers-in-law, too? Couldn’t that just solve everything? That’d make everyone happy, right?!

I know I already live in a different world, and I’ve been alive for over three hundred years at this point, but I just wanted to suggest that.

As for lunch, I had lots of extra helpings. The spaghetti was great and so was the vegetable soup. The flavors warmed me down to my heart.

Man, it was so good, *so* good. People ate three times more than usual when they went to their parents’ house, didn’t they? People gained a little weight, didn’t they? Well, I sure did.

“By the way, Momma, what’s the name of this red mushroom?” I had a feeling I’d eaten it somewhere before.

“That’s the gnomesform mushroom. The firm and crunchy texture is rather fun, no?”

“Ahhh, gnomesform~ I ate it once and, boy, was that a headache~”

…Wait, what?

Why did I associate this mushroom with trouble…?

Isn’t eating this supposed to make you small like a gnome…? I definitely remember Halkara forcing me to eat it once…

“Oh, that’s right! Will you be okay eating gnomesform mushrooms, Azusa? They’re not a problem for spirits, but you’re not a spirit. Humans turn into children for a little while, don’t they?”

Momma Yufufu, you need to check these things beforehand.

The poison must have finally taken effect, because I rapidly started to shrink—

—And I stopped at the size of a toddler.

I was small enough for Falfa or Shalsha to lift me up a bit. I was the same size as Sandra…

“Oh my~ You’re such a cute little thing now~ Oh, just your size; you were always adorable, Azusa.”

I’ve looked like a seventeen-year-old for three hundred years, so I took pride in my cuteness—but that wasn’t the problem.

Momma Yufufu hoisted me up.

I had a feeling that my family did this to me the last time I turned small.

Apparently, once you turned back into a toddler, everyone instinctually wanted to pick you up. Well, maybe I was overgeneralizing; turning into a toddler wasn’t exactly a common phenomenon.

“Oh, yes, you’re so light, so light! How cute, what a cutie!”

Momma Yufufu was calling me *cute* over and over again. I wasn’t really happy to hear it so much right after changing form into something else.

“*Sigh…* I can’t believe I ended up shrinking here… I mean, I know I can just take a mandragora pill and be back to normal, so it’s not that serious…”

These symptoms could be relieved by taking mandragora pills, the medicine sold by Eno, the Witch of the Grotto.

“Aww~ You’re going back to normal so soon?”

Momma Yufufu sounded disappointed, but, yeah, obviously. Life was hard like this. I wouldn't be able to reach things on high shelves, and I'd get more tired shopping than I would if I were an adult.

"Oh, I have a favor to ask," Momma Yufufu said, putting me back on the ground.

"Do you think you could treat me as your real momma for just a bit?"

"I don't get what you're saying."

What was I supposed to do? Be born again as a spirit? Not even I could do that.

"Live with me for a few days as my daughter. You're already little and you're already here—why don't we go into town? Just the two of us."

"Huh…? I've been treating you as my mom the whole time, though, I think?"

Momma Yufufu waved her hand in denial, indicating that I was way off.

"That's like the relationship between a mother and her daughter who's come home to visit, no? Right now, we're like a mother and her young daughter. This is entirely different. It's like drain water and shaved ice."

Did she just call my real self drain water…?

"The general concept of parents and children doesn't exist among the spirits. That was why I was so excited to act as your mother, but I did wish I could be a mommy to a much younger girl~ Heh-heh-heh~"

And for no reason at all, she started patting my head. Apparently, I was like a little treasure.

I had pretty complicated feelings about the whole thing, but she had been making food for me and let me laze around her house. We'd been doing everything my way up until now, so of course she would want to do something her way for once.

And since she didn't have any children of her own, what she said struck a chord with me.

I was living with Falfa and Shalsha, the cutest girls in the world (this is fact, and no, I will not be accepting any criticism), but they were supernatural beings only born after I'd killed thousands of slimes. My life with them was full of delight, so I wanted to pay it forward to someone who longed for a life with a daughter.

And since I was the one who regarded Yufufu as my mom, she would be my mom no matter what size I was. I didn't have any other mom in this world.

Right at that moment, another kid without a mom came to mind.

That was Sandra.

Well, she was a plant, so she probably technically had her plant parents, but it had been such a long time, long enough for her to gain a personality. She probably didn't know who they were.

It was an extremely rare case for mandragoras to become like Sandra, so I suspect they were either already wilted or in a poultice somewhere. Sandra, at least, didn't know who her mother was.

"Fine, Momma Yufufu. I'll stay this way to be your daughter for a bit."

"Ohhh, yay! I'm so happy!!!"

She hugged me so tight, her boobs started suffocating me.

"But I do have one condition…"

"Oh, hmm? What is it?"

Wow, it sure is a tight squeeze between these things…

"Do you think you could treat Sandra the mandragora as your daughter, too? She only really likes me and Falfa and Shalsha, so she might be worried if I'm not around."

"Yes, of course! And right now, I'm getting two daughters for the price of one, so this is wonderful!"

That sounded like something I'd hear in an infomercial from my past life…

"Then I'm going to go back to the house in the highlands for a bit to explain."

"Of course. Yes, please."

At last, I was freed from her massive bosom.

How did she get them so big? Were they ill-gotten gains?

But I couldn't go back right away.

Whenever the droplet spirit hugged me, I ended up soaked.

"Oh my, they'd think you had an accident if you went back like that~"

As if you had nothing to do with it— You know this is your fault, right?

"I'll just go dry myself off with Flame magic…"

◇

Once I'd dried my clothes, I used Momma Yufufu's transport magic to go back to the house in the highlands so I could talk to Sandra.

"Hmm… Acting as a daughter, hmm…? Fine. I'll do it. For you."

She was being rather condescending about it, but I didn't mind. This was par for the course with her.

"Great, then let's go," I said.

Of course, since I came to the house in the form of a little girl, the rest of the family fawned over me.

"I'll make cookies for my little mistress!"

"I will make cookies, too!"

“And I’ll have to buy clothes for my little mistress!”

“I—I… will find good clothes, too!”

Wait, you don’t have to compete over this, dragons! And if you end up buying clothes for me, then I’ll have to turn small every once in a while in the future, so please stop.

“What would happen if she ate more gnomesform in this state? Would she become a baby?”

Halkara’s head was filled with terrifying thoughts. *Please, that’s not funny…*

◇

Starting that evening, both (little) me and Sandra began our tenure as Momma Yufufu’s daughters.

Sandra and I sat on the dining chairs.

“Oh, hey, you’re not in the ground or anything right now, Sandra.”

She was usually already underground by this point in the day.

“…It’s really damp here… If I lived as a plant, I’d wither because it’s so wet…,” Sandra said, looking tired. I had no idea it would be so hard for her! “That’s why I’m staying inside for these few days. I can store nutrients in my body, so I’m okay not getting in the earth for a month or two.”

Right. Every part of her that looked human was actually her roots. Maybe that was why animate mandragoras were so hardy.

“Then I’ll teach you writing and arithmetic instead of Falfa and Shalsha today, okay?”

“Y-you will…? Thanks, then…” Sandra wasn’t really the emotive type, but I was starting to tell when she was happy or not.

“Heh-heh, I baked a cupcake for each of you before dinner~ How about it~?” Momma Yufufu came in wearing an apron and carrying cakes. She seemed pretty happy, too.

“Oh, Sandra can’t eat. We appreciate it, though…”

“Yeah. I’m really just fine with water and earth that’s not too damp,” Sandra added bluntly, but she did seem to feel bad about it. Her expression clouded slightly.

“Oh my, my, I see. I am sorry. Everyone has their own ways of life, don’t they~?”

Momma Yufufu’s eyebrows fell in disappointment, but she then scooped Sandra up into a hug.

“I’m sorry, Sandra. Momma didn’t know. Please forgive me~”

“Hey! You’re hurting me! Stop this… B-but… I guess just a bit is fine…” Sandra resisted a little at first, but her expression softened. “Momma, huh…? I’m a plant, so I don’t really understand, but I find this soothing for some reason. Might not be so bad…”

Sandra was starting to feel Momma Yufufu’s maternal vibes!

“I feel a sense of security that I didn’t have with Azusa… Is this a mother’s bosom…? Is this what motherliness is?”

“Geez, sorry for not having big boobs!”

It felt an awful lot like I was losing here! Not that I ever thought I could win, but this was just frustrating! Really frustrating!

“You can call me Momma, Sandra. Actually, please do.”

“You bring me peace of mind, Momma. And I can hydrate fairly well from you, so I think this is perfect.”

She could hydrate from a droplet spirit as a plant?! This was almost like a proper relationship between parent and child!

And since I could never replicate that, I couldn’t win anymore!

“Well, I have to cook dinner now, so go play with your big sister, okay?”

“Okay, sure.”

“Azusa, take care of Sandra, okay?”

I guess Momma Yufufu had mentally designated Sandra as the little sister and me as the big sister.

“Okaaay, I will. Sandra, wanna play house?”

“House, hmm… If that’s what you want, then sure.” Of course, Sandra would never give a straightforward “Yeah!” to something like this.

House, eh? I’d never actually played house with Falfa and Shalsha because they acted so grown-up. When they played, the scenario tended to get pretty realistic, or maybe specialized was the better way of putting it, so it wasn’t very childlike. That was probably just right, though.

But Sandra’s way of playing house was its own kind of odd.

“Okay, then I’ll be the dad, and I’m a shoemaker in town.”

“Then I’ll be a great big cedar.”

“…Wait, what kind of setting are you making with that? What kind of story are you thinking of?”

The two had nothing in common.

“Isn’t it the big sister’s job to think of a good story?”

Whaaat? Is it really my job…? “Phew! I’m done making shoes today. Maybe I’ll go to the cedar just outside of town~”

“…”

“Wow! Yep, that sure is a big tree! Same as always~”

“…”

“Erm, you should say something now…”

Our game of house would be a very lonely affair if she stayed silent the entire time.

“Why would a cedar tree speak? Cedars are silent and simply stand there. Speaking is out of character.”

Please don’t start bringing up authenticity in this situation…

“Well, maybe you could pretend this one speaks…? It feels really bizarre for me to just play the part of a cobbler by myself…”

“Fine. I’ll make an exception and *pretend* I speak.”

This little sister of mine sure is full of herself… As a mother, I didn’t mind, but as a big sister, it really got under my skin.

“Ho there, Cedar,” I said. “How are you today?”

“A bird has built a nest in my upper branches. I am somewhat watered.”

“Hey, Cedar, Cedar!”

“I will be sending out plenty of pollen next year as well. Prepare yourselves, humans.”

“…Wait, wait. Something’s still off. We can make this better,” I interrupted. “The cedar’s talking, but it’s not addressing the cobbler at all. It’s just talking by itself, isn’t it?”

“If a cedar has a soul, then why would it want to speak to a human? This is rooted in my own experience.” Sandra probably didn’t want to play house.

“…Then you be a baker, Sandra.”

“I want to be a big cedar.”

“How much do you like big cedars?!” *Why is she so obsessed with them?!*

“Cedars are tall enough for me to wonder if they can really see out across the world. Isn’t that something to look up to?”

For her, everything was plant-based…

“Let’s stop playing house so I can help you study, okay?”

“Sure. That’s fine with me.”

Entertaining a little sister sure was a difficult task…

Once we started studying, I immediately learned that Sandra knew many more words than she used to.

“I can write easy sentences. *The cedar is tall. Water in midsummer helps me. Ferns grow in humid places, and they are gross. I fight with mushrooms over nutrients.*”

“Hey, you’re writing, and you’re doing a great job of it. You’re only writing about plants, though.”

“It’s practical, don’t you think? Isn’t it amazing?”

I wasn’t sure how practical it was, but it was good that she could read and write.

Finally, it was time for dinner.

“Here you go, Azusa. The bread is all finished.” Momma Yufufu brought over plates.

“Yay! I was getting hungry,” I said as the delightful scent of wheat tickled my nose. I was a little more excited for my meals now than I was when I was an adult.

I asked if there were poisonous mushrooms in the dinner soup just in case, but there weren’t any mushrooms at all, so it was okay.

“It seems like you’ve learned how to write a lot, Sandra~ I think it might be because your big sister’s helping you~”

Momma Yufufu was enthusiastically playing the role of a mom.

“Yeah. I taught her really well.”

“It’s because I’m good at it.”

Well, I figured Sandra would say something like that. In a way, the fact that she was always so childish meant it was in her nature instead of an act, so maybe it was perfect for Momma Yufufu.

“But, Sandra, your big sister also helped you, so you should say thank you.” Momma Yufufu was strict where it mattered.

Sandra glanced over at me from the seat next to mine. Then, with an expression somewhere between sulky and embarrassed, she said, “Thanks… Sis…”

Hey, this isn’t so bad. I’ll always remember what it felt like to have a kid call me *sis*.

“Azusa, Sandra, why don’t we go into town tomorrow for shopping? If there’s anything you want, I’ll get it for you.”

“Huh, so spirits go shopping in town, too.”

I still wasn’t entirely sure what a day in the life of a droplet spirit was like. There were lots of daily necessities around the house, and she generally cooked food, so I could see that her life was more or less like a human’s.

“It depends on the spirit, but my lifestyle isn’t so different from the way you humans live. Staying put for centuries on end would not be fun at all for me as a spirit.”

That would be boring… I wanted every day to be unique.

“I save money for times like these, so I’ll buy you plenty of cute clothes~”

It was a mystery how she was getting that money, but I was thankful that I could now get clothes for Sandra. Falfa’s and Shalsha’s clothes were too big for her.

“Let’s all take a bath together when we’re done eating, okay?”

“My roots will rot if I go into the bath, so you just go, Sis.”

My little sister was awfully delicate.

◇

“How long has it been since I took a bath with my mom…?” I mused as Momma Yufufu scrubbed my back.

At some point in their lives, kids start taking baths on their own. I know my last bath with a parent was in elementary school, but what year? I couldn’t remember, of course.

“This is my first time taking a bath with my daughter.”

Momma Yufufu seemed extremely pleased, and I was happy that she was.

When we were done washing, we soaked in the tub together.

“You have big boobs, Momma.” It was an opinion I held even when I wasn’t a child, but I had a child’s point of view right now.

“Yours will grow bigger when you grow up, too, Azusa.”

“No, they definitely won’t get that big! That’s the one thing I can say for sure!”

No matter how much I grew, there were still limits. Everyone had their own barriers. Most people found theirs long before Momma Yufufu had found hers.

“*Sigh*~ I wonder what you’ll be like when you grow up, Azusa. You know a lot about plants, so I’m sure you’ll be a witch.”

“Yeah, I wanna be a witch~ And I want my life to be fun and relaxing~”

Momma Yufufu was getting into her role, so I played along.

“I wonder what Sandra will be when she grows up,” Momma Yufufu commented.

“Uh… Y’know, so do I…” Sandra might look like a little kid forever… Or maybe she’d grow into an adult after a few more centuries…

“I want to say you can’t get out until you count to one hundred, but you’ve been in for quite a long time already, Azusa.”

“I love baths, you know~”

Going to the big public baths was one of my very few pastimes when I was a corporate slave.

“We’ll be getting out soon. I don’t want you to get dehydrated.”

Momma and I left the bath together, and she dried my hair with a towel. I wondered if I was this pampered when I was a kid.

Taking care of what you needed to take care of as an adult was also fun in its own right, but this lifestyle had its advantages.

When we got out of the bath, Sandra was waiting with a book.

“Read to me, Momma.”

“Yes, of course.”

Sandra was naturally attaching herself to Momma Yufufu, and Momma Yufufu was incredibly happy about it.

Sometimes, when you let someone cut loose, it benefits you, too.

All three of us ended up sleeping in the same bed that day.

Momma was reading the rest of the book for Sandra. “But then something very terrible happened. She knew she’d left the onion there, but she couldn’t find it! —Oh, Sandra, are you asleep?”

Sandra was snoring softly. I guess she *could* fall asleep in a bed this way. Maybe it would be nice for her to get some close contact from time to time instead of sleeping in the dirt.

“Are you awake, Azusa?”

“Yeah, I’m still up, Momma.”

“Children are lovely, aren’t they?” I could tell she really, truly meant it as her arms gently embraced me.

“And I think moms are great, too,” I replied.

It was a strange day, but it was a fulfilling one.

As I reflected, my head got all heavy, and I drifted off into sleep.

◇

The next day, we went with Momma Yufufu to a relatively thriving town.

“Hee-hee-hee, this is like a dream,” she said.

Sandra and I each held one of Momma’s hands. I’d done this with Falfa and Shalsha before, so I was familiar with that feeling.

Today I’d make sure that Momma Yufufu got her fill. It felt like Sandra was getting used to her role as Momma Yufufu’s daughter, too.

“I’ll buy some nice clothes for you both, okay? I’ve been waiting for this day, so I’ve already picked some out.” Her eyes were sharp…

All righty! Today I’m going to be her dress-up doll.

Momma Yufufu marched through town.

“You’re really comfortable walking around town, Momma,” I commented.

“I don’t think anyone notices that I’m a spirit. We make sure not to all gather in one specific town.”

That meant that so long as she acted normal, she looked human. There were all sorts of different species in this world.

“Huh. It sure is lively around here. So long as there aren’t any witches, I’m fine…”

Sandra was apparently worried about witches. Maybe being the subject of such a large man(dragora)hunt traumatized her.

“It’s all right. I’d trade my life to keep you safe, Sandra. So no worries!” Momma reassured her, showering her with the same love she’d show her own daughter.

“R-right… Thanks, Momma…”

Sandra had fully recognized Momma Yufufu as a mom. Once she experienced her powerful magnanimity, she couldn’t pretend to give the cold shoulder anymore.

I chuckled, and Sandra glared at me. “Wh-what’s so funny, Azusa…?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about how red your face was.”

“What? When we played house, you would only ever play human roles…”

Hey, things would get weird if I pretended to be an oak or a beech tree…

Anyway, back in Flatta, I would always draw attention as a witch, but this time it was Momma Yufufu turning heads.

Especially from all the male shop owners.

“That lady’s breasts are way too big—no, she’s way too beautiful…”

“Those boobs are outrageous.”

“Wish my ma was a busty looker like her…”

“Boobs… I mean—yep, working, working…”

Was that all men could see?

“Look at her boobs.”

“I wonder if she used magic or something.”

“Aww, she’s bigger than me!”

Whoops, sorry, the women were looking at the same thing. The opinions were universal.

When Momma Yufufu walked around town as a mom, she was beautiful enough to make anyone do a double take. Everyone in the house in the highlands was cute, but no more than cute. Laika, Halkara, and—if I may be so bold—myself were all more the pampered type, like you’d see with idols.

But Momma Yufufu was much more alluring.

In a word, she was *hot*.

And with me and Sandra on either side of her, she shone even brighter.

“No way a wife like that is allowed…”

“What a shameless family…”

With us at her side, people started to see her as a married woman, too. I understood how they felt. She had those kind, soft eyes.

Wait a second… But when I walked around with Falfa and Shalsha, I never heard anyone assuming I was married… *What does she have that I don’t…?*

“Azusa, what’s wrong?” Momma Yufufu asked. “You look distressed.”

“I was thinking about mature forms of attractiveness.”

“Oh, you don’t need that, because you’re cute all year round!”

So I guess I really didn’t have any adult appeal… When I got home, I’d have to examine the idea further.

And so as Momma Yufufu walked around, all eyes were on her.

Finally, we arrived at our destination—the clothing store.

In this world, it was normal to have your clothes tailored, but this shop had plenty of ready-made apparel on sale for children. This was a pretty big town, so a shop like this could thrive here.

Momma Yufufu said to the lady employee, “Find clothes that will suit these girls well. Price doesn’t matter.” She was serious about this…

The employee’s eyes shone. “Of course, ma’am. I will help you make these two girls cuter than ever before! You have raised such fine specimens, I say!”

There was something weird about the way she said that.

“Aren’t they? Aren’t they just bursting with cuteness?”

“Yes. They’re so cute, I could just gobble them up.”

Sandra froze. “D-don’t eat me…”

“Sandra, this lady isn’t a witch, so she won’t eat you. It’s a metaphor,” I reassured her. After all, I was the big sister.

“Oh, okay…”

“Well then, come with me, young ladies. You will be more beautiful than ever!” The employee grabbed our arms. I knew we were going to be a pair of dress-up dolls, but this was more intense than I envisioned…

“Azusa, what’s going to happen to me…?”

Sandra was still scared!

“It’s okay. No one’s going to hurt us. I—I think…”

After that, Sandra and I had to put on a whole array of dresses. Every time we tried one on, we showed it off to Momma Yufufu.

She was constantly praising us; here’s a few examples:

“Ooooh! How marvelous! Super spirit-level cuteness! I’ll take these.”

“Ohhh, I almost want to apologize for how adorable my daughters are! I’ll take these.”

“A straight-set victory over the goddess of beauty. I’ll take these.”

“You are literally perfect in my eyes. I’ll take these.”

We couldn’t literally be in your eyes; that’s horrific. Just no.

She was the perfect doting parent… And she was buying clothes left and right… even though every outfit cost a pretty penny… Now I knew what was keeping their economy going strong…

I was starting to get a little frightened, but Sandra, on the other hand, had totally loosened up. She seemed delighted.

"Azusa, don't I look like a princess…? Could I make all the humans kneel before me…?"

Sandra grew up in a world without an economy, and she was still falling prey to the allure of money?!

In the end, we spent almost eight hundred thousand gold. This was the high life… I never spent this much money on clothes for my own daughters…

Sandra and I left the shop wearing our frilly new outfits, while the clerk folded the rest of the dresses for Momma Yufufu to carry.

"Gosh, both of you just look like princesses from every angle!"

"I've never worn anything like this before…"

"Right, hold on just a moment now. I have to put these away back at the house before they get wrinkly!"

Momma Yufufu stepped into an empty corner, used her Teleportation, and vanished. That power sure was useful.

"Spending money is so much fun. I never knew…"

"Come back, Sandra! You're still too young for that!"

I was planning on keeping Sandra safe until Momma Yufufu came back. After all, that was my responsibility as an older sister.

But for some reason, my body was lifted into the air.

I briefly thought it was Momma, but I could tell right away that this person's strength was more violent. The next moment, I was thrown into something—the back of a carriage. Sandra was tossed in after me, but I caught her. I might have been small, but I was still an adult on the inside. And max level, at that.

Sandra was panicking. "Hey! Wh-what's happening?!"

“Sandra, you should stay quiet for now. Let’s check to see what’s going on.”

A man jumped into the carriage just as the horse set off. He must have an accomplice, a driver.

“Heh-heh-heh, you little ladies must be the daughters of nobility or rich merchants, judging by your clothes. Kidnapping you will bring us a hefty ransom,” the man said with a leering smile.

Oh, okay. I get it. “Hey, mister, are you and your friend kidnappers?” I deliberately tried to sound mild-mannered just to make sure I didn’t shock him too much.

“Sure are. Little ladies like you are perfect game for us.”

“Huh. Is it just you and your friend? Or are you members of a big group? Or are you just one branch of a larger organization?”

“You sure are getting specific with your questions… Are kids getting more realistic when they play pretend nowadays? There’s eight of us. Kidnapping for ransom is just one of the things we do.”

“Do you have a name? Or a code name that you only use with your friends?”

“You sure ask a lot of questions… Is playing thief what the kids are into right now? Either way, I wouldn’t tell you.”

In my mind, I had already flipped the switch to come up with a plan to arrest all of them.

Sorry, but you’ve just kidnapped a terribly terrible witch. Ten times more terrible than a regular demon.

The problem was that I didn’t have any way to tell Momma Yufufu, but I wouldn’t know where their base was if I jumped out of the carriage now, and I couldn’t abandon Sandra, either.

From the way things were going, there was probably another one of their men in town with an eye out for a well-to-do lady searching for her children. Momma Yufufu would then find out what happened. If not, they couldn’t ask for their ransom.

“So what’s your parents’ names, ladies?”

“Yufufu.”

“Yufufu? I’ve never heard of that… Which merchant is that…?”

Well, he probably didn’t think it would be a spirit.

I grasped Sandra’s hand tightly. Right now, I had to act like a big sister. “Don’t worry. Everything will turn out fine. Just trust me.”

“Right… okay…”

Well then, I guess it’s time to warn them not to bully my little sister. “Hey, mister, if you make my little sister cry, I will make you wish you hadn’t. Protecting the weak is our house rule. Just remember that.” I glared at the man with a strong look.

“Where’d that come from? You from some kind of knight family…? If you’re from a military family, we might have a little problem…”

“It might be even worse. I hear we have ties to the demons, after all.” *Well,* I’m *the one with ties to the demons, actually.*

“Wh…? Demons…? Pshaw, no way… I never heard of a noble or merchant like that…”

“You never heard of it because no one would ever advertise the fact. I’ve been invited to Vanzeld, the demon castle, before.”

“Wh-wh-wh—?”

The man was bewildered. He probably couldn’t tell if I was lying or not.

This time, I started acting more like an adult. “Mister, there are people in this world that you should never involve yourself with, and today, you got unlucky. Maybe your crimes have finally caught up with you.”

“What is up with this kid…? She’s talking like she’s all grown up…” The color was slowly draining from the man’s face. He was starting to sense that something was off. “Say anything stupid, and I’ll punch you! Just keep your nonsense to yourself!”

“Sure, I’ll be quiet. But touch my sister, and you will feel the wrath of an older sister. You can threaten me all you want, but that won’t change.” I gave the man another hard stare. Personally, I could handle this situation, and it seemed like it was well on the way to being solved anyway, but I felt bad for Sandra.

Plus, it made me angry that it might wreck our memories of Momma Yufufu’s fun day out. So he was going to pay.

“Weird kid… What game is she playing…?” The man turned his eyes away from me and cut the conversation off, but I could see a bead of cold sweat dripping down his face. He definitely sensed something out of the ordinary here.

I rubbed Sandra’s back. “It’s all right,” I told her. “I’m here. Anyone who harms our family will meet their doom.” Just to be mean, I teased the man with an expression that would give him the shivers.

“Thanks… I feel a little better now.”

“That’s good, then.”

The carriage finally stopped at the entrance to some woods. It seemed like they were using an abandoned hut as their base.

“Come on, you two, out.”

“Hey, how many of you are here now?” I asked.

“Besides the two we left in town, everyone.”

Thanks for being so transparent. “Which means that there’s six here now, right?”

“Yeah, and what are you gonna do with that information? I’m not gonna let you run—”

I just leaped at the man’s face and punched him. He flew several yards away and collapsed in a limp heap. Guess I knocked his lights out.

“Great, even when I’m a kid, my power is still the same.” The driver was staring in shock, and I gave him a good jump kick before he could say anything. “I don’t want any rumors starting because I used magic, so I should just go at them with good ol’

fisticuffs."

"It's true… You really are super strong, Azusa…"

Oh, right, Sandra's never seen me fight before. "You can't really tell how strong I am just watching me beat up a bunch of small fry. Stay close to me until this is all over. If things get dicey, go underground."

I went to put my hand on the doorknob of the hut's front entrance—but I couldn't… couldn't reach…

I jumped and touched the knob, but it was locked!

"Agh, screw this!" I splintered the wooden door with a punch.

Just like the man had told me, there were four more enemies inside. They seemed to be having trouble processing that one of the walls had broken and a little girl had come inside. They might have thought they were dreaming.

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“Sorry, criminals, but I’m going to have to ask you to cooperate.”

I leaped onto a nearby table, pivoted on my right foot, and kicked with my left!

The plan was to send one of them flying to the far wall, but the tips of my toes just barely touched him. I missed. Right… I had a shorter reach because I was small…

“What are you doing?!” yelled one of the men as he came at me with a knife. I took one of the plates on the table and slammed him with it.

When he stumbled back, I jumped off the table and drop-kicked him!

“How’s that?! A kiddie kick hurts, huh?!” I shouted, then dashed straight to the other side of the room and head-butted another one of the men before he could recover from his shock.

“What is this? What is happening? Why is this kid so strong…?”

The last one was almost in tears over what he’d just witnessed.

“Well then, how should I put an end to this? Heh-heh-heh…”

“Sh-she’s… a monster…”

I approached him slowly. Sometimes, you just want to cut loose without feeling bad about it. “There’s nowhere for you to run. Just give up.”

“Eep! Please, we can let this all just be water under—”

And then he did indeed disappear underwater.

Like a flash flood, an enormous mass of water shattered the window and crashed into the man!

Oh yeah, there was a movie like this. There was a research facility at the bottom of the ocean getting flooded with water, and then a shark gets inside…

We were on land, so there obviously weren’t any sharks, but the man was washed straight into the wall and fell unconscious.

“Are either of you hurt?!” Momma Yufufu came in through the broken window. A regular person couldn’t pull off a stunt like that, so it was most definitely the power of our resident droplet spirit, Momma Yufufu. “When I heard you two had been kidnapped, I came right away!”

“We’re fine. They couldn’t hurt me if they tried, and Sandra’s okay, too.”

“I’m so, so relieved!” Momma Yufufu squeezed us both tightly.

I could feel her powerful love. In the end, it didn’t matter if we were actually related or not. Time didn’t matter much to us, so it was no big deal.

But pressure from her chest really was painful… *You’re so big, Momma Yufufu… Think of the children…*

There was no doubt that this was the greatest act of violence in this whole kidnapping incident… This could probably even be its own finishing move… *Oxygen… I need oxygen…*

And Sandra was literally on the verge of passing out, so I put a firm stop to it.

“Oh right, what happened to the other two in the kidnapping ring?”

“Momma taught those bad men a lesson. I put them underwater, but not enough to kill them.”

She made sure they were out of the picture before coming to save her daughters.

You’re supposed to save us first and then attack them… We were hostages, you know…

“I’m so sorry for putting you in such a scary situation. I can’t take my eyes off you for even a moment…”

“This was a special case, so don’t worry about it.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Now then, why don’t we go home?”

“Wait, Momma, we should really tell city hall or something about this…”

Even if we had destroyed all eight members of the kidnapping ring without breaking a sweat, it was still a big incident.

◇

Everyone in the kidnapping group was arrested. It was hard to imagine this was their first crime, so I hoped they paid for their wrongdoings.

We instead had trouble explaining who we were to the town. Things could get complicated if we introduced Yufufu as a spirit.

“See, Momma’s a really great witch. That’s why she also protected us with magic.”

I made up a story instead. Conversely, it was hard to think a sweet, innocent child was lying, and there was nothing weird about a story of a witch using magic.

The criminals might testify that I was really strong, but we could probably deal with that by saying it was just an effect of the magic.

“I see. So she stores her magical power in her chest, is that right? I can see why she’s a great sorceress, then.”

How did that make sense?

The people in this town were way too obsessed with Momma Yufufu’s bosom…

We went shopping after that, holding hands the entire time.

“Momma, you don’t have to hold on to me so tightly like that. I’m fine.”

“No. Both of you are much too cute; you never know when you might be kidnapped!”

I couldn’t protest, since we were literally just kidnapped.

But after some time out and about, Sandra’s steps started growing heavier.

“I got tired all of a sudden… It’s rough walking around with my roots.”

“Then Momma will carry you on her back, okay?”

Sandra fell asleep on Momma Yufufu’s back.

The sun was starting to set.

We made a lovely picture—me walking with my mom in the sunset as she carried my little sister.

“Thank you for taking me up on such a selfish request, Azusa,” Momma Yufufu said earnestly. “I think this is the happiest day in all my fifty years.”

“This was one of the best days I’ve ever had, too.” I clung to her as I walked. “It’s fun being the head of a household, but it’s nice to be the kid every once in a while.” If a relationship changed, that just meant it could bring a new kind of happiness. “I’ll come back and visit you with Sandra again sometime.”

People talk about once-in-a-lifetime experiences, but there was no rule that it only ever had to be once. I could see her as many times as I wanted.

“Oh, yes, I’ll be waiting for you! You’re welcome at any time!”

I was sure she really meant it, too.

“And you can be small whenever you like, Azusa!” Momma Yufufu’s eyes were glittering…

“I mean, I’d rather not…”

Kid version of me sure was popular…

◇

By the way, I know it probably seemed like that was the last day we played mom and daughter together, but I spent another five days with Momma Yufufu as a little girl.

“You’re staying again today, right? Right?”

“Okay, fine… But just this one day…”

That happened every morning, so I couldn’t really get home. If it was going to be like this, we should’ve nailed down how many days this was going to be from the start.

On the other hand, Sandra had completely accepted Momma Yufufu as her mom, and on the last day, Sandra was pounding her shoulders to massage them.

In her eyes, was Momma Yufufu more her mom than I was now…?

“How is that? Is that okay?”

“Ahhh, thank you, Sandra. My shoulders get stiff; I wonder if it’s because of my chest.”

Tch. Listening to them made me grumpy. If there was a mushroom that could turn me into a little girl, why couldn’t there be a mushroom that would just make my boobs big?

“You’re much more like a mom than Azusa is. Why is that?” Sandra’s innocent question made me even angrier.

Wasn’t that only because her boobs were a hundred times bigger than mine…? They were sort of a symbol of motherhood, after all…

“Well, Sandra, that’s because—”

I could feel Momma Yufufu looking at me, and I got the sense she was trying to be considerate.

“—I’ve been alive much longer than Azusa has been. I’m sure that’s why~”

I learned then that people’s kindness sometimes hurts others.

Maybe the next time I shrink, I should go through my rebellious stage…

I WENT TO A *SINGLES' PARTY* AT A FISHING PORT

One day, I was out shopping in Flatta like always.

Someone from the house usually came along when I went shopping, and this time, it was Flatorte. There wasn't a lot of entertainment out here, but there was always something going on in the village.

I exchanged the magic stones I got from slimes with Natalie at the guild.

"Here's my haul this time," I said, handing the stones to her.

If I were just saving money, then selling the edible slime *manju* would bring in way more cash, but I'd been doing this for three hundred years now; I couldn't just stop out of the blue.

"Oh, thank you, as always. One, two, three…" As Natalie counted, she was staring at us for some reason.

"Er… Is something wrong, Natalie?"

"Both you and Miss Flatorte are quite attractive, aren't you?"

Her compliment came out of nowhere. It was sudden, but it didn't feel unsettling. Flatorte seemed nonplussed but not upset.

"Of course! Many dragon-men have said to me, the great Flatorte, that I am adorable when I remain silent!"

You'd think saying it aloud would disillusion her… but I'm not gonna say anything… It seemed Flatorte took it as a compliment.

More importantly, why did Natalie say that? She wouldn't call us pretty without a reason. We always saw each other, after all. She was a real go-getter when it came down to it, and this was a village guild with a small staff, which meant the employees

were all skilled, multitalented people.

“Is there more trouble again? Or a weird request…?”

Natalie didn’t outright deny it, so that meant I wasn’t too off the mark.

“Actually… it’s not exactly a request, but this came in…”

She slid a flyer my way.

This is what it said:

The Village of Tazine Singles' Party

Find your ideal partner among the natural beauty and charm of Tazine! Come to the village with all sorts of beautiful men and women!

Enjoy a ceremony in the traditional temple of the pine spirit Misjantie!

FEES

Nonresidents come for...free!
We welcome window-shopping!
Come to sightsee, too!
Come, see, experience!

Approved by the Tazine Guild

There sure was a lot of information on this flyer…

But I got what she wanted to say right away: *They're holding a singles' party, so the young people should go*.

I didn't know they had singles' mixers here in this world, too…

"Flatta's growth is all thanks to you, great Witch of the Highlands. We are truly thankful. But there are some regions out there that are struggling with a declining population…," Natalie explained with a sigh.

Well, there was no point in holding a singles' party in towns and villages where the population was bigger and there were more kids.

Also, I only helped increase the population because all the medicines I made decreased the village's infant mortality rate over time. Children often die until medical science advances, and that's true for any world.

"This Tazine is a small fishing port, but fishing work is hard and starts early in the morning, so more and more young people are leaving the village. It's had a real negative impact on the population."

That sure was a specific reason… Fishermen did head out to sea super early, though…

"They tried to stop it, but none of their ideas worked, so they decided to hold this event. Here in Flatta, especially, our population has been slowly growing over a long period of time, so the guild there assumed we must have good men and women here and asked me to invite them…"

The guilds had a wide network, so they were sometimes used as public offices like this. This was one such instance, apparently.

"So you want us to attend this singles' party—is that what you're trying to say?"

"Yes, well, er… that's right…" Natalie smiled uncomfortably. "See, I was thinking maybe you should be keeping an eye out for someone, you know? Of course, I don't mind if you just go to relax and sightsee, though…"

But Natalie's expression was stiff, so I decided to test her a little. "Huh. But what if I end up marrying someone after this and I never come back to Flatta? That would be a

blow to the village; are you okay with that?"

I was contributing to the village in many ways, after all. I had no intentions of making them pay me back, but I was just checking to see if Natalie was in earnest.

Her face immediately blanched. "I'm sorry; I'm sorry! Flatta could never afford to lose you! Please live in the house in the highlands forever!"

"Well, at least I know how you really feel now."

"I'm sorry… I have to send a young person over, even if it's just for show; otherwise I think the guild management will chew me out… I mean, Tazine is a little fishing village, which is so unlike our village here in the highlands. It's so far away, and I doubt any of the villagers would go…"

I get it. She had to entice people to go. That kind of thing was a pain. When I was a corporate slave, I would get all angry when I was given a quota that would never be sensibly fulfilled.

"What about you, Miss Flatorte? Are you interested in getting married?" Natalie pressed.

The expression on Flatorte's face said that she was somewhat interested. Not a flat no, at least.

"S-sure… There aren't many dragon-men out there who understand my great charm…"

It was hard to tell since she looked so young, but Flatorte was actually already around four hundred years old, and she had been searching for a (dragon) partner to marry since before we met.

The first time I encountered Flatorte was when she crashed Laika's big sister's wedding ceremony, apparently furious that someone younger than her had an older sister who was getting married.

Basically, Flatorte had always been interested in marriage. She'd probably forgotten about it after joining us in the highlands, but now she remembered again.

"I don't think you'd be very interested in human men, but it might be nice just to look. Just to look… Really, just to look…"

It was starting to sound like we were going…

To let you in on how I really felt, I didn't think sending Flatorte to a singles' party in a human fishing village would go over very well at all. It wasn't just because dragons and humans were completely different species; blue dragons were an incredibly irresponsible race. They worked only when they felt like it, and when they didn't have to do anything, they really didn't do *anything*. All of them had the mentality of high school delinquents. It would take a lot for her to get used to village life.

And it was just a theory, but—

I placed my hand on Flatorte's horn.

"Flatorte, I will personally put your feelings ahead of anything else, but the rules say you can't leave me, right…? You have to stay with the person who touches your horns, right?"

"Urgh… yes… I cannot leave you, Mistress… I didn't forget or anything… I just remembered what it was like when I was looking for a partner…"

Flatorte looked at me apologetically. From the way she was acting, she hadn't been thinking about marriage, but she remembered when she saw the flyer.

There was a rule that a blue dragon had to stay with whoever touched their horns. That was why adventurers used to get all worked up over taming them and becoming magnificent dragon knights.

But since that was a rule by the irresponsible blue dragons, we could get away with just living together and letting her go shopping for me once in a while. Flatorte living in her own house somewhere else was just plain against the rules.

I had no intention of binding her to me, but if that wasn't okay with Flatorte, then it was all the same.

"Sorry, but I don't think you can g—"

"Please, could you go, even if it's just for sightseeing?!" Natalie's voice was strained. "You really just need to pop in and show up! I'm sure if beautiful people like you are

there, the guys will get more into it, and more will come next time!"

Wouldn't we just be like a paid audience, then…?

"And Tazine is so far if you use normal means of transportation, so the villagers of Flatta don't want to go! But you can get around on dragonback, great Witch, so I think it's close enough for you to attend…"

I see… so it's too far geographically from Flatta… Then could they not put a request through Natalie here in the guild, at least?

"Um… but then it would be like counting people who really came to sightsee as party attendees; is that okay? I have no plans to get married. I feel free enough living with my daughters."

Tazine was probably mainly after money for their economy. In the one in a million chance that I did end up getting married, I had absolutely no intentions of leaving my house in the highlands, so I wouldn't really be much help.

"Yes, that's all right! It's hard to tell if you are intending to get married or not through the data anyway! The act of attending itself is what's important! That's fine!"

Natalie, you're not even trying to hide your opinion…

"Oh, I just thought of something!" Flatorte cut in. Was her contribution going to be worth it? "Hey, Natalie, you're not married yet, right?"

"R-right… The more a guild employee knows about their town, the more cautious others feel around them. There really isn't any chance for me to date…"

"You should attend the party. I, the great Flatorte, shall carry you there."

"Wh-wh-wh-whaaaaaaaaat?!" Natalie yelled loud enough for the entire guild hall to hear, but to be honest, I didn't think it was a terrible idea. It was way better than just bringing a group full of people who weren't even looking for a partner.

◇

A few days later, we all climbed on dragon-Flatorte's back and headed for Tazine.

And when I say *we*, I mean the four of us: me, Flatorte, Halkara, and Natalie.

Since we were accompanying Natalie to the singles' party, I also felt less guilty about not being a real attendee, so it was perfect.

We decided to have Halkara come along to balance out the party as well. In terms of her looks, she was perfectly beautiful, which would make the men think this party had high standards.

And since there would be mushrooms growing by the sea that didn't grow here, Halkara had her own reason to go. Her boundless curiosity was perfect for this.

"The village of Tazine is a fishing port on the shores of the inland sea. The waters are calm, but it is quite out of the way…," Halkara said as she looked at a map. She was rather knowledgeable about geography, especially since she ran a factory.

"What kind of fish can you get there?"

"Mostly long ones."

That was a unique answer…

"We elves rarely eat the blessings of the sea, so I'm not very familiar with fish… I am interested in mushrooms that mature under the salty sea breeze, though…"

"Of course that's what you'd be interested in…"

On the other hand, Natalie was muttering, "Handsome guys, handsome guys…" She seemed to be enthusiastic about it in her own way.

It was hard to meet new people in small villages like Flatta, so maybe leaving to find a partner was the right idea.

"I wonder what they have for sightseeing… Oh, I guess the Misjantie Temple. That is pretty famous within the kingdom~"

"There's a big temple in the village, right, Halkara?"

"Yes, a large temple that enshrines the spirit of pine as its chief god. Pine trees grow even near the seashore, you know. They say that the biggest pine there is the spirit

Misjantie."

Maybe around here, *spirits* were essentially the same thing as Shinto gods. It wasn't unusual to see a pine forest near the sea, so it did seem like a plausible faith.

"Also, it seems there's a long-standing belief among the area that the pine spirit could also act as a mediator in marriage. That's because there was a tree whose two roots then combined into one, so they say it has a benefit for couples."

"It's kind of ironic that a village worshipping a marriage spirit has to hold a singles' party…"

◇

And then we finally reached the village of Tazine, but—

It was more desolate than I thought.

No one was here. There were almost more cats than people. There was a line of pine trees along the coast, but there wasn't a single person walking among them. So bleak…

Then there was a strong gust of wind.

"Ahhh! Sand got in my eye! It's telling me that elves should stay away from the sea!"

"I think you're just unlucky, Halkara."

First, I had to take at least Natalie to the singles' party reception, which should be around here. Where was it…?

At the edge of the pine forest, there was a table that looked promising. There was a banner across it that said TAZINE BOYS' CLUB, so that was probably right.

There was a man sitting at the reception table who looked to be somewhere in his sixties, right on the border between middle-aged and old. He had a tough-looking face, probably because he was still actively working as a seaman.

Natalie approached the receptionist. "Hello, I'm here for the singles' party!"

"Well! I'm glad'ja made it. What a relief! Our little shindy's at the table in the woods

behind me, so go on in! All the hot-blooded boys are back there~!"

The receptionist had a bit of an accent. He seemed really happy. I felt kind of bad that I wasn't here for real… I could just stay with her and accompany her the whole time…

But something caught my attention.

Did he call this a shindy*…? That sounds a little old-fashioned…*

After Natalie took in all her surroundings, she asked me, "Erm, what's a *shindy*?"

There sure didn't seem to be anything like that around here. We did spot a table in one area that was full of elderly men playing chess and drinking alcohol.

I had a bad feeling about this.

"Everyone at that table over there's part'a the Tazine Boys' Club. They're all lively and looking for love, so have fun~!"

"Wait, but they're all seniors…" Natalie's eyes were not smiling.

"Naw, that's the boys' club. Their average age is what, sixty-seven?"

Your definition of boy *is way too broad!*

We could hear people talking at the table…

"Hey, y'want something to drink?"

"Eh, my doctor told me I should stop drinking…"

"Your whole body is fallin' apart!"

"Ha-ha-ha, and you hurt your back the other day, didn't ya?"

"My back *and* my neck, I'll have ya know!"

"I think I'll use my pension to go on a trip…"

Et cetera.

This was the stuff you hear in a hospital waiting room…

“Well, what with the shrinking population, we can’t have a proper festival at the temple without kids from outside the village, y’see, so we thought about holding a party. Got a little rough once the average age of the boys’ club went past sixty. We’re so happy beautiful girls like you showed up.”

The receptionist was smiling, but Natalie’s eyes were cold. “Erm, isn’t there anyone in their twenties? Or at least in their thirties?”

“I’m the youngest one here. That’s why they put me on reception.”

Seriously? This was just too much… *Sigh*, countryside problems… No boys in the boys’ club…

Natalie whirled around and turned to face us. She was smiling, which made it even scarier. “I’ve decided I’ll find someone nice in the Flatta area! I’m so sorry for causing you all this trouble! I will be sure to pay for all your lodging and food!”

“Uh, sure, but we’re not really strapped for cash… Why don’t we just go sightseeing now…? Look, the sea’s pretty… Yeah, yeah, let’s do that.”

I’ll give Tazine some credit for sensing the impending crisis, but I think forty years was a little slow to act on it… They needed to come up with a plan to bring in people fast; otherwise, it really would become a ghost town…

After that, we walked along the shore.

The coastal view itself wasn’t so bad. Flatorte found a hermit crab wandering around and got very excited. “Awesome!” For someone looking to get married, her excitement was rather childish.

But still, you could find a beach anywhere next to the water, so it wasn’t a very strong tourist attraction. Plus, getting here by land was very inconvenient, so everyone probably moved to places that weren’t so remote.

There were no voices here, only the sounds of the waves.

“I think walking has made me even more sad,” Halkara murmured.

I nodded. “I hate the noise that comes with a crowd, but when there’s nobody at all around, you know…”

Flatorte ran toward the waves; she seemed happy enough.

I respected her for adapting so quickly.

“Gaaaaaah! A jellyfish stung me!”

“Oh, there are lots of dangerous creatures in the water, so we have to be careful…”

“Madam Teacher, a particularly large crab has clamped onto my leg. And I injured my foot on a rather sharp shell that was buried in the sand.”

“You need to be even more careful when you walk, Halkara!”

You really don’t have to experience all the dangers the beach has to offer…

After that, we walked around the Tazine village center, but it wasn’t enough to call it the center of anything at all. Most of the buildings were abandoned, and barely anyone passed through.

“I didn’t think it would be this bad… Why did they think about holding a singles’ party now…?”

“Great Witch of the Highlands, I’m sure the people who recognized the problem left long ago… Only the dull ones have been left behind… There are plenty of villages like this… I’ve never seen one this bad before, though…”

Natalie just seemed exhausted the whole time.

This was a little beyond anything I was expecting.

◇

That day, we decided to stay at the village’s only inn, the Great Catch.

There were other young women there, but they all looked despondent.

“This was a huge mistake…”

“I can’t believe this place. Wasn’t there supposed to be a temple that brings good things in marriage?”

“I want my money back…”

Everyone was having a tough time… Tazine had it extremely rough, but there was no way they could recover from this…

The seafood on the tables in the dining room wasn’t too bad. It’d been a while since I’d had any fried fish, so it brought back memories. But if that was all they had going for them…

“What should we do tomorrow, great Witch? Go home first thing in the morning? I think we should go home.” Natalie sounded like she was at the overnight vigil before a funeral.

“I—I mean, we’re here already, so why don’t we go to the pine spirit temple…? Remember, the temple itself is supposed to bring good fortune to weddings, so it wouldn’t hurt to go…”

“Then why don’t we do that? With an area this desolate, I think *good fortune* might be asking a lot, though…”

Natalie had totally given up all hope…

“Natalie, we made the trip, so why don’t we make it a girls’ weekend? How about it? Hmm?”

“Then why don’t we order some alcohol and drink in our room?”

Hey, now we’re getting somewhere! I’m surprised; that’s actually not a bad idea.

“Yeah, why don’t we do that?”

But our girls’ night didn’t quite go as planned.

“Plenty of young adventurers come to the guild… Would it be too much to ask for at least one percent of them to fall in love with me at first sight…? *Hic…”*

Natalie was a whiny drunk…

I looked at her and suddenly remembered my past life. I never thought about the lives of the shopkeepers in the weapons and item shops in game worlds, but these people had backstories full of tears and joy…

I'm sure they were happy to get a weapon on the cheap sometimes, and getting all the items the hero needed probably took tons of work…

Natalie worked so hard at the guild—I hoped spring would finally come for her!

WE MET THE *PINE SPIRIT*

The next day, we made our way to the temple that enshrined the pine spirit Misjantie.

The pilgrimage path that led up to the temple was not as run-down as Tazine, even in the village itself, and there were relatively many shops open for business along the way. Still, almost half of them seemed to have folded.

"They look like souvenir shops, so there must have been plenty of visitors in the past." Ever the tradeswoman, Halkara was sensitive to this stuff.

"Still, I find it hard to imagine that a spirit faith got so unpopular all of a sudden; why is it so desolate around here?" I asked. Unlike theme parks, you tend to assume places with religious establishments like temples and shrines as their main attraction will last a long time.

"Actually, a large road used to go through Tazine way back when. But about seventy years ago, a new road was built along another route, and pilgrims vanished in almost an instant. I'm sure the population started really falling after that."

"I see… That must've really hit them hard…"

With a road passing through, plenty of people would stay the night and decide to see the local sights while they were in town, but if the village was off the main road, then the only ones who would come by were the ones with a strong reason to.

"Sheesh, all the souvenirs are so gloomy. No one buys wooden swords these days." Flatorte was poking fun at one of the open shops. There was a wooden sword sitting there mixed in with all sorts of weird local craftwork, as if it had mistakenly wandered into a Japanese souvenir shop.

On the other hand, Natalie had been quiet this whole time. There was a shadow hanging over her, too. Maybe that meant she wasn't expecting anything.

"Um, Natalie, I know smiling might be hard right now, but I think you'll just find it harder to be happy with that attitude… Maybe you should try and enjoy what we have here?"

“I’m sorry… Before we got here, I let myself think for a second that I might end up meeting someone wonderful. I’m having trouble recovering from this shock…”

“I mean, that’s not surprising when things are this bad…” I couldn’t just tell her to be happy.

“Oh, I see the Misjantie Temple now… I’ll at least pray that I can get married. It might give me a one in a million chance…”

She had no faith in the temple at all. Once you have to go to a singles’ party to find someone, it’s hard to really believe in a spirit who’s supposed to bless your marriage.

This was rude to say to the temple itself, but it was way too gorgeous for the village.

It was a pure chalky-white palace with engravings of pine trees on each pillar.

On top of that, the basin with water for purifying our hands and the chandelier-like lighting fixtures all looked very expensive.

“Wow, they sure have a lot of money. It’s a little tasteless. Reminds me of a pearl dragon’s house.” Flatorte offered her opinion. Maybe pearl dragons were like a nouveau riche kind of race. But dragons did have a tendency to collect treasure, and Laika the red dragon was pretty rich herself, so maybe Flatorte and the other blue dragons were actually the exception.

A statue of the pine spirit Misjantie sat enshrined deep inside the temple. For a spirit who helped with relationships, the woman’s expression was awfully harsh.

But the temple was empty; no one was feverishly praying or anything like that.

“I honestly thought it’d be filled with people praying: *I pray for a good match!* and *Come to me, people with salaries over eight million gold!* and *Please let the next singles’ party be fruitful!* and *I want to get back with my ex and score!*”

“I suppose a spirit can’t do much about a geographical disadvantage,” Halkara said without much emotion.

“Maybe it has no effect… Of course it would be deserted… Heh-heh…” Natalie finally smiled, but it was a wry one. It was the smile of someone who’d given up.

“Aw, cheer up, Natalie.”

“Staying in this village is draining all my cheer away, so let’s just go home. I’m so sorry for bringing up the singles’ party so much… As a staff member of the guild, I apologize.”

“It’s fine… Look, I think there’s a pine garden behind the temple, so why don’t we take a look?” No matter what, my plan was to get Natalie moving and get her mind off things. The longer we stood still, the darker her mood would become.

“Pines, I see,” Halkara mused. “I wonder if I’m not allowed to gather the mushrooms growing beneath the trees?” She sounded more interested in the mushrooms than the pine trees. And obviously she wouldn’t be allowed; they belonged to the temple.

“Pines… All I can think of are blue dragons hurling pine cones at one another.”

Maybe you blue dragons should calm down a little?

After that, I led everyone into the pine garden. There sure were a lot of pine trees growing there, but—boy, was it drab.

I wasn’t expecting there to be flowers of every color, but all the trees, whether their branches touched the sky or skimmed the ground, were the same color.

“This is boring. You can *see* it’s boring; nobody else is here.” The latter half of what Flatorte said was the objective truth. It didn’t seem like the visitors came this far in.

“None of the pines seem very happy, either. Maybe they’re dying.” Halkara had a very elf-like perspective. “They look like they’ll be rather dead in another thirty years or so. There are so many pines here, too, it’s such a pity.”

“Maybe the pines are depressed because they know the village is wasting away,” I commented.

I was glad Flatta hadn’t ended up like this. I couldn’t bear seeing a village on its last legs.

“Yeah, man… They’re all depressed…”

—A voice came from somewhere, and I noticed a woman slumped in front of one of

the biggest pine trees.

I felt like I'd seen her clothes somewhere before.

Oh, she's a spirit! There were a bunch of spirits in loose clothing like this at the World Spirit Summit.

"Wait, you can see me? Right, no one comes here, so I forgot ta hide myself…"

Could this gloomy girl be…?

"Are you Misjantie, the pine spirit?"

Spirits existed in this world, so Misjantie could very well be real, too.

"Hey, you know your stuff, man… But I'm not that much of a pine spirit; my real job is being the spirit of witness at weddings… Haven't done it recently 'cause nobody uses my ceremony in their weddings anymore…"

So it seemed that this really was Misjantie herself. She sure didn't speak like a spirit… Everything about her was casual. She was way different than the statue.

"I didn't think the pine spirit actually existed. People worship you here, so is this like your house?"

Gods often lived in shrines in manga. But I wondered what the deal was with branches (?) like Hachiman and Inari shrines, which were all over Japan, and how they were treated. This Misjantie Temple would be her so-called flagship, her grand head temple, so of course she'd be here.

"Oh, Madam Teacher, is someone there?" It didn't seem like Halkara could see Misjantie.

"These are just pine trees, right…? Or maybe the great Witch of the Highlands and her max level can see special things…?" Natalie had a similar response. I guess that meant only I could see the spirit.

"Hey, I can kinda almost see this really sorry-looking woman. Is this a mirage?! Woo, my first mirage!" Flatorte could kind of see her, though!

"Whaaat…? This is weird, man… I usually make it so chumps can't see me… Why on

earth would high-level people come here…?"

Right, dragons were strong, too; they weren't at all like regular adventurers… That was why she could sense a spirit who was trying to hide.

"Hey, mirage lady. Who are you? Wait, can mirages talk? Hey, say something."

"Hey! Don't touch me, man! I'm a spirit with a long and honorable history, 'kay?! Be more respectful, or more thankful, or something!"

Since they were being pretty chatty, the other two who couldn't see were confused. They could sense something was going on, but not knowing what that was, they seemed uneasy.

"Um… Misjantie… can I call you that? I think this whole conversation is going to get more complicated, so do you think you could make an exception and show yourself…?"

"F-fine, man! Just make this stupid dragon-girl stop!"

"I'm not stupid! I just didn't go to school!"

For reasons unknown, Flatorte had climbed onto Misjantie's shoulders. When in doubt, Flatorte did whatever the heck she wanted.

◇

We went into a staff room in the temple and heard what was going on.

I had a feeling we were trespassing, but the deity enshrined here brought us in herself, so we could probably get a pass.

"Ahem… Lemme introduce myself again. I'm Misjantie, the pine spirit…"

"Did you go to the World Spirit Summit, too? If you did, we would have just missed each other."

"Why would a human even know about the World Spirit Summit…? I'm so lost, man!"

I explained a bit more about that, and we introduced ourselves. We also told her why we came to Tazine at the same time.

“Oh, hey, I’ve heard of the Witch of the Highlands. Wind spirit gossip.”

I had a feeling these wind spirits were spreading my information all over the world, but I couldn’t exactly stop them.

“We didn’t think the singles’ party would be very productive, so we were going to take a look at the temple, then head home. That’s when we met you.”

“*Sigh…* Tazine’s done for, man… The average age around here gets higher by one every year…”

Meaning there had been no newcomers…

“This village used to be hopping, man… A lot of ’em could get by with their household savings, even when everything started going south, and that’s why they never sat down and dealt with the declining birth rate and aging population until it was too late… I just tried to ride it out, but that was a mistake…”

This was definitely a rural problem…

When people see an imminent change in their way of life that will affect them tomorrow, they’ll realize that what they’re doing now isn’t going to work and then do everything they can to fix it. But when the decline is slow, people endure it by holding off on some things here and there and helping out every so often.

For example, if someone making seven million yen a year lost 100,000 off their salary the following year, they might be upset, but they could still make it through the year with that much. But if seven million suddenly dropped to two million, then they would seriously start thinking about a way to deal with it.

Since Tazine had declined so slowly, they ended up getting used to it.

“And faith in the Misjantie Temple has just gone down because of that, man… I wasn’t just a pine spirit in the past; people also had serious faith in me as a matchmaker spirit for weddings… Look at the whole main branch now…” Misjantie sighed deeply.

Maybe the parties involved just weren’t doing a good job.

“Erm, if I may ask a question…?” Natalie timidly raised her hand. “Great Spirit, do you have the power to, um… immediately pick out a marriage partner, or orchestrate some

fateful meeting, or anything like that…?"

Oh, Natalie was hoping Misjantie would find a partner in marriage for her.

"Nah, I don't have that kind of power, man. I just play matchmaker."

"Very well, then," Natalie replied frostily. If her heart was a book, it probably would have said *I don't need you, then* inside. "Let us return home, great Witch of the Highlands. When we do, I'll start the search for a marriage partner in earnest."

Well, she was right that we now had no reason to stay.

"Yeah, let's head back toward Flatta," I said. Just as I was about to stand, something grasped my arm.

It was Misjantie, the pine spirit. "Er, Miss Witch of the Highlands, I need your help…" After that wide-eyed plea, I had a feeling things were going to get complicated…

"All of you are around the right age, far as I can tell. It doesn't matter who, but I want you to get married and pray to the pine spirit that the couple will have everlasting love! And then I want you to give alms to the temple!"

"You're really going for it, aren't you…?"

"All the Misjantie Temples across the country are in danger, man! For the longest time, I kept things running by doing that ceremony and getting alms during weddings, but… I'm hardly making anything now…"

I mean, look at the state the flagship is in…

"I sympathize with you, but that's all I can do," I said. "I'm not planning on getting married."

"Same as Madam Teacher. I'm enjoying my career; I never feel like getting married," said Halkara.

"Me, too," Flatorte added. "I'm not as interested in getting married as I was."

"I want to get married, but I have no one to get married to… I wonder if a handsome adventurer will come to the guild and suddenly ask to marry me…"

I think that would be too *perfect, Natalie. If someone actually tried that, we'd probably suspect him of marriage fraud…*

"So, since it doesn't seem like we can help you, we're going now."

Misjantie grabbed my arm tighter than she did before. "Just listen to what I have to say, man! I have all sorts of ceremony packages!"

"I mean, you can have all the packages you want, but there's no point without someone to marry."

We couldn't exactly decide if we wanted a lavish ceremony or a simple party if the wedding itself wouldn't happen.

"I can do same-sex marriages, too, man!"

I wasn't expecting her to say that, so my thoughts paused. "Do they even recognize gay marriage in this country…? No way, probably not. I highly doubt twenty-first-century values have made their way into this culture."

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This world was mostly caught up in problems like land inheritance among nobles, so I wouldn't expect them to allow same-sex marriage.

"Even if it's legally invalid, we can still celebrate the couple that wants a ceremony, man! Misjantie Temple started doing it thirty years ago so I could expand my customer base! I made the announcement and everything!"

"I approve of how passionate you are about the business," offered Halkara, company president.

Misjantie might be doing it to expand her customer base, but if a loving same-sex couple got good memories out of it, then it wasn't a bad thing.

"Oh, Madam Teacher, why don't we have a wedding just to try it out? Just kidding."

"Yep, I'm going home now."

"C'mon, Madam Teacher, that hurt…"

"Sorry, Halkara, but if you joke about this kind of stuff, then it will slowly stop being a joke at all. We need to set boundaries here."

The house in the highlands was like a massive share house, and the share house I'd lived in back in Japan had been hell. It was shocking how often there'd been some sort of conflict among the residents.

People who kept loose rules fought with people who kept strict rules, and people who thought of everyone else as family fought with the ones who thought of everyone else as strangers. Even my friends had argued along those lines sometimes: "Why don't you ever pay attention to me?" "You're not my family or whatever, so why would I? Geez."

Adding romance into the mix would just make things even worse. That's why we couldn't have a wedding ceremony for people who lived together, even if it wasn't serious.

I would never let the house in the highlands turn into a share house full of negativity!

"If you're going to do it, Halkara, then I am, too. I'll feel like I'm missing out otherwise. Oh, but then Laika might say she wants a wedding with our mistress, too…"

Exactly. Once it started, it would be hard to put a stop to it. Even without any feelings of romance, it would come across as favoritism. Then people would start getting upset and fighting back against it.

That's why we couldn't do a ceremony so casually.

"Oooh… You're tough… I also have a joint wedding plan for a group of friends, too…"

"…Isn't the whole concept of *wedding* just falling apart now?"

"As the pine spirit, I only pray for everlasting love, man. Romantic or platonic. That's why it doesn't have to be just a couple. I can do a ceremony for a whole adventuring party, a whole team of coworkers from a company, whatever. Doesn't matter so long as Misjantie Temple gets its money."

Everyone in this world was very open about how they wanted money.

That being said, if you were a deified spirit with temples all over the world, then you did have to think about management.

"Oh, I've got ceremony plans for singles, too, where you vow to love yourself forever."

"You're just desperate, aren't you?! You're the pine spirit—why don't you go back to your roots and dedicate your temple to praying for pines to grow up big and strong or something?"

"I couldn't stand to run a boring business like that, man… That's a whole different trade from wedding ceremonies…"

I mean, I'd just call it changing with the times, but this girl was a handful.

"No…? It'll be a day to remember, man…"

"Actually, that's exactly why it's not okay. I have a lot of people in my family, so if two of them got a ceremony, then that would just distance them from everyone else and ruin the peace."

I thought that was good enough to make her back down. Even I had things I could and couldn't help with.

“Well, there are also times when sisters have a ceremony to show that they would always be together, man. You don’t know any siblings like that?”

Oh?

A ceremony for sisters to confirm their sisterly love for each other. Basically, Falfa and Shalsha in little wedding dresses.

And I, as their mother, would watch.

There was nothing wrong with sisters loving each other as sisters, and it wouldn’t cause trouble in the future. That was pretty great, actually.

“Misjantie, could you tell me more about the sister wedding plan, please?” I’m pretty sure my face was really serious. Some people might even think I changed my job from witch to sage.

“Wh-whoa, are you for real?! I’ll bring over the pamphlets ASAP! They’ll answer all your most detailed questions!”

Misjantie left the room, then immediately came back with special documents.

“Hmm, she’s supposed to be a revered spirit, but she looks like a company employee running around doing sales. I feel sorry for her…” Halkara wore a perplexed expression. Maybe the elves believed in the pine spirits to some degree, too.

“I think this plan would be good if you have up to fifteen attendees and they’re all immediate and extended family. We’ll pray that the sisters will stay together forever in your Misjantie Temple of choice. Friendly, but holy.”

“Mm-hmm. I see. And it’s affordable, too.”

“Shouldn’t we talk about this with Falfa and Shalsha around?” Behind me, Flatorte raised a valid argument. *But sorry, Flatorte, I’m ignoring you. I’m the one most interested in this.*

“So usually priests serving the temple act as present witnesses, but since your family can see me, I’ll be the witness myself.”

“Oh, really?! You’re so generous!”

“Don’t worry about it, man. As long as word gets out that the Witch of the Highlands’s family had a ceremony at a Misjantie Temple, that’s good publicity. I’ll need to give more support to the people working at the temples, too.”

Spirits with a following had their hands full, after all.

Momma Yufufu had it easy in that regard.

“Then there’s the vow kiss at the end. If touching lips isn’t an option, they can kiss each other on the cheek or hug instead—we’re pretty flexible. What matters is how they feel.”

“I see. I’m not the one to decide if they want to kiss on the lips or not, so I’ll check with my daughters.”

Well, a kiss on the cheek was probably good enough; I doubted they’d say no to that. They were sisters, after all, and the ceremony was for them to promise to get along in the future. I wouldn’t want things to get awkward.

“Oh, yeah, could we use this place?” I asked, pointing to the ceiling. I at least wanted to do it here in Tazine.

And especially so if it would help out with publicity.

“Sure, man. Normally you wouldn’t rent out a place this important just like that, but I mean, it’s empty… It’s more unusual to have a busy day…”

“Okay, then we’ll take this home and keep discussing. I’m hoping I can give you good news.”

“Right on, man. Call me when you make up your mind,” Misjantie said and then handed me a pine cone. “Hold this, then recite the spell. I’ll tell you what it is, but you’re gonna wanna write it down.”

“Fine. Let me get my pen and paper.”

“Here we go, man. *Wagahorahee rofdarnet mehoralachi numris-wa yenagaye haheherowoah friclas tornewacha comasolue hagiyeho tallabadash.*”

*“…*Sorry, could you repeat that at least three more times?” Why did this sound like a

resurrection spell…?

“Be careful, ’cause if even one letter’s off, I won’t be able to hear it.”

This whole system was a pain…

I had her say it another three times just to make sure, so there probably weren’t any mistakes in my notes.

And so the singles’ party came to its rather strange conclusion.

“Er, Great Pine Spirit, could you please tell me if there is a good way for a guild staff member to find a partner?” Natalie finally asked.

“You just gotta approach everyone, man. The more times you try, the bigger chance you’ll have of making a lucky shot. You draw a hundred straws, eventually you’ll pull the good one, y’know?”

That was one way of handling it.

◇

When I got back to the house in the highlands, I told Falfa and Shalsha about the sister wedding.

“Falfa will do it! Falfa wants to!” Falfa jumped on the idea immediately, the first one to agree. “A wedding means wedding dresses, right?! I always dreamed of wearing one!”

Oh, right. Having someone to marry was a totally different question; a lot of girls just wanted to dress up like that.

But I was naive to think Falfa’s reaction meant everything would progress smoothly.

“Shalsha refuses.”

Shalsha was refusing, of all things?!

Maybe there was something she couldn’t accept about it—like there was no point in doing something just for show, or she was opposed to spirit faith to begin with? Or maybe she was just plain embarrassed?

“Shalsha wants to wear a wedding dress, too. You should dress like a gentleman, Sis.”

That’s why?!

I didn’t realize Shalsha wanted to wear a wedding dress, too. She never gave me that impression, so I never noticed. But I mean, how would I even pick up on that in the first place?

“Hey! Why do you get to wear a dress? No fair!” Falfa, of course, protested, puffing up her cheeks.

“A big sister protects the younger. You should wear gentlemen’s clothing, said to be derived from a knight’s formal dress, and then I will be like a noble lady under the knight’s protection—in essence, it would be sensible for me to wear the dress on this occasion.”

“You’re just making up an explanation! You always do that when it comes to this stuff, Shalsha!”

Falfa was angry. Shalsha did occasionally try to confuse others with convoluted logic—she seemed pretty shy, but she was very opinionated.

But Falfa as a gentleman—in a tuxedo, huh?

I pictured it in my mind, and it was pretty cute on its own.

I unconsciously placed my hand over my mouth. *Oh, gosh, yes! That’s fantastic! Falfa in a tux and Shalsha in a dress? But I’d feel bad overriding what Falfa wants…*

Both of them turned to stare at me.

“Mommy!”

“Mom!”

Of course, they were both asking me to use their idea. No matter which one I chose, I would be the bad guy. It was so distressing.

So I decided to use a trick.

Times like this, it's best to ask a professional. It's like talking with a third party, a lawyer, when fighting over inheritance.

"Just hold on a second. Er, where are my notes…?"

I would never be able to remember this on my own. *"Wagahorahee rofdarnet mehoralachi numris-wa yenagaye haheherowoah friclas tornewacha comasolue hagiyeho tallabadash."*

When I recited the whole thing without messing up, Misjantie the pine spirit appeared three inches from my face.

Three inches?!

"Gah! You're too close! Too close!" I jumped in surprise and pulled back. Personal space!

"Sorry, man. Depending on the pronunciation, I can even appear a ten-minute walk from the tip of the caster's nose. It varies."

"Yeah, a lot."

She wouldn't be able to help if someone called her in life-threatening danger, and she had to walk for five minutes to get there… Well, not that she's the spirit you'd summon in an emergency.

"Well then, now that you called me, is there anything I can help you with, man?"

"Yeah, actually, we had a question." I told her that Falfa and Shalsha were fighting over the dress.

"Gotcha, gotcha. Well, of course people will wanna wear dresses. A wedding is a once-in-a-lifetime event, man. Except for the ones who get married four or five times."

I don't really want to talk about something that serious.

Both of the girls were now staring hard at Misjantie.

Neither of them seemed willing to give up.

"Heh-heh. I have a great plan for situations like these, man. I call it the *One drop, twice the flavor* plan!"

It sounded pretty fishy, but this spirit did have a long and honorable history.

“I don’t really get what that means, so could you explain?”

“Weddings take a long time, man. Sometimes people want to change partway through.”

Oh, like a bride changing her dress for the wedding reception?

“So how about they first come out in tuxes, then change into dresses in the second half? That’s fair, right?”

The girls’ eyes sparkled when they heard Misjantie’s idea.

“That’s great! Falfa wants to wear both!”

“Instead of everyone losing something out of this, we’re all gaining something. Fantastic.”

And then my own eyes sparkled.

My little girls were going to dress up in dresses *and* tuxedos—this was going to be the greatest event their mom could hope for!

“I’ll get all the clothes ready. This option’ll add a little more to the tab, but that’s no big deal. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event. You gotta splurge, man.”

She sure was calculating; this plan benefited her, too. But if money would solve my girls’ argument, then it would get me something priceless.

“Sure. Then give me the detailed quote. As long as it’s not absurdly, outrageously expensive, I’ll pay.”

“Right on. If I can use your experience of the ceremony at Misjantie Temple for publicity, then I’ll give you a discount.”

“Sure. That’s fine.” That’s what I was planning on using the Misjantie Temple in Tazine for anyway.

“And how many people are you planning on inviting? If this is a private event, you okay just having family come?”

When I heard her say *inviting*, several demon faces came to mind.

"I know some people who would complain for the next century if we held the ceremony without them, so I'll ask for their schedule next time I see them. No need for invites."

Beelzebub came over two days later, so I breezily asked her, "Falfa and Shalsha are having a sisters' wedding thing; what days are you free?"

"WWWWHHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!"

Her reaction was just as exaggerated as I imagined it would be—no, more so.

"Let me just say this before you get the wrong idea. It's a ceremony for them to promise to each other to stay close as sisters in the future. They're not both being married off, so calm down."

"What a relief. I thought I might have to murder some fiancés, depending on who they were." She actually sounded like a demon for once.

"And both of them are going to wear wedding dresses. You'd come even if I told you not to, right?"

"I have the obligation of attending as their guardian."

Um, no, you're not their guardian. But I wasn't going to tell her that because I was tired of it. Beelzebub was hell-bent on being their auntie now.

"A sisters' wedding, hmm? What a lovely bit of culture. Could it catch on in the demon lands? I shall bring it up with the demon king."

Crap… If Pecora finds out, she'll definitely want a wedding with me…

But not inviting her to Falfa and Shalsha's ceremony would be too harsh. And then I would have to tell Beelzebub to keep quiet about it, which would get her in hot water, too, if anyone found out.

Oh well. If Pecora started pressuring me to have a wedding ceremony with her, I would just have to be firm about turning her down.

“Okay, then go ahead and contact the other demons and everyone else living there.”

“Indeed, I shall. We will attend this celebration. I will bring them with me, no matter what.”

“Er, don’t force them to come… If it makes things awkward at the ceremony, it’ll kinda defeat the purpose.”

“But no one would be unhappy to attend their ceremony, no?”

I think you’re overshooting a little there, Beelzebub…

Regardless, we picked a date, and the day for the sisters’ wedding soon came.

WE HELD A *SISTERS' WEDDING*

The family all went to the Misjantie Temple in the village of Tazine.

We were renting out the temple for about two hours that day.

Misjantie was helping Falfa and Shalsha get dressed, so I didn't have to be around for that. Instead, I had another job waiting for me.

"Since you're the mother of the brides, you're in charge of reception, man."

"Reception?"

"Your job is to hand out the seating charts to anyone who comes and accept gift money, man."

"This sure is Japanese style…"

I laid out a table at the temple entrance and sat there until, eventually, attendees started trickling in.

First was Eno, Witch of the Grotto.

"Congratulations. Here is my gift money."

I took the gold coins wrapped in cloth. There weren't any paper bills in this world.

"Th-thanks… Er, people give gift money in this world, too?"

"Uh, isn't it common practice? I believe people typically wrap up thirty thousand gold as a gift. Well, this isn't a real wedding this time around, so they probably don't need it, but you're holding it at a ceremonial venue. I'm sure it cost a lot."

She was being realistic in the weirdest way…

Eno went right to registering her name, picked up the seating chart, then went inside.

Momma Yufufu came next. “Heh-heh, the day has finally come, hasn’t it? Here, a gift.”

“Spirits give gift money, too…?”

The demons then came en masse.

There were the obvious ones, like Beelzebub and Pecora, as well as the leviathan sisters Fatla and Vania, plus Fighsly—Pondeli the recluse was also with them, so they probably all came riding on either Fatla or Vania.

“You have my congratulations. Here, a gift.” Beelzebub handed over money like it was a given.

Then Pecora. “Congratulations, truly. Here is gift money, as well as a message of felicitations from the demon king. I believe we will have time to present, so do read it out loud.”

There were even cards, too…

“Well done, Miss Azusa. If you need extra hands, then I would be happy to help.” Fatla had her stuff together even during times like this.

“Well, doing reception alone is easy enough. I’ll be fine.”

“Reception is fine, but you might have to prepare for an after-party.”

“We’re not doing an after-party!”

This was way too similar to weddings in Japan… Way too similar…

Lastly, Kuku the almiraj came.

“Here… Gift money… I’ve gotten more work, and I’m selling well enough that I can finally pay the thirty thousand with ease… Thank you…”

“Oh, thanks… You don’t have to overwork and force yourself to pay the gift money, though…”

“Right, why don’t I play a song for some entertainment? I have a new one, ‘Twenty-Five Years Since I Left You.’”

“That’s definitely not a song for a wedding!”

Afterward, Natalie and some other villagers and even employees from Halkara Pharmaceuticals came.

Honestly, this wasn’t even a real wedding, so I was starting to feel kind of bad…

Just throwing together all the people our family knew was enough for a small crowd.

My circle of friends had exploded in such a short time period.

Then Misjantie appeared. “Good work on the reception, man. Now, Witch of the Highlands, take your seat. The parent has the seat lowest and closest from the attendees, by the way.”

“Hey, have you ever worked at a wedding venue in Japan…?”

“A pan of what, now?”

She didn’t seem like she was playing dumb.

◇

I took my own seat. The rest of the family was being treated as extended relatives, so they sat behind me. *I see how this works.*

“Lady Azusa, I know no change will come of this, but I am still nervous…” Laika sat beside me, and she was rather stiff. It was like she was attending a wedding ceremony of one of her dragon relatives.

“Yeah. I guess it is still a ceremony… This is more put together than I thought it would be. They put decorations all over the temple, too…”

Because this was the temple of a pine spirit, those decorations were pine-themed. They made everything seem Japanese style, but they matched this temple well.

“Falfa and Shalsha will be even happier from now on…” Beelzebub sat in her guest seat, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. She was reacting like a parent at a real marriage ceremony for her daughter… *Isn’t she getting a little too emotional about this…?*

“Spirits that humans worship, like the pine spirit, sure have their hands full. The life of a droplet spirit is one of leisure, free from worldly cares. My shoulders would grow so stiff if people worshipped me like a god.” Momma Yufufu offered her opinion as a fellow spirit.

She was right. Even though they were both spirits, their ways of life were totally different.

“I would not mind holding a wedding with you, elder sister. Or even just as friends, so long as we’re close enough.” Pecora, from her seat near the front, said what I thought she would.

“I have no intentions of getting married to anyone, but please don’t take it the wrong way. If word got out in the human lands that I was getting too close with you, the demon king, then they would probably come after me.”

The villagers of Flatta had finally built up a tolerance for demons, but that wasn’t necessarily true for all humans. Plenty of them were still terrified of demons.

If the human countries considered me a threat, it would be awful for my leisurely life.

—That was my own very logical reasoning, if I do say so myself.

“Indeed. Our feelings will still reach each other even if we don’t fuss over ceremony and form.”

It sounded like she understood, but she had taken it way better than I thought…

—Then the inside of the temple suddenly went dark.

It wasn’t nighttime yet, so it was probably some kind of magic.

“All right, guys, the couple will now be entering the venue. Please refrain from talking. Let’s welcome them with some warm applause.”

Misjantie’s voice came from the air, like the announcements before a play.

The hall was suddenly filled with light again, and the blinding brightness almost felt

divine.

Walking down the brightly lit center aisle from the back was Falfa and Shalsha, hand in hand. They were both wearing what I'd call tuxedos. Even though they probably had never worn them before, they both looked great.

Falfa had a bright smile on her face, and Shalsha still seemed a bit nervous.

I stared at them, captivated, but I did remember to clap. I was their mother; I couldn't be rude now.

What the heck. This isn't just for funsies. The whole atmosphere is pretty serious.

When they reached the altar, they turned around to face the rest of us, and Misjantie appeared behind them, floating exactly where a god might appear.

"I'm the pine spirit, man. People have called me Misjantie for ages. I'm here to see that these two trusting individuals will feel the same about each other forever. I'm also gonna be the master of ceremonies."

There was a somber air about her and a serious expression on her face, but her idiotic-sounding manner of speech was the problem…

Couldn't she at least change character just for this moment…?

"A wise man once said that life is ashes to ashes and dust to dust. But that's only talking about the physical. The heart will never die, man. We pray that these two hearts will grow to the ends of the earth and the ends of time."

The two of them made eye contact and then nodded slightly.

"I, Falfa, will walk with Shalsha, my younger sister, through all the joys and sorrows of our days to come."

"I, Shalsha, will walk with Falfa, my older sister, through all the joys and sorrows of our days to come."

They both looked perfect. I was genuinely glad we held this ceremony.

We could create our own special celebrations. The normal days in our lives were precious and dear, but we needed days like this, too.

"Now, place your vows into your rings and put them on each other's fingers, man. First we'll start with big sister Falfa giving hers to Shalsha, and then the other way around. There's a whole reason for this, but we'll skip that."

Misjantie came over with a board where their rings rested. She sure had put a lot of effort into a fake wedding. I mean, she was a spirit who'd worked as a matchmaker, after all.

"Ohhh, how absolutely lovely! Everything is happening exactly how it went in a book I read!" Pecora's eyes were glittering. She really did like this kind of girly stuff. "As I am in no position to refuse, I have been forced to attend the weddings of important demons, but this ceremony is much nicer; it's so wonderful!"

That was weirdly spiteful!

"Oooooh… They'll both be so happy… As their mother, I shall support them the best I can…"

"Hey, Lord of the Flies! Don't call yourself their mother! You're in the guest section, not the family section!" Lately, Beelzebub had been acting more and more like some things were a given, so I had to tell her *no* whenever I could.

"So touching, watching my granddaughters get married…"

Momma Yufufu was saying weird things, too… *Wait, but I guess I do call her my mom, which would make the girls her grandkids…*

"Okay, Shalsha, I'm putting the ring on."

"Okay, Sis, go ahead…"

Both of them seemed somehow nervous. I guess brothers and sisters didn't go out of their way to tell each other they cared for one another.

If this were a couple getting married, they might get a chance to say something about it, like when they got engaged, but an opportunity like that doesn't usually come for sisters.

“Falfa’s remembering how important you are to me, Shalsha.”

“Shalsha wants you to be my big sister forever. I’m not the best little sister, but I want you to protect me.”

They shared their feelings as they placed the rings on each other’s fingers.

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Was it better to call those feelings friendship? Or love?

It didn't matter which, and maybe it wasn't either of them. Still, I thought it was meaningful that the two could take the time to reaffirm how they felt about each other.

Good work, Misjantie.

"Thanks, guys. Now I'm gonna take your signatures for your vows. I want you to write your names on this contract, which says you will always stay loyal and bring each other happiness. You've written your names countless times before this, but it's gonna mean something special this time."

Things were pretty particular at this point.

The two turned the contract toward us to show that they'd signed it. Their writing was childish, but it was done in careful, familiar characters.

"Now, all of you here today can see that this contract is authentic. Please give them a big round of applause."

There was no reason not to clap. We blessed the two with a thunderous applause.

Finally, after we were done clapping our hands off—

"Mommy!"

"Mom!"

Both of them turned to me and spoke in unison.

""And everyone else, thank you!""

No, thank you*. I'm so glad you were born.*

Beelzebub was already bawling her eyes out. She wore her emotions on her sleeve way more openly than I did.

Sheesh, let it all out, I guess.

The two girls grasped each other's hands again, passed down the aisle between the chairs, and then vanished.

Right afterward, wooden tables and chairs appeared out of nowhere in the open area. On the tables were plates filled with food.

"Now, everyone, please enjoy your meals, mm-kay? Your names are in front of your chairs to show where you're sitting."

I was at a table with Laika, Beelzebub, and Pecora.

Pecora was sitting awfully close to me, while Laika was frowning at her with a glare for doing so. And Beelzebub was sobbing the entire time. *This is a really strange table, but let's just dig in for now.*

Here's the menu, by the way:

Seafood and seasonal vegetable
gelée gâteau

Smoked duck with a
blueberry sauce drizzle

Chilled edamame potage

Butter-roasted rainbow fish with
balsamic screw mushrooms

Filleted steak with seasonal vegetables
in a red wine sauce

& Help yourself to as much
bread as you like

This is more of a real full-course meal than I thought it would be!

"This is very helpful. Let me just write this down…"

This was happening at another table, but Vania seemed to be writing something about cooking down on a piece of paper. I guess she just couldn't help herself when it came to food.

"Elder sister, this is a lovely event," Pecora commented.

"Sure is."

"I do wish I had one for myself."

"Keep wishing. I'm not doing it."

Laika nodded to back me up.

Then, as we were eating, the room dimmed again. MC Misjantie was standing at the front of the room, in the only light. Maybe it was because of her spirit powers.

"Now, let's welcome the sisters once again, man!"

I've been waiting for this! The food is good, but I want to see Falfa and Shalsha right now!

But as we were clapping, Misjantie came to stand right beside me for some reason. It was still dark around me, so it was a little scary…

"Can you stop appearing so suddenly…? This isn't good for my heart…"

Spirits were apparently good at teleporting around; Momma Yufufu was the same.

"Now, come with me, mother of the brides. You have an important job to do."

"What job? I'm already done with reception, so…?"

"This is way, way more important, man! Come with me!"

She took me through the darkness and into a different room. What was going on?

Falfa and Shalsha were here in this other room—and both of them were wearing wedding dresses!

"You're both too cute! Way too cute! This should be illegal! You both maxed out your cute levels! I'm not the strongest at all—YOU are!!"

I wanted to use all the figurative expressions that existed in this world to express how cute they were, but all I could do standing there in front of them was call them *cute* over and over. Was there anything greater in this world? No, there wasn't. There couldn't be.

"Thank you, Mommy!"

"It was tough to put on, but it was worth it if it makes you this happy, Mom."

Falfa seemed in a much better mood now that she was in the wedding dress she'd been hoping to wear. Geez, her smile was the best and brightest in the world. I doubted any brides smiled this much at any real wedding. It was like she was eating her favorite candy.

And in that sense, it was a relief, because Falfa was still a child at the end of the day.

I was probably being a selfish parent, but I didn't want her to grow up too quickly.

On the other hand, Shalsha wasn't as stiff and nervous as she was before, but her face was red and she was looking down in embarrassment. She was savoring the happiness in her own way, I think.

Even at a time like this, even though they were sisters, their reactions were clearly distinct—and that was what was so wonderful about them. Everything about them was wonderful to me!

But I still didn't know why I was here.

"So, Misjantie, what job do you have for me?"

"In weddings, the groom enters first, man. And then the father brings out the bride. The participants always come in that way, even in other ceremonies."

I was starting to catch on. "So you want me to act as the father, right?"

I pointed to myself as I asked, and she immediately responded, “Yep.”

There was nothing really to question about that. If there was something I didn’t know, it was—

“What should I do if there are two brides?”

We were already in an exceptional situation.

“Here I think we’ll have you be in the center, then have one girl on either side of you,” Misjantie replied easily, almost like this had happened before.

Me walking in the middle, my daughters in their wedding dresses on either side of me—I had only a brief glimpse in my mind’s eye, but it was already perfect…

“Mommy, you’re grinning.”

“You look like an evil god they pray to in the north.”

Crap. It was so wonderful… it showed up on my face…

“Sorry, sorry. I was just thinking about what a wonderful moment this is for a parent…”

Normally, the father doing this job would be feeling a sense of parting as he walked his daughter out. I’m sure plenty of them cried with sadness as well as joy.

But in this wedding ceremony, they weren’t being married off or moving away. It was just a great reason to be happy!

Still, to the girls, and all the other attending guests, of course, this ceremony was just going to become a nice memory. In that sense, it wasn’t much different from a regular wedding. That was why I had to do my job right. I didn’t want to ruin my daughters’ memories.

There was a mirror right there, so I checked my expression. More like, I adjusted it.

Good, now I looked serious and earnest. It was time to do what I had to do.

I took the girls’ hands.

Falfa was on my right.

Shalsha was on my left.

Even though they were twins, I could tell right away which hand was Falfa's and which was Shalsha's.

Oh, I've spent such a long time with these two. That's why I can sense even the slightest differences between them.

I was on the verge of tears even before we left the room. I was getting ahead of myself.

"Well then, let's go, girls. We can't keep the others waiting in the dark for too long."

They nodded at the same time.

Misjantie opened the door for us, and we made our way to the hall where everyone was waiting.

The room as a whole stayed dark, but the area around Falfa and Shalsha, including me, lit up like it was under a spotlight.

The three of us walked together holding hands, so this wasn't like a wedding where the bride would follow her father.

But Falfa was just slightly ahead of us.

I was in between them, but she was essentially pulling Shalsha along. She was trying to put herself in front of Shalsha. It was probably unconscious.

I know we were already well into it, but I finally truly felt how this was supposed to be a ceremony for sisters to reaffirm their love for each other. This wasn't a fun little event for me to see my girls all dressed up for a wedding; it was something nobler.

The clapping of the guests from the tables on either side echoed around us.

I think all three of us had a bit of pride on our faces.

When we came to the altar, we turned around to face our guests.

Just as I was wondering what we were going to do now, Misjantie nudged Falfa. “Falfa, go ahead, man.”

Falfa took out something that looked like a message card and slowly began to read.

“Shalsha, Falfa wonders when you said you would call me big sister. It was so long ago, I can’t remember. You always get obsessed over things, and sometimes that’s all you can see. One of those times, you said you were going to defeat Mommy. I was so surprised.”

I see, this is a letter from big sister to little sister.

Shalsha was looking down, tears pooling in her eyes.

“But if you never ran to Mommy’s house, then we probably would have spent our lives hiding in a forest somewhere. Falfa believes that Shalsha is the reason I’m so happy now. I hope we stay good sisters. From, Falfa.”

Beelzebub wailed out loud. It was getting kind of annoying. I think this was my first time seeing her actually lose it.

This time, Shalsha took out a message card.

“Sis, Shalsha sometimes thinks about how you are always looking out for me. I think the only reason why I’ve managed to live this long is because of you. I don’t know how to pay you back, but I want to stay with you. I hope we stay good sisters. From, Shalsha.”

Shalsha’s message was shorter than Falfa’s, but I noticed how it showed their personalities—and that’s when the unexpected came.

“And it’s a little weird to read this here, but, Mom? A lot of things have happened, but… we are glad you are our mom… Thank you… I hope we can alwahays, alwh…”

By the end, Shalsha couldn't talk because she was already sobbing.

I was crying, too, so we were even. I'd really learned how much my girls had grown.

They were thanking me, but I wanted to thank them, too.

I'm so grateful for this sister wedding. Thank you, Misjantie.

"What wonderful messages, man. And as proof of the vows, please kiss each other on the cheek."

They were sisters; a kiss on the cheek was nothing. Without hesitation, they gave each other little pecks.

First, Falfa gave Shalsha one.

Then Shalsha gave Falfa one.

"Your cheek is salty, Shalsha."

"It's the tears. Slime spirit tears still have salt in them." Shalsha was crying too much to hide her tears.

"Everyone, please give our happy couple a big round of applause!"

I clapped my hands together as hard as I could.

But I had one more job left.

Falfa and Shalsha came to either side of me again.

"Mommy."

"Mom."

They both looked up at me with wide eyes. For some reason, even MC Misjantie seemed excited.

"Please also give your mother a vow kiss!"

“Oh, I see…”

In front of me, I could hear the demon king and her minister yelling.

“Ahhh! Elder Sister! How brazen!”

“Damnation! I’m so jealous!!!”

It wasn’t like I wasn’t embarrassed, but this was an important ceremony.

“Go ahead, you two.”

They both kissed me on the cheek. I had to be their mother for as long as I could. I would devote myself to doing an excellent job of it.

Clap, clap, clap. Loud applause echoed through the hall.

I made this event happen with the ulterior motive of seeing my daughters in little wedding dresses, but I ended up crying, too.

“My job as the pine spirit is done, man. I was here to witness, but it’s ultimately up to you two to make sure you stay good friends. If you end up fighting, then I want you to remember this day. Today, I can attest that your hearts were full of compassion for each other. You have my word as a spirit, man.”

Misjantie expertly wrapped it up.

“I want you to continue enjoying your meal, but there’s something I wanna give to these two first, man. It’s like a memento.”

What Misjantie handed to Falfa was a small pine sapling.

“If you can, I want you to plant this near your house. It’ll grow into a totally awesome tree.”

“Thank you, Miss Misjantie! Let’s see each other at the World Spirit Summit again, okay?”

“You got it. And until then, I’m hopefully gonna keep working on restoring the Misjantie Temples all across the country.” Misjantie bowed briefly.

I think I understood why people had believed in this pine spirit as a matchmaker for so long.

I stood from my seat and then looked at the girls. “I’m so happy for you both.”

I gently embraced the two of them.

This was the best day ever!

◇

After that, word spread that the Witch of the Highlands had held a sisters’ wedding for her daughters in the village of Tazine and deepened ties there, and more tourists started to visit. There were also more visitors to the Misjantie Temple.

Saying I did all I could to help revive the village would be overstating things a bit, but as long as it benefited them somehow, that was fine with me.

And by the way, when we planted the sapling that Misjantie gave to us next to the house—

It practically grew to adult size in just three days.

“Okay, it might have some spirit power inside of it, but it grew up way too quickly…,” I murmured as I looked up at the tree. I wondered if it was disturbing any laws of nature…

“What’s with this smug-looking tree…? It sure is cheeky for a newbie,” Sandra the mandragora complained.

“Plants have a concept of newbies…?”

“And… this tree is absorbing a lot of nutrients… There’ll be less for me… I can move, so it’s not a problem, but it sure is a nuisance…”

Exactly! If it’s growing so fast, then it is taking a lot of underground nutrients!

I think I’m going to have to buy fertilizer or something again…

LAIKA ENTERED A *TOURNAMENT*

"Ei! Ya! Tah!"

"Ha! Hei! Yah!"

The yells were coming from Fighsly and Laika. They weren't participating in a festival or anything, and they weren't making mochi, either; they were fighting in front of the house in the highlands.

Fighsly had come because Laika had asked for help with practice, like a private lesson for a big sumo tournament.

They both were dealing out kicks and punches, blocking when necessary. It was pretty interesting, even for martial arts training.

Flatorte, Sandra, and I were watching them.

"Hmm. Not bad. But they're too soft. I, the great Flatorte, would use my tail to attack there."

Well, unlike you, Laika doesn't have a tail in her human form…

"Animals certainly are savage. Plants are peaceful. We would never hold a sword or set fire to anything."

Stop discriminating against animals. Still, it'd be terrifying if plants attacked us with swords or set fire to my house.

"Here we go, then. Fighsly-style slime fist, hidden move! Low power kick!"

Fighsly repeatedly kicked at Laika's feet as she crouched low.

But wasn't this kind of plain for a hidden move…?

“Oh no! She got me!”

Laika couldn’t get out of the way in time, and her feet took the blow! Once the attacks knocked her off balance, Fighsly kicked her up into the air.

“And again, low power kick!”

“Ah! She’s attacking me again in the air!”

Just as Laika was finished flying through the air and was about to hit the ground again, there came another low power kick, and her body rose up into the air again.

And another low power kick while she couldn’t defend!

“What do you think?! Once you disrupt your opponent’s balance, you can continually charge them by chaining attacks that keep them off balance! This is the hidden move of Fighsly-style slime fist! Repeated low power kicks!”

“What is this, some kind of stunlock?!”

That was just mean! But she certainly was able to keep attacking Laika, so maybe it was effective!

“Oh, Fighsly. Winning competitions is the one thing she pours her heart and soul into. She’s a woman who’s made her way through life with her own fists.”

Flatorte was looking at her rather approvingly. Well, Fighsly’s job is fighting; of course she’d be particular about winning.

“There’s a big fighting tournament coming up soon! I have to get even stronger so that I might win and earn the thirty million gold in prize money!”

You don’t have to mention how much the prize is!

“Also, it costs five thousand gold to enter.”

More money talk!

But Laika wasn't your average girl, either. I mean, you could tell that just from the fact that she was sparring, but anyway.

Even caught in a stunlock, she slowly readjusted her stance—and blew flames from her mouth.

"Counterattack! Bwaaaaaaaaaaah!"

This was a red dragon at her best! Even in her human form, Laika could use fire.

"Ahhh! Fire is against the rules!"

The flames reached Fighsly, and she frantically rolled around the highlands to put the fire out.

Sandra yelled, "Fire! Ahhh, I'm scared!" and hid in the ground. Fire was apparently terrifying to a plant.

"Er, are you all right? I don't believe the flames were strong enough to cause serious burns."

"Yes, they're not serious, so I can put them out quickly…," Fighsly said, still rolling.

I could use healing magic, but it wasn't bad enough for me to use it. They were both pretty skilled, so they knew how to pull their punches.

But something unusual happened.

As she was rolling around, Fighsly's body bent in a weird way, and I could hear a *crack*!

The highlands weren't totally flat—what did she hurt?

Then, in the next moment, Fighsly had transformed into a slime, emerald green and twice the size of a normal slime.

"Shoot… I twisted wrong… and turned into my slime form…"

The slime was talking, so it was definitely Fighsly.

That's when I remembered that, at the end of the day, she was just a slime. Her name,

Fighsly, came from Fighsli, short for Fighter Slime. It was very simple, but as she was the only slime who was also a fighter, there was no risk of running into someone else with the same name.

"Well, it sure has been a while since I've been a slime. I suppose I'll turn back into my human form now— Hmm?"

The emerald-green slime didn't budge at all; it seemed she was having some sort of trouble.

"Huh? Whaaat…? Oh, I hurt myself. I guess I hurt myself… I hurt my back…"

I wasn't sure what part of the slime was supposed to be the back, but it sounded like she injured herself.

"Aw, crap… The tournament's soon, though… I cannot return to my human form because I hurt my back… What should I do…? It'll take almost two weeks for me to heal completely… but the tournament's in five days…"

"I guess transforming into your human form is related to that characteristic of your body."

I approached slime-Fighsly.

"This is bad… I'm gonna lose so much income if I can't enter this tournament… That's really what I want to avoid…"

"Come on, say something like *I'm so upset I can't participate in the tournament* instead!"

This athlete (?) was being too open about her salary!

"I'm sorry. This is all because of my fire…" Laika was crestfallen, apparently believing she was responsible.

Of course, this was an injury that happened during practice, so she wasn't at fault here. But whether it be in boxing or in pro wrestling, any fighter who gravely injured their opponent would worry about it.

"No… I mis-rolled, so it's my problem… Fighters do get hurt in their work, after all." Fighsly was levelheaded when it came to these things.

“But like you said, Fighsly, it’s a real shame you can’t enter a competition with such a big cash prize,” I said.

“No, I am not the sort to call it a loss that easily,” Fighsly the slime said. “I will absolutely enter!”

“Could you press on your wound and turn back into a human or something…?”

“No, I will enter as a slime!” Fighsly declared.

“““Whaaaaaat?!”””

We all yelled at the same time.

“That’s not possible… I mean, there’s no way a slime could enter a tournament…”

“Nowhere in the entry conditions does it say that slimes cannot enter. According to the rules, it is allowed!”

“Right, but… a talking slime on its own is already super rare, so you might catch the attention of some weirdos… You’re not telling everyone that your true form is a slime, are you…?”

“R-right…” The slime shifted slightly. Maybe that meant she was tilting her head or something? “I tell people that the Fighsly-style slime fist was developed from the movements of a slime, but I don’t think it would be good for them to see my slime form and realize I’m a monster… Someone might try to kill me if I wander around town…”

It would be difficult to enter the tournament as a slime, after all. She might not even get permission in the first place.

“Oooh, but thirty million. Thirty million, thirty million… I want thirty million gold…” She seemed really reluctant to let that go! “I want five quadrillion gold, if I can swing it…”

I think that’s asking a little *too* much.

“I’ve got it! I will help you!” Laika placed her hand on her chest and stood before

Fighsly. “I will join the fighting tournament with you, Miss Fighsly, as *Laika the Slime-Mancer*! Some people work as falconers, so I don’t think that would be so odd!”

“Yes! Thank you!” Fighsly bounced in place—probably an expression of happiness.

“Indeed, I think you could get permission to join that way. And Fighsly in her slime form could do all the fighting.” Flatorte seemed to think rather highly of this plan.

“Yes. I would be nothing but a means for you to join the fight, so I have no intentions of fighting anyone directly. And if I were to earnestly fight, then we would be entering together, which isn’t—”

“No, I want the money, so if I end up in trouble, please fight with me, Laika.”

You’re so cheap, Fighsly…

◇

And so Laika and slime-Fighsly entered the fighting tournament together.

I was like Laika’s guardian, so I came along. Flatorte also wanted to see what was going to happen with Laika or something like that, so she came, too.

We couldn’t have Fighsly getting attacked by adventurers, so we decided to put her on Laika’s back.

“Hey, that girl has a slime on her.”

“Is it her pet?”

“I bet it feels nice and cool.”

We drew a lot of attention walking around town… Well, there weren’t a lot of people who went around with slimes.

“Registration for the tournament is taking place at the local guild. Please go there,” Fighsly said, quietly enough that no one around us could hear her. There wasn’t much precedent for a talking slime.

“Understood. Signing up should be possible as long as I’m here,” Laika said.

We got odd looks in the guild as well, but registration went without a problem.

“Er, people sometimes get gravely wounded at these things; are you sure about this, miss? Well, you *are* a dragon, so maybe you’ll be okay.”

“Yes. I will fight with my whole body and spirit as a slime-mancer.”

“Slime-mancer… I’ve never really heard of that job before. Even if you’re all right, are you sure your slime won’t get hurt…?”

“I spent many years raising this slime; it is the finest of its kind. It is a cut above all those other slimes.”

“Yes, but… it’s still a slime. This is different from wild-animal taming; are you sure it’s that strong…?”

“Of course it is. There’s no need to worry.”

The receptionist was still skeptical, but Laika and Fighsly got permission to join.

When they registered, Laika and Fighsly went straight for the arena.

This tournament also started with qualifying rounds. There were so many participants that they had to win three times in a round-robin in order to enter the tournament proper.

Flatorte and I sat in the arena stands, which were empty for the prelims.

“By the way, Mistress,” the blue dragon said, “how does she fight in her slime form? She can’t kick and punch like that, can she?”

“I was wondering the same thing, actually.”

Laika and Fighsly hadn’t really done any special training ever since Fighsly had turned into a slime, so we hadn’t seen how she would fight in her slime form.

“Well, she calls herself a Fighter Slime, so she can probably fight well enough. At least she wasn’t a human fighter that turned into a slime.”

Laika the Slime-Mancer's first opponent was a bald, muscly guy, one who certainly looked like a fighter.

This is just like the tournament I entered—does nobody have hair at these things?

"My opponent is a girl… and a slime. If this is a joke, then just go home. When you cross paths with me, successor of the Erto Diamond Fist, your bones will break."

He was really hamming it up with that fancy name, but I'd never heard of it before.

"I would like to fight fair and square as a slime-mancer. If you please!" Laika was polite, as always. She bowed lightly.

The referee yelled, "Begin!"

Fighsly leaped from Laika's arm.

"Taste the slime-mancer's hidden move!" As Laika offered a helpful explanation, Fighsly hopped toward their enemy, and—

A part of her body extended, lashing at the enemy's feet like a whip. Maybe that was one of her attacking techniques.

The enemy lost his balance and staggered, while the slime whipped at him again!

Their opponent sailed through the air.

Just as he was about to hit the ground, she attacked him again!

And again while he was still defenseless!

"I knew it! This really is stunlocking!"

Their opponent was rendered completely unable to fight, receiving a constant barrage of low attacks while he was staggered, and the first round of preliminaries ended with an overwhelming victory for Laika the Slime-Mancer.

Fighsly bounded over and leaped onto Laika's chest, and the referee announced

Laika's victory.

"Mistress, could you call that a fair and square fight…?" Flatorte commented.

"She's using all her might to defeat the enemy, so maybe it's the right way to do it for a pro… I guess?"

The next two preliminary fights went the same way—Fighsly attacking low, then knocking them in the air, and then attacking them repeatedly in the meantime. Same strategy.

By the third fight, it was obvious how they were going to attack. The opponent crouched down at the start to brace for it, but—

"Urgh… I don't even know where a slime's feet are! It's impossible to read!"

Yeah, you're not wrong… Do they even have the concept of feet? I guess Fighsly hurt her back, so maybe she has feet, too.

With no way to guard against it, their opponent easily fell prey to the low power kick (or the slime-form equivalent).

"What's up with this fighter…?"

"I've never seen a type like that before…"

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“Is this the birth of a new star?”

All the big fighting tournament fans sat in the stands, talking among themselves.

Her style was to do none of the fighting herself and let the slime do all the work. She probably wasn’t a fighter.

◇

We met up afterward, and Fighsly seemed to be in pretty high spirits—she was bouncing around everywhere, but she didn’t really talk in front of others.

“Fighsly says, *Today I managed some really solid slime-like attacks and got to push forward without giving an inch or taking a break. I want to keep this up for tomorrow.*”

Laika ended up interpreting for her.

“Not sure those were slime-like attacks… Oh, by the way, what do you want to do about dinner? You can’t eat normal food when you’re a slime, right?”

“Fighsly said earlier, *I want to go to sleep early today so I can be in top shape for tomorrow. I’m just gonna give every fight my all.*”

“Sounds nice on paper, but when you say that as a slime, it’s not very convincing…”

We went to our room at the inn and left slime-Fighsly there, then went out to eat.

Fighsly apparently absorbed some nutrients from the dust in the room and the sand on the side of the road. Making her eat that in her human form would basically amount to abuse, but she was doing it on her own, so I guess there was no cause for concern. She started out as a slime anyway, so there wasn’t much for us to oppose.

I wasn’t particularly nervous, since I was partially an outsider, so I slept normally in my bed at the inn. I couldn’t really tell if slime-Fighsly was too nervous to sleep. She was used to entering tournaments, though, so she was probably fine.

And then came the day of the tournament.

It was a thirty-two-participant tournament. The stands were packed that day.

For most of these people, this would be their first time seeing a slime-mancer.

When Laika, our ad hoc "slime-mancer," entered the battlefield, conversation rippled through the arena.

"What the heck is that…?"

"Hello? That's a slime…"

"Maybe the slime is the real body, and she'll keep coming back to life unless you defeat it?"

Nah, she wasn't a boss character or anything like that.

Fighsly was just as merciless in the tournament today, too.

She would create these protrusions—I wasn't sure whether to call them tentacles or whips or what—then attack low over and over, then really go in once they were off their balance.

I'm sure people would hate her if this were some kind of fighting game, but it was the right strategy for someone who wanted to win. There was no way she could lose like this.

Laika also stood behind her, arms crossed and watching Fighsly intensely, like the coach of an Olympic athlete. Well, I guess a slime having a coach was a little weird, but that's the image that came to mind.

"What is she anyway?"

"She has horns, so maybe a dragon?"

"Then wouldn't she be stronger if she fought on her own?"

Yep, she absolutely would.

Regardless, Laika didn't feel like testing out her strength in this tournament. In terms of raw power, all of the contestants combined would be no match for Laika if she got serious. I mean, she was a dragon…

Anyway, this was the main event, and a fighter who could withstand Fighsly's attacks finally appeared.

They were up against a short dwarf.

"Heh! Guardin' me legs is child's play, lass!"

The dwarf was small, so of course it would be easy for him to guard his feet. He was smacking away Fighsly's whiplike attacks with his hairy hands.

"Wonder how Fighsly's gonna get out of this one," Flatorte commented… well, flatly as she watched the match. "Show us what you can do, Fighsly."

Laika seemed a little worried as well, but it was Fighsly doing all the fighting.

Then Fighsly took one of her slime whips and stretched out as far as she could. She swung around right behind the dwarf and then repeatedly low kicked him from behind.

"Ah cannae believe this!" the dwarf yelled, and I understood how he felt. It was hard to imagine her body could stretch *that* much…

And once she threw him off balance, all she did was low kick him over and over again.

Once the dwarf announced he was giving up, he was released.

"That slime-mancer is cruel…"

"She's not thinking about anything but winning fights…"

"It's fine according to the rules, but, y'know…"

"She's a demon for victory…"

"She sure is ruthless for someone so cute…"

Was Laika's reputation getting worse?! Well, it wasn't like this was being broadcast on national TV, so it wouldn't have that much of an effect. *But I don't know…*

"Mistress, you seem worried that everyone will think less of Laika, but you don't have to worry about it," Flatorte said to calm me down. "See, even if Laika entered the

tournament alone, she would fight just as thoroughly as that. I believe her strategy might be different, but she would never go easy just for the sake of popularity. I'm sure she would be overjoyed to be called a demon for victory."

"Oh…"

Now that she mentioned it, she was right. At the end of the day, Laika had very sharp senses. Her biggest goal was to better herself, and how others saw her was of secondary importance. Even if Laika were a real slime-mancer giving out attack orders, I'm sure she'd do the same thing.

"Man, you have a good read on Laika, Flatorte. You are both dragons, after all," I said.

Flatorte looked away awkwardly. "Laika is just simple…"

Even Flatorte tried to hide her feelings sometimes; it warmed my heart.

Laika, the mysterious slime-mancer who was a nobody before this tournament (because she didn't exist to begin with), won her battles without incident and finally came to the finals bracket.

She must have gotten more popular as she won, because I could hear people yelling, "You can do it, Laika!" These were mostly guys.

It seemed that she was getting people's attention not just because she was a ruthless slime-mancer, but also because she was a beautiful young woman.

Now that they were at the finals, the fair-weather fans started praising her stunlock.

"I love how calm and collected she is."

"She's not breaking any rules. It makes no sense to complain about that."

My worry about her reputation disappeared, too.

I guess at the end of the day, her cuteness won out for everyone of all ages and places. If the slime-mancer were a ruthless human whose appearance alone gave people chills, then their reputation would definitely suffer.

“I bet Fighsly’s overjoyed right now knowing she’s guaranteed at least second place. She’ll get a lot of prize money for this,” Flatorte remarked, munching on some fried chicken she’d bought at one of the shops.

“Yeah, there’s a lot of money even in second place.”

“But that carelessness can cost you the fight, and any opponent in the finals is going to have some skill.”

It would be pretty boring if they won the whole thing using a stunlock.

Then it was time for the finals.

Laika’s—or rather—Fighsly’s opponent was a knight wearing full plate armor.

“My name is Domremy, the strongest swordsman of this province, known as the Bloodied Plate! A slime’s attacks are powerless before such a valuable set of armor! I shan’t fall over, either! Even if I do, the weight of the plate will prevent your low blows from keeping me in the air! Therefore, you will not be able to lift me up in the air with your kick-me-off-balance-then-kick-me-into-the-air-while-I-am-defenseless combination attack!”

People in the audience were murmuring to each other.

“Oh yeah, he’s fine as long as he doesn’t fall over.”

“I guess the slime-mancer’s in trouble now.”

I mean, I doubt the stunlock is her only move.

“Additionally, it is against the rules to use bladed weapons against any of the participants in this tournament, but any kind of attack is permitted to a nonparticipant! This means I will attack this slime not with a wooden sword but with a steel one! How about it?! What a plight you must be in now!”

Urgh… If Fighsly doesn’t handle this well, she’ll end up seriously injured…

“Now what will Fighsly do?” Flatorte mused.

“Fighsly’s still a fighter at heart. She probably has no choice but to just keep punching and kicking. I don’t think her fundamentals will change.”

It really felt like those low kicks of hers were dominating the field, but at its core, she was winning these fights because her kicks were dealing damage to her enemies, so that had to be the result of skills she had tempered in her daily training.

"I think Fighsly fought properly in the tournament that I entered, and she even said she wanted to be my apprentice, so she is a serious fighter," I said. "She talks too much about money, though."

"Which means we'll finally get to see Fighsly's true qualities as a fighter. I'll keep a close watch on what happens, then."

Right—we hadn't really seen what she was capable of yet. This was a good chance to see how much stronger Fighsly had gotten after Beelzebub took her under her wing.

While Domremy the swordsman was the talkative type, both Laika and Fighsly stayed silent. Laika's arms were folded, as they had been this whole time. Maybe they already knew exactly what they were doing.

The referee announced the start of the match.

Fighsly hopped closer to the armored swordsman.

The way she moved around looked kind of silly, but this was her way of charging into battle.

Everyone was holding their breath, watching, wondering if this was going to be an intense fight.

"Slime-mancer, apologies, but I am going to slice your slime right in half! Hiyaaaaah!" Domremy the armored swordsman brought his sword down.

Boiiiiing.

With a rather weak-sounding noise, slime-Fighsly hopped again and avoided the attack.

Or not, as it turned out. Instead, she went straight for the armor.

"A charge attack! I knew you were a fighter!" I called.

But something was odd about this. The slime's body slithered between the gaps of the

armor to get inside.

“Wh—what…? What… is this…?”

Once the slime completely disappeared from view, the armored knight reacted with obvious pain. “Rgh… I can’t… breathe… Aaagggghhhhh…” And he flopped over.

Then slime-Fighsly, who had changed herself into a slithery form, wriggled out from between the gaps in the armor.

The referee announced Laika’s victory in total shock, and the arena erupted into cheers.

“I see. Fighsly probably clung fast to the knight’s face and made it difficult for him to breathe. What a fantastic strategy.” Flatorte was acting impressed, but it didn’t sit right with me.

“That wasn’t even a fight!”

◇

Ten days later, after returning to her human form, Fighsly came to visit the house in the highlands wearing rather expensive-looking clothes, along with some *very* expensive-looking furs around her neck.

“My, you really helped me out, Miss Laika. My wealth is all thanks to you. Oh, here—this is only a small token of my gratitude, but it’s a spoon set of pure silver. Take it, if you’d like. Oh-ho-ho~”

“You sure are worldly for a fighter!”

Laika, on the other hand, was as serious as she always was. “Miss Fighsly, would you train with me again soon?”

“*Sigh*, but I brought an expensive fruit basket. Why don’t we have some with a spot of tea? We can practice afterward, five minutes or so.”

No! Nobody seeking the way of the warrior would act like this!

“I have a saying: Seek money, for it will bring you power.”

“I know you’re saying it to sound cool, but you’re the actual worst!”

If Laika ever tried to become Fighsly’s apprentice, I would have to stop her with everything I had…

WE TOOK A *DIP IN THE SEA*

The seasons were pretty distinct around the house in the highlands.

That being said, summer in the highlands wasn't bad at all, and we didn't get mountains of snow, so it wasn't that inconvenient. I guess if the environment was too harsh, then Sandra the plant couldn't live with us, and I wouldn't be able to get the herbs that a witch needed for her medicines.

The goddess who reincarnated me as a witch must have taken all those factors into consideration. Or maybe she just plopped me here; she didn't seem particularly fastidious…

But still, up here in the highlands, the mornings and nights in winter got to be pretty frigid, and the effects of that could be seen everywhere. For example—

"Well, I am going out to train!" Laika would say as she left the house.

Five minutes later: "I've returned…"

That was fast. Too fast. She should at least try to do a little more…

"How sloppy. Red dragons are such cowards. I, the great Flatorte, am chock-full of energy!" Flatorte declared smugly with her hands on her hips, but her people in general did well in cold places. That was a cheap shot.

"Oh, yes, wasn't there a saying that idiots don't get sick?" Laika shot back.

"Wh-what?! S-sure… humans did make up that saying when they saw the blue dragons, but don't say things like that!"

It came from blue dragons?! Then it wasn't sarcasm, but the truth?!

"Now that you mention it, blue dragons don't get sick or anything…"

"That's right, Mistress. Blue dragons are full of energy, so they are entirely fine drinking alcohol and falling asleep on the roadside in the winter."

I can picture it perfectly.

“Blue dragons rarely ever get sick. If one did catch a cold, they would even go to the doctor to see what was wrong.”

“Er, you go to the doctor when you get sick normally anyway…” The more I talked with Flatorte, the more confused I got.

“Lady Azusa, it is so cold this time of year; why don’t we go to the hot springs at the volcano?” Laika offered an interesting idea.

Hot springs in the winter—not a bad thought. Hot springs in the summer were fantastic, too, of course.

But Flatorte was there to sabotage the idea.

“If we just want to go somewhere warm, it’s warm enough down south. The water off the southern coast should still be warm enough for humans to swim, even at this time of year.”

“What is so bad about hot springs? Don’t quibble with me.” Laika was frowning, but I was interested in what Flatorte said.

“The beach, huh? I haven’t been in a long time. Actually, I think my first time at a beach was when we visited Misjantie the pine spirit.”

That was also because I lived in the highlands, quite a ways from the ocean.

“Mistress, the village of Tazine was a fishing village, so why don’t we go even farther south this time and swim? The volcano is too hot, but the south should be cool enough for even me, Flatorte, to enjoy!”

“Hmm, a dip in the sea… I’m definitely getting curious. But see…” A point of concern immediately came to mind. “Are there swimsuits in this world? I mean, clothes you wear when you swim…”

Medieval European fantasy games made in Japan always gave the female characters swimsuits like it was a given. Even if there weren’t any swimsuits in the game itself, they would sometimes be wearing them in preorder bonuses and stuff. I’m sure there were quite a few reasons for that.

It was hard to imagine bikinis and school swim uniforms and swim racing uniforms in a fantasy world. Still, it's not like I ever looked up swimsuit history in the first place, so maybe there were, surprisingly? I don't know.

"Yes, I know what you mean."

Oh, judging by Flatorte's reaction, maybe there were swimsuits. They had exhibition and spot sales here, so maybe this world was pretty close to modern day.

"If you're worried about getting your clothes wet, then just swim naked. There is no problem with that."

"Yes, there is!"

I'm thinking about this because *I don't want to swim naked!*

"It is improper to swim naked. Please wear a swimsuit…," Laika said shyly.

"Wow… Swimsuits do exist…" I had just gained some very valuable information.

"Swimsuits were developed by merfolk three hundred years ago. They created a new material that was easy to move in even after it got wet. Apparently, they came up with the idea because the mermaids did not like the land dwellers looking at their breasts."

"Then that means they invented it just around when I came." I think I was reincarnated at the perfect time.

"At first, the merfolk made it for themselves, but they got more and more requests for human versions, and it spread from there."

"Nice work, merfolk! I am truly grateful. This means we can go swimming in the ocean."

Then Falfa and Shalsha emerged from the hallway and came into the room.

"We heard what you were talking about." Shalsha sure had sharp ears.

"We want to go to the beach, too! Falfa wants to see a real starfish!"

"Shalsha is extremely interested in the ocean. I was unable to see a starfish in Tazine last time, after all."

Why were they so focused on starfish?

“Then I guess we have no choice but to go to the beach in the south,” I replied.

I gathered the family, and we held a vote.

“The beach, huh? You know what that means, Big Sis,” said Rosalie. “It’s the place where the investigator makes the criminal confess and then pushes him off the cliff.”

“Rosalie, that’s pretty limited. And the criminal doesn’t get pushed off—doesn’t he fall on his own? If the investigator pushes him, then that just makes him a murderer…” *Why does she know weekday TV murder mystery tropes? They definitely don’t have TVs here.*

Also, some of the others weren’t exactly opposed to it, but they weren’t very enthusiastic.

“I don’t really want to be out in salty air, but it’s not like it’s so bad I can’t handle it…” Sandra the plant might have some trouble with the ocean.

“I’m not that interested, but I will go if I can.” Halkara, being a forest-dwelling elf, did not seem very interested in the beach. Her reply was what people said when they wanted to say no.

“Well, I’m not forcing you. Okay, so everyone who wants to go will head to the beach for a bit, and the rest of you who are staying, be sure to look after things, okay?”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t going, did I…? I’m coming, too!” Sandra was being way too dishonest with herself, but it was nice that we could all go as a family.

“I’ll go if I can~”

So maybe Halkara would be the only one not coming along…

◇

To get to the point, Halkara came, too.

“There are grasses that only grow along the coast, so I’m thinking about searching for some.”

That was an honest reason; people could go to the beach for more than swimming.

We all hopped on dragon-Laika's and dragon-Flatorte's backs and headed for a place called Buvirun Beach in the south. It was apparently warmest around there. If I compared it to Japan, it would be like Okinawa.

"Lady Azusa, I hear there are many merfolk swimsuit shops at Buvirun Beach. We will need to purchase a swimsuit before we can swim."

"That's right. That's our starting line."

Almost nobody sold swimsuits in the alpine Nanterre Province. The overwhelming majority of people there had never seen the ocean before.

So we first had to buy swimsuits, and then we could get in the water.

"Ahhh, the air is getting more and more lukewarm… This is unpleasant…" Being a blue dragon, Flatorte didn't seem to be enjoying it very much.

"If she says this is unpleasant, then that means we are approaching our destination," Laika replied. "We should be there soon."

I guess Flatorte's reactions were Laika's barometer…

Even though we could go fast by traveling on dragonback, it still took a while to reach the southern coastline, but we eventually made it to Buvirun Beach.

The market near the beach was selling all sorts of seafood, and there were even merfolk. They did indeed have fish tails instead of legs, which they dragged along on the ground. No one seemed to think it was weird, so I guess that's how they got around.

But there was a problem with what was in the market.

There was a shop selling seaweed, bonito, squid, octopus, sea urchin, shrimp, sea anemone, sea slug, and other things from the ocean.

There was a tool shop for fishing.

One that specialized in dried goods.

One that sold brooches and other trinkets carved from shells.

There were all kinds of shops, but none of them sold swimsuits!

“Wait… are swimsuits really that rare? There isn’t a shop selling cute swimsuits next to the fishing gear store or anything… Maybe they sell them at a mall or something…?”

This would put a swift end to our sightseeing in the south. There was less here than I thought…

But the sociable and merchantlike Halkara asked a lady in the market about swimsuits. It was nice having someone in the family who was good at communicating.

“Madam Teacher, shops that sell swimsuits have not been doing so well lately, so their numbers have significantly diminished. There’s demand among merfolk, but they buy them from shops in the water meant for merfolk, so they apparently rarely ever bring them up to land.”

“Wait, is the concept of going to the beach outdated, then…? I didn’t imagine that would be it…”

“I did hear about a shop that might sell them, though, so let’s go there.”

It was impressive how easily she handled these situations. Halkara really was brilliant, if you ignored all the times she wasn’t.

What would a swimsuit shop in this world look like? I wondered. Would it be some trendy little place?

Excited, we went to the shop in question.

Nene General Store: Selling all your daily items from brooms to clothes-drying poles.

It was nothing like what I was expecting!

Seriously? There were pots and leather gloves on display at the storefront—would they really sell swimsuits here? Wouldn't they just sell things like hand nets…?

"Are we sure this is correct…?" Sandra asked, exasperated. I was thinking the same thing.

"No, this is the right place. I asked what the shop name was, too. Hello? Is someone in?" Halkara called, and an old lady slowly emerged from the back.

"Yes, what is it you're searching for? Flypaper? Ladles?"

"No, do you have swimsuits? We would like cute-looking ones if possible," Halkara replied.

This was the first time I saw someone trying to buy swimsuits at a shop that sold flypaper.

"Ahhh, swimsuits? I think we have some. Wait there. I'll go get them."

"They have them, Madam Teacher!"

"Yeah… Guess they do…"

They definitely wouldn't have proper swimsuits here… They'd probably mostly just have the kind that are like full-body tights…

—But my expectations were betrayed in the best way.

The lady brought out colorful swimsuits in red and yellow and all other sorts. There were even some for kids, with frilly skirts attached to them.

They have swimsuits! Yes, go Nene General Store!

"We only have old ones, but what do you think? Swimsuit shops practically vanished overnight."

"What do you think, Madam Teacher?"

"These are totally fine! Let's pick from these!"

Most of the swimsuits were bikinis, which was probably because the merfolk invented

them. The merfolk were fine as long as they could cover their chests, so it would be weird if they tried to cover up as much as possible.

“Then we’re all fine with bikinis, right? Falfa, Shalsha, Sandra—I think these ones with skirts on them will look good on you.”

“Mistress, I, Flatorte, am fine with being naked.”

“Just wear a swimsuit.”

Nudity was not an option.

I also had Rosalie pick out her favorite, and I helped her change into a swimsuit with changing magic afterward.

“I’m so happy, Big Sis!”

“Ghosts still want to look good, too, right? You might not be able to swim, but have fun in your own way, okay?”

“Okay! I’m going to have a chat with the spirit of the drowning victim over there in my swimsuit!”

That sure was a grim way to enjoy herself…

“I’m not going in, either. I hate salt water. The sun is bright, so I’ll photosynthesize on the sand.”

“Great. You have fun in your own way, too, Sandra.”

This family sure had some trouble getting themselves to the ocean.

There weren’t any good places to get changed, so we borrowed a room at the store to put on our swimsuits. *Thank you, Nene General Store.*

“I had no idea all these swimsuits would sell. I suppose not every day can be the same.” The old lady at the shop was surprised.

“By the way, what *does* sell the most here?”

“Let’s see… seeds that grow well in the salty breeze and garden shears that can reach high branches.”

I’m impressed they had swimsuits at all…

◇

We went straight to the beach.

There were practically no people there, despite the sunny weather. It was almost like we were renting it out privately. I guess going to the beach was a thing of the past for the humans in this world, but it was a plus for us.

Okay, let me give you the rundown on our swimsuits.

First, mine. It was a regular bikini, one you’d probably find at a big indoor pool. My skin was still flawless after three hundred years—not a very flashy ability, but definitely a total cheat.

My skin was a mess when I was a cog in the corporate machine. I mean, I was so tired I died from overwork… I was too scared to even get my skin age checked, much less put on a bikini. Heck, I couldn’t even take a day off to go to the beach…

Uh, that got a little dark, so let’s change the subject.

Laika was in a bikini, too. Yep, she sure was cute.

“This is my first time wearing a bikini… Do I look good in it…?” she asked. She was fidgeting because of how revealing the outfit was.

“Let me put it this way: I’m relieved that the beach is too unpopular for skeevy guys right now.”

If I brought her to a Japanese beach, she would definitely be a target for a lot of playboy types, so she wouldn’t be able to just enjoy her time there (not that this has ever happened to me, so this is just my own imagination).

Flatorte was in a bikini, too. But since she had a tail, we got her a special kind.

“It is hot here, but at least this keeps me cool,” she said.

That was her problem?

“I’d want to take off more, if possible.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

Blue dragons were wild.

Next was Rosalie, although she was off talking with a drowned spirit…

Her swimsuit looked a lot like mine. Because she’d seen bikinis, it was easiest for me to use my magic to put her in one.

And then the one I didn’t really want to talk about—Halkara.

“My chest is so tight in this… Can you do something about it…?”

“Nope! My chest is totally fine, so I have no idea how to help you! Why don’t you ask someone with bigger boobs?!”

What sort of evolutionary advantage did boobs that big even have? It was weird. Definitely weird!

Next were the children.

Falfa and Shalsha were wearing children’s one-piece suits in different colors, building a sandcastle. I don’t have to repeat myself, but they were adorable. I don’t need any other words.

“Falfa’s building a gate in the back, too!”

“Shalsha is making a double moat.”

“Right after you go through the back gate, the path immediately turns ninety degrees, so it’s hard for big armies to move around.”

“Any enemy that tries to cross the moat from this turret will be lost in a storm of arrows.”

They were getting a little *too* into their castle-building.

And just as she said she would, Sandra was photosynthesizing in a similar swimsuit. If I were to compare her expression to a regular person, it was like someone enjoying a hot spring.

"Ahhh, the sunshine is so nice… I can feel the nourishment~"

Sunbathing was part of the beach experience, so that was a good thing to do, too.

"All riiight, everyone going in the water needs to do their warm-up exercises! Make sure your feet don't get cramps! The majority of all accidents at the beach happen because people weren't ready!"

I was basically the head of the household, so I gave the heads-up. I stretched out my Achilles tendon as far as I could. *Oh yeah, Achilles wouldn't exist in this world, so I wonder what they call it…*

"Ha-ha-ha, Madam Teacher, you're such a worrier. The waves are gentle; there's no way we can drown here~"

Halkara, why do you always have to jinx yourself…?

"Halkara, I'm not going to say anything bad, so just do your warm-up exercises… Elves aren't used to being around the ocean, right?"

"Well, I used to swim in the river when I was little. There won't be any problems. Well then, I'll be going in first!" Halkara scampered off toward the ocean, boobs bouncing all the way.

I'm sorry, God. I think I've fallen victim to envy… Is she shifting left and right to make them do that on purpose…?

Then Halkara entered the water.

"Ahhh, the temperature is just perfect. It's so nice~ I'll just go for a little swiaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaAaaaaaaaaaahhhhhHhhhhhhh!!!!!"

Halkara's scream resounded throughout the entire beach.

"See, something happened! It's because you didn't do your warm-up stretch!"

But that reaction was a little extreme for a foot cramp. She was holding her right foot and hopping in place.

“Hey, Halkara, what’s wrong? Just come back on land for a second…”

Flatorte went out to rescue Halkara, but Halkara was only ankle-deep in the water. At least she wasn’t drowning or anything.

Then, just as Flatorte stepped into the water—

“Gaaa

I approached the water.

I see… Upon closer inspection, I saw some cloudy white things floating in the water.

More than I could count.

There might have been hundreds or thousands or even millions of them—they were like dust in the air.

"Ooh… A jellyfish stung me last time when we were in Tazine. I think the sea is my natural enemy…" Flatorte was shaking off her foot. "But what I saw there is no match for this; it's packed with jellyfish…"

"Maybe nobody swims anymore because of the jellyfish…"

The sea itself was a beautiful blue, but the amount of jellyfish there was unbelievable.

It was like a real-world bullet hell. And unlike a game, there was no way we could avoid them when it was so hard to move in the water in the first place…

Halkara and Flatorte were putting medicine over their red, swollen feet on the beach.

As befitting an elf knowledgeable about prescribing medicine, Halkara had brought an ointment for bug bites.

"Oooh, it feels like it's swelling more… I hope this pain isn't going to linger…," said Halkara.

"I can't stand this type of pain…," added Flatorte. "I'd rather be punched over and over again…"

"Well, look on the bright side; it's nothing worse than a jellyfish. If you stay still, it shouldn't get any worse." I decided to add a little positivity into this. No use crying over spilled milk and all.

"I suppose we will have to give up on swimming now." Laika sighed as she gazed out over the water.

I couldn't imagine a way for us to get rid of all those jellyfish.

Then Shalsha started walking toward the water.

“Shalsha, no, watch out! There’s jellyfish!”

But Shalsha already seemed to be aware of that—she picked something up when a wave retreated from the sand, and then she came back to us.

It was one of the jellyfish.

“You won’t get stung if you hold its head. And it’s even safer since it’s weak after being washed ashore.”

“Okay… But be careful when you handle it…”

“This jellyfish is called the Southern Jellyfish, a common type found in this region. It seems it has the tendency to multiply.”

“You sure know a lot, Shalsha…”

But knowing its species wasn’t going to help us deal with it. I guess we just had to play in the sand.

“Everyone, stay away from the water. Let’s play on the sand where there aren’t any jellyfish, okay?”

“I don’t think we’ll find a starfish now… Falfa’s disappointed…” Falfa was crouched down with a dejected look on her face.

“Both of you wanted to see a starfish, didn’t you?” I said.

But the water was not an option. Those jellyfish weren’t like slimes.

Then Rosalie came floating back. Maybe she was the only one who could get into the water…? I wasn’t exactly sure if that counted for her.

“Man, drowning sure is a rough way to go. I’m really glad I died.”

Apparently, she got to chat with her drowning victim…

“I doubt they have any effect on you, Rosalie, but I think we’re going to have to stand

by on the beach because of the jellyfish."

"Huh, well, that's a shame. There's a cave over there that's perfect for exploring, but the beach is riddled with jellyfish the whole way there."

"I don't know about that, then. Even if Laika and Flatorte turned into dragons, I think they'd be too big to make small turns…"

And even if we did make it, we probably wouldn't be up for exploring. We might've found a starfish on the shore, though…

"A lot of bodies wash up in the cave, so it's kinda like a party in there!"

"A party… for ghosts, right? I think I'll pass…"

Rosalie flew off toward the cave. Ghost power sure was convenient at a time like this.

"Shalsha, let's go back to building our sandcastle."

"Okay, Big Sis. Shalsha will start building the defense structures."

The girls would just have to amuse themselves with the castle.

As for what us adults were going to do—

"Guess I'm going to sleep." I stretched out on the sand. It wasn't a terrible thing to laze around on the beach like this every once in a while. Not at all, not at all.

"Madam Teacher, have you given up? Well, I suppose there's not much else to do. I'm already in pain, so I will sleep, too." Halkara also rolled onto the sand. "It's nice to have a vacation like this every so often. Just staring out, thinking about nothing. My stress melts away~"

"Yeah. Vacations in winter are a thing for a reason."

"Indeed~ We can laze about at home, too."

"We might be kept from the water, but why don't we do some more exercise?" Laika asked.

The two dragons still didn't seem to accept the whole situation, maybe because they had more energy than normal.

"Laika, people need moments like this," I said. "We can't be so busy all the time."

"It's exactly as Madam Teacher says. Let's relax and enjoy it at our own pace."

This was exactly what vacations were originally for. We could still have fun together even if we didn't go in the water.

"Mmm, I'm going to run along the beach," Laika replied.

"And I, Flatorte, will check out the market."

"Okay, have fun, you two~"

Everyone had their own ways of enjoying a vacation, so that was fine. They could use their time as they wanted.

After a little while of lying sprawled out, mind blank, Halkara poked my arm. "Are you still awake, Madam Teacher?"

"Yeah, I'm up. We might've had a little accident, but I'm having fun."

"But it would have been nice to get into the water together with everyone to play, wouldn't it?" Halkara's voice sounded a little more mature than normal. She had that company president air about her.

"I was trying not to think about that, but I guess you saw through me." Oh well. The Witch of the Highlands wasn't completely almighty. Sometimes I swing and miss, and I just had to accept my failure. "I sort of wanted my daughters and Laika to experience what it's like to splash around in the water. The whole thing might not be a big deal, but it's important to make memories like that."

After dying from overwork, I reflected on my past and regretted a lot of things I did and didn't do. Now I was used to my slow life, but I did want my family to have a fulfilling time.

I never really got to go to the beach when I was a kid because my parents were so busy with work… and I was told I couldn't go alone because that was dangerous.

“But I can’t think of a way to deal with this, either. I am sorry for bringing it up again,” Halkara said.

“Nah, it’s fine. I guess we could find a shoreline with fewer jellyfish and see if we can at least find a starfish.”

Then Rosalie appeared again, gliding faster than usual.

“Big Sis, guess who I ran into!”

“One of your ghost friends, right?”

“No, it’s Miss Yufufu, the droplet spirit!”

I never would have guessed that. “I always pictured Momma Yufufu living more in the mountains…”

Her house was right near a waterfall, after all. I had a feeling there were a lot of humid places in the mountains.

“There’s a lot of water dripping everywhere in the cave, so it’s really damp. And that’s where she was! She apparently likes to come vacation by the sea sometimes.”

“I don’t usually imagine a damp seaside cave as the best place for a vacation.”

I think if a significant other of mine took me to a place like that, we’d have to start talking about breaking up. Actually, I’d probably start worrying about getting murdered.

But Momma Yufufu was the one who got us up and running again.

In fact, she was already here.

I blinked and she was right next to Rosalie. She randomly appeared more than a ghost did.

“Heh-heh, how lovely it is to see you all after such a long time. What a coincidence finding you here~”

“I’m surprised, too. The world is a strange place—and you’re wearing a bikini, too, Momma Yufufu.”

Momma Yufufu the spirit was also wearing a bikini. Her breasts were incredibly, terrifically large—terrifying, actually. I would say they were criminally large, but they went so far beyond that point that they weren't anymore.

They were so much bigger than mine that I wasn't even jealous…

"Don't you think of swimsuits when you think of the sea? I was quite enjoying myself in the cave, since there was water dripping about everywhere. There were so many creatures like crabs and gobies in there."

Honestly, the bikini wasn't really her style.

"It was so nice listening to the sound of water dripping in a place where the light barely reaches. It's the music of nature~"

"Um, sure… I guess different people are sensitive to different things…"

It was a mystery why someone with such a bubbly personality would go to such an eerie place.

"All of you are off doing your own thing, I see. You look like a parent who brought her children along, Azusa." Momma Yufufu seemed to notice that right away.

"Actually, there were so many jellyfish…" I briefly relayed the situation. I mean, not like much happened to summarize. Our dip in the ocean was cut short because of the jellyfish, and that was the story.

"My, the jellyfish are a nuisance. So they've all gathered in shallow waters, which makes it hard to swim."

"Of course they'd stop selling swimsuits…"

But I still got to see someone I knew, so maybe it was time for some catching up. Maybe we could all walk around the market together.

But then she offered some surprising information.

"It wouldn't be entirely impossible to move the jellyfish somewhere else, though."

“Wait, really, Momma Yufufu?”

This was great news. Would she use some kind of magic to get rid of them all at once? But jellyfish were living creatures, and I didn’t want to be cruel if I didn’t have to.

“I have an acquaintance who is a jellyfish spirit, so I’ll ask.”

“Anything exists in the spirit world!”

This was weird… Weren’t spirits basically supposed to be, like, fire and wind and stuff? A jellyfish spirit would be in the animal kingdom…

“I don’t think it’s all that odd. See, slime spirits like your daughters are water-elemental spirits.”

“…Yeah, you’re right. Most of a slime’s body is made of water—wait.” I realized that slimes and jellyfish had something in common.

Momma Yufufu gave me an approving look. “The majority of a jellyfish’s body is made of water. That’s why there are jellyfish spirits. If we ask her, she might be able to help us.”

Momma said *she*, which meant the spirit was a girl.

“How are you going to contact the jellyfish spirit anyway?” I asked.

“It’s quite easy to call over a spirit whom you know. Just wait a moment,” Momma Yufufu said and then suddenly vanished.

Fifteen seconds later—

Momma Yufufu appeared with a girl with long hair.

The girl’s left eye was practically hidden behind her black hair. Something about her made me think of a ghost. She at least didn’t seem very bubbly.

“Hey. I’m Curalina, the jellyfish spirit. Nice to meet you.” Her voice wasn’t very lively,

either, but it wasn't so much dreary as it was relaxed. She also had a big backpack-looking thing on her back.

"Hello. I'm Azusa, Witch of the Highlands. I'm Yufufu the droplet spirit's—"

"—Daughter," Momma Yufufu said. Things would probably be confusing for someone who didn't know the whole story, but Curalina didn't say anything.

I also had Halkara, Rosalie, my girls building their sandcastle, and Sandra all say hello to her. The dragons weren't back yet.

"Curalina has been traveling around the country. She's a wandering artist," Momma Yufufu introduced her.

"Yes. I'm walking around the world, painting pictures, selling them, earning money, and using that money to travel more."

Her lifestyle sounded awfully lax, but traveling freely wherever she wanted also sounded like the typical life of a jellyfish.

"What kinds of paintings do you do, by the way?"

"Want to take a look?" Curalina said, then plopped her backpack down onto the sand. I guess that's where her paintings were.

The first painting was of a child sitting gloomily on a swing. The background was pretty dark, so the whole thing seemed eerie…

The second painting was of a lady selling goods in town, her head drooped gloomily.

The third painting was of a shepherd gloomily chasing after a sheep.

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“All these pictures are so gloomy! Why is that?!”

“That’s what happens when you try to express the world as it is.”

She might be extremely artsy, but this wasn’t something I wanted in my room…

“And they’re all so dark that none of them sell.”

“I’m not surprised!”

“Anyway…” Curalina was the one who broached the main topic at hand. “Yufufu called me over, so I came. What do you need?”

Right. We still hadn’t told her what we needed.

“Well, we came because we wanted to swim in the ocean, but there are so many jellyfish that we can’t. Do you think you could move them temporarily?” It might be a rude question to ask a jellyfish spirit, but it was the only way to potentially fix this.

“Well, sure, it’s *possible*, but it’s a lot of work.”

I see; she can’t control the jellyfish at will.

“I’ll have to get a wave spirit to create a water current that the jellyfish won’t stagnate in.”

“You can’t move the jellyfish themselves?”

“No. The jellyfish don’t think; they just let the current sweep them away, so it wouldn’t work even if I talked to them with telepathy.”

Then there was no reason for Curalina the jellyfish spirit to come… We should have asked for help from the wave spirit…

Momma Yufufu stuck out her tongue in an apologetic smile. Spirits could be so irresponsible, even when it came to this stuff.

“By the way, Curalina, what kind of influence do you have over the jellyfish?”

“…I live a vagrant lifestyle to set an example for them.”

None, is what you're saying.

Halkara leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Madam Teacher, there's something odd about her… Is this okay…?"

Well, she was already here, so we asked her to do something.

"Curalina, can't you make the jellyfish luminate?" Momma Yufufu asked, reminding Curalina what she could do.

"Oh, that's right." Curalina looked like she understood. Why did she have to have someone else tell her what her powers were? "But I forgot how to use it a little while ago, so I'll do it when I remember how."

…*I'm pretty sure she's going to get fired as the jellyfish spirit.* Well, if this spirit system were an office anyway.

"I'll go ask the wave spirit now," Curalina said.

Yeah, if they could move the jellyfish, then that was better for us.

"But on one condition."

"Urgh… What is it?"

"Be a model for one of my paintings."

That request wasn't very spirit-like. "Sure. I can do that…"

"Thank you." Then Curalina disappeared.

"Isn't she a funny girl? Heh-heh~" Momma Yufufu was very open-minded, so she probably adored everyone, even people like Curalina.

"She sure had a unique sensibility… She definitely seems like a jellyfish spirit…"

In the meantime, Laika and Flatorte came back, so I told them what happened.

"Huh. A spirit traveling around without thinking? She sounds like an idiot," Flatorte scoffed.

“Perhaps you two might get along,” Laika said.

I didn’t think they would. Curalina was a different kind of idiot from Flatorte.

Thirty minutes later, Curalina suddenly appeared again.

“My, that sure took a while,” Momma Yufufu commented.

“I thought I went to go ask for help from the wave spirit, but I accidentally went to the waterfall spirit’s place.”

Come on, spirit girl!

“I got served tea, so I couldn’t leave right away. Then after negotiating with the wave spirit, we reached an agreement for a three-minute shoulder massage. So no worries.”

“A three-minute shoulder massage is enough for moving the ocean?!”

Was the sea something that could be manipulated for that cheap…?

“We’re both spirits, which is why three minutes was enough. A human might have to do it for thirty thousand hours if they went to ask.”

That would definitely wreck your shoulders.

“Well then, I’m going to move the jellyfish now, so please wait.”

Curalina faced the sea and clapped her hands.

There was a slow change in the movement of the waves.

The jellyfish lazily started to part to the left and right, until eventually there was a space clear of jellyfish; it was like Moses had pushed them aside.

The concentration of jellyfish was higher on the edges, so it looked like they were all

crammed together, but if it was okay with the jellyfish spirit, it was probably fine. The center was completely clear of jellyfish.

“Okay, do as you wish.”

Curalina was spacey, but she seemed like a good person. She was probably close with Momma Yufufu, too.

“Thank you. We will enjoy the ocean to the fullest.”

Falfa and Shalsha were already running toward the water.

“Ocean water feels so good!”

“Our mother, the ocean, oh fertile ocean. You who makes criminals confess their sins and repent…”

Shalsha, I think that last bit doesn’t exactly fit with the rest…

Halkara was floating in the water. “Oh, this brings back memories. I used to float in the river all the time in summer.”

I didn’t know she had summer memories, too.

“It felt so nice, and I would eventually fall asleep, and then the current would take me downstream~”

Halkara, please value your life more. I felt like there were more important things for her to worry about than making medicine.

Laika and Flatorte were having a swimming race. They were both practicing the crawl.

“I am faster!”

“No, I, the great Flatorte, am faster!”

It was turning out to be a real competition; I was impressed.

“Mommy, we found a starfish!”

“The sea is home to creatures of peculiar shapes. How mysterious.”

My girls had apparently found the very thing they were searching for—a starfish.

“You did it! I’m so happy for you! Are you having fun in the ocean?” I asked.

“Yeah!”

“I am more enthralled than enjoying my experience. This is an entirely different ecosystem from the highlands.”

Both of their eyes were glittering. Just seeing that made coming here worth it.

“Can either of you swim?” I asked.

They shook their heads at the same time.

“I’ll teach you. First we’ll practice by putting your face in the water and opening your eyes!”

I didn’t have an instructor’s license or anything, but I taught them how to swim in my own way. I held their hands and had them kick their feet.

Falfa got the hang of it quickly and managed to swim about thirty feet just kicking her feet.

But Shalsha would sink immediately. Even though they were twins, they had their differences when it came to these things, too.

“Ooh… my body is rejecting the water…”

“You’re getting stiff because you’re afraid. Relax a little more, Shalsha.”

“Easier said than done…”

Their speed in learning might be different, but I was sure that once she got a feel for it, she would be able to swim.

I’m being such a mom right now!

Momma Yufufu got in the water.

“Count me in~”

Momma splashed me with water. I wanted to get her back with a counterattack, but my hands were still full with Shalsha!

“Weeell? Attack, attack!”

“Momma Yufufu, you’re mean! This isn’t fair at all!”

“But you’re having fun, aren’t you?”

We never get the chance to do this.

I sort of understood how people living in landlocked areas longed for the sea now.

A short distance from us, Flatorte had her hands clasped together, filled with water, and she squirted it at Laika. Anyone could do that with their hands, but she created a powerful, straight stream like a laser, much like something a dragon would do.

“Take this, Laika! This is my Hydro Attack!”

“That is nothing!” Laika breathed fire and evaporated the water.

“None of that! Fight water with water!”

“You don’t get to decide the rules on your own.”

Everyone was getting plenty of fun out of the water. This was fantastic.

But from my position, I had to keep a greater eye on things. Sandra couldn’t get in the water, so I wondered what she was up to. I hoped she was okay.

It looked like she was digging around with Rosalie and Curalina.

Sandra’s head popped out of the sand.

“Yes! I found a big shell!”

“You’re a natural. By the way, there was another big one underneath that. I went down and took a look earlier,” Rosalie said.

“You and I will find every shell on this beach!”

You’re definitely the strongest pair for finding shells, but please don’t actually do that…

“Curalina, was it? You’re digging holes all over the place. You should be more methodical about it.”

“Unplanned is my way of life, so.”

Curalina had really dug shallow, haphazard pits in the sand. Even an amateur could tell that nothing would come of that.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, even if you can’t go in the water.” I sat down next to Sandra.

“The sea is nice, I suppose. I would not be happy if we lived here, but I suppose I’d tag along if you went to visit again.”

Yes, yes, I know you’d jump on the opportunity if you got one.

I patted her head, but she didn’t resist today.

“Look. The children will be here soon; they are interested in shell hunting.”

Oh, Falfa and Shalsha? You’re the littlest kid here in terms of looks, though.

And it was just as she said.

First Falfa came, and then Shalsha came a few moments afterward.

“Falfa wants to do it, too!”

“There are creatures in this sand. How peculiar.”

It seemed like I accomplished my mission of bringing my family to play at the beach. I’m not sure why, but it felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

The phrase *family obligations* existed back in an era I once lived in. As a single person, it wasn't something I experienced, but I understood the concept.

I didn't consider this whole thing an obligation but an event where we all had fun, including myself. I planned on keeping it that way.

Obligation meant that it was some kind of externally enforced requirement. I didn't think that was meant to be at all used for family. Wouldn't that just mean I didn't want to go to the beach with my family and spend time with them?

But it was true that I wanted to do more things in the future to bring joy to my girls and the rest of the family.

There wasn't much variety in the slow life at the house in the highlands. In a good way, that meant it was relaxing. In a bad way, that meant things could get boring. I wanted us to have special events so that no one would be bored.

I went back to the water.

Flatorte had gone underwater and caught a sea urchin with, "Gotcha!"

"Don't you need a fishing permit for that…?"

"Lady Azusa, these sea urchins are poisonous and small, so we are free to gather as many as we like, or so I've heard. I looked it up before I came. If we remove the poisonous parts, we can also eat them."

"You are my prize pupil, Laika…"

"Falfa's going underwater, too!"

"All right, follow me, the great Flatorte!"

"Shalsha is finally able to go underwater."

Everyone was now searching for food.

But if they got a sense of accomplishment from it, then there was nothing to complain

about.

As that was all going on, it got pretty dark.

It seemed I completely forgot about the time.

“I think we’ll have to finish up soon. We’re getting pruney,” I said. I was still in the water, and something unexpected happened right after.

The sea on both sides of us started to glow in all different colors, like Christmas decorations.

“It’s so beautiful…”

“How romantic~”

Laika and Momma Yufufu were enraptured by them. It was a nice surprise.

Obviously, Christmas decorations didn’t exist in this world.

But what were they?

Curalina was standing on the beach, both her hands extended to either side of the ocean.

“I remembered how to make the jellyfish light up. What do you think?” The sight was so vivid but also soft and gentle—I’d say it was perfect. “Jellyfish might be unimportant, but it’s nice when people remember them every once in a while.”

That was a very jellyfish-spirit way of wrapping this up.

“Thank you, Miss Curalina. You helped us have the best day ever.”

“This wasn’t much at all.”

Everyone needed important friends like spirits. Miracles didn’t happen that easily.

Laika then approached me with worry on her face. “Erm, I just realized…”

“What is it? Is there a problem?”

“Halkara has been gone for a while now…”

Oh right, after we managed to get into the water, she was floating on the surface, but I didn’t remember seeing her afterward.

After Laika and Flatorte went to search for her in their dragon forms, they found her far offshore.

“I was so scared… I woke up, and there was sea all around me… And some kind of shark was getting closer…”

“Next time, no sleeping in the water, okay…?”

And so our day at the beach ended without incident (especially since we saved Halkara).

When we all came back to the sand, the jellyfish scattered again, still lit up.

“People might not be able to swim, but this illumination is nice. Why not have them light up every once in a while?” Momma Yufufu offered an idea to Curalina.

“I don’t really care; what would it accomplish?”

It seemed like the people who lived at the beach had gathered there. Everyone was looking at the glittering sea before them.

Ahhh, I bet this is an unusual sight for them.

“Wow, incredible!”

“It’s gorgeous!”

“We could definitely get tourists with this!”

Right! Even if no one could swim, if people came to look at the jellyfish light up, then the local area could profit from it!

“See, at least make them light up on holidays. I have nothing against the jellyfish, but

they are being a nuisance."

"You're right, Miss Yufufu. If you say so, then I'll do it."

What a relief. I was so glad they could contribute to the town in some way.

Well then, we're going to stay at an inn in this port town tonight. We're at the beach already, so I want to eat some seafood.

Curalina patted me on the shoulder. "Well then, I hope you uphold your end of the promise."

Promise? What was she talking about?

"Please model for one of my paintings."

I totally forgot. I needed to do that for her…

"Sure, but I'm a little embarrassed doing that in my swimsuit, so why don't you come to my house in the highlands later?"

"That's fine with me."

A few days later, without any warning, Curalina visited the house. Her unpredictable actions were very befitting of a jellyfish spirit.

"Thank you for doing this; it won't take that much time. Please have a seat," she said, and I had no choice but to follow. Just like she said, I didn't end up having to sit for hours on end. After fifteen minutes, she said she got the general feel of the picture.

In exchange, she had the rest of the family sit for her, not just me. We rarely got the chance to do this, so it wasn't wholly terrible.

"It will take a little while until it's finished, so I'll bring it when it's done. Bye."

And with that, Curalina had gone. She sure marched to the beat of her own drum. I wonder where in the country she was loitering around today.

“Mommy, do you think she drew Falfa pretty?”

“You’re *adorable*, Falfa, so I don’t think she has a choice but to make you pretty.”

I was obviously being a doting parent, but I still didn’t know how it would actually turn out.

And then, a month later, Curalina suddenly arrived with Momma Yufufu, right around the time when the cold had gotten even worse.

The demons Beelzebub and Pecora were at the house that day, eating with us (uninvited), so the house was really full.

“I have a lot of paintings, so would you mind me borrowing an open space if you have one? I’d like to put them up on display.”

“Sure. There’s an open area at the end of the hall, so go ahead and use that.”

There was a big, rustic wooden addition to the house that we used for the Witch’s House Café. That was what Laika built after she destroyed part of my original house.

It was so big that we normally didn’t know what to do with it, and it was usually too cold passing through it after coming out of the bath or something, but it was perfect for events like this.

Just as we finished eating, Curalina came back to say she was finished.

Knowing someone had drawn me made me nervous…

The painting was very well done. *She’s a genuine wandering artist*, I thought.

But—

I had a really sullen-looking face in all of them! The background was really dark, too!

“This is weird! I thought I modeled a happier face for you?!”

I thought I had a smile on the whole time just so she wouldn’t draw me so dark!

“I’m expressing what’s on the inside. The inside.”

Why did she repeat *the inside*?

The paintings of everyone else were the same. Even in the painting of Falfa and Shalsha sitting together reading books, they had dead eyes. *Hey, this doesn’t look like they’re studying.*

In the picture of Halkara sitting, there was a terrifying ghost standing behind her. *Wait, this ghost is…*

“I am not this creepy-looking! I am not the type of ghost that puts deadly curses on people!” Rosalie protested. I knew it was her…

The painting with Laika cooking, the painting with Flatorte sleeping in her bed, and all the others were the same. Flatorte looked like she had half an hour to live.

There were also paintings of me in poses I never remember doing, like picking grasses, but they were all dreadful.

In Sandra’s painting, there were hands coming out of the ground around her. *Those are just zombies…*

“This is too much… I would not have modeled if I knew it would turn out like this…,” Sandra protested.

Curalina really outdid herself this time…

But on the other end of the spectrum, Pecora and Beelzebub were howling with laughter.

“Oh yes, these are brilliant. A few of them have forever changed my perspective of you!” Beelzebub said.

“Please pardon me, but I see not so much of your strength, Elder Sister, and more of how frightening you are.”

Don’t you care at all…?

“I often painted sorrow up until now, but now I’ve broadened my horizons to paint fear. Thank you,” Curalina said.

I had no intentions of contributing anything to that.

“I can give you one as a memento—would you like one?”

“No. Please just sell them off somewhere.”

But I think that choice might have been a mistake.

Curalina had apparently held a private exhibition in the royal capital after that.

The Witch of the Highlands’s house series was received rather well, and they sold for quite a bit of money compared to other paintings of hers.

That was fine on its own, but I was still worried that people might start talking about the Witch of the Highlands as some wicked creature… I just hoped this wouldn’t cause any serious reputational damage.

It sure is tough when someone you know becomes famous.

WE WENT TO *HALKARA'S HOMETOWN*

One day, after dinner, Halkara was very seriously reading some documents at the dining table.

That was the face of a manager. She usually seemed clumsy and messy, but she was still the president of Halkara Pharmaceuticals.

If she were just a lowly employee, I would have been concerned to see her bringing home work, but a company president would inevitably find herself troubled over big problems from time to time, so I let it slide.

Death from overwork typically happened among the people being exploited, but in my observation, stress levels were completely different for the people giving out work or doing the work because they liked it (basically, management).

People doing the work because they liked it had less stress, so they had fewer risks. But of course, it wasn't good if they lost sleep over it and that had a negative impact on their health.

It looked like she was working hard, so I made her some tea in the kitchen and brought it to her.

"Here, some herbal tea. You're really concentrating, aren't you?"

"Oh, thank you, Madam Teacher. This work is part of a big project, so I thought I might give it a think at home~"

When I gave her the tea, Halkara's expression returned to her regular carefree one.

"What kind of project?"

"Our current factory is on a very good trajectory, so I thought that it might be about time to start building a second or a third factory elsewhere."

"I see. That's a big deal."

Making a factory required tons of money, and the bigger the scale, the bigger the risk. This factory sending them into the red would be no joke. It required caution.

"I've received invitations to build a new factory from a number of towns already. That is why I've gathered all these documents and started to look into it."

Even in a different world, this stuff was still the same.

If a factory from a rich company opened in a town, then more townspeople would be hired, which meant more tax revenue. It was nothing but good things, so any town would come offering their land to build on.

"There are so many, so I am now screening the documents. I'm taking out any with problems in their terms."

"This is almost like an idol audition…"

"For example, there is no good highway passing near this town, so that will be too much in terms of transport costs. That town doesn't have the right water quality. Nutri-Spirits and others require relatively hard water, but this is soft water."

Wow… Her work mode is incredible…

Honestly, Halkara right now was way more of an adult than me, who just keeled over from overwork as a corporate slave. That was why I didn't have much to say.

"Well, if it comes down to it, I'll decide by doing what the forest spirits tell me."

"What a sloppy way to decide! Should you really leave it to fate like that?!" I was sure the towns giving offers would be shocked to hear that.

"Well, these are sort of like their résumés, no? That means they've only written good things about themselves and have left out their weak points. I can't say that wherever I choose won't end up having some grave problems."

"I guess you mean you can't get rid of the element of luck in the end. You can't exactly build factories in thirty different places at the same time and then select from there, huh?"

If this were more like Japanese convenience stores, then she could build them

everywhere and cut the ones that didn't get business, but she couldn't do that with factories.

"Of course, I intend to do some inspection, but even after all that screening, half of the remaining will still be a trial of luck."

"I get what you're trying to say, but things won't turn out so great if you *rely* on luck, Halkara…"

I could already see a few crises happening, so I didn't have any peace of mind at all.

"Hey! I have good luck, don't I?! My factory would have gone bankrupt in a year if I didn't!"

"Well… I think you're a skilled *manager*. But I don't think you have great luck…"

I was actually more surprised that she herself wasn't aware of it yet. In a way, she had to be a very positive person to think she had good luck after going through so many awful things.

Then I guess that was a good thing. I had a feeling that part of the key to being a successful person was being positive, or so I read in a life-hack article in my past life. But maybe she should still be a little more attentive…

"It seems you still don't believe me, Madam Teacher. In that case, I will prove to you that I have good luck!"

"How?"

Was there some tool that could measure luck?

"I will close my eyes and choose one of these offers! If it has good terms, then I win, and if it has bad terms, then you win!"

"Why is this turning into a competition?!"

"The pupil must one day surpass the master!"

"But I don't really feel like I'm the master here… You were a professional even before you met me…"

“Then I will go and inspect the place on the document. I am certain it will be so wonderful that I will be able to make up my mind on the spot!”

“You can just do what you like with that, Halkara…”

“Here we go! I wonder what I’ll get, I wonder what I’ll get~”

Why’s she singing? For some reason, I imagined someone rolling dice in my mind.

Halkara closed her eyes and started rustling through the documents.

There was a hard *thunk*.

Halkara’s hand had collided with the cup of herbal tea I poured for her, spilling steaming hot liquid across her skin.

“Ahhhhhhh, that’s h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-hot! Was this a trap?!”

“See, bad luck! This means you definitely have it! You don’t have to prove anything to me!”

She made up her own rules, then went and burned her hand… Geez…

“No, that does not count! I wonder what I’ll get, I wonder what I’ll get~ And! Here we go!” Halkara picked out one of the documents. “Now, let’s see what sort of wonderful town this is. And its name is—”

Halkara checked the name.

“Ack…,” she murmured quietly.

I didn’t know what town it was, but the moment she made that noise, I won.

“It’s the Wellbranch Marquessate in the province of Hrant… A small elf state within kingdom territory… And where I was born…”

“Oh yeah, you’re from Hrant, aren’t you?”

That word *marquessate* was kind of old, but it basically meant that it was a territory ruled by a noble lord.

“And… the very town I was born in, of all things…” Halkara’s expression was darker than usual.

I was just about to say that it might be nice to go home and show off, but Halkara’s situation was a little complicated for that.

“Right, you were wandering around after getting kicked out of Hrant, and that’s why you came here, right?”

Halkara nodded. “Yes. Though it was a misunderstanding, I was forced to leave when the people of my home believed Miss Beelzebub was after my life… When I thought about the risks of the town and country retaliating against me, I had no choice. But it wasn’t fun for me.”

Yeah…

Halkara’s hometown immediately chose to make her a scapegoat once they concluded that the great demon Beelzebub hated her. They could have told Beelzebub that they wouldn’t hand her over until they got any proof or that they would handle the case themselves, but they didn’t even try to keep her safe.

If they had, then they would have learned that Beelzebub didn’t hate Halkara at all, and then Halkara wouldn’t have had to wander.

Maybe it was an ironic plan to help guard against demon attacks. But I could also tell that they still didn’t trust Halkara, because she stayed at the house in the highlands even after the problem was solved.

“This document is directly from the elven elder, the Marquess of Wellbranch himself… Well, he sure has some nerve to send me an offer to build a new factory in his town. He wrote, ‘I jumped to conclusions before. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.’”

It sounded like he was handling things like an adult and actually apologizing.

“‘The past is water under the bridge—why don’t you build a factory again in your old home? Employees who once worked for you are still here, and I believe we will be more efficient than other towns.’ I have some thoughts about this, but he’s not entirely wrong…”

If people with experience were already there, then that was a good thing for

management.

"'Even if you don't come to build a factory,' he says, 'why don't you take a long-awaited visit to your home?' Ugggggghhhhh." Halkara gave a long, long sigh.

And then she was silent.

What it said in the letter was private, so I couldn't say anything careless. I didn't feel like I had the right to butt in, since I didn't have a hometown in this world.

"Well, I suppose I could take a visit home."

Halkara looked refreshed as her regular relaxed smile spread across her face.

"And I said I'd go inspect the place I chose, didn't I? I will keep my promises."

"Sure. This is all your decision, so I won't say anything."

"Also, I would love if we all went back to my home together—what do you think? You all could treat it as a little vacation."

This wouldn't be your typical fun trip home to her, so if going with the entire family would ease her nerves, then it was perfect.

My daughters would probably just be happy to travel.

"Yeah! Let's all go to Hrant!" I said.

"Thank you! I will include something to that effect in my reply!"

Afterward, I told the rest of the family what was going on, and nobody protested.

The only concern would be Sandra the mandragora. I didn't think Sandra would like elf lands since there were lots of herbalists there, but—

"I need someone around to water me, so I'll go."

She decided to come along, pretending not to care all the while.

“Hey, you can move, so you can definitely get water—mgh!”

Flatorte was just about to come out with a sound argument, so I covered her mouth.

Sandra would never outright say she wanted to go, but that was her personality, and that was okay. I accepted her as she was.

◇

We all rode on dragon-form Laika and Flatorte and headed to the Hrant Province.

I was on Laika. Falfa and Shalsha were behind me.

“The Hrant Province is called the Province of Trees. Most of the land is forested, and eighty percent of the population are elves. The elf territory is called the Wellbranch Marquessate,” Shalsha explained while we were in flight.

“By the way, how is an elf town different from a human one?”

“Some elves have stone or brick houses, but most are made of wood.”

I mean, they lived in the forest. Anyone building a home there would make it out of wood, elf or no.

“They share some similar eating habits with humans, but elves do have unique local cuisine. It is rather advanced, however, so I’ve heard that only professional chefs are able to make it nowadays.”

“Thanks, Shalsha. I think I’ve got the picture.”

“And in traditional elf abodes, you remove your shoes before going inside. They say this is because it’s easy to get shoes dirty in the woods.”

That sounded pretty Japanese to me.

“Shalsha, there are easy spots for me to land, right?” dragon-Laika asked. “If the forest goes on forever and ever, I won’t be able to land. Please check for me if you have a map on you.”

Dragons were like airplanes, so she needed something like a runway.

“You’re weak, Laika. I, the great Flatorte, can land anywhere, even in the forest. A long time ago, we blue dragons used to compete with each other to see who could land in the most dangerous places!”

“No games of chicken, okay?!” *Your passengers would die! Think of Halkara and Sandra!*

“It’s fine, Mistress. I’m doing my best to fly safely. I haven’t had anything to drink.”

Well, good. I’m fine with that—

Flatorte pulled in front of Laika.

“Heh-heh! I, the great Flatorte, am faster than you, Laika!”

“No racing! I don’t wanna cause an accident!”

I think if Flatorte had been born human in Japan, she would’ve been a street racer…

And as for the landing, Shalsha was flipping through the map.

“Once Hrant Province comes into view, there will be a river to the west with a flat plain nearby. There is a town close to that area that sends out carriages to the elf towns. There is also a carriage terminal there, apparently.”

“Understood! Thank you!”

We knew exactly where we were going now.

“Ah, so we are landing at the human village that serves as the entrance to the elf ones,” said Halkara. “From the terminal there, please take Marquessate Transport Bureau carriage number 206 going counterclockwise. We will then arrive at my hometown, Higashaman.”

“Two hundred and six? Are there really that many carriages going out…?”

That’s a lot of carriage lines…

“The carriages in the two hundreds are part of a loop system. The ones in the one hundreds are the express routes, and regular services are one- or two-digit numbers. And so there are only about nine lines each in the one hundreds and two hundreds.

But still, including the regular ones, there are about eighty lines in total. Elves typically get around by carriage."

This was like a bus system… I think the image I had of elf life was way different than this…

"Also, in addition to the Marquessate Transport Bureau carriages, there are also carriages belonging to different companies like Hrant Transport and Forest Carriages. You can tell by the color of the carriage—Hrant Transport is brown, Forest Carriages are red, and Marquessate Transport Bureau is green."

"I don't think anyone will understand me, but… these are literally just buses." The more I heard, the carriages going into the elf towns sounded more and more like public transport!

"Also, while they're typically different colors based on company, there have been more and more ads covering them lately, so it's hard to tell who they belong to unless you see the inside. Sometimes we can't tell them apart unless you're really looking."

Yep. Buses.

"Well, it's not unusual to see carriages running in routes like this in human lands as well. The area around the house in the highlands is just too quiet~"

I couldn't say for sure whether that was true or not, but if someone told me that we didn't have much of a bus system because we were way out in the boonies, I'd think they were right.

We landed in the flatlands of Hrant Province near the human town mostly when we said we would.

We went to the carriage terminal, and just like Halkara explained, there was a huge line of carriages there.

And these weren't tiny carts for just a few people to ride. They were the same size as buses, with a similar capacity. You might be wondering how a horse could pull such a thing because you, like me, mistakenly believed carriages could only be pulled by horses—but an entirely different creature was pulling these things.

“Ooh, Shalsha, what kind of animal is that?”

“That’s a behemoth, Big Sis. The elves have completely domesticated them. Their strength is fifteen to thirty times that of a horse.”

I listened in on my daughters talking and learned what the beasts were. There were a lot of customs around the world.

“Route 206 counterclockwise will be at stop number five. If we wait by this pole, it’ll be here in due time.”

Just as Halkara said that, a carriage that had 206 NORTH TERMINAL VIA WEST AVENUE passed stop number five and parked at a different stop.

“Hey, Halkara! It went over there! Isn’t that it?!”

“No, Miss Flatorte. That’s the clockwise route. It would technically get us there, but it would take an incredibly long time. We must take the counterclockwise route.”

“Dang, this sure is complicated… This is way different from Nascúte…” Rosalie floated there with an uneasy look.

“Our Nanterre sure is pastoral, isn’t it…? There are so many people here, too…” I said *people*, so you might be thinking *humans*, but there were more elves than humans.

The buildings were mostly crammed together, which really made it feel like a city. There were all sorts of business signs plastered on the buildings near the carriage terminal, all vying for attention. Maybe that was because this was more of a human town than an elf one?

“Oh, the carriage is here. We get on this and then get off at Higashaman. We pay when we get off, so please get on first. We’re close enough that we only need to pay the base fare, so it’ll be two hundred gold.”

I couldn’t see them as anything but buses at this point…

We crammed into the 206 carriage, and I felt like I was going to have a flashback to rush hour as a corporate slave…

We were on the carriage for about thirty minutes before we arrived at the Higashaman

Community Center stop.

I had seen them from the carriage window on the way here, too, but there were lines of wooden houses that looked like boxes. They looked just like prefab houses.

“I thought elves would have a more relaxed and liberal kind of lifestyle, but they’re pretty fussy, huh…”

This was finally starting to remind me of the Tokyo commuter towns from my corporate-slave era.

They weren’t living quietly in the forest at all. The trees were just street trees, growing orderly in a straight line, and the center of the road was completely flat so the carriages could run more smoothly.

“My, the population gets denser and more crowded every year~ We elves live such a long time, you see~ And so our population just keeps growing and growing—it’s terrible.”

“Guess long-lived races have their own problems…”

“Oh, I’ve heard that elves have a much harder time having children than humans, you know? If not, then the world would just be full of elves. And yet there’s more and more of us every year. Populated areas are nice because there are so many shops, so everyone ends up in the city.”

That was the exact problem Tokyo had…

“Well, first, why don’t we go say hello to my parents? Just take it easy.”

Halkara’s parents… I honestly couldn’t imagine what they’d be like.

◇

After a three-minute walk, we arrived at Halkara’s house.

There was an elf girl hanging up laundry to dry out front. She was young; I wondered if she was Halkara’s sister.

“Mother, I’m home~”

What?! That's her mom?!

The young mother put her hand to her mouth with happy shock. "Oh, Halkara! You're home! And you've brought your friends with you…"

We each introduced ourselves in turn.

"Oh, please come in! I am so sorry the house is so small… I will bring out drinks and snacks right away!"

Just like I heard before we got here, we took off our shoes before entering the house, and we were brought to a living room–type area.

There was a low, wooden table sitting in the room.

"Oh, so you sit right on the floor here."

"Elves have always done this, Madam Teacher," Halkara said, stretching out on the floor. "See, you can sleep like this whenever you like. Isn't that convenient?"

This was definitely made for Halkara…

After that, her mom brought in the tea and snacks, and the conversation turned straight into a mother-daughter chat.

"This girl is always such a mess, you see; she even forgot to send in her school application and almost failed before she even took the exam."

"Gosh, Mother, stop telling that story!"

It honestly felt like… I'd just come to a friend's house in Japan…

After that, Halkara's mom told us about all of Halkara's horror stories in a way only a mother could.

"You see, we could never get Halkara to stop wetting the bed—"

"Hey! Why are you bringing that up?!"

"Hmm, I believe it wasn't until she was thirty-five that she finally stopped."

For a moment, I thought about how she should have seen a doctor if she was still doing that as a middle-aged woman, but thirty-five was still very much a child to an elf… This stuff would definitely cause confusion…

While we were talking, my eyes just happened to travel to Halkara's mom's chest.

It was bigger than Halkara's—she couldn't be someone's wife.

It's genetic! She got it from her mom!

"I wonder what other funny stories I have. Oh, what about how you were late for your first day of school?"

"Mother, everyone is here, so please tell them good stories about me. Why does it feel like I'm losing out when I'm the one at home?!"

Halkara was complaining, too, but she seemed fairly relaxed and in good spirits. She had never said she was fighting with her family, so maybe her grudge was only with the government.

And as an ex-Japanese person, I was incredibly grateful for the feeling of sitting on the floor with my legs folded.

This certainly did calm me down. Man, I wanted more of this. Maybe I should build a room in the house in the highlands where there were no shoes allowed and we sat directly on the floor.

"Do any of you have any complaints for Halkara? You can take this opportunity to tell her."

Halkara's mom was a rascal, and I could absolutely see how she had a daughter like Halkara. She didn't seem strict at all, at least.

"Mother, don't make me a target!"

"Miss Halkara always takes good care of us," said Laika, ever the class act. She would never stray from her usual MO in a situation like this.

"But I sometimes wish you'd cook food with a lot of meat in it." Flatorte was being greedy.

“Miss Halkara is funny~!”

“Miss Halkara is funny.”

My daughters’ evaluation was also honest. And they weren’t wrong.

“Ooh… I’m not sure if I should be happy… or sad about that…”

Halkara had caught the implication that the girls didn’t respect her, at least not completely.

“But, Halkara, it’s way better than someone telling you that you’re boring,” Rosalie offered.

“You might be right, Miss Rosalie…”

“Life is short, so better make it fun.”

“Er, an elf’s life isn’t all that short, though…”

Their versions of common sense were at odds…

And so, conversation with Halkara’s mom proceeded amicably the whole time, and the sun started to set.

“Mother, shouldn’t you start getting dinner ready soon…?”

“Oh, you’re right! I’m sorry!”

Yeah, she was definitely related to Halkara. I could see where the daughter got her carelessness…

“Everyone, please have dinner here! The house is rather small, so it might be a little cramped when you get to sleep.”

“We already have rooms at an inn, so it’s all right. I’m very sorry for showing up so suddenly,” I said, as the head of the house.

Halkara had already told me her house wasn’t very big. It wasn’t super small, but it was about the same size as a regular Japanese family’s house.

Just one person might be okay, but with a big group like us imposing, there would be all sorts of problems, like not enough beds and not enough blankets.

“Oh, I forgot to buy vegetables! I need to go to the market now!”

“Sheesh, you’ve forgotten everything! You’re such a mess!” Even Halkara was calling her mom a mess!

Her mother rushed out of the house in a big flurry.

“I’m sorry you had to see that… That’s what my family is generally like.”

Her own mistakes aside, Halkara had shrunk in on herself, embarrassed by her parent’s blunders.

“It’s fine. She’s a good mom. She’s so generous.”

“My family is a mess, too, so I don’t mind,” offered Flatorte.

No, Flatorte, your mess of a family was on a different level…

Five minutes later, Halkara’s mom returned.

Wow, that was pretty fast. Maybe she’s a speedy shopper?

“I noticed I forgot my wallet, so I came back!”

Classic!

I finally got it—she was just Halkara with an extra shot of Halkara-ness…

“Now I’m finally ready—oh wait, my point card for the market isn’t in here. Today is double stamp day, I can’t leave it behind. Now, where was it?”

“Mother, please pull yourself together! We have guests waiting; the point card doesn’t matter! You’re an adult; please act like one!” Halkara was starting to seem like the mature one here.

This was new… Halkara's mom was a force to be reckoned with…

"Collecting points little by little is nothing to sneeze at. Life isn't easy for us, so I started making lunch for your father, too. His company did some 'restructuring,' so he had to look for a new job where his salary was lower. Things have been rough…"

"Gosh! Stop talking about our family problems!"

"Your brother is working part-time, so his income isn't that remarkable… Your sister works full-time at a salon, but she doesn't make very much. She's always moving from one store to another and never settles down…"

"Please stop! This is getting uncomfortably real!"

I was only listening, but this was getting draining even for me…

I thought Halkara was rich because she was running a factory, but her family was barely scraping by…

After her mom went out shopping for real, Halkara looked at all of us with a cloudy expression. "I can't hide it anymore, so let me just tell you that all my family members are generally much more disorganized than I am…"

That was just plain rough…

"Please try to picture my situation objectively: People who are more of a mess and more haphazard than I am are around you all the time. Imagine the stress…"

It was truly a shameful thing to announce, and for her, it seemed to be something very serious.

"And since I'm the most responsible, I always get caught up in their messes! I couldn't tell you how many times my brother would forget his lunch and make me bring it to him! And they would always put off paying resident tax until right before the deadline, so I sometimes had to do it for them. Don't you think the parents should do that?"

"You sure have had your hands full…" Sandra nodded, her arms folded. "I always thought elves were nasty creatures for doing whatever they wanted with grass, but I sympathize with you."

“I appreciate your sympathy.”

That’s what she’s thankful for…?

“I should still have savings from when I had my factory here, but I made it so that the money can’t easily be withdrawn. You never know what mess this family will make if you just give them money. They’re not terrible people, so I don’t think they would use it in a bad way, but they would buy completely useless things.”

I could see it so easily.

“For example, a pot for putting snakes in, even though there are no snakes around. Or pots that will bring happiness to the family.”

There were fortune-telling frauds in this world, too… which was puzzling, since magic actually existed here.

“Halkara, I understand now how you grew up to be someone who could run a factory.” After visiting the house she grew up in, I had seen her roots. “You’re the rock that holds this house together. That’s why you could be a manager.”

“That’s exactly right. You’re so sharp, Madam Teacher!”

Halkara hugged me. *Hold on, hold on, I don’t think this is important enough for a hug, but I don’t exactly mind…*

“When I was a little girl, I thought, *If I’m not the one to keep everyone together, then this whole family will fall apart!* My father would get fired from work now and again because of all his mistakes, and my elder brother has been surviving his whole life off part-time work! Nobody can pull it together!”

Guess every household has its own issues.

“Anyway, everyone is so spacey. And since our entire family is like that, no one tries to fix it! Someone just apologizes after making a mistake, and everyone else just lets it go! They’re all too easy on one another!”

I patted Halkara on the back. “You’ve had your hands full.”

“I am the same as them, though.”

That, I would agree with.

“I believe everyone will be coming home soon, and that’s when you’ll really see what I mean. Please be ready.”

An hour later, Halkara’s older brother came home before her mother did. He also looked rather young. He was on the handsome side, but he seemed generally nonchalant. Like he never really thought deeply about life.

“Hey, Halkara, you’re back.”

“What job are you working now, Brother? You were working at a carriage terminal before, right?”

“Yeah, but I got fired. I ended up giving wrong directions to customers a lot, and they got mad at me. Then I had a job handing out advertisements around town, but my numbers were lower than everyone else, and I’d always talk to cute chicks whenever I saw one, so. Fired.”

As he talked, Laika stared at Halkara’s brother like he was an unbelievable idiot. He was definitely her least favorite kind of guy…

“I’ve got a part-time gig at a café. But the manager doesn’t trust me—I think he hates me, actually. Wonder when my time’s up.”

“Erm, don’t you think it’s about time you got a real job? Hasn’t your girlfriend been telling you to get steady work?”

“We broke up. Technically, she dumped me. She said she liked how chill I seemed but not how I didn’t actually take anything seriously. She said that I needed to make my own living, even if I was cute.”

That was tough reasoning.

Is this really a fantasy world…? Are we sure this isn’t just twenty-first-century Tokyo…?

Afterward, the mother came home and started cooking.

The next one to come home was Halkara’s dad. He also looked a little young to have a family. Just seeing them all together made it clear how long elves really lived.

“Ah, Halkara. Man, I hate how my boss keeps criticizing me.”

“Don’t tell me he’s using his status to harass you? That does happen; some managers can be strict on mid-career hires.”

“Nah, I just got all the numbers wrong in the books, and it caused a big problem with another company.”

He has no room for excuses!

Halkara’s dad put mistakes in his accounts with the same gusto that Halkara put poison mushrooms in her cooking.

“I don’t think I’ll be getting any bonuses at this rate. Uggghhhh, what a pain. Ha-ha-ha!”

Was that something to laugh about?

It seemed Halkara’s little sister was running late, so we ate dinner with the four of them, including Halkara.

We were eating hot pot, by the way—the basic kind where we just put in a bunch of vegetables in a boiling soup. The flavor was incredibly close to Japanese style.

“Azusa, was it?” said Halkara’s brother. “My little sister’s smart, but she doesn’t do her checks, so you should be careful when you eat mushrooms with her or whatever. She sometimes puts in poisonous ones.”

He knew exactly what her weak spots were. They *were* family!

“Actually, I have had a few terrible experiences with poison mushrooms so far…”

“I knew it. We almost all died once because of poison mushrooms. ’Member, Dad?”

“Yeah, we were all fighting over the toilet back then. Ha-ha-ha!”

“We didn’t even think about eating mushrooms for three years after that. Heh-heh,” Halkara’s mom added.

Her parents were just treating it like a funny little anecdote, but I wondered if they

knew how serious that was.

Still, even though they were a mess of a family, I could sense that everyone was having fun. Just watching them sit around the hot pot like this warmed my heart, which was perhaps a little strange.

There were plenty of families who were successful economically and socially but who were emotionally distant from one another. Compared to a family like that, maybe this household was the happier one.

The problem is that not only is *happiness* vague and undefined, but the more you think about it, the less meaning it has. That's the most I knew.

But Falfa and Shalsha were delightedly pecking at their food, and everyone else in my family seemed to be included in the circle somehow.

They were full of problems, but they were tightly knit, and I thought about how Halkara had come from such a happy family.

Despite all her shortcomings, she was a generous person, which was proof enough she came from a happy home.

"Oh, I'm going to run to the bathroom real quick." I was drinking more alcohol than I anticipated, probably thanks to the hot pot, so I stumbled a bit when I stood up.

On my way back, Halkara's mom was standing in the hallway. I guess she was waiting to use the bathroom.

"The toilet's free now," I told her.

"Azusa, thank you so much for watching over my daughter for such a long time."

That came out of nowhere.

Halkara's mom graciously bowed her head. Wait, was she really more earnest than she seemed…?

I immediately sobered up.

"I'm sure you might be aware of this already, but she can be truly scatterbrained, so I

know she must be causing you and the rest of your family so much trouble. And yet you've warmly accepted her, and as her mother, I can give you nothing but my thanks."

"Oh, of course. We are having fun with her, too. There's no need to be so humble."

"I won't keep you for very long, but would you mind if I had a little chat with you?"

When she asked, I had no choice but to accept.

We moved to the open veranda of an empty room and sat. Since the whole place was built for taking one's shoes off, they had an indoor spot where you could see the garden. This was also sort of like a Japanese house.

"At first, she tried to work at various companies, but she was always late and made so many mistakes that she could never stay in one place for very long. Her grades in school were good, though. Back then I thought, *Ahhh, she really is my child*."

"Yeah, her personality probably wouldn't be landing her many jobs…"

She was the kind to constantly make tiny mistake after tiny mistake, after all… Worst comes to worst, she would never be able to enter society.

"And then, one day, she said she would start her own company. It was quite a risk for a member of this family, so I told her not to do it. For us, starting a business would just be creating debt."

"This might be a little rude, but… I understand."

Halkara's mom laughed. If the company failed, not only would she lose her savings, she would also be in debt… It was a gamble.

"She wouldn't back down. She argued that she was sure she could do it if she was managing others rather than being managed. That was the first time I saw her be so stubborn." Halkara's mother smiled as she gazed up at the moon, like it all happened just yesterday.

"Halkara must have wanted to help her family in her own way. She has never spoken badly about you while she's been at my house," I said.

“I see,” she acknowledged quietly. “She had a knack for business. I don’t know how she pulled it off, but she had the skill set a manager needed and made quite a bit of money. But she couldn’t stay here because of the incident, so she went into hiding—and that’s how she ended up with you.”

“Yes, we’re having a wonderful time with her in our family.”

“I have nothing but thanks for you. Please keep taking good care of her.”

Halkara’s mom was such a good person. I could feel the corners of my eyes growing hot. Tears were beginning to form.

Oh no. If I went back with red eyes, they’d think something was up…

“I think I’m going to sit here enjoying the breeze for a bit. It sobers me up,” I said, embracing the night air in this elven town.

I had to create a family that was just as great as Halkara’s. The most important thing was to make sure that everyone was happy.

I was alone for about ten minutes before I went back to the hot pot room. It was almost time to wrap things up.

But the room was awfully noisy.

“Blech… I drank too much… I cannot move…”

Halkara was stumbling around, and she looked really pale!

“Miss Halkara, here—let us at least go to the washroom.”

“I can’t, Miss Laika. Moving me would be the most dangerous thing right now… I can hear my stomach begging me…”

“Sheesh, don’t black out in front of the guests… I’ll bring a bucket or som’n. Oh, I stood up too fast, and now I’m all dizzy…”

Halkara’s brother’s face blanched immediately!

“Hey, I’m not gonna let you start throwing up in front of others—but I feel like I might…”

Halkara's dad put his hand over his mouth!

"Laika! Just bring everyone out to the yard! We can't just leave them here like this!"

"Understood, Lady Azusa!"

The story had taken a strange turn, and now we were the ones taking care of Halkara's family as they all passed out from alcohol one after the other.

Yet another unsurprising incident with Halkara's family…

Halkara's mom, the only one not totally smashed, apologized to me again.

"Just look at them… I am so, so sorry… They never learn…"

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“Oh, no, I mean—at least things are interesting…?” I wasn’t very confident in my reassurance.

Even if the family was happy, they *could* stand to be a little more put together…

Then a girl that looked like Halkara’s little sister came home.

She had a baby face, but her chest was massive. She probably got a lot of attention at school…

“Ooh… I went out drinking with my friends, but I drank too much and now I feel terrible… I’m seeing three of everyone…”

She was drunk, too!

“Lady Azusa, we should do something about all of them… We can’t leave them here like this…”

“You’re right, Laika…”

Afterward, we waited until Halkara’s family sobered up, and we ended up getting to our inn a whole lot later than we expected.

WE WENT SIGHTSEEING IN THE *ELF KINGDOM*

Halkara's family saw us off while their faces were still pale, and we went to our inn.

There wasn't a room for all of us to stay in, so we got two four-people rooms.

I was with my daughters and Halkara. That's right—Halkara wasn't planning on staying with her family. I mean, if she did, her hands would be full taking care of them…

In the other room were the two dragons and Sandra.

*Rosalie was floating around the area, so she came and went between both rooms.

We had already eaten, so all we had to do was bathe (there was a big public bath that the inn encouraged us to use) and sleep.

And since my girls were tired from the trip, they went straight to bed after their bath.

Consequently, Halkara and I were the only ones left.

But this was planned, in a way.

I believed that it was my job as head of the household to have a good talk with the one whose hometown we were visiting. Well, maybe calling myself the head of the household was too much. Maybe it was more correct to say that I felt like I needed to check on her as her friend.

We sat on the bed, chatting as we drank water. The water here was delicious.

"Your family really is interesting."

"Gosh, I have been apologizing this entire time, but I'm truly sorry for everything…"

She was embarrassed just letting us see her family, never mind what they were like

drinking…

I had a feeling I could accurately trace how Halkara was feeling right now.

“But if I had to choose, I’d say I was relieved when I saw what they were like,” I said.

“What?! You saw them! Don’t tell me you imagined something even worse, Madam Teacher?!”

No, my intentions weren’t that ironic.

“See, you never talked about going home, and you never said anything about your family, so it was kind of hard for me to ask about it. I wondered if you had a falling-out or something.”

“Ohhh, that’s what you mean. I see now.” She sounded surprised.

“But it didn’t seem like you had any issues with your family, so I was relieved.”

“They’re all nitwits, but family is family. Elves live for such a long time. They will be in my life for many years to come, so I’ll only get tired if I get truly angry with them.” This was her family, and it felt like she was being more modest than usual. “Well, I’m also glad I got to say hello.”

A quick glance at Halkara’s profile was enough to tell me she was being completely honest.

Even though we weren’t blood related, we were still family, after all.

“But I also remembered how dangerous it is to leave a family like that alone…”

And then an unusually despondent look crossed her face. But I could somewhat understand how she felt.

“Economically, especially… Despite their lack of income, they’re so careless with their money. They just suddenly buy strange things…”

“Then why don’t you send some to them? You probably have some extra, considering your income from the factory.”

“No, if that happens, I feel like they would stop working…”

I guess it would be bad if she sent them too much money.

“To be honest, though, I do have a little bit of an idea.” Halkara then put on her manager face. Now that I thought about it, the biggest reason we came here wasn’t actually to see her family again. “Tomorrow, I will be talking with the lord of this land about building a new factory here. Please do some sightseeing in the meanwhile. I will be back at this inn by sundown.”

“Sure. We’ll hang out and see the village.”

We must have been really tired, because we fell asleep almost right away.

◇

The next day, all of us besides Halkara went to sightsee in the elf villages.

Laika was holding a book called *The Wellbranch Marquessate Sightseeing Guide*.

Shalsha was holding an even thicker geography book. I wondered if it was too heavy for her, but she was probably used to it.

“According to this guidebook, we can find great trees all over the place. Those are apparently places of interest,” Laika said.

“I suppose that just means some big trees. Well, we are first-time tourists here, so why don’t we go around and see what the book says?” I suggested.

We hopped on a carriage and went to see the first great tree.

In the elf towns, anywhere there wasn’t houses was full of trees, so any extra land was like a little forest. Standing on this particular plot was a tall, tall tree that stretched all the way to the heavens.

There was a fence around it to make sure no one got too close, and tourists (mostly elves) were looking up at it. We looked up, too.

“Well, that’s a magnificent tree. I know it’s not very descriptive, but that’s all I can say.”

“Indeed. I get the impression that it is full of life. Not only that, its boughs are constantly reaching out, reminding me that I can make great progress as well. I also sense tremendous strength from the bright green leaves.”

Laika’s thoughts were much more mature than mine, so I was a little embarrassed.

“Coool!”

“It’s huuuge!”

“It’s so biiig!”

Falfa, Flatorte, and Rosalie’s thoughts were all kind of childish, so I was a little relieved.

“This tree is known as a whattheheck tree. One at this height is extremely valuable. As the name Wellbranch Marquessate suggests, they grow excellent trees here, which are considered sacred places to the elves and have been revered as holy places for ages. A town was built around it, and we arrive at the present.”

“You sure know a lot, Shalsha~”

“After getting this famous and receiving protections from the government, this one looks like it’s having an easy time. It’s set in its old age.”

“And Sandra’s offering the plant point of view…”

But even though the first great tree was relatively interesting for us—

The next tree was great, too.

And the tree after that? Pretty awesome, again.

And the tree after that one.

And the next one was—you guessed it—pretty neat.

“I’m tired of all these trees!”

I gave my honest opinion at the café we went into for a break.

There was no way I could spend the whole day watching trees sit there doing nothing and be satisfied with my experience. I thought it was about time they put something else in the mix.

I noticed the course meals they offered here were salad, salad, salad, and salad.

"Now that I think about it, over half the tourists were elves… Maybe this guidebook was meant for other elves…"

Laika flipped through her book.

Right. Maybe an elf would find this entertaining…

"I, Flatorte, started getting all the trees mixed up by the third and was looking around for the right one…"

You and me both, Flatorte. "Isn't there anything else in there, Laika?"

"Let's see… Um, the Wellbranch Marquessate is apparently famous for its spring water. There are a lot of little springs here and there."

Oh yeah, the water at the inn tasted great.

"Thanks to the abundance of spring water, the forests are also lush. Everything is connected." Shalsha's explanation was rather philosophical.

"Drinking lots of cold water after a race is sooo good!" And Falfa's feelings matched her apparent age.

"The water here is certainly full of minerals. It would be very easy for a plant to grow." Sandra was drinking water from a cup at the café. I guess she could absorb moisture from her mouth, too.

Sandra had also noticed recently that she didn't have a problem using her mouth. According to her, she couldn't absorb as much moisture this way, but the act of drinking itself was something she could do.

"I'm sure I would have ended up much curvier if I grew here, but it would have been hard to live this long without any elves finding me… This land really is terrifying to a mandragora."

I could hardly imagine Sandra with curves.

That aside.

“I can’t drink anything as a ghost, so I don’t really know, but I don’t think living people would get a lot of fun out of just looking at springs. Right?”

“Yeah, you’re right, Rosalie…”

We would definitely get bored of looking around at springs. *I think we’d get bored even quicker than we did with the trees.*

“Isn’t there something here that’s a little more fun…? All these sightseeing spots are kind of plain…”

“Hold on a moment… I’ll do a little more searching…”

Laika flipped through the guidebook. “I see… There’s this. But… this… isn’t something the whole family can enjoy… Ohhh, Miss Halkara isn’t here, so this might be perfect, but…”

“What did you find, Laika?”

“Lady Azusa, the alcohol here is also quite well-known. They make a lot of cider here.”

Now I understood why Laika seemed a little apprehensive. If Halkara were here, she’d probably end up blacking out again.

“The clean spring water is well suited to making alcohol. And we can find all sorts of fruit in this area. It’s perfect.”

“You really know a lot about geography, Shalsha. I’m so proud of you.”

There were students out there who couldn’t drink but still knew a lot about specialty products, which included local drinks.

“There is an establishment that holds drinking competitions through cider tasting,” said Laika. “It’s called the Wellbranch Drunkards’ Cidery.”

All of a sudden, it felt like we’d come back down to earth.

“I am interested, but Falfa and Shalsha can’t drink, and Rosalie’s a ghost, which means she can’t ingest anything in the first place, and Sandra can’t drink, either…,” I mused. “It wouldn’t be a good look if we all went but more than half of us couldn’t drink.”

Maybe we should do something that everyone could do instead.

“Um… Maybe…” Sandra timidly raised her hand. “Just maybe, but I might be able to drink. I mean, I don’t think getting drunk is possible for us…”

“Now that you mention it, can plants get drunk…? Still, is it okay if it has alcohol in it? You’re not going to dry out, are you…?”

“As long as it’s weak, I should be able to have a little. And I want to know what it tastes like… I wonder if I could be an adult… Everyone was having so much fun drinking yesterday…”

Sandra was falling prey to the lures of adulthood!

Was it my job as her mother figure to stop her? But it wasn’t like she recognized me as her mother, and she was independent at her age—maybe I was assuming too much authority to tell her no.

I wouldn’t do it. There were too many exceptions in our family, so thinking about all that wouldn’t give me a right answer…

“We might have had a lot of fun drinking, but Halkara’s family got so pale, they were almost blue. Bluer than me, and I’m a blue dragon!”

“They just overdid it! People use flames to cook, but they sometimes end up burning the house down. They don’t know their limits; it’s an exception to the rule!”

Sandra was right. *So was Halkara’s family just full of problem children from her point of view…?*

“Oh, Lady Azusa, the book says that we can also drink fruit juice without any alcohol,” Laika offered.

“Yaaay! Falfa loves juice! My favorite is apple juice!”

“Shalsha is fond of orange, grape, pear, and fig.”

Both girls joined us in supporting the Wellbranch Drunkards' Cidery choice.

"Big Sis, it really makes no difference to me where we go, so we can go wherever. And I think a cidery would be a lot more interesting than looking at trees."

I knew what Rosalie meant. It was probably better than trees and water.

"Okay! Then let's head on over to the Wellbranch Drunkards' Cidery!"

◇

We made a transfer on the carriage lines to head for the Wellbranch Drunkards' Cidery.

Laika was with us, so she told us where we needed to transfer, but there were so many carriages, it was a little complicated. Everything looked the same, too, so it was confusing.

There was some kind of forest park in the middle of town, but everything besides that was built along a grid. They were rezoning all this land.

"I totally imagined elves living in the deep woods—so deep that any trespassers would be trapped with no way out…"

"It was apparently like that long ago," replied Laika. "But it was inconvenient because the elves also got lost, and they made major modifications. According to the guidebook."

So the wave of civilization caught the elves, too.

We arrived at our destination without incident: a dignified building made of cypress wood.

Balls made from cedar sprigs hung from the eaves like lanterns. *Hey, those things usually identified a brewery in Japan…*

"Mom, the cedar balls show us that this is an elf brewery."

"Hmm… Things are getting further and further away from my idea of elves…"

The Wellbranch Drunkards' Cidery was an alcoholic theme park, so after we paid our

entrance fee, we were free to drink as much as we wanted; it was an alcoholic's dream come true.

There were several pictures of fruits lined up at the tasting corner. I guess that meant those were the kind of fruit ciders we could drink.

"This is a wonderful place…"

"I am looking forward to sampling the different ciders," said Laika.

"I will conquer them all!" Flatorte announced.

The drinkers—me and the dragons—were already all smiles even before we started drinking.

All the corresponding fruit juices were sitting next to the ciders, so Falfa and Shalsha were getting excited, too.

"This place is great, Shalsha!"

"I want to stay as long as possible. But we won't have enough room for food, so we should drink in moderation…"

Sandra was the only one acting a little different. Her expression was a mix of anticipation and nerves.

"Alcohol, alcohol… What will it be like…?"

This was certainly her first experience with it. There was a kind of innocence about her, but this was probably a big deal for her.

And just in case, I had her pick a few samples without a lot of alcohol. I could use recovery magic if things got bad.

I first tried strawberry, grape, apple, persimmon, akebia fruit, and silverberry ciders. I know that's a lot of things to try *first*, but it was all-you-can-drink, so I ended up taking a lot. With all the small cups on my tray, it was almost like a buffet.

When we got a table the whole family could sit at—

We all brought our wooden cups together with a “Cheers!”

“Hey, it’s not too strong, and it goes down easy. This flavor would definitely be a hit with girls~” (Me)

“The full-bodied flavors are spreading throughout my mouth. It goes down so smoothly; I think this would be nice with a meal.” (Laika)

“Delicious!” (Flatorte)

Our differences in personality were obvious in our opinions.

At least, I now knew very well that Flatorte should never review food.

And as for my daughters—

“It’s so yummy~♪” (Falfa)

“To put it mildly, I am in supreme bliss.” (Shalsha)

They were also commenting in their own way. I had no doubts that they were satisfied.

And the one I was worried about the most was Sandra.

“I-if I can’t handle it, I can just regurgitate it… It’s not like anything’s going to happen with just this little…,” Sandra was muttering to herself, holding the wooden cup.

She then took tiny sips, almost lapping it up. Her expression was full of suspicion, and she looked at the empty cup, bewildered.

“Well? How was your first taste of alcohol?”

“More bitter than I thought. And it feels like my body is getting warmer.”

A very typical impression from someone who just started drinking.

“That’s how it is,” I replied. “But for some reason, people get hooked on that feeling~”

“Hmm. Animals are strange. But I don’t think it’s too bad.” She reached out for the next cup.

Hey, maybe she’s more of a drinker than we thought.

“Lady Azusa, there are plenty of varieties still to try. Let us keep going!” Laika was slightly more excited than usual, probably because of the alcohol. If there was anywhere to do it, it was here.

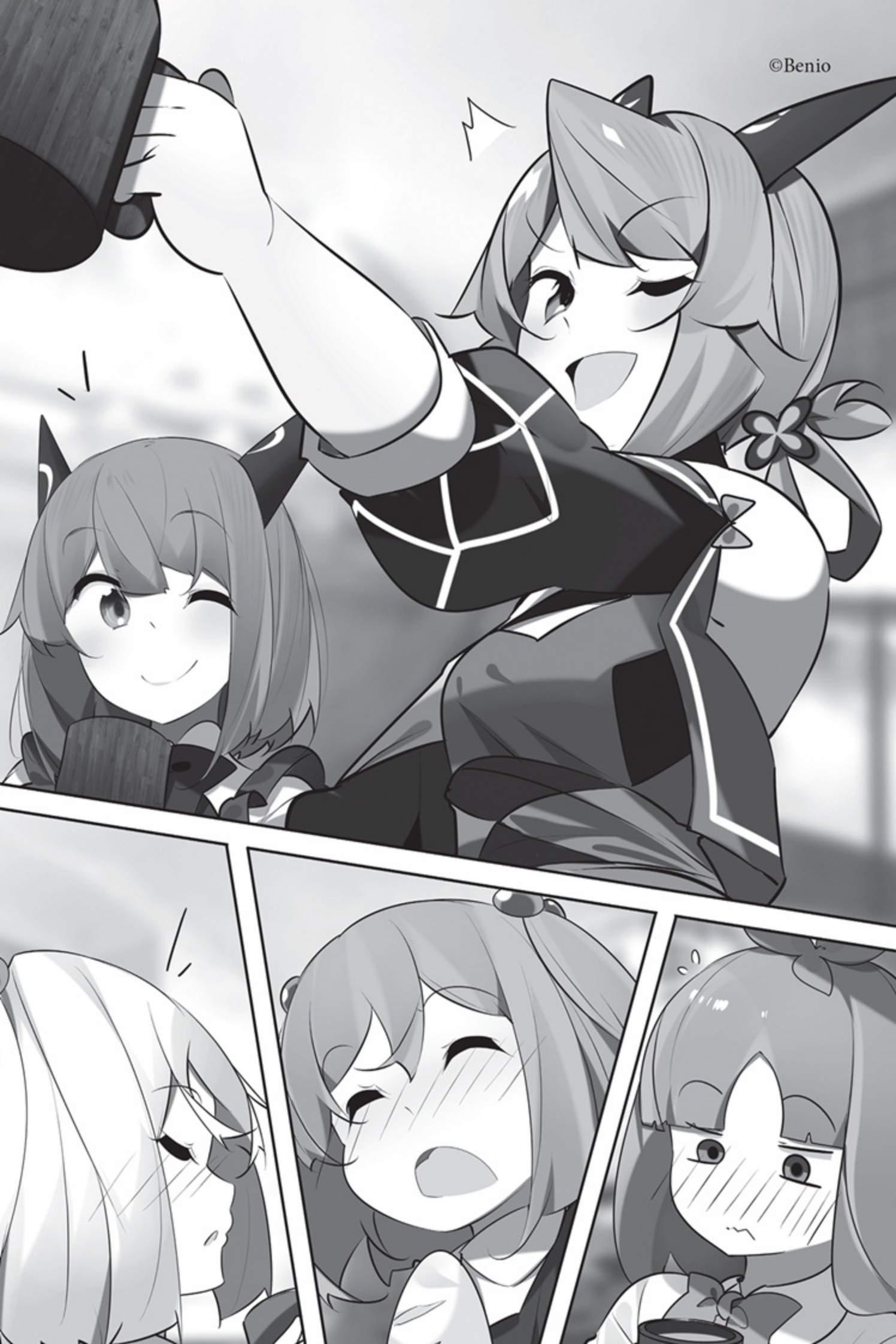
“Yes. Let’s make sure we don’t end up hurting ourselves, though.”

“I, Flatorte, will have all the apple cider!”

We chose and drank all the alcohol we wanted. Man, what a fantastic place. I was getting so wasted…

Of course, they didn’t just have alcohol there. We could pay for little snack plates, too. Elf country had all sorts of odd snacks to go with alcohol.

“These elvin-pickled beans sure are salty. But it goes great with the drinks.” Flatorte was eating some local beans dipped in something like soy sauce.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Now that I thought about it, that “elvin” sauce tasted kind of like soy sauce, didn’t it? There were all sorts of vaguely Japanese elements hidden in the elf world.

Japan was full of mountains, which meant it had a lot of forests. Maybe the reason was that the elves lived in a similar geographical environment to Japan. But I guess that was a bit of a stretch…

Also, Shalsha and Falfa bought some bread to eat with the rest of the snacks.

“This goes so good with the bread~”

“No matter what I eat, I want it with bread; it’s like magic. They all tend to be salty, but it’s perfect when I put them on bread.”

Was this like how alcohol snacks also go well with rice…?

Back in Japan, pickles went with both alcohol and rice, so it wasn’t all that strange.

Sandra had switched to juice pretty quickly. I guess that was the safer choice for her.

“Aww, life in the elf lands is so nice. Maybe we should have Halkara visit home every other month or something…”

When we were full, we went to look around the museum area, which would also help sober us up. True to form, Flatorte skipped all the reading, while Laika read every letter. But we could actually see them making the alcohol, too, so of course Flatorte watched with great interest.

Laika also bought something that looked like the facility’s official book. She sure was serious…

Flatorte bought some alcohol to drink at home, too. I felt like we were spending way more money than we initially planned, but I guess it was normal to use so much money on a trip.

It was the perfect environment to refresh ourselves. I really felt like I could spend a full day here.

In reality, it was almost nighttime.

“If they had a year-round pass, I think I’d buy it…”

“It seems like you can get one for fifteen thousand gold, Lady Azusa.”

“Sheesh… I’m actually considering getting one. Maybe I shouldn’t…”

“Well, I think it is about time we headed back to the inn.” Laika really was a considerate girl.

“Yeah. I wonder if Halkara’s done with work already… I’m too full to eat dinner with everyone, though.”

“Mistress, please let me have another glass!” Flatorte was completely into it.

“Sure. Just one more, okay? I guess I’ll finish up, too…”

And just as we were about to get in line, I saw someone with a very familiar rear silhouette.

Hey, that looks a lot like Halkara…

I mean, we were here in elven territory. Most of the customers here were elves, so it was very likely that I mistook someone else for her.

But I had a feeling she looked a little *too* similar from behind. Even back here, I could sense that she was a little spacey…

They say the way someone carries themselves says a lot about them, and hers said *I make a lot of thoughtless mistakes*.

Should I loop around to see her from the front? But that would be weird if she turns out to be someone else…

Then the Halkara-looking person staggered a little.

“Oooh, maybe I should stop. No, I was just walking and almost tripped a little, that’s all. I am not drunk yet. I can still drink, I can still drink!!”

“That’s definitely Halkara!”

I tapped her on the shoulder from behind.

The elf whirled around, and it was, without a doubt, Halkara.

“Ahhh! Madam Teacher! What a surprise! Why are you here?!”

“I actually want to ask *you* why you’re here. We were just hanging out.”

“Oh yes, I understand. There isn’t a lot of sightseeing in this country. I didn’t have many recommendations, either, so I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh yeah, we never got any information from our local resident…”

“I didn’t want you to blame me for telling you about something boring, so I decided to just say nothing. There are so, so many disappointing sightseeing spots, after all.”

She was really going in for the kill, probably because she was a local!

I brought Halkara over to our table. There was no reason for us to rush back to the inn at all now.

“If you’re here, Halkara, then does that mean your business talks ended in failure and you’re here to drown your sorrows…?”

Even if it did end in failure, it wouldn’t cause any harm to Halkara Pharmaceuticals, but if the experience left a bad taste in her mouth, washing it down with a drink was a normal reaction.

She had apparently talked to the lord of the area in her meeting, and I could think of plenty of ways it could’ve gone wrong. Maybe he was an arrogant jerk or something.

“No, the opposite. We came to an agreement without incident, so I wanted to have a good drink before going back.”

“A celebratory drink, then!”

People who drank could slap any reason on to do so at any time.

“I’m glad for ya, Big Sis Halkara. You saw your family, succeeded in your business talks—what more could you ask for?” Rosalie summarized it nicely.

She was right. There wasn’t much else for Halkara to say.

“Nothing. First I will build a new factory here in the Wellbranch Marquessate’s Fusme District. I already have a candidate for the land and an idea for the structure of it.”

She was so good at this stuff. Halkara did have a knack for business.

“But I think there won’t be too much for me to worry about. I am in the more advantageous position, and they will benefit from this as well. The work isn’t over, so I’ve only drunk about half so far.”

“You ended up drinking anyway, huh…?”

Halkara sure loved her alcohol…

But maybe that was a given when it was your home area’s local specialty. I’d probably be an aficionado, too.

“So what made you feel like you succeeded? What went so well?”

I still hadn’t heard the crucial answer.

“I felt a lot of things yesterday when I visited home. I told you a little bit about them, Madam Teacher.”

“Well, yeah, sure.”

I’d listened to Halkara tell me how she felt about her family as we sat on the bed.

“Even from my point of view, they are a problem-filled group, and I’m sure they’ll keep getting themselves fired, but they are still my beloved family. That’s when I came up with the perfect plan.” Halkara grinned. “I will hire my entire family at the new factory. I will make them work there!”

Aha!

“All of them were often late for work, which reflected poorly on their evaluations, but

if their place of work was right next to their house, then I'm sure those risks would decrease."

She had used her strengths to solve the family's problems!

"Honestly, I can't leave management to them, so I will have someone else take care of that, but I know they're not terrible people, and they will do the work given to them. As long as Halkara Pharmaceuticals grows according to my planned trajectory, I know that it will support them, which puts my mind at ease."

"I see, I see… So that's how you did it…"

I wasn't in any position to oppose, so I just accepted it. This was Halkara I was talking to—she wouldn't make a decision that would sink her company.

"And so, I have completed all my missions for this trip! That is why I was here to drink before returning to the inn!"

I knew her reasons. I had no problem with them.

"All riiight! Let's drink more!"

If there was a problem, it was that Halkara was pretty drunk already, and her steps were unsteady.

Afterward, Halkara drank way more than she should have and threw up.

She seriously never learned…

A small spring-water creek flowed through the Wellbranch Drunkards' Cidery, so anyone could put their feet in the water and rest there.

Halkara was doing just that to sober herself up.

"*Siiigh.* I drank too much again… Yet another reason why drinking is bad…"

"No, I think this is completely your fault." I sat next to her to keep an eye on her and make sure the drunk girl didn't do anything weird. The cool water washed away my tipsiness all at once.

“But this entire incident proves my point.” Halkara looked smug.

“What point?”

“That I have good luck. This was the place I pulled randomly, wasn’t it?”

“Oh right, that sparked this whole thing…”

I wasn’t completely satisfied with the conclusion that this proved Halkara had good luck, but since she solved her family’s problem, I wasn’t going to nitpick.

“Yeah. You do have good luck. That’s fine with me.”

“Thank you! And… I do have a request to make…” Halkara drew closer to me. “Could you take me to the toilet…? Blech… I think wave number two is here…”

“I’m starting to think *I’m* the one with bad luck!”

I was again reminded how hard it was to hold a family together as I held Halkara and took her to the toilet…

BONUS: WE FOUND A *WEIRD TEMPLE*

With a watering can in hand, I went out to the garden, where I grew vegetables for eating and herbs for medicines. At first glance, some of the plants looked like weeds, but those did actually have medicinal effects, too.

And living there was a very, extremely special plant.

“Azusa, hurry up and water me.”

In the corner of the vegetable garden, Sandra was in the dirt up to her chest. It looked like she had been buried alive, but she wasn’t in nearly so much danger.

“Yes, I know, hold on a moment.”

In an orderly fashion, I watered the area around Sandra. Falfa and Shalsha typically did this, but it was my turn today.

“Put more on my head. I’m going to wash my leaves while I’m at it.”

Her leaves were to her what hair was to a human. As I watered her, I thought about how she was essentially taking a shower.

“Oh right, you changed your spot, didn’t you, Sandra?”

Even though Sandra could move around, she had settled on a favorite spot, so she was usually there. She was part of the family, so those kinds of changes did catch my attention.

“Yeah… That thing has been making me all uncomfortable…” Sandra raised her head slightly with a flash of irritation in her eyes.

She was looking at a massive pine tree.

“That’s the pine sapling Misjantie gave to us at the wedding, isn’t it?”

Because it was a gift from the pine spirit, the tree grew magnificently in just three

days, and now it was even more majestic—enough to be designated one of the natural wonders of Nanterre Province.

"It's taking all the nutrients around here. It has no restraint—it's *shameless*. That is not how a newcomer should act."

I guess the plant world had hierarchical relationships, too. Or maybe it was just Sandra's own rules.

"Well, I'll just be grateful for the privilege of having such a beautiful tree so close. You have to look for the bright side."

Even if it was a nuisance to Sandra, the pine was still stately and awesome.

"Yeah. It's just one tree, so I'll allow it this time."

Sandra wasn't malicious toward it—she didn't want it to die or anything. Compliments from her were few and far between, but that didn't mean she was angry. One way or another, she was probably going to try to get along with it as a fellow plant growing in the earth.

"It sure is massive. It's like the pine-iest of pines."

I almost wanted to put a table out here and snack on my own famous edible slimes. And I wanted some green tea to go along with them. This pine sure suited the Japanese taste.

But there was something off about it—it was different from all the others I'd seen before.

What was causing this feeling? I didn't think it was much different size-wise…

I carefully observed the entirety of the massive tree, from its roots and all the way up.

Hey, there's something at the top.

There was a wooden box with a triangular roof, like a birdhouse, sitting up there.

No, it was way too big to be a box. It was almost big enough for people to wander in and live in there. A little house was snuggled right in between the pine branches.

“Hey, Sandra, you didn’t make that house, did you?”

“How could I…? There is nothing to be gained from being so high above the earth, and I couldn’t get up there anyway…”

“Then… was this Falfa’s idea or something? If she asked Laika to do it, she could get it done quick.”

Hmm? There’s a sign hanging off a nearby branch. It’ll have the answer, I bet!

Misjantie Temple

House in the Highlands Branch
Deity: Misjantie,
Pine Spirit

History

The Great Pine Spirit Misjantie, enshrined in the village of Tazine, offered a pine sapling to the Witch of the Highlands, and this sapling grew into a great tree just three days after being planted. This shrine commemorates that event and enshrines the Great Pine Spirit Misjantie.

Available for weddings, prayers for romance, and marriage counseling.

(Free consultation)

“She just *built* this without telling me?!”

Hey, come on! Who did this? Well, I sure have a guess.

I put my hand on the pine’s trunk and climbed up. My level was maxed out, so this was easy.

I knocked on the door to the building. “Is someone in there? Open up if you are!”

“Oh… We’re currently closed, man, so please wait… Unless you need to talk about a wedding, in which case, we’re wide open.”

I knew exactly who this was from the manner of speech. My guess was right.

I opened the door and found Misjantie surrounded by stacks of little cloth bags. It looked like she was doing some kind of side job.

“Whoa, hey! Don’t just barge in, man!”

“Let’s get to the point. What are you doing here?”

“I’m making charms to sell here in this branch shrine, man. One will go between five hundred to a thousand gold.”

“No. I’m not asking what you’re making.”

And she was making charms? Like the ones for a Japanese shrine?

“I never heard anything about you building a shrine here. And reading the history plaque, it sounds like *we* built this shrine.”

The spirit definitely built this place herself.

“That’s, er…… See, a sapling growing in just three days is like… a spirit’s miracle, or something mystic, man… It’s pretty normal to build a temple for those things, you know…”

Misjantie refused to look me in the eye, so there was definitely something she was ashamed about.

“Oh? Well then, it sure is a coincidence that it grew in three days. So that wasn’t part of your little plan, then? It was a real miracle, right?”

“I mean, I might’ve helped it along just a little…”

“You planned the whole thing!”

I brought Misjantie into the house in the highlands and held a hearing with the rest of the family.

“I’m sorry, man… The pine spirit faith is really weak in this province, so I thought I could get more wedding ceremonies if I got some territory here… I felt like I couldn’t play it safe, so I decided to go on the offensive…”

And your first point of attack was right by my house.

“I doubt you will flourish here, but if many people do start coming to the shrine, we will lose the quiet environment we have now.” Laika wore a troubled look.

Exactly, that’s what was dangerous about this. We had a shrine next to our house now.

“Just cut down the pine tree. That’ll solve all the problems. Simple.” Flatorte’s idea was, of course, violent.

“But… don’t they say you’ll be cursed if you cut down such a special tree like that? I heard so many stories like that back when I was alive…” Rosalie the ghost was shaking. I had heard stories about sacred trees like that when I lived in Japan, and they must have existed in this world, too. But why would a ghost be worried about that?

“Even if there was a curse, I still wouldn’t be afraid of this pine spirit.” Flatorte pointed at Misjantie. “You curse me, and I’ll destroy another one of your Misjantie Temples.”

“P-please don’t, man… It costs a lot of money to rebuild a temple… I just want to settle this peacefully… Plus, my curses are weak…”

Misjantie was on her knees. She had no authority as a spirit…

“If you were to curse us, what sort of things would happen?” Laika asked, sounding

less afraid and more interested in spirits.

“You’d wake up covered in pine resin.”

“That’s just *mean*!” Laika retorted.

It sure was a powerful prank, though…

“I, the great Flatorte, am not afraid of pine resin! I’ll cut it down!”

“Wait. You always, always want to resort to violence,” Laika told Flatorte, then turned to Misjantie. “Your temple being here is a problem, but we have no right to bar you from proselytizing here in the province of Nanterre. Let us search for a point of compromise.”

“Then why not use the pine wood to make torches?”

Flatorte, that probably isn’t a compromise to Misjantie.

All of a sudden, two people shot out of their chairs.

“Wait, everybody!”

“Big Sis and Shalsha can put this together nicely.”

Both Falfa and Shalsha had taken victory poses.

I’m pretty sure they wanted to be cool, but it was just cute. Super cute.

“Miss Misjantie, thank you for the wonderful wedding. We wanna help you this time!”

“We are both slime spirits, after all. Spirits help each other in times of need.”

“Thanks, man! I’ll remember your good will my whole life!”

Could a spirit promise to remember something her “whole life” that easily?

“If you two say so, then I won’t cut down the tree…” Flatorte was accepting my daughters’ proposal, too. “Cutting it down was a joke. I, Flatorte, am not that violent.”

“No, she was most certainly going to chop it down,” Laika said curtly.

And so, as a result of Falfa and Shalsha’s efforts—

The Misjantie Temple, Flatta Branch, was completed in an empty lot in town after the building in the tree was moved.

The girls were the daughters of the Witch of the Highlands. The villagers gladly agreed to their wishes, and the land was free anyway.

“This is a relief! Falfa is glad it’s somewhere everyone can come visit easily!”

“If we continue planting pines around it, it will naturally become a temple with a subtle, profound, and holy air.”

The two gazed at the temple they had helped move to the village, smiling in satisfaction.

“I appreciate it! I’ll spread the pine spirit faith throughout the entirety of Nanterre from here!”

Misjantie seemed sincerely thankful. This whole situation appeared to be settled. There were no serious problems with a new temple in the village, and all she needed to do was put the temple’s business on a good track.

“In ten years, I want every wedding in a Misjantie Temple! I want anything else to be, like, for weirdos, man!”

That might be too much, though…

The villagers and people from surrounding towns seemed interested in the new temple, so many people came to take a look. *Please buy the charms the spirit herself made—she worked hard on those.*

Of those guests, one was particularly serious.

It was Natalie, guild staff member. “I can get marriage counseling here, too, yes?! Please! I want instructions from the Great Pine Spirit herself!”

Natalie's eyes were so earnest. *She really wants to get married that badly, huh…*

Now that I thought about it, Natalie could apparently see Misjantie, probably because they met once.

No one else knew the spirit was here. Most spirits didn't typically show themselves to normal people, although some of them, like Momma Yufufu, were practically a part of human society.

"Sure, man. I'll do the pine spirit marriage fortune reading for you, which has been handed down for generations. I should be able to get you advice that's tailor-made just for you."

Ooh! Misjantie's in serious mode now!

—But her methods were less than impressive.

Misjantie took a bunch of pine cones and placed them down around Natalie.

"Hoy man, hey man, hoy man, hey man…"

And her chant was stupid.

"Er, the pine cones are just sitting around me. This is enough for you to know…?"

Natalie was apparently starting to get apprehensive. There was no divinity about any of this.

"Trust me, man. When this ritual tells someone when they'll get married, it's right on the money eighty percent of the time!"

"That is a high percentage! Very well! I'll trust you!"

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Natalie brought her hands together, closed her eyes, and prayed.

And finally, when about a hundred pine cones were placed around her—

“Natalie, we have a conclusion,” Misjantie said with a grave, spirit-like voice.

“Y-yes? And?”

But Misjantie’s expression immediately loosened up.

“You’re not getting married for a while, man. You’re gonna have to be patient.”

“Whaaat?! What does that mean?!” Natalie complained.

“You gotta have patience in life, man. You can’t keep pining forever.”

“Don’t make a joke out of this! Did you do the ritual properly?!”

“There won’t be any wind or waves for at least another seven years, man.”

“That’s such a long time! I can’t believe this! I almost wish I hadn’t asked in the first place!”

Hearing this from the pine spirit probably wasn’t funny at all…

“I will pay you, so please introduce me to someone handsome!”

“I don’t have power like that, man!”

“Ugh, whatever! I’ll use the guild network to score with a young, handsome guild employee! I’ll prove to you that your fortune was wrong!”

“Right on, man! A fortune is only a fortune. Carve your own path!”

“Oh, your attempts at encouragement are infuriating!”

I didn’t really understand, but as long as it gave Natalie some motivation…

But when I watched their conversation, I got a twinge of unease.

Should we really have fixed this temple to Flatta…?

The End

I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1,500 Years, and the Demon King Made Me a Minister

Kisetsu Morita

Illustration by Benio

I WAS ALMOST *BRIBED* DURING AN AUDIT

"One, two, one, two, one, two!"

Lately, I'd been running around the castle's inner moat before reporting in to work, putting my morning to good use.

A passerby who was walking his hellhound early in the morning (the general public is allowed as far as the outer side of the inner moat) said, "Oh-ho! Trying to lose weight, are you?"

Nope. I was exerting myself for a completely different reason.

When I'd finished my usual two laps around the moat and was resting in the shade of the trees, someone came over in front of me.

"You're out working hard very early, Miss Beelzebub, minister of agriculture."

It was the very one responsible for my position: Her Majesty the demon king, Provato Pecora Ariés. She was by herself today, under a parasol.

They said she hardly ever went around with attendants and that she popped up randomly all over the castle. In fact, I'd run into her several times myself, so I knew that was true.

"Oh, fancy meeting you here, Your Majesty." I started to get up, but she put out a hand, stopping me.

"You're training yourself physically to build the strength not to embarrass yourself as a minister, aren't you?"

"…Was it that obvious?"

"I have an *excellent* eye for my subordinates." Her Majesty sat down beside me.

She was mischievous, but she tended not to act all high-and-mighty. When she first ascended the throne, some demons were uneasy about that, but lately, she'd acquired

a fine reputation as a demon king who did what it took.

“I’m a minister, whether I’m suited to the position or not… It would be embarrassing if I couldn’t defeat my own subordinates.”

In the demon world, even among bureaucrats, we tended to lionize strong fighters. Maybe it was a holdover from when we fought humans long ago.

When you’re at minister level, some more conservative types believe you’re doing something wrong if you can’t nonchalantly plunge humans into terror.

Even now, people from noble stock who tended to end up at minister level were put through the mill from a young age, and they were pretty formidable, both physically and magically.

Here in the demon world, we didn’t have pampered young nobles. Most of ours were tough.

“And not only do I hit harder, I believe I’ve managed to beef up my Ice and Snow spell quite a bit lately, too. I’ll have to keep developing it—well, enough to let me defeat my two leviathan secretaries without trouble, at least…”

There was a deep-rooted stereotype among demons that masters must be stronger than their subordinates.

If the master was that strong, you’d think the subordinates wouldn’t have joined battles, but when you were taking on an enemy, the subordinates had to go up against it first. You might have seen many examples of that in war chronicles and novels.

In addition, even among demons, leviathans were a pretty big deal. People said they were a match for ten thousand human soldiers each.

“If you keep putting in so much effort, I’m sure you’ll make progress. I believe in you.”

The demon king smiled at me, then left me to my devices.

“Effort… I hope the day comes when my efforts are rewarded, but I dunno…”

◇

When I made the rounds of my sections, I could feel the tension rise slightly.

Hmm. I must have more of a presence now.

It had been about eight months since I became minister of agriculture, and as far as I could tell, I had started to gain recognition in the ministry for the way I worked.

If I keep this up, I may be able to get away with taking a day of paid vacation next week. Or maybe I'll say I caught a cold and spend a day or so just lazing around.

The only problem with that plan was that my mansion was too big, which made it hard to just take it easy. Lazing around in a studio apartment felt more authentic. In a mansion, it might just feel pointless…

"Lady Beelzebub."

As I was thinking about stuff that didn't mean much, I realized Fatla was right in front of me, waiting. "Wh-what is it…?"

"An urgent job has come in for next week."

"Urgent, hmm? Well, that's fine. After all, I'm pretty familiar with almost everything in the ministry by now!"

"No, this is a business trip."

Ugh… I still wasn't completely used to business trips. Back when I was a bottom-tier bureaucrat, my job had hardly ever required them.

"It's an audit. An on-site audit of a fruit farm run by the relative of a Ministry of Agriculture executive who fell from power. The farm and the executive may be colluding with each other."

"Can't somebody else handle this?"

"It's necessary for the head of the Ministry of Agriculture to go in order to show the people that the ministry itself was not a party to the relationship. It is also an order from the demon king."

Vania came up beside us. "We really should go, boss! Let's go!"

“Why do you look like you’re having so much fun? Do you plan to sample all the local gourmet cuisine during this business trip? Is it a hobby of yours or something?”

“It’s a fruit farm! We can eat all the fruit we want!”

“You’re treating this too much like an ordinary trip! Besides, there’s no way we’d be able to eat at a place we’re auditing!”

“You might be surprised. You never know until you try!”

Why was she getting all worked up over this…?

Fatla gave Vania a proper scolding later, if you were wondering.

◇

My two secretaries and I headed for the Bellgundeal Fruit Farm.

Fatla had transformed into her true form as a leviathan, an ultra-large flying beast, to carry us there.

“Hell’s bells, this really is a flying ship.”

I was sneaking peeks at the scenery from way up in the sky while I looked over the documents I’d brought along. Vania was helping me.

There were several buildings lined up on top of the leviathan, and we were inside one of them.

“This is the true charm of leviathans, after all. Long ago, we flew freely through the skies, but since there’s a risk of bumping into dragons and other creatures, we have to get permission first now.”

“Life is hard as a leviathan, isn’t it?”

I could never beat something like this. I sighed inwardly.

I’d have to do some absolutely ludicrous training, or it would never work… No, even if I did, there’s no way one person could beat a battleship.

“That’s why my big sister became a bureaucrat, and I followed her lead and took the test. Once I was out of cooking school, I could have just become a chef, but my sister told me not to. She said I’m not suited to that type of management.”

“You went to a cooking school? I see I still know next to nothing about my subordinates.”

Just then, something like a shipboard announcement came on.

“Vania, you’re only talking about personal matters, and your hands aren’t moving. Do your job.”

I see… So Fatla was keeping an eye on us even when we were riding on top of her.

“This farm is suspected of aggressively marketing low-quality fruit as high quality and yielding considerable profits. Potential tax evasion has also been indicated.”

“That’s terrible in several different ways, huh…”

“There were doubts in the past as well, and audits have been conducted twice, but they found no problems on either occasion.”

“Doesn’t that mean they’re innocent, then?”

“You see, there are rumors that the individual who was a Ministry of Agriculture executive at the time interfered, or that someone under the influence of that executive was sent to conduct the audit. This is why you—a former commoner who is not hampered by any of those things—are looking into the matter.”

Being called a commoner irritated me a little, but it was the truth.

“Well, I’ll take a real thorough look for you, then.”

Still, it sounded like the company was under suspicion for quite a few things. *They aren’t going to just up and attack us, are they…? Quite a few members of demonkind are still pretty hotheaded. We can’t get careless.*

“If it comes down to it, Vania and I swear to protect you, so have no fear.”

I guess I’m still weak enough to need protecting.

“Thank you very much for your visit! I am Bellgundeal, proprietor of Bellgundeal Fruit Farm!”

No sooner had we arrived than a one-eyed evil eye demon met us with a smile. There were even employees holding a WELCOME! banner behind him.

“Well, this isn’t quite what I was expecting…”

“I’m a little taken aback myself.” Even Fatla, who was always cool and collected, was blinking rapidly.

Next to her, Vania was waving cheerfully and saying, “Thank *you* very much!”

“You must be tired after that long journey. Come make yourselves comfortable in the office first. While you do, we’ll prepare the documents for the audit!”

We were escorted right to the office.

“Say, Fatla, is this how audits generally go? Aren’t they usually more solemn? This is nothing like what I’m familiar with…”

For audits at the Agricultural Policy Organization, we’d only had to go to another institute in the same organization, so there hadn’t been any issues with finding a compromise. But I’d expected a very different experience from an external audit.

“I’m very sorry; I don’t have much experience with audits myself.”

In other words, we were all total amateurs at auditing. Was this really going to be okay?

That said, if nothing turned up, then so much the better.

The important thing was the fact that an audit had taken place.

“This is the office, honored inspectors!”

The space we’d been shown into looked like a glass-walled café with a view into a hothouse garden. The tables and pillars were pure white, and the space was very bright and cheerful. If rooms could be poseurs, this one fit the bill.

“Ooh! This is fascinating! And there are colorful exotic birds in the garden!”

Vania was already in full-blown tourist mode. *Granted, this might be the first time I’ve seen tropical birds. Are these related to parrots?*

“Is this really an office?”

“Yes, we designed it based on data that shows that providing a good environment raises efficiency at work!”

When we dubiously sat down in a seating area that looked suspiciously like a café, another staff member came up and served us fruit juice. “Your beverages.”

“This is fresh-squeezed juice made exclusively from fruit grown at this farm. It isn’t too sweet, and it’s an extremely effective beauty tonic,” Bellgundeal the proprietor said, smiling.

“I—I see… Well, I suppose being offered drinks isn’t that odd…” When I tried a little, it was refreshing, and the straightforward sweetness tickled my nose.

This was exquisite.

Fatla and I looked at each other.

“Lady Beelzebub, this juice is the real thing.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Vania had already drained her glass and requested a refill.

“You should probably learn to hold back a little at times like this…”

“Well, I mean, it’s good for your looks, you know?! I want to drink it while I’ve got the chance!”

She’s completely forgotten that we’re here for work, I thought, even as I ordered seconds myself. I wish my neighborhood market carried stuff this good.

“W-well, all right… We’ll just have to conduct that audit thoroughly…” I dabbed at my mouth with a napkin. No particular problems here.

Just then, the documents for the audit arrived. Most of them were accounting records and the like.

And they came accompanied by an assorted fruitcake set.

“B-Bellgundeal, what on earth…?”

This place actually is a café, isn’t it?

“You see, on an audit, you have to look at all those fiddly little numbers one by one, don’t you? There’s nothing better than sweets for tired minds. If you clear your heads with my company’s fruit, I’m sure your work will go more smoothly.”

“I—I see. Now that you mention it, perhaps…”

For a second, I thought I heard a voice say, “Talk about easy.”

“Did you say something, Bellgundeal?”

“No, nothing, nothing. Good luck with your work.”

With my eyes on the documents, I started on the fruitcake.

The first bite was shockingly delicious!

“The pleasant acidity of the oranges harmonizes perfectly with the sweet cake!” I cried.

“The slight dusting of sugar looks like powdery snow!” Vania added.

“Ahhh! Even in the castle town, quality like this isn’t available anywhere! I’m so glad I came along on this trip!”

“Lady Beelzebub, Vania, we aren’t here to eat cake, you know. Th-this is wonderful… Sinfully delicious…”

All smiles, we somehow managed to get through the first stage of our job, the audit.

We didn't find anything particularly problematic.

When our work reached a stopping point, the evil eye proprietor came back and said, "Would you like to take a tour of the farm as a little diversion?"

"But if that delays the audit, won't it cause trouble for your company as well?"

"No, I thought that having you see for yourselves that our humble establishment grows fruit of good quality could serve as part of the audit. I'd like you to confirm that we do not grow anything low quality!"

"I—I see… You do have a point."

"Yaaaay! A factory tour! It's a field trip for grown-ups!"

"Vania, curb your enthusiasm. Still… it is intriguing, isn't it?"

Fatla might say otherwise, and it didn't show in her expression, but it was clear that she was enjoying herself, too.

I got the feeling the proprietor said "Seriously easy" again, but I might have been hearing things.

They ushered us into the hothouse.

"Demon territory is located in the frigid north, so we provide a variety of fruits from southern climes by building greenhouses like this one," the proprietor explained.

The colorful fruits were indeed unmistakably tropical.

"Sister, Sister! A big bird landed on my back!"

"Be a little quieter, would you? But… put it on my back later, please."

So you're letting it ride on you anyway, huh? This seemed to have turned into a sisters' trip. *Bureaucrats are busy, so maybe it's all for the best.*

No… No, that's wrong; this isn't a trip.

"Bellgundeal, I think we'd better be getting back to the audit."

"Yes, I understand. In that case, shall we return to the office?"

This time, we were given a very fancy mixed juice, and we checked into their accounting records.

No money was flowing in any particularly opaque directions.

"Even if we are taking breaks, my eyes are getting more and more tired."

Earnest Fatla was the type who focused and worked intently for a short burst. However, not only was the amount of work too great for that this time around, we were currently on a business trip, so her pacing was off.

"I've started to get sleepy…"

"Vania, you are a real piece of work. No sleeping. I mean, fatigue is inevitable for a task like this, and I do understand how you feel, but…"

I nearly yawned, too, but I fought the urge desperately. As a bottom-tier employee, I'd spent a long time doing dull work, so I still had a tolerance for it. That said, whether I could handle it or not and whether it was interesting or not were completely different things.

Even so, if I fell asleep during an audit, it would embarrass the entire Ministry of Agriculture.

C'mon, tough it out, tough it out…

That was when Bellgundeal the evil eye came by again.

"You seem fatigued. Our company has female staff members who give beauty treatments. Would you like one?"

For a moment, I almost broke into a smile, but I managed to bite it back. "Hrm… A kind offer indeed, but wouldn't that count as entertaining us?"

“It wouldn’t do to have your concentration lapse and cause you to overlook something. I believe it would be best to clear your bodies of any metabolic waste, then begin your work again in a refreshed state of mind.”

Hmm. I’m beginning to feel as if I’m being cleverly manipulated. If I don’t shut this down now, we may not be able to go back…

“That’s a valid way of looking at it. May we take you up on that offer?” Fatla nodded. She should have been more hard-nosed than that!

No, let’s look at this from another angle. If Fatla’s saying it’s okay, doesn’t that mean there’s no problem?

“All right. In that case, yes, please let us try this beauty treatment of yours.”

I got the feeling the proprietor smirked, but that was probably also my imagination.

The beauty treatment was, in a word, heaven.

It’s a bit weird for a demon to be talking about heaven, but it really felt that good. A piping-hot towel was placed over my eyes, and I dozed through the whole treatment.

My body definitely felt lighter, and my face seemed more delicate than before.

“Boss, you look incredibly cute now!”

“Vania, flattery will get you nowhere. But I will admit your skin looks younger as well.”

“If it weren’t for work fatigue, would I be more attractive…?”

In the end, all three of us were satisfied in three different ways.

Back when I was a bottom-tier bureaucrat, beauty treatments like this one were barely even an option. Although that was because I’d used that money to buy cheap liquor and beer snacks, then drank at home. I never knew such happiness existed…

While we were checking documents again, feeling rejuvenated, night fell.

“Nnnnnn! I think that’s it for work today! We’ll get through the rest tomorrow morning!” Vania stretched.

Yes, it was about time to call it a day.

“All right, let’s get something to eat,” I said. “We obviously can’t let the group we’re auditing invite us out, so we’ll go somewhere else.”

There weren’t many places around, and we went into a slightly trendy restaurant.

If you let the group you’re auditing entertain you too warmly, the audit doesn’t work. We might have gotten a little too cozy today. *I’ll let those regrets remind me to keep a clear head tomorrow…*

However, even there, something peculiar happened.

We kept receiving dishes that were clearly more luxurious than what we’d asked for.

“How odd… Did we order a full-course meal like this?”

“If it was not you, Vania, we must not have.” I thought it was strange, and I asked a staff member if there’d been some mistake.

“Oh… As a matter of fact, it just so happens that you’re our five-thousandth party of customers, so we’re serving you a special full-course meal for no additional charge,” the staff member said, averting his eyes awkwardly.

The hallmark of a guilty conscience.

I was positive.

No matter how you looked at it, this was weird.

Meanwhile, Vania was pleasantly drunk, and Fatla had eaten too much and was holding her stomach in pain.

These two won’t be any more use today…

◇

That evening, after the three of us had checked into the inn, I went back to the farm by myself and grilled the employees who were there working overtime.

“Is the proprietor still here?”

“No, I believe he’s already gone home… If you need him, please try again tomorrow.”

I grinned.

Yes—when the proprietor isn’t here, the place is vulnerable.

“No matter if he’s not here. Earlier, they brought the documents for the audit to us; could you show me to the vault where those documents were originally?”

“Huh?! You mean right now?!”

“There’s no rule that says audits can’t be conducted at night. Hurry up and open it. It’s nothing important; I only have the urge to check the ones that weren’t there earlier. A personal interest, you understand. That is why I’m here by myself.”

With no other options, the employee opened the vault.

I carefully checked through the accounting records for the period that I’d wondered about, working by the light of a small hand lantern.

We’d been entertained far too well.

There had to be something to find.

And after about fifteen minutes—

I pinpointed a stream of capital that was clearly anomalous.

“The company’s positively gushing money, and I can’t tell what it was used on, either.”

Just then, a figure appeared in the vault.

It was Bellgundeal, the evil eye proprietor.

“Minister of Agriculture. How dedicated you are to be working at an hour like this.

With your status, you shouldn't need to do such a dull task."

I sensed a hint of sarcasm.

"Hmph! I am a new noble who got promoted all of a sudden. I spent forever doing accounting. I've gone over the same books again and again because they were off by less than the cost of a meal. When something's fishy somewhere, I can feel it."

"And did you?"

"We'll still have to do a detailed investigation, but it's almost certain that you've been conducting financial transactions under the table with that Ministry of Agriculture relative of yours and having them grease some wheels for you. You may also have been falsifying production areas and using goods that are past their sell-by dates, but everything from here on out is a job for the lot from the audit bureau and the police."

"So you've finally tracked it down, have you?"

Bellgundeal was holding something. A blunt instrument? Was he planning to strike me down here?

I tensed up. *I may not look it, but I'm still a demon minister. I'd never lose to a mere evil eye!*

However, while the object could have been used as a bludgeon, that wasn't what Bellgundeal did with it.

"I don't suppose we could settle the matter with this?"

What Bellgundeal the evil eye held out to me was—

A pyramid-shaped stack of gold ingots!

"Mistress Beelzebub— Ah, forgive me. As you are a noble, perhaps I should call you Lady Beelzebub. You have only just been elevated to the nobility. You have no economic foundation whatsoever. This farm can create that foundation for you."

"Do you intend to bribe me with this?" I glared at the evil eye.

"To be honest, you have my sympathies. With no backer to support you, even if you've

been given a position as minister of agriculture, there are any number of opposing forces, and should you prove inconvenient, you might be cut off at any time. You could conceivably be hounded out of your current rank next year, or the year after that. Should you not at least have savings to use in your retirement?"

"On its own, that's a sound argument. I'm like an insignificant little fly."

Slowly, I approached the pile of ingots.

"That's right. Come, prosper along with this farm!"

And then—

I swept my right hand through those gold ingots and sent them flying.

"But don't take me for a fool! While I love fruit that's nearly rotten, I have no intention of fraternizing with such rotten characters! What you just said is so filthy that I want to wash out my ears; go get me some cold water!"

The evil eye's expression abruptly hardened. His hand tightened around a gold ingot.

"I'll teach you to push your luck, you upstart commoner! You'll die here!"

The evil eye brandished the ingot—which I suppose *could* serve as a bludgeon!

Not good! My Ice and Snow spell wasn't going to make it in time!

I managed to dodge the first attack somehow, but this really wasn't a good environment for fighting.

"It's too cramped in here! I can't even draw a magic circle!"

"Exactly! All right. Now suffer!" Slowly, the evil eye closed in on me.

What do I do? Should I take a risk and close the distance? No, I'll get hit before I can manage it… There's no room to take flight…

However, before he could slam that gold ingot into me—

The man slowly tipped forward and collapsed.

Behind him were the two leviathan sisters.

“Lady Beelzebub, we really can’t have you going off on your own like this.”

“My, that was a close one, wasn’t it?! Still, all’s well that ends well, huh!”

“Fatla? Vania?!”

Vania nodded happily. “When your serious-minded boss disappears, work is the first place you look.”

The relief made my legs give out on me, and I sat down right where I was.

Fatla picked me up and put my arm around her shoulder.

After the wave of relief passed, I started feeling pathetic. *Even though I’m a demon minister, I’m seriously weak.*

“I’m sorry… For a demon, I’m still not that powerful. I really am no match for you two leviathans. I’m not living up to the Beelzebub name…”

“Don’t get the wrong idea, please.” Fatla sounded a little sniffy. “I serve the Lady Beelzebub who devotes herself to her official business as minister of agriculture. I am not groveling because of your strength.”

“We’ll support you when you can’t manage on your own, Lady Beelzebub!”

“You have my gratitude, both of you. Thank you…”

Uncharacteristically, I was crying.

◇

Several months after a lot of arrests were made at that farm as a result of the audit—

“Hah! Hiyah!”

—I was sparring with Fatla and Vania.

We were starting with special training to boost the power of my punches and kicks.

I'm the minister of agriculture, and I'm going to get to midlevel boss-class strength if it's the last thing I do!

"You're doing well, Lady Beelzebub." Fatla, who was receiving my attacks, encouraged me with compliments. "At this point, you have power on the level of a Ministry of Agriculture section chief."

"I'm still at section chief level, huh? This is going to take a while." I got close to feeling discouraged, but I didn't give up. As if I'd ever give up.

"No—no, boss, you're strong! If there were three of you, I'd lose."

"That prerequisite makes no sense! I don't turn up in groups of three!"

Vania's method of praising me was a little strange.

"But remember that nasty evil eye from earlier?" Vania continued. "You could beat him easily now."

I stopped attacking. "Is that the truth?"

"I'll swear to it as well. You really are stronger, Lady Beelzebub." Since Fatla had said it, it probably was true.

Great. I'm going to keep on getting stronger. I'll become an outstanding minister of agriculture. I won't lose to anybody.

Huh…? When had I set my sights on that particular goal? As a bottom-tier bureaucrat, I'm pretty sure I was an idler…

At that point, the demon king passed by under her parasol again.

We stopped practicing and saluted briskly.

"A very good morning to you, ma'am, Your Majesty," I said.

Smiling, the demon king came up to me. I got the feeling she was plotting something again.

“Miss Beelzebub, this is an order. Would you bow your head there for a moment?” she said, still smiling. Did she mean I was acting too proud? Either way, it was an order, so I couldn’t refuse.

“…All right, ma’am, Your Majesty.” I bent forward, inclining my upper body.

“Very well done. ♪”

The demon king stretched out a hand—

And patted me on the head.

“Your Majesty…?”

“Yes, very good. If you keep putting in that kind of effort, I’m sure you’ll make progress. After all, Miss Beelzebub, I’ve placed my confidence in you.” The demon king giggled, smiling impishly despite her status. “I need you to get stronger and become my right-hand demon.”

Then she shifted the angle of her parasol slightly and departed.

It didn’t make much sense to me, and I cocked my head.

“Lady Beelzebub, has the demon king taken a liking to you?” Fatla asked.

“Frankly, it’s a mystery. I don’t know her all that well.”

“She may have recognized your potential from the very beginning.”

Potential, huh?

It would be nice to have, but even if I don’t, it won’t change what I’m doing.

“All right, let’s keep going! I’ll be as strong as a department manager by the end of the month!”

©Benio

I *CRUSHED* A RECALCITRANT *NOBLE*

"—And that concludes my report as minister of agriculture," I said with a triumphant look, then sat down.

I was right in the middle of a ministers' meeting in the presence of Her Majesty. You could call this the very heart of demon politics.

The other ministers were whispering among themselves.

"What an admirable response."

"You'd never think she was self-made now."

Good, good, gimme more of that.

I'd been minister of agriculture for several years at that point, and it felt like I was completely used to my rank.

"Thank you, Miss Beelzebub. I wouldn't be ashamed to introduce you as my minister anywhere now." Beaming, the demon king complimented me as well.

"No, no, it's all because your virtues cover the whole of the demon world, Your Majesty."

It was a standard expression, but I praised the demon king right back.

Right now, I was shining more brightly than I ever had in my life. I was performing my duties brilliantly, and I'd been blessed with good subordinates.

Vania bungled things pretty frequently, but we handled it.

I was actually even interviewed by a girls' magazine the other day for a feature titled "Five Demon Women Who Are Flying High."

They sent me a sample copy, but I personally bought about ten of 'em and gave copies to Fatla and Vania, too. Fatla told me, "It's far too obvious that you're boasting," but I don't think that's really a problem.

The demon king was in that same magazine, in fact. She's still young, and she's governing demonkind with a steady hand. Of course she'd get into print.

"My virtues, hmm? Unfortunately, there's one place where that isn't necessarily the case." The demon king gave an affected-sounding sigh.

On the whole, she tended to ham it up, but the demon kings have had a penchant for drama for generations. Maybe it ran in her blood.

"You know, when I engage in politics, people and factions gain my support, which means that no matter what I do, someone's rights, interests, and power must suffer. Inevitably, there are complaints from those quarters."

"Outrageous! We cannot let them get away with opposing you, Your Majesty."

I could give socially acceptable responses quickly now, too. I was not nervous like I was back when I first took up my post.

The other ministers followed suit.

"Precisely."

"Let us show those demons hell."

"Thank you, all of you. As it happens, I'm having difficulties with a certain area that has fallen behind on its tax payments. The lord of that territory says this is unavoidable due to a poor harvest, but I strongly suspect it may be a gesture of defiance against me."

Saying you couldn't pay your taxes because your harvest was bad, and that you just wouldn't be able to manage unless you got a discount, was the oldest trick in the book.

"What do you think, Miss Beelzebub?"

"They must pay! If they say the harvest was poor, then I'd recommend dispatching a supervisor and seeing what things are actually like over there."

"Yes, you're right."

Then the demon king smiled.

For some reason, a chill ran through me.

"The area that hasn't paid its taxes is the domain of Lord Nastoya the alraune."

Hmm? I feel like I've heard that name somewhere before…

"He once held power in the Ministry of Agriculture and was favored to be its next minister, but he lost his position due to graft."

Curses! This had everything to do with me!

"Since it just happens to be an issue with a formerly influential person in the Ministry of Agriculture, Miss Beelzebub, can I ask you to go?"

At this point, I suppose I can't refuse.

"Yes, ma'am, Your Majesty…"

All I could do was nod my head.

◇

"Lady Beelzebub, this is a terribly alarming situation."

When I returned to my minister's chamber, I was met by Fatla's reproachful eyes.

"Lord Nastoya the alraune is the great noble who was expected to become minister of agriculture upon the ascension of the new demon king, but he was instead cross-examined regarding corruption and ended up retreating into his domain. And now the new minister of agriculture will walk in. He will take it as spite… *Sigh.*"

"Oh, so this really is headed in an unpleasant direction?"

"You may not come back alive. I mean it. Even if he is an alraune, Lord Nastoya is an ultra-high-level demon."

If you were wondering what an alraune is, they are a sort of plant spirit. Strictly speaking,

you can't call them demons, but demons are extremely lax when it comes to drawing lines like that. We may have wings, or horns, or tails, or one eye, or maybe three—there are too many differences when it comes to those things, so we don't sweat the small stuff.

Vania was shaking harder than I was. "No! I don't want to! The food in alraune territory isn't even good! It's all just weeds!"

"Why are you worried about *that*?!"

"People who live in territories with bad food are peculiarly stoic and narrow-minded! Lord Nastoya and his hangers-on were so unpleasant to be around. They were extremely picky about little things, too!"

*The views expressed here are those of the characters. Well, just Vania, really.

"Still, if an executive from the Ministry of Agriculture is causing trouble back in his territory, as the current head of the ministry, I expect I'm the one who should go and resolve it."

"There are tax collectors, aren't there?" Vania protested. "I'm pretty sure the group was made up of top necromancers and things. Let's ask them to handle it, okay?"

"Apparently, the tax collectors all oh-so-conveniently caught the flu, and they can't go."

"In other words, a conspiracy. They're trying to shove an unpleasant job off onto you!"

"Now, calm down; just settle down. Even alraunes won't grab you and eat you. They're demons, too."

"That's why I'm worried! If they were humans and they attacked, we'd be able to take them out instead, but demons are scary! I mean it!"

She's a leviathan; why is she this jumpy?

"Anyway, we're going. It's a simple job. We'll just tell him to pay his taxes, and that'll be the end of it. We'll leave next week."

"You know, that just happens to be the day my stomach always hurts, so I won't be able

to g—”

“Do you take me for a fool?” I hit the side of Vania’s head with a noogie attack.

“Hey! This is assault! This is blatant workplace violence!”

“So says Vania. What say you, Fatla?”

“I see nothing. It just happens to be the day when I can’t see my little sister.” Fatla summarily took my side.

Apparently, my loyal secretary would choose to side with her boss rather than her sister.

“I’ll go… I’ll go, so please stopppp!”

And so we ended up going to see Lord Nastoya the alraune.

Vania assumed her true, enormous leviathan shape, and we rode on her back to alraune territory.

In a way, it was a job that showed off her abilities as a leviathan, something that could boost her reputation.

However, there was a rather sizable problem.

“There’s too much rocking going on…”

The cup I’d been about to drink from flew toward the wall of the room, along with the table, as Vania tilted again.

“I’m sorry. My sister is a bad pilot.”

Fatla was standing there as if it was nothing. *She must be used to this*, I thought, until I saw that she was holding on to a ring that hung from the ceiling.

“What’s that thing you’ve got there?”

“This is a strap for stability. If you grab it quickly when she leans or rocks, you can

maintain your balance."

"Riding leviathans sure is rough…"

"I'm sorry! Every time I remember we're going to alraune territory, the stress interferes with my piloting."

An announcement from Vania echoed through the room. She had the same sort of method for that as her sister, Fatla.

"Just deal with it. You are a leviathan, so even if they do pick a fight, you can certainly win it," I said.

"Alraunes are treacherous. They might use some sort of cheap trick…"

"You never know; they might welcome us warmly, the way that farm did several years back."

"You say that because you don't really know alraunes, boss. They'd never be generous."

How much does she hate alraunes anyway? If she said things like that in public, they'd call her a racist and run her right out of town.

"On that point, my sister's view may be the correct one," Fatla said. She was still hanging on to the strap. "Alraunes are vicious at heart. You really mustn't let your guard down. And family lineage is extremely important to them, so I expect their hatred of you is murderous, Lady Beelzebub."

"Oh, come on. Don't threaten me too much."

"It isn't a threat. That said, you're far stronger now than you were when you first became minister of agriculture, so I doubt it's anything you can't handle."

She just takes it for granted that we'll be fighting, huh? I thought, grabbing one of the ceiling straps myself as Vania rolled to the side again.

Hell's bells, I'd fare better flying with my own wings…

◇

And so we went to see Lord Nastoya.

We told the alraune gatekeeper why we were there. His feet looked like plant roots, which was typical for an alraune.

“Understood. My master will be here before long, so if you’d be so kind as to wait…”

As we’d been told, we waited outside the gate.

Let us in first, would you? I thought, but it wouldn’t do to get hostile right off the bat. We’d wait.

Fifteen minutes went by.

“Excuse me, is he going to be much longer?” Fatla asked the gatekeeper.

They’d kept us standing there the whole time, so I could understand why she was irritated. Fatla always looked irritated, but I was positive she was genuinely annoyed now.

“Ah, my apologies. I’m sure he’s having trouble deciding what to wear.”

After that, we had no choice but to wait.

Thirty minutes went by.

“Really, what is the meaning of this? Hurry and summon your master, if you would,” Fatla pressed the gatekeeper.

However, the gatekeeper only said, “I don’t understand it myself.”

Fatla turned my way with a really scary expression on her face. I thought she was going to yell at me for a second, and I flinched.

“He already got us. He’s harassing us by making us wait forever.”

“That… seems extremely likely.” Something was obviously amiss.

Vania had sat down in front of the mansion and was taking a nap.

“That’s disgraceful! Wake up!” Fatla scolded and promptly shook her, but…

One hour later.

“Thank you for coming, plebian Minister of Agriculture.”

Finally, Lord Nastoya turned up, walking on root feet that looked like octopus tentacles. One look at his face was enough to tell he was of noble blood.

“Plebian? I am a proper noble now, mind you. Well, that doesn’t matter. I’m tired after all this standing. Show us to a room with chairs.”

My rank was currently higher than his, so I went with the arrogant approach. I was getting used to acting more pompous, too.

“Yes, of course, do follow me. Plebian Minister of Agriculture.”

They did have chairs waiting for us—ratty, rickety chairs that looked ready to collapse the moment we sat on them. They were warped and leaning; a stiff breeze might knock them apart. Saying they were collections of boards in the shape of chairs would have been more accurate.

“Oh-ho, is this an attempt at living green or something…?” My temples were starting to twitch.

Fatla was glaring steadily at the man.

“These are the only chairs I can provide you with. I’m terribly sorry.”

He really did have a nasty personality. I hadn’t expected him to be such a lowlife.

Vania whispered in my ear. “Boss, please don’t take a swing at him, okay? He’s trying to get you to start a fight. He’s planning to make it so that we attacked them, and then they can thrash us in self-defense.”

I couldn’t entirely write that off as Vania’s delusion. They were out for blood.

“Let’s get down to business, Lord Nastoya. I’m told your territory hasn’t sent in even the slightest bit of tax money, so I came to look into it. Would you show us to your farmland?”

“Before we get to that, I imagine you’re tired. Please have a drink.”

They brought us a purple mystery beverage that was very obviously sinister. No matter how careless you were, nobody would just gulp this down without asking questions.

Or so I thought, but Vania was about to drink it until I covered her mouth with my hand.

“Mrgl, mrgl…!”

“You make it too easy.” Fatla slowly took something that looked like pink stationery labels out of her jacket. “This paper tests for poisons. If mild poison is present, the pink paper will turn brown; for strong poison, it will turn black.”

She put some on.

It turned jet black.

“Yes, that’s lethal poison. We must not drink this under any circumstances.” Fatla turned a menacing glare on Lord Nastoya.

We couldn’t start that fight, so she was threatening him with her eyes.

“My, my, I’m sorry about that. I must have added poison completely by accident.”

Nothing was beneath this guy when it came to mocking us… That was a crime, not an accident. Couldn’t we put together a case?

“Now then, I’ll show you to the farmland. Be sure to check the harvest numbers.”

This time, they took us to a farm that was a short distance from the manor.

They grew wheat here, and we were going to take a look at how well it was growing.

While we were on the move, we never let our guard down and kept an eye on the situation at all times.

Lord Nastoya was in the carriage with us until we were close to the farmland, and the man might very well attack us himself. Everyone here except us was the enemy.

In the end, we got to the wheat field without incident.

“To be perfectly frank, it’s an excellent crop.” Fatla sounded annoyed.

I nodded.

“It looks delicious, doesn’t it? The ears are hanging low. I bet you could bake good bread with this.” Vania’s impression was missing the point a little, but it meant the same thing.

This was not a poor crop. As a matter of fact, it was a bumper crop.

So his failure to pay taxes really had been a kind of sabotage.

“Lord Nastoya, I really don’t think you could ever consider this a bad crop—”

I turned to look at the lord—

And he was gone! Even though we’d gotten out of the carriage together!

Instead, alraunes armed with bows and arrows were bearing down on us!

They were most definitely planning to kill us.

“Why you little…! You tricked us!”

“I knew it! Alraunes are the worst! We should never have come here!”

We ran for it. If we didn’t run, we’d get shot!

Aah, if this is how it’s going to be, should I have followed my instincts and just kept pushing my pencil as a bottom-tier bureaucrat? At the very least, there wouldn’t have been any attempts on my life…

I considered striking back with magic, but there were mage types stealthily lurking in the field, too. They were probably there to get in the way if we tried to cast spells. Since casting spells would make us more vulnerable, it would actually be a fatal error…

However, it wasn't as if we'd made no plans of our own. We weren't grunt-level demons.

"Lady Beelzebub, distance yourself from me a little, please," Fatla said, moving to stand in front of me. "This is a field, so I have room. Leave it to me."

"All right. Don't you dare get hurt, though."

I took Vania's hand and put some distance between us and Fatla. We appeared to be abandoning her, but that wasn't the case at all.

As Fatla stood there by herself, they prepared to launch their arrows at her. Just then, she transformed into her enormous leviathan shape!

The arrows bounced off her hard skin like little toys.

"Sh-she's way too huge!"

"We can't fight that!"

At the sight of the leviathan, the alraunes ran away with their tails between their legs.

…Not that alraunes have tails.

"We seem to have made it out alive…"

For the moment, Vania and I decided to hole up in a building on top of Fatla.

"Honestly, what they're doing is beyond unacceptable. Let's go back to the demon king immediately and report them!" Vania was already on the verge of tears, and I completely sympathized. However—

"If we go home when things are like this, it will cause trouble for them, too. Their boss will probably come out to explain it."

Sure enough, from our vantage point up on top of Fatla, we spotted Lord Nastoya

emerge.

I had Fatla turn back into her human shape, then confronted the lord.

“I’m terribly sorry, plebian Minister of Agriculture. The fact that there was hunting here today slipped my mind. That was a bit of a blunder. Ha! Ha! Ha!”

I see. So he’s going to keep playing innocent, huh?

“Well, everybody makes mistakes. I’ll forgive you,” I told him, smiling proudly.

Lord Nastoya’s smirk crumbled, probably because I was being excessively nonchalant.

“You see, I don’t trouble myself with trivial matters. As you well know, I’m the minister of agriculture. If I got caught up in the details and neglected the big picture, I’d never make it as the minister of agriculture. Indeed, I am from common stock, but the minister of agriculture is the minister of agriculture. Because she is, after all, the minister of agriculture… ♪”

Lord Nastoya’s expression froze over.

I knew it.

This man had one heck of a complex over not getting to be the minister of agriculture.

“And so, Lord Nastoya, I’d like to ensure the big picture is clear. From the looks of it, there are no problems at all with your harvest, and I want you to pay your taxes properly. Understand? That’s all I came to accomplish as the minister of agriculture, so you do your job as a backcountry lord, would you?”

“S-silence, whelp!” Lord Nastoya roared, finally showing his true colors. “What ‘minister of agriculture’?! A nobody from nowhere becoming a minister—the world’s gone mad! By all rights, I should have been minister of agriculture!”

“What you think doesn’t matter. The fact is, right now, the head of the Ministry of Agriculture is me, and you are just a retired noble has-been. Pay your taxes, would you? You can talk nasty about me all you want, just pay your taxes! Pay up, pay up, pay up!”

“Hmph! Making a pathetic wench like this the minister of agriculture… That little girl

of a demon king is a benighted fool!"

That was crossing a line.

"Hey! Insulting the demon king is an inexcusable crime—one you might pay for in blood!"

I couldn't care less what people said about me. I'm sure if I listened to every uninformed opinion about me, my whole life wouldn't be enough time to hear all of it.

I was a minister who made an unprecedented rise to power from the bottom of the heap. I must have blackmailed somebody, right? I was some high-ranking official's lover, right? I'm sure somebody was saying it. If I let that get under my skin, I'd never survive.

But I couldn't let insults directed at the demon king slide.

"The leviathans who serve you are just as foolish. They must be completely devoid of pride to obey such a low-class demon!"

Why, that little—! Fatla and Vania, even!

"Lord Nastoya, I challenge you to a duel. If I win, first you will apologize to both my secretaries, and then you will present yourself to the demon king and apolo— Bwuff!"

Fatla had come up behind me and caught me in a nelson hold.

"What are you saying?! You were coolly backing him into a corner, so why bring up dueling?!"

"Lemme go, Fatla! Insulting me is one thing, but I cannot let him get away with insults to the demon king and my subordinates! Otherwise, I am a failure as minister of agriculture!"

Vania came to help Fatla out. She was almost crying. "Boss, in a duel, you might get killed, you know?! Please take it back!"

Right. Depending on the situation, people sometimes die in duels.

Lord Nastoya was licking his chops. He probably expected this to go his way.

“In that case, if I win the duel, may I respectfully request your resignation as minister of agriculture? Can we agree to those terms?”

“Yeah! I’d be happy to! And your attempts at politeness now are completely pointless.” I didn’t back down one little bit.

“I am of noble birth, after all, and my family’s status reaches back for generations. Low-level demon though you may be, I acknowledge the fire that makes you stand your ground so firmly.”

◇

We chose to duel in the mansion’s garden.

Lord Nastoya had a sword. Alraunes could attack with vines that extended from their bodies, too, so that blade was probably a weapon meant to take my life.

I was empty-handed. As a rule, I didn’t carry weapons around with me.

The spectators all had ties to my opponent’s house, so this was an “away” game for our team.

That said, I didn’t intend to excuse myself by saying, *I lost because our cheering sections were different sizes.*

“Lady Beelzebub… If you feel you’re in danger, please forfeit…”

“Boss, even if you get fired, we’ll support you at the leviathan house for life!”

My two secretaries were cheering for me, and that was enough… *Wait, is that cheering? They might actually be worrying…*

“Hrrmmm. *Siiiigh…* My blood’s begun running rather hot over these past few years.”

It was almost hard to believe I’d ever plugged away processing accounts.

I wonder what sort of rank-and-file bureaucrat is doing my job at this point. I made a manual and left it for my replacement, so if they read it properly, they should be able to do the work by now…

“I’ll crush this low-born demon and make my return to the Ministry of Agriculture! Your resignation should change the winds of fate!”

Yeah, sure, talk all you want. The only way to drain the pus with this type is to crush it completely.

I understood why I’d been sent here, too. It was to fan the flames of jealousy for someone I’d personally bumped off the ladder of success.

In that case, let’s have him burn himself to ashes.

I drew a deep breath. *Always take deep breaths before the important things.*

That wasn’t something anyone had taught me. Actually, it was something I’d said to Fatla back when Vania had burned some important documents. Even calm Fatla had turned so red in the face, I’d had to remind her to breathe.

“After all, if this were another era, I’d be an executive of the demon king, blocking the humans’ advance. If I can’t put down one country-bumpkin noble, I’ll never get anywhere.”

“Hold your tongue, lowly commoner!” Lord Nastoya ran at me on those root legs of his.

I spread my wings and charged at the enemy.

Don’t underestimate the Lord of the Flies!

I slipped through the enemy’s vine whips, and—

“Who are you calling a commoner?! I’m a proud noble!”

—I decked him in the face.

Whuddd!

“You insolent oaf!” I cried.

I’d knocked the enemy off balance, so I hit him again.

Krakk!

“And you even insulted the demon king! That’s a grave crime!”

This time, I kicked up from the lower left.

Whomp!

Then I clasped both hands and brought them down on his head like a hammer.

Booooooom!

Okay, now for the next attack, I started to think, but Lord Nastoya had already blacked out.

“Hmm…? Is it over? Was that good enough?”

I’d expected the fighting to get fiercer, but my opponent didn’t even look like he was going to move, and not even a noble as rotten as this one would play dead and watch for an opportunity.

I kicked him one more time just in case, but he only dribbled something like drool from his mouth. Sap, I guess?

When I looked at my secretaries, they weren’t jumping around and cheering at all. They just looked stunned.

“What…? Did I break the rules somehow? I’m rather concerned by your reactions…”

“Boss! You’re so strong, it’s almost creepy! Actually, it *is* creepy! It’s creepy!”

“Hey, Vania! If you say any more than that, I’ll dock your pay!”

You could hardly even call that a compliment!

“Lady Beelzebub, you did keep diligently working all that time to get stronger… However, I never dreamed it would be so… You’re top class, even for a demon…” Apparently, Fatla couldn’t believe it, either, but before long, a smile bloomed on her face. “Congratulations, Lady Beelzebub.”

That brief comment made even my eyes get a little moist.

“I feel as if I’m your boss for real now.”

I walked over to the sisters and pulled them both into a hug.

“—And that concludes my explanation of the plan to distribute the territory under Lord Nastoya’s control.”

I wrapped up my report in the demon king’s chambers.

There was no point in telling the other executives about this, so it was just the two of us.

For a variety of reasons, including his crime of neglecting to pay his taxes without a legitimate reason and the crime of insulting the demon king, Lord Nastoya had been exiled.

“Yes, Miss Beelzebub, well done.” The demon king came up to me and patted me on the shoulder. “You’re rapidly growing into a demon after my own heart. It makes me happy.”

“Your Majesty, you sent me because you knew it would turn out this way, didn’t you?”

Send in the person most likely to irritate a fallen noble and goad him into picking a fight—both Lord Nastoya and yours truly had been neatly manipulated by our king.

“Oh, that’s so complicated; I’m not sure I understand.” The demon king feigned ignorance with a smile.

After that reaction, I can’t even pursue the issue.

“However, I do have an ideal—an image of an ideal elder sister.”

“H-huh…”

What the heck is she talking about?

“Somebody everyone loves, even idolizes—who exudes an atmosphere of nobility despite her common birth, who has earned all of it with hard work. Splendid, don’t

you think?"

One thing's for sure—she's talking about me.

"And that big sister's sworn little sister is a girl born into the most noble of noble families. Don't you think that's a marvelous gap?"

This time, the demon king put her hands on my shoulders.

Her eyes look dead serious…

"I feel as if I've finally managed to mold you into my ideal elder sister, Miss Beelzebub. Hee-hee-hee-hee…"

I sensed that I was in danger.

Yes, it was true I couldn't come close to matching the demon king's true power, but this fear was based in something else entirely.

"W-well, I still have work to do as the minister of agriculture, so I'll be going!"

I backed away from the demon king, then got out of the room fast.

From behind me, I heard a voice say, "Wait! Please don't run away, my elder sister candidate!" but I ignored it.

I thought I'd crushed an enemy and finally managed to act as a minister of agriculture should—

But I got the feeling another awkward problem had reared its head.

The End

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's been a while. This is Kisetsu Morita!

This is a very sudden note to start on, but I will be going to Vietnam.

It truly is very sudden, so allow me to explain a little. I was invited to an event at a bookfair called Haru no Tsuki in Vietnam two and a half months from now.

I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years is also being published in Vietnam, but this is my first time being invited overseas as an author, so it is an incredible honor for me. And so I renewed my passport for the first time in twelve years.

In my life, I've had my share of sudden starts to trips, like going on the Shinkansen to Sanada's base in Ueda, Nagano, on the day after a Taiga drama was announced (a trip that I'd decided to go on the day before the show's announcement, so that was a surprising coincidence, too), but I never imagined I'd be going to an event that would send me overseas. I hope to enjoy the unpredictability.

Now I have some announcements to make.

First, we have decided to do a second drama CD! Ta-daa! For the next volume, number seven, there will be a normal version and a limited edition that comes with the CD on sale at the same time!

It was because the preorder numbers and sales for the first CD were so good that we decided to do a second right away. To all of you who purchased the first CD, thank you so much!

In regards to the second CD, the last CD was about curry, so we plan on making the second one about ramen.

And since this is in the drama CD format, I hope to try some things that I can't in the main story. I hope you will hear these details with your own ears! I think it will be something that both people who love and hate ramen will enjoy, so please have a listen! And there's no worry if you didn't listen to the first one; you should be able to

enjoy it without a problem!

Also, I heard that since the number of preorders was much more than any of us were expecting, there weren't many limited editions on the bookstore shelves, so some of you couldn't get one. If you really want to get this one, please preorder it.

Next one: Volume 2 of the comic will go on sale at the beginning of summer! Ta-daa!

The comic version is a very popular series in GanGan GA (seriously popular; a second edition of the first volume went out just one month after the initial on-sale date!), and the second volume is coming out!

This second volume will cover up to the dragon wedding. Please take a look at Yusuke Shiba-sensei's seriously cute Azusa and Laika!

The comic version is also currently being uploaded to GanGan GA's manga app! It goes up all the time!

Please take a look!

http://www.ganganonline.com/contents/slime/

And finally: In the URL above, where you can visit GanGan GA, we will start posting the second part of the spin-off short story starting on April 12! Ta-daa!

That was Beelzebub's story, which was included right at the end of Volume 6, and this next time, I plan on having a story about Little Miss Blunderer, Halkara.

The point of view will be completely different from Beelzebub's story, so I believe this short story will be one you will enjoy. Please look forward to it!

And thanks to all of you, we broke records for an exceptional number of hits for a short story when we posted the Beelzebub spin-off. Thank you so much to all who read the posts!

Next, the usual thanks. Ta-daaaaaaaaaaaaa!

Benio, my illustrator, thank you so much again for the wonderful illustrations in this volume.

This is the sixth volume, so while this is a fantasy series, I thought it was about time we had our beach episode, so I forced them to go to the beach and wear swimsuits, which were drawn as colored illustrations, and I am extremely satisfied.

Also, there are new characters appearing all the time, which causes him a lot of trouble… The concept for the sixth volume was "Lots of spirits and Halkara's home," and the new spirit characters were so cute and funny! I hope to do something with the spirits again.

Also, to all of you who bought this volume, thank you so much. It's thanks to you that I'm able to continue this work. I hope to use my readers' support as the tailwind that keeps *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years* flying high into the future!

Kisetsu Morita

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