



5

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio

Average of 25
x 365 days
x 300 years
x (2+2 EXP)

Level 99

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

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

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

- VOLUME 5 -

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-ILLUSTRATOR-
Benio

[Yen Press]

I can
dally as
long as I
wish be-
cause I,
Flatorte,
am unem-
ployed!

...on
a
dun-
geon
quest
!

Let's
go...

I shall
collect
all the
stamps,
and the
free prize
shall be
mine!

I
dunno
about
this...





I Was a Bottom-Tier
Bureaucrat for 7500 Years,
and the Demon King Made Me a Minister

MY NAME IS
AGRICULTURAL
THE DEMON
BEELZEBUB,
MINISTER OF
REALM!

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Communicating with My Underlings Is a Pain

Story by Kisetsu Morita Illustration by Benio

She slaughtered slimes for 300 years...

I've Been Killing SLIMES for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level 5

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio

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ON
NEW YORK

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I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level, Vol. 5
KISETSU MORITA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt
Cover art by Benio

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SLIME TAOSHITE SANBYAKUNEN, SHIRANAIUCHINI LEVEL MAX NI NATTEMASHITA
vol. 5

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AZUSA AIZAWA

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



PERSEVERANCE EQUALS POWER. I ONLY DO THINGS I CAN STICK WITH!

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."



MY NAME IS BEELZE-BUB, AGRICULTURAL MINISTER OF THE DEMON REALM!



MOMMY,
MOMMY!
I LOVE
YOU!

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.



LADY
AZUSA,
I'LL
DEVOTE
MYSELF
TO IM-
PROV-
ING
AGAIN
TODAY!



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.



ENO

The immortal Witch of the Grotto, who reveres Azusa as her senior.

Though she has superior potion-making skills, her unwillingness to let others see her efforts prevented her from making progress. After Azusa reasoned with her, she changed her ways. She's actively working now, but she sometimes butts heads with her industry competitor Halkara.

KUKU

An almiraj minstrel. She once made a living (barely) with her intense death-style music and aesthetic, but she learned the importance of expressing words after meeting Azusa and family, and she started off on a new path.



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.

WE WENT TO THE THIRD BIGGEST UNDERGROUND DUNGEON IN THE WORLD

It was one day after the World Spirit Summit had ended and peace had returned to our lives.

I was out shopping with Flatorte. Along the way, we killed every slime that appeared and put the magic stones safely in our pockets. This was another important daily job for us.

Flatorte was being lazy, using her tail to smash the slimes.

Wait, she was technically moving a part of her body, so was she really being lazy? Or was that more like a kick or a punch for her?

“My tail just moves on its own whenever a slime gets near, so this is a cinch.”

“You *are* being lazy!”

“It’s not a problem, is it, Mistress? There’s no rule that says I have to go mano a mano with the slimes, and it’s better to beat them than just let them go.”

“That’s true... Well, I guess you’re not my apprentice, and it’s not like I’m teaching you how to fight anyway. You’re right.”

Laika would probably complain if she saw this, but my philosophy was to carry on without too much effort, and by that standard, there was no problem here.

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaawnn. You know, Nanterre is so peaceful,” Flatorte said as she opened her mouth wide.

I mean, that was a *big* yawn. Absolutely shameless. It was times like these that Flatorte seemed too careless, but you could also argue that Laika was too uptight.

“The monsters in Nanterre aren’t strong at all, either. And it’s not just this area; they’re quiet all over the whole province.”

By the way, it wasn't as though demons like Pecora and Beelzebub were managing all the monsters. Demons and monsters were the same in a broad sense, but monkeys didn't live in human society. Monsters like the slimes native to these rural provinces were like wild monkeys to the demons.

And so in this era of peace between humans and demons, there were plenty of spots where monsters naturally appeared, and they brought with them adventurers who made their living defeating those monsters. Without that reality, there wouldn't be any guild to buy the magic stones from us, so we could never forget what the monsters had done for us.

"Mm, we have sooo much free time. And that makes me want to cut loose," Flatorte said with a bright and clear voice that had a nice ring out here in the highlands.

"What do you mean exactly by 'cut loose'?"

"You know, like punching out monsters or slamming them into the ground, things like that. I've been so well-mannered since coming here that I'm getting rusty."

Wait, who was the one who got buck naked alone in a forest? I thought, but maybe everything that wasn't "cutting loose" was "well-mannered" in Flatorte's eyes.

I actually wasn't that surprised. When we went to the blue dragon village, I felt there were quite a few who thought like small-time—no, big-time thugs.

"I'd want more festivals, but there aren't many around here."

It was true—Flatta had only the Dance Festival. There were other, more religious events, but those weren't the kind at which we could run around and be loud. I guess that's the difference between a festival and a ritual.

As we talked, Flatorte's tail killed another slime.

"Man, if only there was a place where I was free to break whatever I wanted! I wanna go crazy!"

There was a very wide gap between her girlish appearance and her aggressive topics of conversation.

But stress relief is essential to your health. I had to think of some outlets for her. Maybe

I should enter her in a fighting tournament? *Fighsly* would definitely know plenty about that—maybe I should ask her next time.

As I quietly assigned myself some homework, we entered the Flatta guild.

We handed over a sack stuffed with magic stones to Natalie at the counter.

“Thank you as always, great Witch of the Highlands. I’ll go ahead and count these, so please sit tight.”

“Sure. Take your time.”

While she was totaling the stones, Flatorte read the requests on the message board. It was the perfect way to pass the time.

But to be blunt, the requests weren’t very promising. The majority of them were basically odd jobs. Things like *Our drain is clogged, so please come clean it* or *The roof leaks when it rains, so can someone please fix it*, and so on and so forth.

After all, the province of Nanterre was a peaceful one with weak monsters, so the emergency task of monster extermination didn’t exist.

As a result, none of the requests really grabbed us. No matter how crazy Flatorte went, cleaning drains wouldn’t relieve her stress.

“Oh! This is great!” Flatorte yelled. I mean, her voice was always loud, but this was louder than normal for her.

“What is it? Did you find something so interesting you just *had* to shout?”

“Look, Mistress, look!”

I glanced over the paper that Flatorte pointed to.

CAMPAIGN: VENTURE INTO THE WORLD'S HARDEST UNDERGROUND DUNGEON!

Take the challenge and go into the leading underground dungeon, the Bugabee Underground Ruins! Work together with your party of four to break through!

The party that makes it to the deepest area during this campaign will receive a LUXURIOUS PRIZE!

Conquer one of the seven wonders: ruins said to be the third largest underground dungeon in the world!

Registration is free NOW!
Receive a free item when you preregister!!
Don't miss your chance to ALSO win a rare item through a lottery!!!
Ask for details at your nearest guild!!!

That's too many exclamation points.

"They sure are telling us a lot..."

Especially the part about how it was "said to be the third largest underground dungeon in the world"—that was something you said when you were sort of a big deal, but you were comparing yourself to other, more impressive entities.

I sensed something shady about this whole thing, but Flatorte didn't.

"Mistress, we should go to the dungeon!"

It was a strong assertion, almost like a high school girl asking to go to a theme park.

"What? But doesn't it sound fishy to you?"

"It looks like it goes very deep underground, and I'm sure it would be a great way to test my strength! My blood is boiling!" Judging by the mood of the blue dragon village, *boiling blood* was probably right on the money.

"Oh! Are you interested?"

And of course, Natalie had to start talking about it to us. Guilds were in the service industry, too.

"Do you know a lot about this, Miss Natalie? About the Bugabee Underground Ruins, I mean."

"No, not at all. Oh dear, I started talking to you as I was counting and forgot what number I was on!"

What a mess!

Afterward, Natalie pulled out some documents, and according to them—

The Bugabee Underground Ruins were in a land far, far away from here.

Well, that much was a given. The problem came after that.

"It apparently used to be a mine. I heard it was very rich in silver a long time ago, but then all the veins got depleted."

"I see. And so now that mine's a dungeon. But they're underground ruins, right? I guess you could call an abandoned mine 'ruins,' but that doesn't feel like the right nuance."

"They apparently wanted to turn it into a theme park for children, but it was so out of the way that they received no guests, and it closed down."

So it was like a failed attempt to revitalize a countryside town...

And when she said "theme park," she didn't mean it in the sense of That One Theme Park that claimed to be in Tokyo but was actually in Chiba; she meant it in the sense of a smaller, cozier kind.

"However, then a new mayor assumed office, a real go-getter, and started working to label the theme park ruins as 'underground ruins' and turn it into a tourist attraction."

"He's thinking in reverse!"

"So when they did construction, they apparently found that there were actual ruins very deep under the ground. They seem to be inviting adventurers to come and conquer the ruins for them."

A truth born from a lie. This sure was complicated.

"I hear if they can get lots of adventurers together for an event, they'll drop a ton of money in town, and the townsfolk will somehow make do from that."

That sure was an aggressive approach for a fantasy realm, but the people of this world all seemed to have a way of thinking similar to that of modern humans, so I wasn't surprised to hear someone like that was around.

"We must go, Mistress! Then we will beat up all the other adventurers!"

"Why do you want to fight the other adventurers?!"

A dungeon was not where you wanted to stage a death match.

Natalie was reading over the rest of the documents. There was more information than

I thought.

"Well, well! It says, *The guild the adventurers with the highest marks registered with will also receive a splendid reward!* And you might celebrate the birth of a new local hero—it's two birds with one stone!"

Natalie was staring hard at me.

Oh no. She was urging me to enter.

"Sure, we might get some good results if I entered, but that might be against the rules... and I dunno how I feel about being put to work to make a lot of money for the guild..."

"We would receive a substantial amount of wheat of the highest quality! Please!"

If that was all, then maybe it was okay...

That being said, I would stick out like a sore thumb if I did do it... The name of the Witch of the Highlands was already getting around, but I wanted to do this on the down low.

"I understand how you feel, Mistress. I, Flatorte, have an idea!"

It didn't sound like saying *no* was an option at this point. I just had to hope that Flatorte's plan would work.

I had my doubts about some parts of her idea, but it was an easy one, so I would just give it a try.

There were horns on my head.

They were *on* it, by the way, not growing *from* it. It was similar to the horned headband I wore when I once pretended to be a demon.

"They suit you so well, Mistress! You look like a dragon, even when I squint at you!"

So Flatorte said, but I would take it with a grain of salt. She had suggested a very simple strategy: If I disguised myself with horns, then no one would know I was the Witch of

the Highlands.

I still had my doubts about whether this would work. Or maybe it would...? I decided to show my homemade horn headband to my family and check their reactions.

I first showed my horns to Laika.

“What do you think, Laika? How do I look?”

She sat frozen in place for a moment, like she'd been petrified.

“Hmm? Don't tell me you don't care? I'd like to hear what you think, if you can let me know.”

“I-it's... cute... It's so, so cute!” Laika yelled, her face flushed red. She put her hands on her own cheeks. “I am too embarrassed to calm down, so I will try again!”

And she ran back to her room!

This strange effect is concerning in its own way!

“Aww, Laika got all flustered from how cute the horns are. When I was younger, I too would've been too shy to look you in the eye.”

“Hey! What do these horns mean to dragons?! Do they really drive you that crazy?!”

This isn't making me feel any better!

I decided to show them to Halkara next. I went to her room.



"What do you think, Halkara? How do I look?"

"Madam Teacher... Are you into dressing up like that?"

"No. Don't you have any other thoughts? Like, *Wow, you look just like a dragon!* or anything?"

"I could use shavings from those horns in medicine."

And now she was talking like a pharmacist; she wasn't much help.

Rosalie and my daughters said they were cute, by the way, but I wasn't wearing them for the cuteness points... But now that I thought about it, I guess there wasn't much point in showing this to my family, since they knew who I was...

Well, I'd just think positive—people shouldn't know I was the Witch of the Highlands anyway.

Now that my disguise was complete, it was time to pick my party members.

We had to register as a four-person party to go through the Bugaboo Underground Ruins.

The reason was logical: The chances of survival for adventurers increased dramatically with more people. It would be dreadful if one person went on their own and got severely injured.

That's true for daily life, too. If you live alone and suddenly collapse at home, it's hard to call for any help. But with family, you can call an ambulance. Not that this world had ambulances, but you get the point.

It wouldn't be a campaign if the organizers ended up with a ton of dead people on their hands; plus, it would be hard to hold the event the following year. They would be thorough when it came to safety measures.

"All right, Flatorte and I are for sure going, so who should we pick for the last two?"

As I sat at the dining table and stared at the entry sheet, Laika came up behind me.

“Lady Azusa, I will join, too!” Laika straight-up volunteered.

“Thanks! You’re pretty strong, so it’s probably not going to be dangerous for you, so I’ll put you down.”

And now, just one person left. I couldn’t take my daughters along, Halkara might *actually* die, and Rosalie the ghost probably couldn’t register according to the rules.

I looked up and saw Beelzebub sitting across from me, excitement written all over her face.

I’m here, am I not? Pick me, pick me! I could almost hear her voice...

When did she come around anyway...? This is my house. But I wasn’t too surprised anymore whenever she let herself in.

“You’re a demon. Can demons go into dungeons and kill the monsters there?”

“Do you mean to say that it goes against nature when a large fish eats a smaller fish or when a large bird eats a smaller bird? Is it all cannibalism? Then you may not eat beef or pork or lamb for the rest of your life.”

Oh, that’s right. Monsters and demons were essentially different.

“But we would be cheating if our party came with a high-ranking demon...”

“Speak for yourself. Who was it who defeated me in battle?” she said, staring at me coolly.

That’s right, too... I broke the rules the moment I joined...

“And in fact, should there be any exceedingly strange or harmful monsters, I should be able to provide help as a demon.”

Beelzebub’s expression grew a touch more serious.

“There might also be a spontaneously occurring monster with high enough intelligence to be considered a demon, or perhaps the revival of a demon that was once sealed in the human lands long ago. This dungeon has yet to be thoroughly investigated, so I decided to confirm for myself.”

"So you have honest reasons."

"Beelzebub coming with us gives us the strength of a hundred," Laika added. It might even be the strength of a thousand.

"Leave it to me. I shall walk through the entirety of the dungeon and leave no stone unturned."

But what about poor Bugabee with no natural resources to call people in afterward...?

"Then I'll put you down as the fourth person, okay?" I put Beelzebub's name down in the name column.

But my name spot was still empty. I hadn't thought of an alias for when I was in disguise. And I still hadn't filled out the occupation column.

What were Laika's and Flatorte's jobs? Warriors, maybe?

"I'd want a cute name~ But I don't know what dragon names sound like~"

"Oh sheesh, just write whatever you want! I'll write it for you!"

Beelzebub flipped the paper around.

She wrote **Azuzard** in my name spot.

"Hey! That sounds way too strong! That sounds like the name of some final boss!"

"You *are* like the boss of this world, so I think it's perfect! And the job doesn't matter!"

And so, our entry sheet ended up something like:

Entry Sheet

	Name	Occupation	Race
1	Azuzard	Witch	Dragon
2	Flatorte	Unemployed	Dragon
3	Laika	Unemployed	Dragon
4	Beelzebub	Minister	Demon

"Wait, this doesn't look right..."

It didn't make a great impression when two of our four were listed as "unemployed." They might not have regular jobs, but that sure was a rude way of putting it...!

"I suppose I am unemployed... Though I would be happy if you wrote down *domestic help* or something..."

See? Even Laika's shocked!

"And are you sure you don't have to hide who you are, Beelzebub?"

"I am proud of who I am, so there is no need to hide anything."

I already had a feeling this whole dungeon exploration would be a disaster.

"Oh yes, and there was something I wished to ask you." Beelzebub looked at me curiously. "Why are you wearing those horns? Have you found yourself a new hobby?"

Oh no. I was still wearing them.

"No! You have the wrong idea!"

"Well, if you're looking for horn transplant surgery, I know a very skilled shady doctor—I can introduce you to him."

"Nooo, no thank you! This is just a disguise; I don't want that at all!"

"Oh, a shady doctor is a doctor specializing in the shade arts handed down through the demon race, so there is no need to worry. He has a legal medical license."

"This is too complicated!"

And by the way, Flatorte came in afterward, but she didn't seem to think anything of being labeled "unemployed."

"Well, the majority of the blue dragons are unemployed, after all. I suppose you could even say that being blue dragons is our job."

The blue dragons didn't seem to have the concept of "steady jobs." *Maybe you guys should pay a little more mind to your reputation?*

We had way too many problems, but at least our party had been put together.



I was always super-thankful that there were dragons in our family whenever we traveled long distances. Laika did the flying this time.

The village of Bugabee was inland, far away from all major highways—it checked all the boxes for a settlement doomed to waste away, but there were plenty of large-scale buildings. That probably meant it once thrived on the mines.

There was an excessive number of taverns, so I could see how the people who worked in the mines would have spent their off hours. Long ago, the village was probably big enough to be called a town.

And this tiny village was teeming with loud adventurers—practically buried in them.

There was a banner that said WELCOME, ADVENTURERS! fluttering in the sky.

They seemed to be desperately resting their whole revival on the dungeon.

We headed for the guild, which was acting as the reception. The sign said BUGABEE GUILD & TOURIST INFORMATION CENTER. When we stepped inside, the staff lady looked at us with bright, glittering eyes. It felt like she was expecting too much...

"Hello, this is our party list for going into the underground ruin..." I was a little nervous as I handed over our list. Any record we might set in the dungeon would be invalid if we didn't hand in the list.

"Thank you! I have received your list!"

Great, now we were qualified to enter.

"And here are coupons you may use while shopping in town!"

"Oh, thanks."

"And here is your sightseeing map! There is a fortress built five hundred years ago in a valley a little ways away from here, so I would recommend that one! There's also a beautiful two-tiered waterfall in the area! Also, buckwheat-flour galettes are a popular treat making the rounds right now, so when you see this mark on certain shops, you'll be able to try their specialty galettes!"

Wait a sec. She's not explaining the dungeon; she's giving us tourist info!

"Oh, and have you settled on an inn yet? We have a list here. If you display your coupon to them, you'll receive a discount of eight hundred gold per person! And local dishes made with the village's vegetables will be included free—"

"Wait, wait! You know we're adventurers and not tourists, right?!"

Our own intentions and the village's expectations weren't adding up, were they?!

"Oh, of course... I know that..." The receptionist lady gave a slightly discouraged sigh. "But Bugabee's population has been steadily going down... We don't have any industry

to begin with, so people aren't able to make their living anymore. I thought if we at least put some effort into encouraging sightseeing, then we might get a bit of life back..."

That sure painted a vivid picture.

"Well, if we clear these underground ruins quickly, then we may do some sightseeing in our free time. This counts as work for me this time around, so I don't have to use any of my vacation time."

Beelzebub sounded like she was ready to do some sightseeing as part of her business trip.

"I can dally as long as I wish because I, Flatorte, am unemployed!"

"Why do you sound so proud of the fact that you're unemployed?" Laika seemed slightly ashamed when it came to that.

"Being jobless means endless possibilities. It's like being colorless—we can be any color we want!"

Flatorte seemed to think her jobless/colorless comparison was very clever.

I heard so much news in my past life of people committing suicide from overworking or from failing to get a job, so maybe it was a relief to see her questioning why people had a problem with her unemployment.

Being alive was the most important thing.

"Oh, your party's job descriptions sure are, um... unique..."

I think the receptionist noticed.

"Among all the warriors and mages and monks, this sure is unconventional..."

"We'll be fine. We'll manage. Also, it's not unconventional, it's *unemployed*."

Wait, Flatorte, she's worried about you because you're trying to go into a dungeon without a job!

I never minded all that much, but now I saw how much of an idiot Flatorte was... Maybe I should educate her...

"Also, this 'minister' thing must be a joke, right...?"

"It is nothing of the sort. It would be a liability issue if I lied on this form."

Sure, if the minister of agriculture wrote "multimedia creator lol" on her résumé, she would probably be fired. She should write down the truth at times like this.

"V-very well, then... I'll go ahead and provide you with a map that covers everything until the twentieth floor; so feel free to use that. Poisonous monsters do appear, so please be careful."

"By the way, what's the record for the lowest floor so far?" Laika asked. Our diligent dragon was like the party's conscience.

"The thirty-third floor. It goes rather deep underground, since it was originally a mine, so the higher floors are mostly just for getting down there. I believe the real fighting will start at around the eighth floor. Please bring back some sort of proof from floors thirty-four and below to show that you've been there."

"Understood. There's also one more thing I want to check," Laika said, glancing over at Flatorte. "Would you please tell us if there's anything we are not allowed to destroy within the dungeon?"

Right, she was taking precautions for when Flatorte started "cutting loose"...

"Um... Please refrain from destroying the underground guide maps and trail markers..."

"Does that mean I can break everything else?" Flatorte asked, and the receptionist finally seemed to recognize the storm that had come.

She went pale. "...Holes and damages to the walls as a result of battle are inevitable, so that's not a problem."

"All riiight! Traces of the great Flatorte's exploits will be etched into the dungeon!"

"Um, but please do come back up if it gets too dangerous. Please retreat before you start to feel that your life is in imminent danger. Our image will be harmed if there are

too many deceased..."

People who acted like the dungeon wasn't a big deal did sometimes meet awful fates, that was for sure. But we really, *really* were fine in that regard.

"Please don't worry—I will be making the appropriate judgments," I said, placing my hand on my chest.

"Yes, please, Miss Azazard the dragon."

Oh, she called me a dragon...

My disguise was a success for the time being.



We went straight down into the Bugabbee Underground Ruins.

The WELCOME! written across the entrance struck me as a little iffy...

My first impression upon entering the ruins was that it was incredibly chilly.

Now that I thought about it, I visited a research museum that was in an abandoned mine when I was in Japan; it was midsummer and ninety-five degrees outside, but it was sixty inside.

This place was naturally air-conditioned; maybe the wind was coming from underground.

Back then, it wasn't just chilly but outright frigid, since I'd only been wearing a T-shirt. This was a lot like that.

Laika was scowling. "A-are all dungeons this cold...? I don't think this will be very enjoyable..."

"But the chill feels so good! It makes me just wanna punch any wall that comes my way!"

On the flip side, Flatorte was in very high spirits, so the two dragons canceled each other out.

Even though they were similar races, they were comfortable with different situations depending on the environment.

And so when we entered the Bugabee ruins, the first thing we saw was—

The origin of the Bugabee Mines

Legends have long told of the rich veins of silver in this area, and it is said that there was a small silver mine here over 1,500 years ago. It was only 450 years ago that a proper mine opened here.

—a guide plate like something right out of a museum!

“Oh-ho, they have the old mining tools on display here.” Beelzebub was observing the inconspicuous row of items.

“Wait, this isn’t what dungeons are supposed to be like... Oh, and the map says it’s a museum until the second basement floor...”

The map even showed where the bathrooms were.

I’m sure they meant to be considerate with this design, but I just wasn’t getting the feeling of adventure from it. I came all the way to this fantasy land; I wanted it to act a little more like one.

I’d been intrigued, since I’d never actually done a real walk-through of a dungeon

before.

I didn't mind my slow life in the highlands, but now that I'd gotten all the way up to level 99, maybe it wasn't a terrible idea to do some more battle-oriented stuff.

And now we'd found ourselves in a museum... I know, she said that the real dungeon started on the eighth floor, so it was pointless to complain.

But this place was a trap we hadn't expected.

Laika was carefully reading all the displays, which slowed us down even more!

"Hmm, that's quite useful. So that's how they dig the mines. This reminds me of the toil of the dwarves." She'd forgotten how cold it was, and now she was reading over every word and every phrase of every single panel.

She's too serious.

On the other hand, Flatorte just said "Boooriiing..." and marched on ahead.

This is exactly what happened when we went on a field trip to the museum in middle school! There was a display of Tumulus-era artifacts unearthed in our area, but the kids who weren't interested just walked right by it.

By the way, I was even worse, pretending to read the information plates but never actually doing it.

Beelzebub was sticking right by my side. She thought I was just skimming over the plaques. She didn't seem to be having that much fun.

Just before the stairs to the second basement floor, there was a table that said STAMP RALLY. Apparently, if we collected all the stamps down until the twentieth floor, we could receive a prize.

Beelzebub took the stamp sheet and pressed the design right on its spot. Then she sighed.

"I was wondering what manner of dungeon we might find ourselves in, but it's all out of sorts. I wonder if it'll be like this until the end... What a strange concept..."

I knew how she felt. I was starting to think this was a failure.

"Well, it might get more difficult after this," I offered. "Yeah, I really doubt it's going to be like this the whole way through. They're just making it so that even lower-level adventurers can enjoy it, too. Yeah, that's definitely it!"

Flatorte was waiting for us at the end of the second floor. "Let us hurry ahead, Mistress. I'm getting tired of waiting."

"You don't have to read any of the explanations or anything, but don't run too far ahead, okay? We're still a party."

Finally, Laika showed up. "Do you think they will be selling a picture record of the displays somewhere?"

"You honor-roll student!"

Of course they wouldn't be selling that in the dungeon.

From the third floor down, there was still more Bugabee sightseeing information, so I gave that a pass.

After a continuous stream of commentary on special regional products, a folk craft corner, a local festival corner, and other things I didn't care about, we finally came to the end of the seventh floor. *That took forever...*

"That took way longer than a normal dungeon would, in a way..." Beelzebub groaned.

She was right—this dungeon sure was eating away at our time, if nothing else...

"But it looks like the dungeon is about to get good. See, there's a sign."

Written there was a warning that strong monsters appeared below this point, and that anyone who wasn't an adventurer should stay out, along with a skull mark.

"I, Flatorte, have been bored to tears without any monsters. I will unleash the full force of my savagery from here on out!" Our dragon sounded less like an adventurer and more like a monster herself. That worried me a little, but I could sympathize with her

boredom.

She didn't even look at a single display...

"Excuse me, but would you mind if I took a little rest here...?" Laika, our other dragon, hesitantly raised her hand.

"Oh? But we haven't even fought yet..."

"I was reading all the displays so carefully, my feet grew tired..."

"This happens all the time in museums, too!"

Depending on the museum, you could spend a whole hour or two standing and looking at the displays. That was pretty hard on the feet. I knew how that felt.

"If this were a real museum, we'd handle that by taking a rest at the adjoining café, but at the end of the day, we're still in a dungeon..."

"No, there really is a café right over there." Beelzebub pointed.

"Seriously?! What kind of dungeon is this?!"

There was indeed a shop right next to the stairs called Café Sunflower.

It looked like they'd gone through all the trouble of bringing lumber down and wedging a building into one of the wider tunnels.

"Hell's bells... This dungeon would make adventurers cry in a very different sense. At this rate, our adventure may be nothing but some questionable sightseeing in a provincial city..." Beelzebub voiced her apprehensions again.

That suspicion was sneaking up on me, too. "Well, we can go in. One of the first rules of adventuring is to face dungeons in tip-top shape."

"Do adventurers also look at exhibits, Mistress?" Flatorte was unexpectedly snappy.

"Intelligence is invaluable to skilled adventurers..."

When we entered Café Sunflower, it was surprisingly packed with adventurers.

We managed to secure a four-person table for ourselves and listened in on the other parties' conversations.

"Man, I dunno. We spent a whole lotta time just looking at the exhibit..."

"Should we leave and come back tomorrow?"

"No, then this whole thing would've been pointless. We gotta lift our spirits and head down."

They were in the same boat we were!

"What if the 'luxurious prize' they're promising isn't an overpowered sword but some kind of gift set full of specialty products or something?"

"With the way things are going, I wouldn't be surprised..."

"I wouldn't allow that to happen. We paid a lot of money on transportation to get here..."

My own stomach was starting to hurt just from listening to them.

Their village revival was turning out to be a complete failure. *I mean, trying to revive the village is all well and good, but they're calling in adventurers and tricking them to make it happen...*

"Lady Azusa, what will you be having?" Laika brought the menu to me.

"I guess I'll have this specialty, the Bugabee sandwich... Apparently made with locally harvested vegetables and meat from animals caught in the vicinity."

It said that all the fifteen shops in the area gave this Bugabee sandwich their own flavor and flair.

Since it had the region's name in the food, I got a strong impression that this wasn't a local dish with old and strong ties to the area but something they slapped together for tourists. We ordered six.

We ordered more than the number of people at our table because the dragons would

each eat two. It would be unthinkable to give a dragon only one sandwich.

The food that arrived looked like a cross between a sandwich and a hamburger. It was tasty enough for that, but it wasn't enough to erase the glum look from Beelzebub's face.

"Mmm, my heart has begun to ache," Beelzebub said quietly with a clouded expression. "I've been thinking about what I would do if the village where I'm from wanted to revive itself and reached out to me for help..."

"That sounds like it could happen, since you're a politician..."

Here in Bugabee, you could clearly see the reality of a declining region, as well as the resistance to the decline and the futility of said resistance.

"There are plenty of abandoned towns and villages in the demon world as well. The world is full of ups and downs. No one can stay prosperous forever. New towns and villages suddenly boom, while others fade away. But we cannot overlook the places that have been left behind..."

Beelzebub cradled her head in her hands.

This was a type of anxiety I had definitely not anticipated when we started out. I just wanted to worry about how hard the dungeon might be.

Beelzebub was first and foremost a politician. In most cases, she couldn't just say, *Hey, the village is declining, so we're shutting it down, and you all have to move out now.*

"There are villages suffering in our area, too. We may grant each one a subsidy so they don't die out, but they cannot use it for much more than keeping their town hall clean. Having said that, the village will perish entirely if we don't subsidize it..."

This wasn't a problem for adventurers anymore...

"This Bugabee sandwich is good, but it's not very original. 'Tis certainly not good enough to justify someone traveling all the way here just to have one, is it? 'Tis much too weak to be a focal point of sightseeing."

"When you put it that way, I think I sort of understand." The problem was now clear. "The region is trying their hand at many things, but no single one has much impact."

Nobody would come here just to look at the museum exhibits we saw, for example. Even if Bugabee touted the scenic appeal of their location, that was something that all rural places shared.

"I suspect the theme park they once built was just as shallow as all of this," Beelzebub continued. "Too few guests came for the amount of money they invested into it."

"I guess it's depressingly hard to rebuild a village from scratch, huh?"

As Beelzebub and I stewed in worry, Flatorte ordered more Bugabee sandwiches. She seemed to be happy so long as she was eating.

Laika was absorbed in a pamphlet that looked like a sightseeing guidebook. I'd heard that a cultured person could find enjoyment even in the smallest things, so maybe Laika was one of them.

Characters like these two would probably be satisfied with a village like this, but they were in the minority, no two ways about it, and it wasn't like they came to Bugabee because they wanted to come *here* specifically.

It was pretty questionable how far they could push through with nothing but the Bugabee Underground Ruins. Nobody but adventurers would come to something like this.

"Well, I suppose it's all right. The first thing we must do is venture into the dungeon in question and confirm the full picture for ourselves. We may discuss this now, but there are still too many unknowns."

"Yeah. It's not like we have a view of the whole thing yet."

Maybe they had something that would make everyone want to come to Bugabee.

—And then I heard another party start talking again.

"The monsters in the dungeon were pretty lame."

"Even the treasure chests only had torches and used gear."

"We were right to pull back at the twentieth floor. We'd make a fool of ourselves going any deeper."

...That wasn't very promising, was it?

Still feeling worried, we paid for our food and left the café.

Well then, we were off to the eighth floor. *Please let it be a real dungeon...*

When we went down to the eighth floor, things started to feel a lot more dungeon-y.

That said, it wasn't exactly—well, it was *nothing* like a cave with frightening narrow tunnels where monsters might pop out at us at any second.

The ceiling was high and spacious, and various buildings sat here and there. But they were all rusted away, abandoned, and even the signs were leaning and about to fall over.

“I see... This is what happened to the theme park...”

The word *ruin* didn't have to strictly apply to things from over five hundred years ago; if it was a relic of the past, be it three years ago or five hundred, it was a ruin.

So it was fair to call this an underground ruin, too.

“Oh-ho, this is much better than before, isn't it? Perhaps monsters are lurking nearby.”

“All riight! I, Flatorte, am going to get things done here! I'll freeze everything!”

Both Beelzebub and Flatorte were raring to go. It wasn't a bad thing if killing monsters could relieve their daily stress.

And I was getting a little excited, too.

Now this is what it's like to be an adventurer! We're gonna find us some treasure chests!

Our party was probably the strongest of all the groups in this dungeon, so these early floors would be a cinch.

We'd get to floor thirty-four and break the record, and I bet we could do it in no time.

Then a monster finally appeared before me.

And my memorable first encounter was—

An enormous worm.

“Oh, this is a giant worm. It attacks by lashing its body about like a whip. It is one of the most basic monsters that live underground,” Beelzebub politely explained. Exactly what it said on the tin.

I took a step forward. “All right, then! I’m just going to pummel this thing right into the—”

And then, it was at that moment I realized I was missing something.

I didn’t have a sword or a spear. My only choice was to fight with my fists.

I’d fought with physical punches during my battle with Pecora, but I didn’t want to touch a worm with my bare hands.

I have always hated creepy-crawlies. I could touch roly-polies when I was in preschool in my previous life, but once I got to elementary school, that became a thing of the past.

I took a step back.

“What is it you want to do?”

“Beelzebub, I don’t have a sword, so I don’t want to fight it. I’ll pass.”

“Ahhh, you’re the type who hates worms, aren’t you?... As am I.” Beelzebub also recoiled.

Oh right, none of us has any kind of sword anywhere.

“Mistress, I’m not a big fan of these things, either.” Flatorte was retreating, too.

What...? Does no one want to touch this thing? “Oh well. All right, Laika—”

Laika’s face was paler than it had been when we first entered the cold mine shaft.

“Lady Azusa, ghosts and these sort of slimy creatures... are not for me...” Laika hid behind my back.

That’s what she was afraid of?! For a dragon, she sure had a lot of phobias.

“L-look, if you breathe fire on it, it’ll just burst into flames, right? It’s pretty open in here, and I figure maybe using fire is an option...”

“I do not want to stand in front of the worm... And it’s huge... I simply cannot deal with worms like this. I was once chopping some cabbage and found a small green worm inside... My knife had cut it in half...”

Oh, that would traumatize me, too...

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Laika, you’re an embarrassment to the dragon race!” Flatorte taunted from her hiding place behind Beelzebub. Not very convincing.

“I understand, Laika. I’ll try to keep that in mind, so don’t worry. You’re like my little sister, after all.”

“Okay. Thank you, Lady Azusa...”

When the little sister was scared, the big sister had to do something.

“Then how shall we defeat this?” Beelzebub asked.

Yep, that was the question.

“All right, I’ll freeze it with magic. And then—”

“Azusa, there’s a note right there.”



CAUTION!

Frozen monsters will cause blockages in these narrow corridors. Please refrain from excessive use of ice magic. Thank you.

Oh no. What should I do?

The worm was timing its attack.

I wanted it to fear our strength and flee, but it didn't seem intelligent enough for that. Wishful thinking.

"It's all right, Beelzebub. I have a plan."

"And? What might that be?"

"Run." The simplest methods are often the most effective. "We're going to hightail it out of here as fast as we can. We're all powerful enough to easily get away, right?"

"...I see. That's how we'll be doing things."

We spun around on our heels, and—

"Okay, everybody! Run!"

We ran away from the worm.

But this was a dungeon. Another monster was blocking our way—a giant, slimy slug.

“This one is a giant slug. It has poison, so we must be careful. But you have magic that neutralizes poison, don’t you, Azusa?”

It didn’t matter if I did or not. The more pressing issue was that I was *not* touching that thing.

“Raise your hand if you want to touch it with your bare hands!”

No one did, of course. Even the beefiest of guys would be hesitant.

“Okay, *run!*”

Again, we booked it out of there.

As we fled from enemies, we learned of a terrifying problem of this dungeon.

We just kept encountering giant worms and slugs! And these, like, huge nasty bugs scuttling everywhere!

“I mean, it makes sense! It’s dark and underground, so it’s no surprise these things are all we’d find!”

As we dashed at full speed to get away from it all, we found the stairs going down along the way and went to the next floor.

The floors beneath also had the terrible trifecta of worms, slugs, and gross bugs. We ran until we found stairs, which we would then go down, and then repeat ad nauseam.

We were going deeper and deeper into the dungeon at high speed.

“Wait! Stop for a second!” Beelzebub yelled. I wondered what it might be, and then I saw the stand with the stamps.

“I’ve gotten my second stamp. The next one is on the sixteenth floor.”

She sure was fussy about this stuff.

We were on the twelfth floor. *Let's keep going! Let's keep running away!*

We were sticking with the choice to keep running from the monsters, using our strength techniques to advance. Given our speed, escaping from the enemies itself wasn't too draining.

There were other adventuring parties along the way, but we passed right by them and paid them no mind.

"What's up with that party? Did a strong enemy appear around here?"

"Ugh, there really *are* just worms!"

"Another freakin' worm!!!"

The parties cried out as we passed them.

I'm sorry. But the enemies here are all plenty manageable, so please take care of them yourselves.

"Mmm, to think this absurd stratagem would pay off..." Beelzebub had gotten tired of running and was now flying in the air. The worms and slugs weren't very intimidating like that.

The creepy-crawlies stopped coming out in waves—those enemies were probably only on the higher floors.

Laika, Flatorte, and I were following behind Beelzebub.

"Lady Azusa, do you think it's all right to constantly show our backs to our enemies like this?" Laika questioned.

Honestly, we could just freeze them with magic. The problem was that the worms mostly waited for their prey in tight corridors, so freezing them would only block the road. That was inconsiderate in such a narrow dungeon.

I didn't want to fight with worms anyway; I just wanted them out of my face. I wanted to use such a magnificent spell against real monsters that were worth it...

"Do you wanna throw down with gross enemies like that, Laika?"

"...Let us run."

Even the goodest of Goody Two-shoes hated these nasty little monsters.

"See! I bet there'll be real monsters if we keep going down! We'll just take our shortcut until the end!"

"Running this whole time has made it even more fun!" Flatorte was smiling, waving both her arms. A monster would sometimes catch up to her from behind, but she would immediately put distance between them.

"This has become a dungeon marathon. But I guess this is fine."

We ran through the tunnels without stopping even once.

By the time we reached the fourteenth floor, the whole theme park atmosphere was totally gone, but we kept on running.

At the sixteenth floor, we took a quick rest by the stamp table. Beelzebub's stamps were starting to add up.

"The next is on the twentieth floor. I wonder what the luxurious prize could be."

"I wouldn't expect too much. Sheesh... I didn't think we'd still be finding worms and slugs..."

They just kept coming; they were the main monsters we fought.

"Worms and slugs multiply of their own accord. This is their fortress now."

There was a postbox on the stamp rally table that said LET US HEAR YOUR COMMENTS, so I chose to register a complaint: *The monsters we encounter here are too creepy.*

"But I have never heard of a dungeon that houses the same types of monsters throughout. We should see more unique monsters at some point."

“Right? I believe you!”

We headed even farther down, and on the seventeenth floor, we finally saw a monster that wasn’t a worm or a slug!

No, it was an enormous centipede.

The way it zigzagged about was viscerally repulsive.

“Just give me an enemy I can hit with my bare hands! Quit it with the crawly stuff!” I could probably defeat it with a single punch, but I didn’t want to punch it!

“This is a giant centipede.”

“Beelzebub, those names are lazy...”

I was starting to get the feeling that you could make anything into a monster if you added “giant” before the name.

“It seems this dungeon was not blessed with quality monsters... Judging by the number of participants, they probably thought adventurers could afford to just pass them by, but everyone pulled back halfway through...”

Even real adventurers would want to defeat more proper types of monsters.

“Well, I guess that means we’ll just keep on running.” We turned our backs to the centipede and hurried away again.

On the twentieth floor, Beelzebub got another stamp.

“I shall have all the stamps after I get the one on the twenty-seventh floor!”

So the last one was on the twenty-seventh floor. Pretty far down.

“And after we go that deep, we should finally, finally, finally see other monsters besides worms and slugs and centipedes,” she said.

With the need to get away from all the creepy-crawlies as our somewhat unorthodox motivation, we pushed even farther underground.

When we came to the twenty-first floor, there were no more elements of the abandoned theme park. It just looked like the remnants of a mine shaft.

Come out, come out, enemies I can hit! Let me fight with you already!

Let me conquer this dungeon for real!

Let me have my dungeon debut!

—A suit of armor with no one inside appeared before us.

“Yesss! I can hit this one!”

My right arm shot out toward it.

I'm gonna kill it! I'm gonna get its magic stone!

But when it got closer—

Some kind of wriggly, sticky, tentacle-looking thing slithered out from between the gaps in the armor.

“There's something gross living inside!”

“Oh, this is a monster called the armored snail. A cousin of the slug, essentially.”

“Okay, I'm not touching it! And on closer inspection, the armor looks all sticky, too!”

There's some kind of mucus on it! No way am I punching that!

And once again, we ran away.

We quickly found the stairs leading to the next floor and went down.

“There's a *huge* bias in the monsters living in this dungeon, Beelzebub! There's no variety at all!”

“Now that you mention it, it is quite damp in here... Perhaps there's a natural spring

somewhere.”

“I think we picked the wrong dungeon...”

Maybe we should’ve gone to a forest with stronger monsters or something.

We finally came to the twenty-seventh floor, and Beelzebub got her last stamp. “All right, I should be able to exchange this for something.”

Beelzebub was keeping up her motivation in a different way than I was.

On the other hand, there was another adventuring party that had come this far, and they had just about had enough.

The knight who looked like the party leader talked to us.

“Hey, you guys are looking pretty fresh. We’re bushed, so we’re heading back... Not only are the monsters disgusting, they’ve gotten pretty strong...”

Since we’d been avoiding battle this entire time, we hadn’t really experienced that yet.

“We’re all worn out, too,” I said. We were, from running this whole time. That wasn’t a lie.

“I see. There were other young, powerful adventurers besides you—I wonder which of you will set the next record.”

“Really? Huh,” I responded lightly.

“Yeah. They all had, like, wooden sticks they were using to stab everything. They were talking about how they didn’t want to touch any of them.”

“That’s a smart party...”

Maybe we’d need to bring along some sticks when we came down through the dungeon tomorrow.

But our patented “cut-and-run” stratagem had successfully brought us pretty far down, so maybe we should just keep pushing forward.

It was like we were recording a speedrun in a video game.

"Then let us make it our goal to catch up to the party ahead of us, Lady Azusa."

Laika found a different goal to put her energy into, but she was still hanging back behind me. It didn't seem like she wanted to look too much at the monsters here.

I understood why, but a dragon was turning me into her meat shield. What was I to her...?

There had been plenty of information plaques on the earlier floors, but there was almost no information down here. Few had come this far, and the staff at the guild probably hadn't been able to make it all the way down here, either.

And so, on the twenty-ninth floor, we found this sign:

**The underground ruins
begin on the thirtieth floor!
Great job so far!**

Please note the worms will be
stronger from here on out, so be
careful! The worms on the earlier
floors don't even compare!

- The reddish-colored ones are especially aggressive.
- The blue ones are poisonous.
- The longer ones will wrap around you to constrict you.
- A new type of worm was discovered here seven years ago.

"It's only the types of worms that are any different!"

What even is the ecosystem of this dungeon?!

"Azusa, we must accept that this land is what it is. We've come this far, so we may as well go all the way down. To be precise, I do not feel like coming back tomorrow."

"Yeah... We'll aim to complete this today, then."

The stairway down to the thirtieth floor was practically just a pit.

Maybe the pit was originally created by a small collapse that someone just made more accessible.

We went down and saw what looked like more underground ruins—but we could tell they were man-made. The walls were painted.

There were plenty of doors as well, and we opened one to find treasure chests that had already been opened and emptied.

"Now *this* is a dungeon!"

My excitement skyrocketed.

And now, the countdown to breaking the record!

We arrived safely at the thirty-third floor. There was a small sign there that said DEEPEST RECORDED EXPEDITION.

Still avoiding the monsters along the way, we forged ahead to the end.

We would finally be coming to the thirty-fourth floor!

Laika was now carefully mapping out the dungeon to prove that we set a new record.

"At last, we've made it to unexplored territory. I'm starting to get a little nervous, too."

"There must also be good treasure, Mistress!"

This was the most excited Flatorte had been thus far. The time was finally approaching for our reward.

"We've been finding a lot of rooms with doors ever since we came to these strange ruins, so I'm sure there's some unopened treasure chests! Like legendary items or something!"

We were checking the floors much more carefully than we had been before. Plus, Laika was making a map, so we couldn't just run straight through them.

And then we discovered a tiny room that looked like just the kind of place an item would be hiding.

"Oh, I hope it's something I can bring back as a souvenir for Falfa and Shalsha~"

However, the chest in the room had already been opened and cleaned out.

"What does this mean? Isn't this floor supposed to be untouched? Was the sign out-of-date?"

"Perhaps the adventurers who came ahead of us already passed through here. Remember what we heard on the twenty-seventh floor?" Beelzebub pointed out.

Oh, right, the people stabbing the monsters with sticks. "Now that you mention it, we haven't seen that party at all. I wanna get past them, though."

"Well! We haven't fought once, so we are not that tired at all. 'Tis only a matter of time until we find them. We shall rule this dungeon without even having raised our weapons!"

Wait, that last part was a little post hoc; it wasn't like we didn't want to fight. But the worms were still attacking periodically, and that didn't exactly inspire my inner warrior.

We would keep pulling back, although they were rather nimble. They were getting stronger, too.

"Um, was it this way...? If these two connect, then we could give them the slip..."

"Beelzebub, there's a worm chasing us! Pick it up!"

I wanted to freeze it, but since the passageways were narrow, I didn't want to use my ice magic until I absolutely had to.

And there was another one coming at us from the opposite direction.

Oh no—we're trapped!

Another worm was also barreling toward us from behind.

We had our backs to the wall—well, not exactly.

“I have no other choice. I guess I’ll freeze ‘em here...”

There were practically no other adventurers on this floor, and we wouldn’t get in trouble if one corridor ended up blocked, probably...

“Everyone, step back, just in case. I mean, don’t step back too far or the worm will get you, but...”

I began murmuring my incantation. But in the moment before I finished casting the spell—

Something thrust straight into the body of the worm in front of me.

A wooden stick had come from my blind spot. The worm quickly perished and became a magic stone.

Oh, I can touch it once it’s a magic stone. I wonder if there was a stick lying around. Or maybe it turned into a magic stone after I froze it...

Wait, wait. There’s something more important to worry about.

It was definitely the party ahead of us that had wooden sticks.

What kind of people were they? Would they seem like veteran explorers? But did veterans explore with wooden sticks?

A person stepped in from my blind spot.

“Oh? If it isn’t Miss Azusa, and Lady Beelzebub, too.”

Fatla the leviathan.

And if Fatla was here, that meant—

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“Whoa! I didn’t think we’d see you here! What a coincidence!”

Next appeared Vania, Fatla’s little sister.

“Ugh, now this means we’ll be racing for items... What a waste...”

There was even Fighsly, the fighting slime.

After seeing those three, I could guess who would come next.

“You and I are tied by the thread of fate, Elder Sister.”

The demon king, Pecora, appeared.

The party of demons was making their way through the dungeon!

Of course they would set a new record. They’d never lose to a bunch of worms.

Fighsly blanched when she saw us. “Erm, don’t tell me you guys have been killing the worms and slugs with your bare hands...? That’s so gross...”

“That is not a reaction I’d like to hear from a martial artist! You’ve been punching these worms yourself, haven’t you?”

“What? I kill slimy things like these with elegant pole arts!”

You know, when she said that, I expected a graceful fighting stance with her stick, but she just looks like she’s poking at something gross from as great a distance as possible.

“You can’t call that pole arts!”

And so that was how we grouped up with the demon party deep underground.

“By the way, Pecora, why are you here?”

When I thought of Pecora, I thought of evil tricks, and when I thought of evil tricks, I thought of Pecora. I had to ask. I hated the thought of getting wrapped up in more of that.

"Oh, Elder Sister, I doubt you would understand, but I must always remain in the castle, since I am the demon king. I am but a songbird in a gilded cage. Oh, how unfortunate I am..."

"Er, you're outside a whole lot, though... But never mind. Continue."

Behind her, Fatla was looking like, *Your Majesty, where on earth is that coming from?* so I felt justified in my comment.

"I'm finally out and about, only after much insistence. I must keep control and composure, as I am a ruler. And should a demon king lose control, then the humans might be struck with terror."

"Oh right, humans are terrified of the demon king... You were acting like an idol, so I totally forgot."

"But I am a girl of age! I long to go into dungeons and search for treasure like everyone else!"

I wanted to comment, but Pecora looked way too intense.

"I've read so many tales of dungeon exploration, ever since I was a little child. I especially loved *Dungeons and Dwarves*—or *Ds and Ds*, as we call it!"

"O-kay..."

Pecora spoke with a different light in her eyes than usual. Come to think of it, she did strike me as a bookworm. It was probably true that she wasn't as free to walk around outside as she would have liked, so she would have things in her room like books that could keep her entertained.

"Did you know this, Elder Sister? The four hours it takes to read about the characters going through one floor of the dungeon in *Ds and Ds* goes by in a flash!"

"That's massive!"

That was way more time than actually going through a dungeon in real life.

"But you never get bored of the fascinating twists and turns when you read it. The part where the adventuring companions are attacked by a giant caterpillar and die one

after the other is such a masterpiece.”

“Wait, the good guys die...?”

“Yes. The weak adventurers die relatively quickly in *Ds and Ds*. I appreciate the realism. I just end up cheering for the monsters.”

That sounded like a pretty complicated way of enjoying it...

“Long ago, I used to fall asleep fantasizing about relentlessly attacking adventurers in dungeons.” Pecora hugged an imaginary book to her chest.

A dungeon with the demon king waiting inside would be the hardest of hard modes.

“But of course, that dream could never come true, so I’ve simply continued my work as the demon king. I wonder if anyone would take my place?”

“Not allowed,” Fatla calmly replied from behind us. I’d be willing to bet she was the most earnest girl of everyone I knew.

“Then I heard about these Bugabee Underground Ruins, and I decided to say yes! I would participate and complete the dungeon, just like an adventurer.”

“That’s almost exactly the same idea I had...!”

I wanted to do something that adventurers would do. That was one of the dreams of a fantasy world.

“Oh, you, too, Elder Sister? Wow! Sisters really do think alike!”

Pecora took my hand and swung it around. I thought our personalities were rather different, but I was starting to recognize her as my little sister.

“And since it required a group of four to join, we were roped in!”

“We are treating it as a business trip.”

The two leviathan sisters answered.

“I gladly came along, since travel allowance was included. That’s why I’m working hard

on all the qualities of a fighter: heart, technique, physique, and money.”

“Fighsly? I think you added an extra one...”

That being said, I didn’t think having one fighter in the party would balance it out very well. They had two leviathans with them, which made party balance even worse.

Wait, hold on a second...

“How did you guys fill out your entry sheet thing anyway? The one you write your job on.”

Even if they were okay with demons coming along, people would panic if she wrote “demon king” in the occupation column. Actually, they’d probably just think she was making a joke.

“Then I shall present it to you. Our extra copy should be here somewhere...” Fatla dug around for it, then showed us their entry sheet.

Entry Sheet			
	Name	Occupation	Race
1	Pecora	Civil Servant	Demon
2	Fatla	Civil Servant	Demon
3	Vania	Civil Servant	Demon
4	Fighsly	Fighter	Demon

“You’re all civil servants?!”

“Since we sisters are government officials, we are civil servants. And since Her Majesty’s general duties are public service, I came to the conclusion that there would be no problem in calling her a civil servant.”

Well, then. They weren’t lying, after all.

This meant the dungeon was going to be conquered by parties full of civil servants and the unemployed, of all things. Was that okay?

“If I treat it like work, then I can enjoy my time here in the dungeon without care as well! Our party lineup breaks no rules, either, so it’s quite comfortable!”

Pecora was in truly high spirits, and her demon-like tail slowly swayed back and forth with excitement.

“However... If there has been any disappointment so far...” She turned around.

There was a giant worm slowly approaching us, one that was probably very strong.

She poked it with her stick, killing it easily, and it turned into a magic stone.

“This dungeon is too full of slimy things... I would’ve gotten myself a sword if I had known it would be like this...”

“Indeed—we underestimated the necessity of weapons and the like. We failed this time.” Fatla recognized their mistake, her expression unchanging.

I guess that meant they’d run into a basic but major issue in enemies that were just uncomfortable to fight.

“Well, I don’t think it’s a problem. We can stab them with wooden sticks anyway! We can kill any enemies that come up to you if you want~” Vania said with the same eagerness as offering to carry our bags.

“Would you? We’ve been so frazzled running away from worms this entire time.”

Then I noticed a problem.

I came all the way to this dungeon, and now I would end up clearing it without defeating a single enemy... I wouldn't be accomplishing my original goal at all...

I decided that next time, I would check ahead to see if the dungeon was home to cuter monsters.

But if they're cute, they'll be harder to kill, so maybe I'll look for a dungeon with monsters that are as clean as they are mean...

WE CAME BACK OUT FROM THE DUNGEON

We decided to team up with Pecora's party to complete the dungeon.

The paths weren't big enough for all eight of us to walk abreast, so we went in a double-file line. Vania and Flatorte were at the very front, and Pecora and I were behind them.

Pecora and I were holding hands, like little kids crossing the street.

"Perhaps I should take this as a date with you, Elder Sister?"

"Absolutely not. We're pretty deep inside this dungeon, you know. I think any couples coming down here for a date would probably end up singles. They'd die before they got this far."

"But I wonder what these used to be. They've gone completely unchecked, even by the demons."

Pecora placed a finger from her free hand onto her lips. It was a gesture that suited her well.

From behind us, Fatla added, "Yes, there was no documentation on these ruins in the castle archives."

"Then that would make this place the site of some kind of ancient civilization, right? That alone makes it pretty interesting. Amazing—there might be some kind of treasure here!"

Not only was our party large, but it was insanely strong, so our strategy was to find our fun in treasure hunting and things like that.

"It would be nice if it is as you say, Elder Sister, but none of the items we've discovered so far has been a relic or anything like that."

"That's right—you were opening the chests, weren't you?"

“Yes. Most of them contained tea sets and daily necessities and the sort. Nothing cheap, but nothing you wouldn’t see for sale in town somewhere.”

That gave me a bad feeling.

“Don’t tell me they’ve faked strange underground ruins to generate interest in the abandoned countryside... And they’re putting whatever items in them that they feel like...?”

“That is unlikely, Miss Azusa. It would be incredibly difficult to do up the inside of a dungeon this far underground. The worms *have* gotten quite strong, and they would have to hire a lot of trained adventurers to get through it. An event calling on adventurers would only expose the plan, since rumors would spread from the hired adventurers,” Vania said as she walked ahead of us, stabbing another worm.

“Phew, I’m glad. You’re right—I guess normal people would have a tough time getting this far.”

I almost forgot about stuff like that because of how OP I was.

“But I did get the impression from the items in the chests that they were generally things people didn’t need and just left in storage. Like, we found a plate with a weird pattern on it and stuff. I wonder what’s up with all that?” In a carefree manner, Vania picked up the magic stone that appeared. There was no sense of tension at all.

“That part might be a mystery, but we’ll solve it as long as we keep adventuring, right? Solving mysteries is an adventurer’s job, after all.”

I thought that was pretty slick, but no one reacted to it. I was a little sad.

“That was such a cool line, Elder Sister.”

“You said that after such a long pause that now I’m embarrassed! Stop it!”



We went down the stairs and headed down to the next floor. We were now on the thirty-fifth floor underground.

There were drain channels running along either side of the paths on this floor. It was like a subway station.

The dungeon was already damp, but there was now enough water flowing that they needed drains.

On the other hand, the doors on this floor had something written on them:

STORAGE ROOM FOR THINGS SENSITIVE TO MOISTURE

We peeked in and saw framed paintings and other things that would be ruined if they got wet. In a word, it was storage.

“This definitely isn’t from an ancient civilization...”

“Indeed. This is starting to dampen my spirits, too.”

There was nothing there to challenge my understanding of the world. It felt like I was just looking into the basement at a friend’s house.

Then, as we proceeded, something unexpected happened. At the end of the path was a stream of faint light.

“Huh? We’re deep inside a dungeon—what’s happening?”

“Let us go, Mistress!”

“As a representative of Her Majesty’s party, I will go, too!”

Flatorte and Vania ran off. I chased after them, but since I was still holding Pecora’s hand, I couldn’t go very fast.

“It would be an egregious violation of etiquette to let go of your little sister’s hand. You will lose your right to be my elder sister!”

“Yeah, I know...”

Our hands still joined, we went toward the light—

—and out onto the surface.

This spot looked to be at the bottom of a deep ravine, and when I looked up, I saw a faint stream of light coming from way above the cliffs.

Water was dripping from the rocks, and various types of ferns were growing; the spring water must have flowed to the cave. This was the kind of place that would have a lot of negative ions. There were even trickles of water that I would call small waterfalls.

“Ah, I see now. I thought this would happen.” Laika immediately took out a map of the area and nodded.

Our cartographer seemed to understand what was going on, but I didn’t. “Laika, explain.”

“I saw something that said there was a deep ravine a short distance away from Bugabee. A deep ravine means that as long as we proceed through the dungeon, we will encounter the ravine and come back up to the surface.”

“Then this marks the end, I guess.” I gazed at the water trickling down. I was disappointed that there wasn’t a boss or anything, but adventures were adventures. And somehow, I was feeling very nostalgic.

Why is that? I never went to places like this back in Japan.

No. It wasn’t as vague as my memories from my past life. I had been to this place before.

“What’s going on? I’m having a strong case of déjà vu right now.”

“Have you been here before, Lady Azusa?” Laika asked curiously.

“That can’t be. It’s rare that I leave the house in the highlands at all. But still... I remember this view.”

What does this mean? Seriously, why do I feel like this?



Still unsure where this odd, wistful feeling was coming from, I walked even farther in.

“Oh, Lady Azusa, you will get separated from us if you stray too far from everyone!”

“I’m fine—I’m smart enough not to get myself lost. I can’t sit still. I can’t go home until I figure out what’s going on!”

Indeed—I was an adventurer right now. I wouldn’t let this mystery go unsolved.

I will find an answer for this weird feeling!

My steps were unsteady. The rock floor was wet with dripping water, so if I lost concentration for a moment, I’d slip and fall over. But I paid that no mind and kept moving forward.

The dungeon might be over, but the road kept going. I would scour every last inch of the bottom of this ravine.

And then, I finally arrived at my answer.

We came across the spirit of droplets, Yufufu—also known as Momma Yufufu—as she pulled out the vegetables she had cooling in a spring.

“Oh my, why are you here, Azusa?”

And behind her was the house I’d stayed in.

“Yes! I knew I’d seen this before! I was here not too long ago!”

Water was dripping all around. It was the perfect place for a droplet spirit to live.

“Oh, have you come from the dungeon? Don’t take too much from the dungeon now. But I suppose it’s all things I don’t need, so perhaps you’ll have a more practical use for it.”

Wait, that means...

“That whole underground-ruins part is yours, Momma Yufufu...?”

“I’m on the executive committee of the World Spirit Summit, remember? We once held the summit around here. And so I thought it would be best for there to be a place to stay, so I did renovations in the ground to create rooms. I’m using some of them as storage now, though.”

So that’s what those were!

“I’m not sure when it happened, but it eventually ended up connecting with the dungeon somewhere, I suppose~”

“But if you built that whole thing, then there would have been a lot of workers on the construction, right? So why did word never spread?”

“I gained the cooperation of the stone spirits for the construction, so it wasn’t that much trouble.”

So only spirits worked on it.



The mystery was solved. The Bugabee Underground Ruins were just the ruins of some lodgings for spirits.

But from a human's point of view, it was still an outrageous-enough discovery.

After that, I introduced Momma Yufufu to everyone.

"I appreciate you always looking after Azusa for me."

"That's something a real mom would say, too... But... I guess that's fine..."

There were times I felt like she really was my own mother, so I couldn't complain.

"Wow! You even look like my elder sister!"

You're just making that up, Pecora. We're not related by blood at all.

It would be rude to go straight home, so we reminisced about our dungeon crawl as we feasted on deluxe pancakes at Momma Yufufu's house.

"It was a dungeon full of nothing but worms and slugs, wasn't it?"

Despite being the demon of flies, Beelzebub seemed repulsed. Well, it would be unreasonable to tell her to get over it just because she was a fly herself.

"This means they weren't underground ruins in the end. They were ruins, yes, but they weren't that far underground, and I believe that an adventurer will get all the way through sooner or later," Laika said as she spread open the map she'd so diligently made.

By the way, there was also a floor plan of the "underground ruins" in Momma Yufufu's house.

Of course there was, since she designed it.

And so our conquest came to an end with but one unresolved issue.

"Guess that means the little village of Bugabee lost one of its hopes for revival..."

The moment someone made it through the whole dungeon, adventurers would stop coming. They wouldn't get any new treasure, either.

We didn't have to stick our noses into their business, but this was a difficult one. This kind of problem couldn't be solved just by working hard.

If I lacked strength, then I could do strength training or take other personal measures to manage somehow.

But if someone told me to do something about a desolate, abandoned town, there was nothing I *could* do.

It was just part of nature; sometimes things were abandoned and fell to ruin.

"Azusa, the people of the town just have a one-sided misunderstanding, so there's not much for you to worry yourself about. Everyone and everything in this world has their own troubles," Beelzebub told me with an annoyed expression. She wasn't saying this to be cruel; she was trying to console me. She herself had a fussy personality.

"But I really got the feeling that they were trying to get back on their feet with tourism... You know, like how it's really hard to just ignore someone passed out in front of you?"

"I understand, but there is no more reason for people to come to this abandoned mine..."

We were silent for a while.

Oh no. I made the mood worse.

Everyone looked like they were trying to think of something, but the answer wasn't coming so easily.

If anything could've helped, we would've been acting on it already.

"I have an idea!" Fighsly's voice echoed throughout the empty room.

"What is it? It's a bad idea, isn't it?"

"Please have a little more faith in me, Master Beelzebub."

This sure was a difficult teacher-student relationship...

"They should keep doing these underground exploration events over and over. Like annual fighting tournaments—something like that!"

Well then. That wasn't a terrible idea.

People were invited to functions like that in Japan, too.

"Oh, a better idea than I thought."

"Master Beelzebub, you know you didn't have to put it that way, right...?"

These two were somehow on the same page.

"If they offer a great sum of prize money, fighters will come from all over the world. Everyone would prefer money over three square meals a day."

I think that's just you... But I guess adding some extra punch with prize money was the right way to do it.

"I see, I see~ But my thought is that a village of this size economically might only be able to offer a set of locally cultivated vegetables as a prize." Pecora stated her very clear opinion.

"Oh, I wouldn't participate for that prize."

"That one-eighty was too fast, Fighsly!"

"But when you join a tournament, you get punched and kicked and it hurts. I would not be happy if all I got after all that pain were vegetables! Money, money! Give me the goods!"

She has a point...

We weren't coming to any sort of conclusion of what to do about the village of Bugabee.

"Man, if only there were some kind of scenery, like *real* underground ruins. Then everyone would come to sightsee..."

But that was crying for the moon. There was nothing like that here, so the town would just continue to decay.

There were apparently some waterfalls near Bugabee, but they probably weren't a big deal. If they were, then they'd be more well-known.

"Hmm, scenery, you say? Then what about..."

Momma Yufufu seemed to be hinting that she knew something.

"What about what?"

"There are quite a lot of waterfalls around here, including a very nice one. I call it the Great Falls of the Abyss."

There was even a waterfall right next to Momma Yufufu's house. Water must seep out from the ground easily here, thanks to the geography.

I wondered if we could reach a breakthrough with just a nice-looking waterfall...

Wait, I can't make any judgments before we see it. Let's take a look first.

"Momma Yufufu, do you think you could take us to that waterfall?"

"Of course, my darling Azusa. I'll go make some sandwiches, so bring those with you."

Are we seriously going out for a picnic? I thought, but we *were* going to see the waterfall, after all.

As we waited in a different room while she was getting ready, Laika hesitantly came up to me. "I see you met a very maternal person, Lady Azusa..."

"Oh yeah... It was when I was with Falfa and Shalsha, because they're all spirits..."

Laika's expression then softened a little. "I've never seen you rely on someone like that before. I'm relieved to know you have a bit of a childish side, too, Lady Azusa."

"What do you mean by 'relieved'...? And I-I'm not relying on her that much... This is just normal..."

"I believe this might be the first time I've seen you in such a huff, as well." Laika smiled at me even wider. I had no more dignity as her teacher.

We weren't really much of a teacher and apprentice anyway.

The sandwiches were done, so we followed Momma Yufufu to see the waterfall.

We walked straight through areas where the groundwater was dripping between the rocks.

It was quite a distance, considering where we came out from the cave. And the path was awful.

"Even if the waterfall is great, it's way too inconvenient—I don't think this will be good for sightseeing..." Vania said what everyone was probably thinking, but she shouldn't have said it out loud.

"Let's just keep going... It might be something really unusual..."

All the odds were against us, but we had nothing to lose.

By the way, of all the waterfalls I've seen, the worst one was back in Japan. It was only, like, a foot tall. It might've even been a foot and a half, but either way, that was just margin of error.

It was awful, just awful. It looked like a part of the river. I can't believe they got away with calling it a waterfall...

"Judging by the geography, this place does seem likely to have a waterfall nearby. There's even some water dribbling down here. It's not terrible." Fatla slowly observed her surroundings as she walked.

"Oh, this moss is valuable." Vania plucked something off the wall and put it in her bag.

"Are you a moss collector?!"

"Yes. If you examine it closely, moss is rather cute in a calming sort of way."

Takes all types, I suppose. I didn't really get it.

"Look up, Miss Azusa. It's positively magical!"

Fatla's gaze lifted. Water trickled from between the towering cliffs and sent up mist to create a unique sight.

I understood why she called it magical.

"...Yeah, this isn't bad. This could be a tourist attraction."

The only way to see this view was by walking along the depths of the earth itself.

"Miss Azusa, please be sure to watch your step," Fatla cautioned me, immediately before Vania slipped on the wet rock face. I certainly would be more careful...

We walked another ten minutes. Along the way, we passed through a space between two boulders—

"Heh-heh, we're finally here. This is the Great Falls of the Abyss."

Ahead of the rest of us, Momma Yufufu stopped.

There was a stone face in front of us, so my field of view wouldn't open up until I turned right.

Beelzebub and Laika were in front of me, and their jaws dropped in surprise. "This is incredible!"

I hurried forward and rounded the corner.

And there I saw a magnificent vista—there were no other words for it.

Dozens—no, hundreds of tiny waterfalls leaped off both sides of the stone wall like a weeping willow. Each waterfall itself was tiny, but since there were so many of them, it created something I had never seen before.

There was a slight ray of sunshine, and it was incredibly amazing.

"Whoa..." I stood still, awestruck.

When she'd said *waterfall*, I was expecting one whole magnificent one, but this was something else entirely.

It was like countless showers of water were playing in an orchestra. I guess you could call it a "cluster falls."

The whole group of us silently watched the falls.

"Isn't it lovely? This is my absolute favorite view." Momma Yufufu didn't seem boastful at all; she simply smiled. "And yet no one knows about it. I might be the only one with a voice who knows of this place, unfortunately."

"Erm... Why does no one know about something as marvelous as this...?" Laika asked. She had been enraptured watching it, but when Momma Yufufu spoke, it looked like her brain finally started working again.

"It's simple. There were no paths that came all the way down here. It appears it was only recently that this area connected with the part that I made, so not a single adventurer has arrived here yet."

Right—we only first came here by going through the dungeon. And our discovery was this waterfall.

Fighsly was still staring at the cluster falls with clear eyes.

Then she murmured, "People would pay to see this." Her heart was paved with money.

Still, it wasn't a bad idea. Charging people to see it, I mean. This could be a sightseeing destination!

"Momma Yufufu, can I ask you something?" I was rather timid about it, because our request might sully such a special place. "We want to spread word of this waterfall as a sightseeing spot. Is that okay?"

If word got out that the Bugabee Underground Ruins were a passage to a legendary waterfall, then the town could call in visitors.

This waterfall existed only here. Even if there wasn't much else worth seeing, this was the only place to come to see it.

Of course, regular people couldn't get here, but we'd set that aside for now.

"Sure. There's a path to it anyway, and someone will inevitably find their way here even if we leave it alone."

Momma Yufufu gave her permission without a hint of offense on her face.

Maybe spirits were fairly broad-minded—or maybe they just didn't sweat the small stuff.

"Thank you. I think this could save a village."

I held Momma Yufufu tight in an embrace. Well, more like by the time I realized it, I was already hugging her.

She really was like a momma.

I felt my tension melting away against her bosom...

Clinging to the spirit of water droplets left some of me soaking wet... I guess it was like a side effect, and I'd just have to deal with it...



We went back up the caves, freezing all the worms we met along the way (for a change of pace on our way back—no more running), and returned to the guild. It was already dark out.

The staff receptionist was giving sightseeing information to other adventurers again, so we went up to her once she was finished.

"We merged our two parties together and cleared the entirety of the underground ruins."

We spilled our map of the inside of the ruins and the loot we had gathered in the dungeon (all just things Momma Yufufu said she didn't need anymore) onto the desk.

"..... I-I'm sorry? You... cleared it...?"

The receptionist was taken aback for a moment.

Clearing the ruins was basically razing their tourist spot. Of course she wouldn't be happy about it.

"Yes. After setting the new record, we came out to the surface from a relatively high floor."

"O-oh... I suppose you made it to the Bugabee Fissure, then? It's a massive ravine rather well-known among geology enthusiasts."

"I believe so. Since we've cleared the dungeon, are we eligible to receive some sort of grand prize?"

"I completed the stamp rally as well, so I'd like something for that, too." Beside me, Beelzebub produced the page filled with stamps.

She sure likes these little collectibles. I was the kind of person who'd get bored before I could finish.

"Yes, please wait a moment. Oh dear... What should we do about our dungeon project next year...?" She wasn't happy for our victory at all. It was kind of sad.

When she returned, the receptionist was staggering under the weight of our prize—

"These are the Bugabee long carrots and yellow radishes! They're famously sweet, almost like fruit!"

She actually brought back specialty produce!

I think it was a good thing that we were the ones to clear it. An adventurer hoping for rare items or money would cause a riot if they got this...

After she handed us the box filled with carrots and radishes, her excitement instantly dissipated.

"But the underground ruins were much shallower than I expected... Once we learned of the ancient civilization, we were planning on turning ourselves around and being reborn as Bugabee, the village home to the secrets of the cosmos..."

That was less of a plan and more like a dream...

"I'm sorry, but do you think you could call the president of the tourism association?"

The receptionist's expression tensed. "Is it another complaint...?"

"Another"?

"We've had so many complaints. 'It's too dull in there,' 'I came all this way, and it wasn't what I expected,' 'There's too many worms,' 'There's nothing but worms...' At this rate, we won't be having any repeat customers. I don't know what to do..."

Either way, things would have just dwindled and died off...

"It isn't a bad thing, so please don't worry."

When the president of the association came over, I explained the incredible waterfall.

The president seemed to be excited in response to the story at first but only ended up gloomy again.

"I'm very thankful you told us, but... I don't believe it will be a good tourist spot, since only outstanding adventurers like you can reach it..."

"Well, about that—if you dig a tunnel out around floor fifteen, you'll reach the cliffs. And once you reach the cliffs, you can go down by hugging the cliff."

Indeed—the floors of the abandoned mine weren't stacked neatly on top of one another but were offset toward the cliffs, so by the fifteenth floor, it was running very close to the Bugabee Fissure.

And once you reached the cliffs, monsters like the worms and slugs wouldn't appear that often. They still might pop up, but anyone could hire an adventurer to deal with them.

The president was starting to perk up again as I talked.

"I see! We will certainly give it a shot!"

"I'm glad we could be of some help."

“Truly, thank you so much, demons and dragons!”

I was startled when I heard that. I placed my hand on my head, and my horned headband was still there.

Oh yeah, I gave myself horns so they wouldn't know I'm the Witch of the Highlands.

“You helped us a lot, Miss Azuzard the Dragon!”

This disguise sure is effective...



Days later, the town of Bugabee started promoting the waterfall on a wide scale.

They sent visitor information on the waterfall to our house, along with a bunch of special local produce.

On the front, it said in big letters, BUGABEE: NATURE, EXCITEMENT, AND WATERFALLS! *What's so exciting about it?*

Well, they let me get through the first dungeon of my life, so they could have that one. If I could go back, I would've defeated more monsters during our expedition...

But the story on the guide was a little odd:

BUGABEE: NATURE, EXCITEMENT, AND WATERFALLS!

Centuries ago, a group of dragons and demons came to the people of Bugabee and revealed the existence of a **magnificent waterfall underneath the coal mines**. But as time passed, the people forgot where it was. In recent years, we began a **years-long project** to rediscover the waterfall. **And after a full five years since the beginning of the project, the waterfall was found again!**

Everything was exaggerated!

Not just exaggerated—everything besides us telling them the location of the waterfall was an outright lie!

The lie didn't hurt anyone, though, so I thought I'd just let it slide...

WE WENT TO BEELZEBUB'S HOUSE

It was another day, and we had another visit from Beelzebub.

“As always, here’s your present. These are valuable nuts in the demon lands.”

“Yaaay! Thank you, Miss Beelzebub!”

“Many thanks.”

She was currying favor with my daughters again, trying to play her cards right to adopt them and take them home with her.

If she thought my daughters were that cute, then she should just get married and make her own. Well, I’ve been single for three centuries; I have no room to talk. I shouldn’t make comments about other people’s lifestyles, anyway.

“My manor is full of all sorts of delicacies. I am the agricultural minister, after all. I get plenty of free food samples.”

That sure was a perk.

And then I suddenly realized something. “Oh yeah, what *is* your house like, Beelzebub?”

Beelzebub was always popping in to the house in the highlands, but we’d never visited her house once.

“Tis a resplendent abode. I am a high-ranking demon, you know! The outer facade alone is imposing enough to take your breath away!”

Beelzebub was clearly proud of it. Not many people would boast about their own home so candidly.

But she was an important person for the demons, so it wasn’t surprising that she would live in an amazing place. Actually, I’d really hate to see her living in a tiny broom closet.

"Then could we come over sometime for a peek?"

For a second, Beelzebub was nonplussed.

"Oh, Falfa wants to go to Miss Beelzebub's house!"

"Shalsha is very interested, too. I would love to have a look."

The girls were into it. They had a more voracious curiosity than normal children—or maybe it was better to call it enthusiasm for study.

She had been to our house in the highlands a lot, so we had the right to go to hers.

"Of course... But my two leviathan secretaries have been quite busy as of late, so it may take some time to arrange transportation..."

"We can fly ourselves, since we have two dragons here. They move faster than leviathans, at least."

"Blue dragons are super-fast!" Flatorte called from another room. *I'd like to request safety over speed, please.*

"Oh yes... Then tell me your dates, and I can snag good lodgings for you ahead of time..."

"What? Don't you have a magnificent manor? Why not just use some of the extra rooms inside?"

Rosalie could stay somewhere for free because she was a ghost, but paying for everyone else in the family would get rather expensive.

And then there were Beelzebub's attempts to avoid this whole thing.

"Beelzebub, don't tell me your house is way smaller than we think?"

I was getting reminded of that trope in Japanese comedies where a character who looks filthy rich is actually dirt-poor. Even if she didn't live in a broom closet and actually had a little two-bed, one-bath place, she would have a tough time inviting us over after acting so high and mighty.

"Of course not! My manor is enormous! Famous within the neighborhood! There is no

doubt about that! Do you think I would spin lies that could be so easily found out?!"

She started feverishly denying it!

But it was true; if she had a small house, then she wouldn't have been so openly bragging about living in a big one.

"However, if a whole group of you was coming and you needed rooms for everyone, then I would have to attend to those needs. That is why I just thought about arranging outside lodgings for you. Th-that's it..."

"Oh, right, sorry for doubting you..."

She wasn't a university student letting a friend stay the night in her dorm.

But still, I was getting a strong vibe that she didn't want us to come.

"All right! Falfa is going to ready her sleepover bag!"

"I may not be able to sleep if I change my pillow. I require my pillow. And I can't forget a book to read during my free time."

The girls were very excited for this, so we couldn't pull back now.

"Then the whole family will go. Do you mind Nutri-Spirits as your thank-you gift?"

"I do not mind either way. Come empty-handed," Beelzebub responded, clearly anxious.
"I need to start as soon as I get home. I need to start making preparations..."



We asked when Halkara would be off from work at her company, then officially picked our dates.

We made our way there, taking breaks and staying the night at places along the way. The demon lands were still pretty far, even at the speed of a dragon.

Beelzebub could come all the way to the house in the highlands so often because she was using teleportation magic.

I did try to learn it once out of convenience, but not only was it more of a hassle than I thought it would be, the pronunciation contained unique sounds only demons could make, so I just couldn't really pull it off.

Being a high level didn't mean I'd get good at pronunciation, so demon magic was hard for me to use.

Or maybe demons were just tougher and didn't get tired. Or maybe all the demons I knew were just weird.

Along the way, Laika and Flatorte started to race, but I stopped them immediately.

"You need to drive carefully! You have people on your backs! Halkara is crying!"

"I'm losing consciousness... Actually, I think I'd prefer it if I passed out and woke up when we got there..."

We didn't want our ditzy Halkara to fall, worst case, so she was being held in place with a rope tied around dragon-Laika's stomach. That was her literal lifeline.

"Big Sis Halkara is weak when it comes to this stuff."

Rosalie was a ghost, but she was staying right on Laika's back because of inertia, I guess?

When it started to get a little chilly, we spotted the demon lands off in the distance.

"Lady Azusa, where shall I land?" asked dragon-Laika.

"Let's see. Land to the north of Vanzeld Castle. Beelzebub's manor is apparently close to the north side."

Now then, how was Beelzebub living?

We walked down through the demon castle, following the address we'd been given earlier.

I'd gotten used to the sights of a demon city. I was actually visiting the demon castle

town way more than the human realm's castle town. Probably because I had too many demon acquaintances.

Our destination came into view way before we arrived in front of it.

There stood an enormous three-story European-style manor with a large front garden. There was even a high wall and a golden gate around it right in the middle of the road.

"Big Sis, she's a bona fide rich person..." Rosalie, who was born a commoner, stared in awe at the scale of it all.

"Yeah... I almost feel guilty for doubting her for even a second..."

But how were we supposed to get in? The manor itself was set way back. Any children shouting, "Come out and play!" would go unheard by the people inside.

The gates were practically ten feet tall. We could fly over and get in that way, but that would be rude. That's how thieves get in.

—Then we heard a wild *dingalingaling*.

Flatorte was ringing the large bell to the side of the gates.

"Hey! That's too loud; you're disturbing the neighbors!"

"But I think this bell is for people to announce that they have business here."

It did look like an alternative to an intercom. We couldn't announce the purpose of our visit without a doorman.

Flatorte's insight was correct. After a little while, Beelzebub emerged from the manor.

The place looked big enough to house a whole staff of maids and butlers, but maybe it was the rule that the host herself entertain the guests.

She undid the gate lock from the inside. "You made it! My apologies for entertaining you in such a humble abode, but please do come in."

"Come on. I know that's what you're expected to say, but it's too much now... You were just bragging about how splendiferous your house was not too long ago."

We were first led to the dining hall on the first floor. I was already thirsty, so her hospitality was spot-on.

"I have many types of tea, so please drink whichever one you please."

"Oh, thanks," I replied. "When in Rome, I'll do as the Romans do—can I have a spicy tea from the demon lands?"

"The demon nobility sure is prosperous. These sorts of manors are not often found in the human world." Laika gazed around the room, genuinely impressed.

"I have been the minister of agriculture for a long time, you know! 'Tis a given! Heh!"

Beelzebub seemed relieved to be able to show that she was genuinely rich. Any doubts anyone would've had flew out the window once she showed them all this.

Afterward, we rambled on in conversation.

We always saw each other, so it wasn't like we were constantly waiting to catch up, but we still had plenty to talk about.

Beelzebub occasionally went to fetch demon sweets, so I never felt the need to go out of my way to ask for more.

"Try this one. It's rather salty, but it's delicious once you begin chewing."

Beelzebub recommended to me something that looked like a subspecies of pickled plum. I took it, and then I stumbled on a thought.

Beelzebub had been the one retrieving the candy this whole time. I mean, we were the guests here, and we didn't know where she kept it, but it was usually a maid or something who did all that, right?

Meaning she didn't have any maids.

Was she living all alone in such a big house?

Not that there's anything wrong with that; I lived alone for a really long time myself. But it wouldn't be strange to have one or two maids for a house this big. Even a high-ranking demon would have trouble keeping the house running alone. Some people get

mentally fatigued from being around strangers, so maybe she decided to live on her own?

I thought seeing Beelzebub's house had solved the mystery, but now there were even more mysteries.

Anyway, us adults could sit around chatting for ages, but there were children here who weren't satisfied with that.

"Miss Beelzebub, Falfa wants to explore the house!"

"Shalsha agrees. We will stay within a range that won't trouble you."

Indeed—Falfa and Shalsha were excited to be in such a big house. They probably wanted to look at everything and race down the hallways.

"Very well. I shall show you around."

And so we began the obligatory tour from the lady of the house.

"First, this is the kitchen."

Yeah, this kitchen wasn't your average kitchen—it was huge. I almost wanted to cut it out and paste it in my house to use for medicine making. Laika seemed jealous; she loved cooking.

"Next, this is the bathroom."

Ooh, the bath is big enough to fit ten people at the same time.

"And this is the toilet."

Well! That's a real flush toilet that uses water magic.

"And if you look out the window from that hallway, you can see a proper garden."

We wouldn't be able to see the whole thing unless we went outside, but it sure was big. I could even see a pond. It was more of a forest than a garden.

“And that concludes our tour!”

Ohhh, wow, I see, I see— Hey, wait a second.

“Hold on, hold on. Beelzebub?”

“What? I can tell you more about the garden once we reach the hallway.”

“You showed us, like, nothing. This house should have way more rooms, even just on the first floor. And we still have the second and third floors.”

“Urgh... Very well. Then I suppose we’ll go around a little more...”

The next place Beelzebub led us to was—

“This is my room.”

There was a large bed, a dresser, and a vanity in the room. It definitely felt like a private bedroom, but... it was a little *too* cozy for how big the house was.

It sort of felt like these rooms were all there was...

“Hey, do you not usually use any of the other rooms, then, Beelzebub? This feels like a studio apartment for a single woman.”

“I—I am free to live as I please! And I have private spaces I do not wish to show the public...”

—Then, all of a sudden, Falfa darted out of the room.

“Falfa wants to see the second floor, too!” She ran down the hall and headed straight for the stairs!

“As her little sister, I must follow her.”

She didn’t run with as much enthusiasm as Falfa, but Shalsha could keep pace with a jog.

“Hey! The second floor is off-limits!”

Beelzebub tried to stop them, but the mischievous duo wasn't going to listen to her.

They tromped right up the stairs to the second floor as Beelzebub and I chased after them.

But what would await us upstairs?

"Yaaay! Exploring, exploring!"

Falfa was already all the way up, and Shalsha reached the top a moment afterward.

Falfa threw open the door nearest to the landing, and—

She fell to her rear right on the spot.

"Ahhh... ahhh... waaaaah...!"

Shalsha, on the other hand, stood stock-still with tears brimming in her eyes.

"Wh-what is it?! Did you see something you shouldn't have?!" I called.

I doubted it, but it was still the manor of a demon, so I hoped it wasn't anything violent... like a row of skewered humans, or anything else too graphic...

I hurried up to them.

And what I saw was—

A room that was practically abandoned, almost pure white from all the cobwebs and dust.

This wasn't an environment for someone to live in. No, I bet not a single person had even stepped inside for at least fifty years.

"Is this not your manor...? What is happening here...?"

Now that I looked, I could see the floor on the second story was covered in a thick layer of dust. There were clear footprints where the two had gone, as if they'd run down a street with a fresh blanket of snow...

"You saw..." Beelzebub caught up to us with a look of resignation.

"There's a lot I want you to explain. You will tell us, right?"

Beelzebub nodded slightly. "First, I'm telling you the truth when I say this manor is mine."

So she wasn't lying. The problem was the miserable state of the second floor.

"But it is much too big for me to manage, so I live only in a portion of the space on the first floor... I do not go anywhere on the second floor and up!"

The mystery was solved. Now I understood why she made that face when we said we wanted to come over, despite her magnificent manor. There was no place for guests to stay, and she couldn't show people how white these rooms were...

And by the way, even the rooms on the first floor that she hadn't shown us were in the same state. I heard a noise coming from one of them, opened the door, and—

"Ooooh, this dust is too strong... I've had enough already..."

"It's almost time for a break, Vania, so please just power through... This is tough for me, too..."

The leviathan sisters Fatla and Vania wore respiratory masks, fighting desperately against the dusty room!

I peeked into another room to find Fighsly scrubbing away at the walls and floor.

"Compared to the days when I get all worn out from training, I feel like a normie just being out of the rain and wind!"

She sure was working hard. The martial arts were a kind of manual labor, so she wasn't entirely unsuited to the work.

Afterward, after pressing Beelzebub for more details, I learned that this manor hadn't been passed down in her family for generations but instead had been given to her once she reached the position of minister of agriculture.

"You're not from nobility at all."

"No, I just automatically became a noble after I entered society as a government official... My parents are both commoners... It embarrassed me, so I never mentioned it. Apologies..."

"But Beelzebub is your real name, right? You sound plenty strong."

"There are commoners who name their children after saints among humans as well, aren't there?"

Oh, now that she mentioned it, she was right. There were plenty of women in the world named Maria.

Beelzebub was an upstart. She probably had a hard time revealing that to us after spending all this time acting so arrogantly.

And now that she had a manor, she didn't know how to live the high life and apparently chose to do what she could on her own, without hiring a single maid or butler.

I'd wanted to live in a big house when I was a corporate slave back in Japan, but there were limits. Even if I got myself a house too big for my place in life, I wouldn't know how to deal with it.

But as I listened to Beelzebub explain, I started feeling strangely and unpleasantly hot.

When I turned to the source of the heat, I found Laika. "Lady Azusa, don't you think it's a waste to have such a grand house without effectively using all of it?"

Well, it sounds like she's opened her eyes to something...

"Let us clean this manor!"

I knew she'd say something like that! She was such a straightforward girl!

But I felt a little uncomfortable. This wasn't just helping with cleaning for a normal

house. It was a whole manor, and there would be an unimaginable number of rooms. If we simply poked at it here and there, it'd be a mere drop in the bucket...

"Hey, Laika? Why don't we just do what we can with the empty rooms on the first floor...? If we did a thorough cleaning, I could easily see it taking a week..."

Beelzebub wasn't having any problems with her present living space, so that was probably good enough.

"Lady Azusa, I have a secret plan. I can improve the state of this manor in a very short period of time."

Was that possible? Well, Laika sure seemed to think so.

She pointed a finger straight at Flatorte. "I place our dignity as dragons on the line and challenge you to see which of us can clean the fastest!"

I see. She's stirring up Flatorte and turning the cleaning itself into a competition.

But Flatorte was more the sloppy type if anything, and I highly doubted she would agree to join a cleaning race—

"I'll win every competition against you! That is my pride as the great Flatorte!"

She hopped right on board!

For a brief moment, I thought I saw darkness in Laika's smile. I could almost hear what she was thinking: *This girl's an idiot.*

I think she's learned how to manipulate Flatorte. I wanted Laika to stay pure and innocent for as long as possible, but I guess anyone would learn how to make their way in the world after living for such a long time. You could call it a kind of growth. *Please grow even stronger, Laika.*

"Then first, let's set dinnertime as our deadline. The one who cleans the most within that time period wins."

"All right! I've got this! I, Flatorte, will blast all the dust and cobwebs and furniture in this house to smithereens!"

“Wait, please don’t destroy the furniture, okay...? This is Miss Beelzebub’s house, you know...? Please be careful with the furniture...”

Flustered, Laika marked their limits. Flatorte might’ve had the spirit, but with how roughly she tended to handle things, it was possible the manor might be destroyed.

At any rate, Operation Race to Quickly Clean the House was starting to form.

When the leviathan sisters heard that the dragons were doing a cleaning race, they were overjoyed. They probably knew that meant less work for them. In fact, they seemed happier than Beelzebub herself.

“Well, cleaning isn’t a bad thing, so they can clean all they like.”

At its core, it was a good thing to do. There was no reason for me to stop them so long as they didn’t overwork themselves.

“All right, our judge will be—”

I looked upward. Floating there was Rosalie.

“—Rosalie, would you do the honors? I don’t really want to go to the second and third floor...”

“Roger that!”

It was times like these that Rosalie was a big help.

And so, the dragons’ cleaning race began. Laika started her cleaning on the second floor and Flatorte on the third. Everyone else waited in the first-floor dining hall.

“Oh, and to be honest, the garden is overgrown with weeds, or mostly trees and shrubbery, rather. I haven’t tended to it much...”

“This manor is way out of control!”

It was almost useless to her...

Maybe she didn't need a grand mansion if she was going to live on her own...

"But I feel bad leaving all the cleaning to them, so I suppose we could at least help clear up the garden," I offered.

"I am rather knowledgeable when it comes to plants." Halkara pounded her chest, as though telling us we were in good hands. And her chest jiggled. *Show-off!*

"Indeed. I suppose 'twould not be bad for me to get some exercise."

My daughters were fidgeting, apparently excited just to go out into the garden.

It looked like their trauma from seeing the dusty white room was gone now.

"All riiight! Let's begin our project to make this manor nice!"

—And the sun started setting.

"It's too big. Or maybe I should say it's too deep..."

Those of us in the garden cleanup crew stood in frustration at the entrance to the garden.

Everything growing there was some kind of tree with thorns in it, and they were all deeply rooted. Some of them were over thirty feet tall, which made it less like a garden and more like an actual forest.

Not only that, but the trees and grass carpeted every inch of the garden, which made it difficult to find a spot to step into in the first place. You could even call it a forest wall.

"An elf can do nothing here... This is a much different type of forest. Any elf who approaches would only be done in themselves..."

"I've not stepped into this garden once since becoming the minister of agriculture... And I heard it'd been mostly left untouched since before then, so I suppose it's been this way for at least five hundred years..." said Beelzebub, the garden's owner, with an exasperated sigh.

“You can’t call this a garden. It’s just a wildwood...”

It was growing rapidly without any outside influence.

I squeezed between two of the trees and went inside. There was even grass growing in the gap, too.

“It would take weeks just to pull all this grass out...”

Since this was the demon lands, I wouldn’t be surprised if the roots went down for miles.

I grabbed a handful of grass nearby and gave it a good tug just to see. The roots were a normal length but very fat.

“As a witch, I find these very interesting.”

They looked perfect for medicine. I knew the demon lands wouldn’t let me down.

It wouldn’t be an awful idea to come all the way out here every so often to collect ingredients for potion making. *All right, how about this grass?*

“D-don’t pick that!”

I suddenly heard a strange voice, and my hands froze.

“Wait, did you yell something, Halkara...?” I turned to face where everyone else was.

“I’ve just been sitting here exhausted...,” she said.

Then who was that? It almost sounded like it came from the ground...

I looked down, and for some reason, there were traces of a mole crawling just beneath the surface.

“Did I bother a demon beneath the ground...? I don’t really know.”

More importantly, we had to see the results of the dragons' contest.

First, the second floor.

"This is the result of my hard work!"

Two of the rooms on Laika's second floor were spotless, ready for immediate use. It was easy to see her everyday approach in her results.

And then, on the other hand, we had the third floor.

"The great Flatorte clinches an overwhelming victory! Anyone can see the clear difference between the two!"

Yep, the difference sure was clear, all right...

Flatorte had cleaned most of the third floor, but it barely counted. She had swept in a circle in every room, leaving dust in every single corner. I could see white lines along the edges of the hallways, which meant she'd paid attention only to the middle and ignored everything near the walls...

But in terms of surface area, it was true that Flatorte had won by a landslide.

"I'm the judge here, but who am I supposed to announce as the winner in the end...?" Rosalie seemed distressed by the difference in quality.

"Yeah... It's all up to you, Judge..."

The two in question both seemed confident in their own victory.

"There is no doubt that this is my win. Look how clean it is."

"I, Flatorte, have a tripled score in surface area! Even a bribed judge could only say that this is my victory!"

Crap... Maybe we should have set more detailed win conditions...

"Erm, then... the winner is... no one! It's a tie! No one wins!"

Taking advantage of her status as a ghost, Rosalie dashed through the wall and escaped. Just vanishing was a very ghostlike way of handling things.

Afterward, Laika and Flatorte quarreled for a long time, like I thought they would, but Beelzebub's manor ended up just a touch cleaner than it was before. No harm, no foul.

"It really is manageable with a bit of cleaning," Beelzebub commented.

"You make it sound like it's not your problem, but you own this house—you manage it."

"Indeed. I shall tackle the maintenance from now on..."

I didn't know when the manor would take back its brilliance from yesteryear, but we'd come to stay over when it did.

"I shall work to make it clean enough for Falfa and Shalsha to stay over next time!"

"That sure is a wicked way to get motivated!"

My daughters were happy, too:

"Yaaay! A sleepover sounds like fun!"

"Staying overnight somewhere would contribute to my growth as a person."

Beelzebub would go all out for Falfa's and Shalsha's sake, so maybe her house really would come out spotless before long...

WE WENT INTO THE SEA OF TREES IN THE MANOR GARDEN

A month had passed since we last visited the manor.

This time, Beelzebub took the initiative to invite the family to visit.

Since the only one of us who had fixed working hours was Halkara, we adjusted our schedule very quickly.

I felt like Beelzebub would end up pouting if we didn't go, so we paid our well-calculated visit.

“What do you think? Quite different from the last time you were here, no?”

When we arrived, Beelzebub first proudly showed us the hallway on the second floor.

A long red carpet ran the length of the entire corridor. It wasn't white with dust like it had been last time.

“Sure. Compared to the dusty and cobweb-covered state it was in last time, it looks much more like a real manor now.”

“Big Sis, even ghosts like places that are more on the tidy side...” Rosalie mentioned.

“You're right. You wouldn't want to pick a filthy place to live in... It gets hard to breathe with all that dust...”

“Well, I don't breathe, so I don't really know what that might feel like, but I hate spiders, and it's a real pain living with big spiders. There were times I spent entire days jumping in fear...”

She must have been picturing a spider in her head, since she was shivering.

“Ghosts hate spiders, too...”

“I’m viscerally repulsed by the way they move... They look just like servants from hell, don’t they?!”

In Japanese folklore, spiders actually dropped their threads from heaven down to hell to offer people a chance to escape, but I guess this was just a cultural difference. I’d hate to actually see swarms of them crawling around in heaven.

“Spiders, hmm? There are some around here that are as big as my arm span,” Beelzebub said.

“That’s too big!”

Any bugs would be terrifying at that size, not just spiders!

“It’s all right. They pose no danger to us. They are kind creatures that eat the harmful ones for us.”

“Still, they can’t be *that* big! That’s basically just a monster at that point!”

I couldn’t live here in the demon lands... If I ran across one of those things, it’d stay burned in my memory for a century and a half...

“Giant spiders... I can’t handle that... Just thinking about it... I can see a light at the end of a long tunnel...”

Rosalie, her face pale, slipped through the walls of the building and went outside. There wouldn’t be any spiders in the sky.

“Hmm, she’s more of a coward than I thought.”

“Sure, but I’m wondering why you’re so calm, Beelzebub.”

Maybe this was a cultural difference, too. Apparently, there are people out there who can smash cockroaches with their bare hands. Maybe this was the same.

“The manor is clean now, so Falfa and Shalsha may be adopted into my household at any time, no problem.” Beelzebub was grinning. Why was she grinning?

"Say it as much as you like, but I'm not giving them up for adoption. It is my responsibility to raise them, so you don't need to worry about them."

Falfa, by the way, was running around the manor, now that there was more space for her to do things. Beelzebub was probably happy because Falfa was.

"Wooow, it's so biiig! We can run around forever!"

She ran around and around and around, quietly and by herself. She sure was full of energy.

On the other hand, Shalsha was lying sprawled out on the floor, rolling herself down the hall.

"Shalsha, what are you doing...?"

"I'm testing to see how far I can go before I get dizzy. Hands-on practice is just as important as study at a desk."

This was not good etiquette, but okay, just this once.

Shalsha was still rolling down the hall. She was going faster than I thought she could.

"Aww, that looks like fun~! Falfa wants to do that, too!"

Falfa rolled after her in hot pursuit. It was naughty of them to do that, but it was hard not to smile seeing it. At least for Beelzebub and me.

"Mm, that is how children should be."

"Yeah~ I want them to grow up good and healthy."

The area surrounding the house in the highlands was perfect for running around, but running around inside must be a different sort of fun.

"It wouldn't be so bad to bring them over to play every once in a while."

"You said it! I heard you say it with my own ears! I shall send you my holiday schedule, so do bring them along when I have off!"

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t expect them all the time.”

I wasn’t planning on offering them up for adoption, but this could be like an auntie’s house, where Beelzebub could fuss over them. It wasn’t a terrible place.

And they both might get bored of staying in the house in the highlands all the time. It was perfect for a slow, leisurely life, but that also meant there was not a lot of stimulation. The demon lands would have plenty of that, at least.

But the children got bored quicker than I thought they would. Once they reached the far end of the corridor, they both slowly plodded back to us.

“I’m done with the hallway.”

“I think I’ve had my fill.”

Oh, they looked unimpressed already...

Beelzebub was shocked, probably because she spent such a long time cleaning the house for them...

“I wanna explore the garden next!”

“The garden in this manor is vast, like the sea. I do wish to take a stroll in it.”

I see, so that’s where their interest lies.

“Beelzebub, did you manage to clean up the garden, too?”

But Beelzebub looked at her feet and shook her head.

“I did not get around to that...”



All of us from the highlands house family went to the garden, though it was less of a garden and more of a sea of trees.

“The trees here have spread their roots far... It will not be easy for even a demon gardener to handle, apparently... It will take an immense amount of time to sort out...”

“Yeah, it’s not like it’s all packed into one tiny area. I understand.”

But my daughters were instead looking on with sparkling eyes.

“We can play explorer!”

“It will be worth going in.”

With that, they plunged straight into the forest.

“Hey! Don’t go too far in!”

They weren’t listening to me.

“*Sigh...* Well, they might get bored soon and come back, though.”

But Beelzebub’s expression was clouded. “This is not good... They will not be able to return if they go too far in...”

“Wait, wait, wait... You have to be exaggerating, right?”

“Among the plants might be some that would attack animals.”

I was reminded once again that we were in the demon lands. She meant that the trees and grass might try to hurt the two!

“This is very bad!”

My family immediately started insisting we go save the girls.

“Lady Azusa! We must hurry into the garden immediately!”

“Madam Teacher, they’re not safe! I will offer my help!”

I appreciated Laika’s and Halkara’s thoughts. But—

“Halkara, you don’t have to come. I can see you ending up injured in there... I can see that very easily.”

"Whaaat?! That wouldn't happen, Madam Teacher! I am an elf! I definitely would never get lost in a forest!"

That "definitely" wasn't very convincing...

"Then let's assume you don't end up getting lost."

"Please don't 'assume'; you know what they say about assumptions..."

I'm sorry, but I've seen you cause trouble so many times... Please let me protect you.

"Fine. Let's pretend you don't get lost."

"I'm not a child to play pretend with... But all right... Continue with what you were going to say..."

"You know there's still a risk that the plants growing in there might attack you, right? Like a plant that spits acid that only dissolves your clothes or something?"

"Those risqué situations don't happen all that often~"

"Well, something on that level might be more of a joke, but your ability as a fighter does make me nervous, so I don't think you should go in."

Beelzebub, owner of the manor, crossed her arms and nodded.

"Those who can fly are the only ones who should go into the forest in the first place. Even if one gets lost, they may be able to fly and escape that way."

"Oh, okay then! So everyone besides Halkara can help me find the girls, right?"

Flatorte, Laika, and Rosalie all said "Yes!" in turn.

"Waaaah! It feels like I'm being left out!"

I knew how she felt, but if Halkara ended up getting hurt because of this, then I wouldn't know what to do.

"Sorry, but you'll have to stay back. If there are any good plants for medicines, I'll bring them back."

“Okay... Do be careful.”

And so we stepped into the sea of trees in order to find the girls.

But it was still a garden at the end of the day, so if all of us did our part searching, we'd find them right away.

—So I once believed.

Ten minutes later, I was walking all alone in a dim wood.

The other members of the search party were nowhere near me.

I hadn't been separated from them; we'd fanned out to extend the breadth of our search, but I couldn't even hear the others anymore...

“The demons just love to blow everything out of proportion... What kind of garden is this...?” I muttered to myself as I passed under something that looked like a giant gate made of roots.

They say jungles felt like this.

There wasn't any kind of road, so I just weaved my way forward through the trees, but I lost my sense of direction right away. It was especially worrying when so many of the trees had thorns.

The teeniest bit of silver lining was that as of now, I hadn't found any hostile plants yet.

If they were just lost, then we'd eventually recover them without incident.

“Faaalfaaa! Shaaalshaaa! If you're there, say somethiiing!”

No response.

And the sun was even quickly vanishing behind clouds. The daylight hours were short in the demon lands.

“Ooh... I'm starting to lose hope, too...”

—And then, something appeared from the thicket!

It was like a cousin to a boar. It was probably native to the demon lands.

“Oink, oink!”

I braced myself for an attack, but instead it just looked surprised to see me and dashed off into the wood. I could hear its hooves galloping away.

“There are even animals living in here. It’s its own ecosystem. Man, that really scared me...”

—But then, something just underneath the surface of the earth sped right toward me!

“What?! What is this?!”

I braced myself again. There were too many mysteries in here; I couldn’t catch my breath.

Some grass was moving.

Was it moving because of the roots underground? The earth was upturned. Had I finally come across a plant that attacked people?

And then, the grass popped out from the ground right before me.

What, do the roots have a mouth for prey, now?

To get to the point, they did.

No matter how I squinted at it, the roots of the grass looked like a small human girl.

She was probably five or six years old. Smaller than Falfa and Shalsha. She even wore clothes, although they were dirty from her time underground.

“Phew, I sure was scared when that balloon boar suddenly ran at me! I hate it when he steps on me.”

I thought it was grass, but that was apparently her hair. Well, maybe that wasn’t quite the right way to put it. Maybe it was better to say that the grass on her head looked like hair.

"Hey, uh, who are you?" I started with a simple question.

She looked at me.

Then she blinked.

Time stood still for a moment.

"...Ahhhhh! It's a human, a human!"

"Why are you so surprised?!"

I'm *the one who should be shocked here!*

"A-and... you look like you're a witch. Oh no... What should I do? She's gonna kill me!"

"Rude! I'm not an assassin or anything like that!" My level was unnaturally high, but I had a kind, peace-loving heart.

"She's gonna smash me to pieces! Oh nooo!"

"Do you think witches are barbarians?!"

Now she's just being cruel! She's treating me like a monster!

"I have to get outta here... I didn't even think demons would ever come here, never mind *humans*!"

The strange... *girl* dove back underground and started slithering away.

I thought about chasing after her, but she whizzed right by all the spots where roots got in my way, so I quickly lost sight of her.

"Who was she...? Whatever, I need to concentrate on finding Falfa and Shalsha first. Let's just forget about that thing for now..."

I went right back to searching for the girls.

And then, another ten minutes passed.

“Everyone, I found them!”

Dragon-form Laika loudly flapped up into the sky and yelled. It was easy to see a large dragon, no matter how deep in the forest anyone might be.

We found my daughters safely under her.

I bounced up the trunk of a tree (yes, like an action game—my stats allowed me to do that) and then hopped onto Laika’s back from the top of the tree.



Falfa and Shalsha clung to me like little koalas with tears in their eyes.

"We went just a little ways in and then couldn't tell which way we came from... We wanted to go back, but we couldn't..."

"It felt like we were lost for hours... It was a terrifying, indescribable experience..."

I smiled wryly. They'd lived for years, and yet they were still children.

"See, you can't go off on your own like that. In the demon lands especially—you don't know what's out there."

"I'm sorry, Mommy..."

"Sorry, Mom..."

"It's all right. As long as you understand. It's all right."

And that closed the book on that.

Even in Japan, there were people in the countryside who said things like, *I own half of this mountain in front of you. But I rarely ever take a good look around it.* I guess this was the same concept.

Simply owning land and having a good grasp of what was on the land were two different things. The girls had thought of the garden as Beelzebub's, which meant they weren't ready for it.

That day, we stayed the night at Beelzebub's manor and had a relaxing time.

Shalsha claimed she wouldn't be able to sleep with a different pillow, but she was out like a light.

A SEARCH FOR THE MANDRAGORA BEGAN

A few days later, Halkara and I went to the shop of the Witch of the Grotto, Eno. We had just run out of Mandragora pills, so we went to buy a new bottle.

She wasn't in a grotto, by the way. Eno had a shop in town now.

We flew in on Flatorte, but she wasn't all that interested in medicine, so she waited outside.

I came with the intention of gossiping with a fellow industry professional, but Halkara was acting like she was here to spy on the enemy. She was examining the products very seriously.

"Oh, this bottle looks handy. Something this small might be nice for single households..."

"Hey, you! You better not plagiarize me! I will file a cease and desist with the kingdom if you act with intent to harm!"

While there was no concept of copyright in this world and the existence of licensing was dubious at best, merchants could go to the courts and claim that other merchants' products were breaking the rules.

"I am not plagiarizing you. I am simply consulting. Sometimes I get inspired by looking at the products of other companies."

"You do have ill will! Depending on what you do, I might file a lawsuit to prevent Halkara Pharmaceuticals from doing any work at all!"

Halkara and Eno were competitors, so they were rather sharp with each other.

The closer people were in the industry they worked in, the worse their relationship became. I had no business sense at all, so I was neutral.

"Miss Azusa, please make sure that apprentice of yours doesn't do anything sneaky, okay?" Eno warned me.

“Sure. Even if you didn’t worry, Halkara would never do anything so ruthless—”

“If I could just learn the components of this medicine, perhaps we could mass-produce something similar for a cheaper price at the factory? That sure would deal her a blow.”

Oh, but maybe she could get brutal when it came to competition...

“Halkara, don’t go too far, okay...? I don’t want either of you going bankrupt, okay...?”

“It’s all right. Even if we bankrupt them, I would then hire them at Halkara Pharmaceuticals!”

“I’m telling you: Don’t bankrupt them.”

I was uncomfortable being a neutral party in the middle of such a savage and heartless war.

“Indeed—once you comprehend that they cannot be done cheaply and mass-produced, then I shall take you under my wing as an apprentice at any time. Even with more people employed, I will never forget the spirit of creating each individual pill by hand with love. The Witch of the Grotto’s medicine is made of ninety percent kindness!”

“So only ten percent actual medicine?”

It would be too much trouble if I got too deeply involved, so I would just interpret this in a positive way—these two from the same industry were just pushing each other to even higher heights.

“Okay, then, Eno, I’d like to purchase a bottle of Mandragora pills.”

“Oh, Miss Azusa, you can take them for free. You are my benefactor, after all!” Eno had more recently started treating me as her senior and mentor. She wasn’t wrong, though. “Please wait a moment. I have one just for you.”

Eno produced some Mandragora pills in a bottle that looked to be of much higher quality than the regular ones.

“Regular Mandragora pills use mandragoras that have been aged three years, but the ones in these have been aged for ten years. This is an incredibly valuable product, and I can make only a limited number per year.” Eno began her explanation with a confident

look.

"I feel bad taking something so valuable... All of us at home are generally pretty tough..."

"Oh, please take it! This is my expression of gratitude! Please! Lead an even healthier life!"

I had no choice but to take it after hearing that. "Thanks, Eno."

"Oh, it's nothing at all. I only wish to be as wonderful as you, Miss. One day, I'll find a top-quality three-hundred-year-old mandragora and make the greatest medicine ever created!"

"Three hundred years old... So they can live that long..."

There was nuance to mandragoras, too. I really wasn't all that interested in them, for a witch. They didn't grow in the highlands, though.

"Is this three-hundred-year-old mandragora really so impressive?"

"Yes, of course it is. You know the myth, right? When you pull out a mandragora from the ground, it lets out a scream that kills anyone who hears it."

"Oh yeah, I know that."

The same story existed on the Earth I lived on in my past life. They said that bit of folklore came from the humanlike shape of mandragora roots.

"Don't tell me they really do scream when they're three hundred years old?"

Something like that was entirely possible in this fantasy world.

"No, it's way more than a scream. It's said they can fluently speak in the language of people, and they can even move around."

From how Eno was acting, this was a big deal.

"And making medicine out of a talking mandragora— Oh! That is the dream of any witch! I'd love to get my hands on it one day!"

She clenched her hand into a tight fist.

"Ohhh, I get it now."

"But you're a witch, Miss, yet you don't show any interest in mandragoras at all." Eno looked at me inquisitively.

"My goal is to live an easy life, you see. I don't have a goal of being the best witch ever."

If I'd wanted to mature as a witch, my three hundred years of leisurely killing slimes wouldn't have happened.

"But where would a talking mandragora be? Trees over three hundred years old probably exist, so I wouldn't doubt the existence of a three-hundred-year-old mandragora."

"It would be no problem at all if I knew where they were. As you know, the mandragora's ability to move around means it will run away. It should usually be underground, and it is incredibly difficult to pinpoint its habitat."

That was a good point. It was like a ninja constantly using earth ninjutsu. It'd be a miracle if anyone found it, especially in a world without security cameras.

"The tracks it leaves as it moves are distinctive, like raised ridges in a field, I've heard."

"Huh. I'm surprised there are plants out there like tha— Ah?"

My gaze suddenly darted to the ceiling. There wasn't anything that caught my attention up there, but it was a habit I had when recalling things.

"I feel like I've seen something like that recently..."

"What did you say?!" Eno immediately squeezed my hand and shook it around. "Where?! Where did you see it?! Please tell me!"

"Wait, wait! I could be wrong, so don't get your hopes up!" I'd hate to disappoint her, so I gave a disclaimer first. "Well... I thought I saw grass moving around on the ground, and then something that looked like a human popped out... And then... it spoke."

"That has to be it! That's a mandragora that's lived for three hundred years and gained

human intelligence!"

"When it saw me, it said meeting a witch was the worst thing, or something like that, then ran away..."

"That is it, one hundred and twenty percent! Any creature that grows in the ground like that and gets scared when it sees a witch has to be mandragora-related!"

That was awfully specific; I would sure hate for there to be more than one.

"And where was this? Its location is vital!"

The look in Eno's eyes was terrifying. The red flame of passion was burning within them.

Well, less passion and more pressure on me, specifically...

"You are hounding Madam Teacher too much! You must remember your manners, even if you are good friends!"

Halkara took it as danger to my person and cut in, but—

"Some things are more important than manners!!!!"

"Oh, um... okay..."

Halkara succumbed to Eno's drive and stepped down. *Wait, that's not why you should be backing down!*

"Hmm, where was it...? Oh yeah."

"Where was it?! Where?!?!"

I succumbed, too.

"In the garden of Beelzebub the demon... I say 'garden,' but it's practically a forest. Actually, it's been left untouched for centuries, so it's just a natural wood at this point..."

"Oh-ho! I see, then! Very well! Thank you for providing this information!"

She finally let me go. I was free...

I doubted this was something to get all worked up over, but Eno immediately started briskly packing a cloth bag.

“What are you doing...?”

“I will depart today! I will leave this store in the hands of another supervisor for the time being!”

“Um, you know how far away the demon lands are, right?”



"I have a contract with a transport wyvern, so I will use that. I must go as quickly as possible. I'll be fine!"

She was rushing around in a hurry, so Halkara and I left the shop. We woke Flatorte, who was taking a nap in a café—probably because we took too long—and went home.

"Is a living mandragora really that exciting?" I asked Halkara as we rode on Flatorte.

"I am an elf, so this is something I shy away from, but I believe there are quite a number of witches who want it."

"Why would being an elf make you shy away?"

"It is taboo for an elf to take the life of any intelligent being living in the forest. Even if it might be a plant, I cannot turn a speaking mandragora into ingredients for medicine~"

"Oh..."

Eno had strong-armed me into spilling the beans, but maybe that was a bad thing...

Now I started to recognize the gravity of the situation.

"Wait, when you say turning mandragora into ingredients, you don't mean like borrowing a bit of its leaves or something like that...?"

"It depends on the witch, but I believe there are people who grind down the entire thing."

That was bad.

From the way Eno was acting, she was probably going to use the whole thing...

At the worst, I'd be an accomplice to a murder...

And Eno would be breaking and entering into Beelzebub's house, so I didn't know if she would get out of this unscathed herself. Someone with common sense would have known it was impossible and given up when they heard it was in the garden at Beelzebub's house, or at least gained permission to investigate the garden before acting.

But when I thought about Eno's behavior, it was entirely possible that she would explore the garden without Beelzebub's consent.

The mandragora was in danger.

Eno, who was acting with no regard for herself, was also in danger.

I had to stop her!

"Flatorte, we're changing direction... Fly to the demon lands... to Beelzebub's house..."

"Yes, Mistress, understood!"

We rushed straight toward Beelzebub. But our speed dropped slightly.

"Mistress, Halkara might fall if I go faster, so I want you to secure her with rope."

"You're right... We should take care of that just in case..."

Always drive carefully, even if you're in a hurry.



We sped straight to Beelzebub's manor.

We arrived later into the night, so she was home from work.

"Another sudden visit. I'd at least want you to bring along Falfa and Shalsha if you do this."

"Your garden might be in trouble!"

"Hmm...? I don't understand..."

I explained the situation as simply as I could.

And then, she looked annoyed with me.

"Had you not told her about the mandragora in my garden, then this would not have happened..."

"Y-you may be right, but... She just kept pressing and pressing me for answers... She was too much for me..."

It ended up sounding like an excuse, but anyone would have caved under that interrogation.

"Well, we mustn't cry over spilled milk. For the time being, I will ensure that the strange witch will not be torn to shreds should she be discovered within my property."

"I appreciate it."

Now Eno wouldn't be killed. That didn't mean the forest still didn't pose any danger, though.

"If possible, I'd like to put the mandragora in our care before she finds it. That would be the safest thing to do."

Halkara the elf was taking part in our strategy this time, too. Flatorte was sitting and staring out into space.

"However... This is the first time I'm hearing about such a thing living in my garden as well. I only know so much about my own garden..."

Beelzebub looked out the window toward the forest. It was dark, so there wasn't much to see.

"That's true... It's not like we know where the mandragora is, so even if we want to take care of it, just finding it would be difficult..."

It might be a garden, but it was huge. It would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack. But actually, we were searching for a single mandragora from a huge forest, so maybe it was even harder than that.

"You say a lone witch named Eno is coming to search for it? Then perhaps it would be faster if I find this Eno person and tell her to not enter my property. If I do, then she may obey me out of fright. It would be coming from the demon minister of agriculture, after all."

Beelzebub looked confident, but Eno was on a rampage. Would she listen? I got the impression she would go on with her work in secret...

“By the way, is there a barrier or something around the manor?”

“There is one around the manor itself, but the garden is large, so I’ve left it alone.”

I could use barrier magic as well, but not something this large. There were designated entrances in towns and villages, so I could selectively reinforce those areas, but anyone could enter from anywhere in a forest.

“I understand the situation for now. It’s just a little witch girl, no? I can manage her one way or another.”

Despite how worried I was, Beelzebub seemed undaunted. To her, a human witch probably wasn’t the least bit scary. I was probably an extremely rare exception.

“This Eno will come on a wyvern, yes? Then there is still time yet before she arrives.”

“Would you mind if we kept watch here for a few days?”

“Sure. Use any room you like.”

After that, nothing happened for four days.

Apparently, Eno hadn’t come to Beelzebub’s garden at all.

“Tis quite peaceful, no? Our fears were groundless. What a relief.”

Beelzebub went off to work as she always did. We kept watch in the meanwhile, but nothing too out of the ordinary happened. We were just lazing around a noble’s house.

Eno had seemed enthusiastic about this, but maybe her fervor had cooled somewhere along the way. Maybe she got scared of the thought of going into the garden of the demon minister of agriculture.

“We call this crossing our bridges before we get to them. You may return home once you understand that we’ll be all right. I have off tomorrow—shall we go sightseeing or something together?”

“Well, if it turns out our crisis management efforts were for nothing, then that would

be ideal."

—But then, the next morning, something unbelievable happened.

A whole congregation of dozens of witches had gathered outside of Beelzebub's garden!

Some were wearing black hats like me; some had brooms—there were all sorts. But I could generally tell they were all of the same trade.

"Wh-what is the meaning of this?!?!" Beelzebub cried, unsurprisingly. This was her property, after all... Not a public park...

And then Eno emerged from among the witches.

"Are you Miss Beelzebub? My apologies for showing up uninvited today. I heard tell that the greatest quality of mandragora lives in this garden, so I rushed here to obtain it. Illegally, if I must!"

She was very polite about telling us she was going to commit a crime!

"No—go home, go home! Why do you have a whole entourage anyway?"

"I contacted and gathered all the witches from across the land so that we may find the mandragora with certainty! We have agreed to take equal shares once we find it!"

The other witches nodded. Everyone else looked just as enthusiastic as Eno.

"This is the dream of any witch!"

"I promise I will compensate you afterward!"

"I will take on this challenge, even if it means my life!"

"I never thought a moving mandragora was real! I've been searching for a hundred years; this is the greatest news!"

This was too much!

Oh no. Mandragoras really are incredible things to witches.

"The witches' union will now catch ourselves a mandragora! Commence the operation!"

The witches, including Eno, all marched into the forest one after the other.

"Eno! Stop! I command you as your senior!"

When I called out to her, Eno stopped and turned around. Would she listen to me?

"Miss... I'm sorry! This is for the sake of creating the world's greatest medicine!"

Nope!

Then she pressed into the forest, too.

"Hey! This is not funny, you scoundrels! I'll burn this garden to the ground!"

"Stop! Don't do that! You'll just kill the mandragora!"

I ended up having to hold Beelzebub back.

"Now that it's come to this, we have two options. We could find all the witches, beat them to a pulp, and arrest them, or we could find the mandragora ourselves first," Beelzebub said.

We might end up with corpses on our hands if we went with the former, so...

"Let's go with the latter."

The rest of us reluctantly went into the garden.

Furthermore, Halkara and I were working together. She was with me because some of the plants growing in there were hazardous enough to put her in danger.

The other two, Beelzebub and Flatorte, were searching on their own.

Since I had Halkara with me this time, I could use that elf knowledge of hers. "Halkara,

do mandragoras have any special characteristics? Like the places they grow and stuff?"

"They do have some, but this mandragora can clearly move freely. So I'm not sure where we might find it."

She was right. It was intelligent, after all... *I guess it wouldn't stick to only damp spots or something like that.*

"By the way, Madam Teacher."

"What is it, Halkara?"

"There's something like a vine tying me down. Am I being attacked?"

"It sure didn't take long for weird plants to start assaulting you!"

A plant with tentacle-like vines was reaching out for her. I could easily tear them off, but you couldn't let your guard down for a moment...

"Wow, the plants in the demon lands sure are scary~ Oh, that mushroom over there is giving off deadly poison spores~ Perhaps we should make a detour~"

"Halkara, I think the whole forest itself is after you...!"

This was so strange. When I'd come into the garden, it was much calmer than this. Halkara was a magnet for these things. It wasn't like she herself was careless—the danger just came to her.

I don't know how the planets were aligned when she was born, but I was starting to think that was why this always happened. I would be powerless to stop it.

"I'm sorry; it seems plants like me because I'm an elf. Oh, that one there preys on small animals and melts them into a soup. If you reach out like this—"



“No need to test it! There’s no need!”

“Ahhh, no! My clothes were just about to melt!”

“Why do things always trend towards the erotic?!”

At this rate, I’d have my hands full just trying to keep Halkara safe... Maybe it was a mistake bringing her along?

But Halkara’s gaze was trained carefully on the ground.

“At the very least, it doesn’t seem like there are any signs that the mandragora came this way. The way the moss is growing suggests that nothing has stepped on it.”

“Thank you! That’s the kind of information I’m after!”

“And this big tree has very thick roots. It would be difficult to move underground by a tree like this. The roots would be in the way.”

Oh, that made sense. I guess it would be hard for the mandragora to go through spots where roots from other plants formed a wall.

“This kind of tree is everywhere, so if we disregard all the places where they grow, we might be able to narrow down the location. It could use its roots to walk on the surface, but it would be very easy to spot, so it’s likely staying put.”

“You are so clearheaded today! You’re so smart!”

“This is my profession, after all. If I could not play an active part here, where could I— Oh, another vine’s wrapping around me again.”

Marveling at how long Halkara had managed to stay alive, I pulled the vine apart.

And so Halkara and I narrowed down our search.

But our opponents were using human-wave tactics to beat us with numbers. Each witch had her own designated area to search within. We came across enemy witches several times along the way.

“Hmph... So you are the Witch of the Highlands... Greetings. I am the Witch of the

Treetop."

"Oh, hello... I'm the Witch of the Highlands."

"So you're the Witch of the Highlands, eh?! Nice to meetcha. I'm the Witch of the Mistletoe."

"Oh, uh, hi, I'm the Witch of the Highlands..."

We met them, but it never broke out into battle.

Witches were either a kind of intellectual or they just dealt with others softly. Either way, the majority of them were very polite.

Some of the witches we met here and there had been tied down by the vines like Halkara was; we promised them that they would be safe, but then we just left them. *Sorry, but I want to keep down the number of enemies.*

The area of our search within the spacious garden was gradually shrinking.

—And soon enough, Eno and I came face-to-face.

"I see you think this spot is the one, too, Miss." Eno had her eyes trained intently on her feet.

"Eno, this mandragora is almost exactly like a human. That's why I need you to stop trying to put it in danger."

"A three-hundred-year-old mandragora is purely botanical, Miss. And at the top of every witch's wish list!"

Rrrgh... We just see it different ways.

Sure—it was still a plant. But this couldn't be settled because of our cultural differences. For me, the girl I'd met once already was a human.

"A three-hundred-year-old mandragora has leaves that glow with life, and they say that you can tell what a noble plant it is from a single glance. I am a witch! I swear I

will find it!"

"Sorry, but I'm not going to let you!"

Both of us looked down and stared hard at our feet.

I would find the mandragora before Eno could. Once I did, I could insist on finders keepers!

It looked like some of the witches had also determined that this area might be it, so the number of people around gradually grew.

Flatorte even came by.

"There are a lot of people here, so I figured there must be something here, too."

That just makes you a rubbernecker...

But since we were now up against a whole crowd, we were at more of a disadvantage...

"Crap... At this rate..."

"Oh, Madam Teacher, that mandragora is perfectly human, isn't it? It can speak our language, and it even ran away when it saw you and realized you were a witch, right?" Halkara asked, still searching with me.

"Yeah, that's right. Really, you should say she's unequivocally human."

"Then let's work backward from that."

It seemed Halkara had some kind of idea.

In the next moment, she took a deep breath—

"Oh, mandragoooraaaaaa! You're in dangerrr! Life-threatening dangerrrrrr!"

—and yelled at the top of her lungs!

“Your only hope is to come under the protection of the great Witch of the Highlands here! Please leap into the great Azusa’s bosom for solace!”

Halkara’s voice echoed throughout the forest.

In the next moment, I saw the ground swelling up!

A leaf poked out from the ground, just like the one I’d seen before.

“There it is!”

“Catch it!”

“It’s so fast!”

“Hey! Stop running into me!”

The witches were trying to get a hold of it, but it was a lot faster than they thought it would be. They couldn’t stop it at all and just ran headfirst into one another.

The ridge of earth weaved among them—

And when it reached my feet, a girl jumped out!

No doubt about it! This is the mandragora!

“H-help!”

The girl clung to me!

She was pretty warm for a plant; I could feel her body temperature. But that didn’t matter. More importantly, she was asking for my help. That was all.

What should I do now? The answer came to me naturally.

“I will watch after this girl! If you have a problem with that, then come at me! But please don’t if you can help it!” I announced sharply. The last sentence of my statement wasn’t very strong, but I was a pacifist, so there wasn’t much I could do about it.

The whole area fell silent, as though time had stopped with my voice.

I was glad that it didn't seem like any of the witches was going to attack me.

"Are you sure, Miss...? You do know that's a bona fide three-hundred-year-old mandragora, right...? A witch can live in great luxury with that," Eno said to me, trying to make sure of my decision.

Ugh... The witches in this world were still thinking of this girl as a plant...

"Sorry, hold on a sec. There's no need to worry, okay?"

After warning the mandragora girl, I spun her around and held her out to face Eno.

"Ahhh! Don't hold me out at her! Help me!" The mandragora kicked and flailed.

"It's fine; it's fine! I'm not going to do anything bad!"

She sure was tomboyish...

"Eno, let me ask you this: Are you telling me you can shave away at this cute, innocent little girl and turn her into medicine?"

The mandragora sniffled and looked at Eno with tears welling in her eyes.

"Ngh! That just makes me feel guilty... I was actually imagining something more deformed, but she's so cute..."

Good, she was still open to discussion.

"That's exactly right. Now that she's asked me to help, I have no choice but to protect her. I'd be the worst person if I let her go, wouldn't I?"

There were other witches nodding, so I did have some agreement.

"I never thought it'd be so cute."

"Yes, she's adorable."

"Totally adorable."

“She’s so cute, I want to take her home... I want to keep her...”

“I want to have her in nothing but an apron...”

Yikes. It sounded like a few of them were into some weird stuff! I had to keep her!

Eno, their representative, sighed in defeat.

“Regardless of what you’re planning on doing with her, you still got a hold of the mandragora first. We lose this time. We don’t have the right to take something from the witch who obtained it, at least not without good reason.”

“I suppose this settles the matter, then?”

“W-wait!” the mandragora girl in my arms yelled.

She then took her hair—I mean one of the leaves growing from her head that looked like hair—and ripped it up into tiny pieces.

“I can’t give you my root, since it’s my body, but I can give one of my leaves to the witches. It’ll grow back eventually...” She held it out to Eno.

“Oh, are you sure...?” Eno slowly approached the mandragora.

“So in exchange, promise not to go after me, okay?!”

“Yes. I promise! I, Eno, the Witch of the Grotto, will no longer go after you!” After making her announcement, Eno took the pieces of leaf from the girl. “Wow, this is from the leaves of the legendary mandragora...”

The other witches also seemed keenly interested, surrounding Eno and peering at the leaves in her hand. They’d probably split them among themselves later. They could settle that on their own.

“Phew, I guess that puts an end to th—”

“Wait.” Beelzebub arrived, apparently very put out.

She had something in her hand—it looked like a rolled-up piece of paper.

She went over to Eno and handed it to her.

“Erm... What might this be...?”

“This is a bill for entering my garden. It’s one hundred thousand gold in the human currency per person—so that amount times the lot of you. There is no group discount.”

Eno was rich, so she could easily pay it, but the other witches were starting to murmur.

“Oh, I don’t have much to spare this month...”

“I think I’m starting to catch a cold, so maybe I should leave early...”

“Okay?” pressed Beelzebub. “You will pay, and if not, I will begin taking further measures.”

The one who had been most inconvenienced by all of this was Beelzebub, the owner of the garden subjected to this whole commotion. This was really more like compensation for damages.

“A-all right... I’ll take responsibility and pay...”

“Mm, ’twould be troublesome to collect from each of you individually, so as the leader, you should take care of everyone’s portion.”

Not even Eno would fight back against a demon minister at this point. The mandragora case was over.

“And the park is closed for today now! You have three minutes to leave the grounds! If you do not, you will pay extra for staying late!”

The witches scattered like baby spiders at Beelzebub’s announcement—but then came the icing on the troublesome cake.

An actual spider appeared before the witches.

It was just like Beelzebub had described before—as big as an adult human’s arm span.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

“Gyaaaaaaahh!”

“Waaaaaaaaah!”

The witches screamed and ran.

“What—? It’s just a large spider. They don’t attack humans.”

“Hey, you might be used to seeing them, Beelzebub, but this is the stuff of nightmares!”

The spider seemed indifferent to the witches and vanished into the forest. Guess it really was harmless.

The danger was gone, and I released the mandragora girl from my grip.

“Well, we can finally relax now. Though there still might be witches out there using guerrilla tactics to try and capture you, so you should be careful.”

But before I could finish my sentence, the girl was clinging to me again.

“I’m scared. Hide me... You said you’d help me, right? You won’t go back on your word, right?”

She was right. This was no time for simple catch and release.

“Okay, let’s go to Beelzebub’s manor for the moment. I want to hear your story.”

“It’s been such a long time since I’ve been in a building.”

She *was* a plant, after all.

We went inside the manor. Now that I was relaxed, I realized how unexpectedly tired I was...

On the way in, I carried the mandragora girl on my back.

“I get tired of burrowing through the ground and walking around. I don’t want to if I don’t have to.”

I guess that’s because plants never move much, period.



"That was an excellent play, Halkara."

When we came back to the manor, the first thing I did was commend my elf apprentice.

We all sat down in the reception parlor. Since there were no maids or butlers in the manor, Beelzebub went to prepare the tea.

"If we hadn't decided to let her find us instead, then she might've been caught by one of Eno's. We would've been in real trouble if that happened."

"Heh-heh. I'm smart, too. Quite clever."

"Well, I wouldn't give yourself too much credit. I might start seeing you as a problem again, so don't push your luck."

Halkara typically ended up failing when she got too carried away.

"Well, they say to leave the plants to elves. I've come this far with my smarts and my good luck."

Good luck...? I wasn't sure if Halkara's luck was good or bad. Which was it...? I had a strong feeling that she had the luck of the devil himself. If not, she'd probably already be dead....

But the mandragora girl was extremely wary of the bumbling elf. She hadn't even left my side. She wasn't clinging to me like a child did to a parent, but she probably felt this was the safest space for her.

"I hate elves... Elves pick plants all the time. Including mandragoras."

Ahhh, plants would see races that used them as predators.

"I understand, but I have to eat either plants or animals in order to live. I'm good-natured. I am not going to attack you."

"You're an elf and that's scary enough. Stay away! Ooooh, grrrrr!"

She was threatening her... This was bad in a very concrete, physical sense.

Then Beelzebub brought back the tea, which meant the gang was all here now.

"So then, mandragora, what's your name?" Flatorte asked. Right, we didn't know yet.

"My name is Mandragora."

"Idiot. That's your species. I, Flatorte, am asking what your personal name is."

"I don't have one of those. I don't need one. The other plants don't talk, so I don't have to introduce myself."

I see... This girl doesn't have a concept of a proper name.

"Huh. But without one, we'd have a hard time calling for you. All right, I, the great Flatorte, shall choose for you. We'll shorten 'Mandragora' and call you 'Drago'!"

"That name sounds too much like 'dragon'; it'd just confuse people. Idiot."

"Wh-what did you say?! All blue dragons are like this!"

Did she just call all blue dragons idiots...?

But it was true that picking a name for her would make it easier for us to converse. What kind of name should we pick...?

"Then why don't you pick, Azusa? The Witch of the Highlands, was it?" the girl asked from my lap. She was small and not all that heavy, but this was too close.

"Mm. It makes sense for the one who first found her to name her," Beelzebub said reasonably.

More like the plant found me, though. "Name her? That's a pretty big job..." She looks like a girl, so she should have a cute name. A cute name... I'll give it my best shot! "How about Gina?"

The girl scrunched up her face. She wanted a different one!

"H-how about Cornet or something...?"

She scrunched up her face again. This was difficult for no reason! I didn't even know

what kind of stuff she liked!

“How about Great Running Mandragora?”

Halkara suggested the kind of name that belonged to a totally different category.

As expected, the girl growled, “Grrr! Be quiet, elf!”

“Okay, then... What kind of stuff do you like? I’ll try and put that in your name.”

“Dirt and sand and water and sunlight.”

That was a plantlike answer!

It was hard to think of a cute name with *dirt* in it! *Doi* has the kanji character for dirt in it... No, that's a last name. And it doesn't really fit in this world.

Another word for dirt was *soil*. That wasn't very cute, either. As for sand... sand...

“Okay, Sandra! Your name is Sandra!”

“Sandra... Hey, that's not bad.”

All right, that settled it! I'm honestly relieved we picked a name so quickly!

“Mistress, that name sort of sounds like the sun dragons. They might get mixed up.”

Those existed...? There were all sorts of dragons.

“I like it, so it doesn't matter! Stand down! Grrr!” Sandra was acting hostile to Flatorte. She was still a little wild...

I was happy to see she was satisfied with her name.

—Once we decided on Sandra's name, we finally got around to talking about her life story.

“After being alive for such a long time, I suddenly started to look like this.”

It didn't sound like Sandra remembered when she turned into what she was now.

"And once I learned that there were people out there looking for mandragoras like me, I started going around to find a place where they wouldn't catch me. I learned how to speak from living near human houses and listening in on them. I saw humans wearing clothes, too, so I copied them."

It sounded like Sandra gained knowledge as she moved around.

"And when I saw that this forest was completely untouched, I thought it would be safe and started living here. And then I met you, and I was so surprised to see a witch... And now we're here."

Her whole life story was over already. It wasn't like she had much curiosity for anything, so she had apparently just lived in the dense sea of trees that was Beelzebub's garden for such a long time.

"A mandragora, hmm. I doubt there are any like you recorded in the demon census. This is one of the rarest of cases."

Someone like her didn't even exist among demonkind, a category that included all sorts of races.

But that made sense. If the demons recognized her as a human, then the witches wouldn't have come after her in droves to harvest her.

"Mm. And, Sandra, what are you going to do now?" Beelzebub went straight to the point.

"What do you mean by that...?"

"You're a plant. You lived all this time in my garden, which means you are fine living there—are you going to stay in the garden? I would not call plants in my garden illegal squatters, so you may stay here; what will you do?"

Sandra drooped her head slightly and fell silent. She seemed troubled.

She didn't seem particularly keen on staying here.

"I've lived here for a long time, but... The sunlight isn't very strong here... And it's not very fun... It's hard to grow..." Sandra muttered quietly to herself. "That's why... I

thought it might be a good idea to move elsewhere... But I'd hate to be caught by witches again... So I want to say somewhere safe..."

Beelzebub glanced at me.

And then Halkara glanced at me.

Ohhh, fine, fine. I get it.

"What's going on?" asked Flatorte. She didn't understand at all. That was to be expected from her.

"Sandra, would you like to come to the highlands I live in? We have a vegetable garden, so you can live there. We do have extra rooms, so you can stay in one of those, too."

For a moment, Sandra's eyes sparkled.

But her expression immediately changed back to a dubious one.

"R-really? Is that really a good environment to grow in...?"

"I don't know if it's a good environment for mandragoras, but if it doesn't suit you, then you can move elsewhere, right? You can give it a shot. There's plenty of sunlight for you to bathe in."

"If you say so, then... I guess I'll try... T-take me with you..."

We'd come to an understanding.

When I thought about it, had this girl never met me, she would have spent the rest of her days living quietly in Beelzebub's garden, so the logical progression was that I would now take care of her. I'd even named her.

I'd have woken up feeling awful if she'd ended up caught by a bad witch and turned into ingredients for medicine.

As long as she stayed in my garden, I doubted other witches would come to harvest her. I could put a barrier around the garden; it would work out somehow.

"All right, Sandra. Starting today, you're now a member of the house in the highlands."

I patted Sandra's head, and she didn't seem so displeased herself.

"Yay! Our family is bigger now!"

Halkara was delighted, but Sandra huffed at her.

"What family?! An elf isn't a mandragora! I'll just be in the garden! Grrr!"

"Ah... I suppose she doesn't take kindly to anyone but you, Madam Teacher..."

Halkara seemed apprehensive, but she might be right... And if Sandra was hostile to Halkara, then it would be the same for Flatorte...

"Mistress, she's too cheeky," said the dragon. "Make her run fifteen laps around Flatta to beat that temper into shape."

"This has nothing to do with you! Grrrrr!"

"Hmph! If I breathe on you with the breath of the blue dragon, you'd be nothing but an ice block! Earth freezes, too!"

"Th-that's unfair... Going for the earth is against the rules..."

Sandra hid behind me. She was just a small girl when it came to things like this. And it appeared she could walk normally, too, even though she was supposed to have roots and not feet.

"I can't escape to places without earth..."

She could walk, but it sounded like that was more trouble than moving inside the earth.

"Sandra, I have one condition for you if you're going to come with me."

I raised a finger.

"What is it...? Tell me..."

"Play nice with the others living in the house in the highlands. I don't mind the occasional fight, but you have to make up afterward."

Then Sandra fell silent. She was the type to clam up when things weren't going well for her.

"If you can't do that, then I can't take you with me. You might've lived on your own as a plant this whole time, but there are countless animals who can talk like you in this world. There's no need to be friends with all of them—it's not even possible—but getting on well with the people you meet makes life easier."

Sandra looked like she was having a hard time with this, but I think she was more worried about embarrassing herself by giving in or something like that. She already knew her answer.

"Fine... I'll try to be nice, so take me with you..."

"Great, glad to hear it." I patted Sandra's head again. "Glad to have you as a part of the family, Sandra."

"Yeah, thanks, Azusa..."

There was a great big smile on Sandra's face.

She really looked like a kid like that. The grass on her head was just starting to look like hair.

"But why are you so sweet and sour despite living on your own for so long~?" Halkara didn't need to ask that.

"I'm not being sweet! Especially not with you! Don't you even know what *sweet 'n' sour* means?! Grrr! Grrr!"

"Ahhh! I offended her! Wait, how do you even understand the concept of sweet and sour when you're a plant?! What sort of earthy nutrients have you been absorbing?!"

Halkara's commentary was right on the nose, but I didn't want her to rile Sandra up any more. She wasn't a very straightforward girl, after all.

I was about to have more trouble on my hands, but that was par for the course for the house in the highlands.

I'd gotten even more capable, too.



Sandra really ended up planting herself in the corner of our vegetable garden.

“Yeah, this isn’t so bad. There’s nothing here to block me, and it feels like the daylight hours are long here.”

I could hear her voice coming from inside the earth, which was kind of surreal.

“Then you’ll just stay put there, right? You don’t have to come live in the house, right?”

“I can’t sleep on beds, so I’m fine here. I’ll go in the building when I feel like it.”

I was unsure if I could consider this lifestyle as being part of the family, but we could communicate, so I’d think of her as such.

Then Falfa and Shalsha appeared with a watering can.

“It’s watering time.”

“Water, Miss Sandra~♪”

Shalsha gave Sandra a little shower.

“Ahhh, that feels great. Relaxing. Thanks, thanks. Oh, that’s enough. Any more will cause my roots to rot.”

It sure was convenient to have the plant tell us the proper dose of water.

“Mom, this plant is extremely precious. It’s worth observing.”

Shalsha was trying to start an observation diary. *Wait, she isn’t a morning glory, you know...*

“Mommy, I’m glad our family is bigger!” Falfa’s reaction was so purehearted.

“Yeah. Shalsha, treat Sandra like family, like you do with Falfa.”

“Understood. I will without fail.” Shalsha nodded.

"Oh, I need water twice a day. Please." Sandra was still talking more as a plant than a girl. "I don't need water when it rains. I'll tell you what to do about that when it happens."

"Understood. I will raise you with my big sis and me." Shalsha nodded vigorously.

All sorts of dividing lines were starting to blur... But accepting it all was the way of our house.

WE MADE VEGGIES EVEN MORE DELICIOUS

The first people Sandra got used to (after me) were Falfa and Shalsha.

On the second day, they ran around together in the fields. Apparently, they felt some affinity for each other as creatures with similar ages.

Sandra looked to be about five or six years old, like their younger sister.

“You’re so fast when you move underground, Miss Sandra~!”

“Yeah. I bet I’m the fastest of all plants!”

“You’re uprooting all our assumptions about plants. How fascinating.”

“Guess it just means I’m the greatest plant ever!”

Yeah, they were hitting it off. At this rate, she could probably meet the other members of the family halfway.

But—

That night, things got pretty noisy in the bath.

It was Falfa and Shalsha’s turn—maybe they ended up fighting while they were in there together.

As their mother, I had to give them a warning. It wasn’t good for their upbringing if I let it slide.

I started down the hallway to the bath. It was a little far away in this house. That made it exciting, like going to the big baths in a hotel.

As I was walking down the hall, Sandra came running to me in tears.

“Help! Help me, Azusa!”

“What’s wrong? Did a witch suddenly attack you?”

“Falfa and Shalsha won’t listen! They want me to go in the bath!”

Wha...? I didn’t really understand what she meant at first, but I slowly managed to swallow the situation.

“Miss Sandra lives underground, so we have to wash her off!”

“Cleansing one’s body cleanses the heart.”

My daughters ran out in their underwear. I guess Sandra escaped while they were getting undressed.

“I’m telling you, I don’t take baths! If I do, it’ll rot my roots! I don’t have to get in hot water! I’m not dirty!”

I could tell Sandra was serious from how desperately she was resisting.

“Sandra is a plant, you two. You can’t force her into the bath.”

“See, see! It might hurt me! Grrr!” Sandra hid behind me and growled at the two.

Unrelatedly, where had this girl learned to make that kind of noise...? Maybe there was a time when she lived behind a house with a dog?

“I see. This is a cultural difference. Shalsha came to the wrong conclusion. Apologies.”

“Sorry~”

The girls apologized, now aware of their mistake.

“Sheesh... When they suddenly pulled me out of the ground and dragged me to the bath, I thought I was gonna die... This is plant oppression!”

Ooooh... This little tragedy happened only because they didn’t know Sandra, but it wasn’t too surprising that they didn’t. Maybe it would be a good idea to hold a family meeting.



Thus, I called the whole family together.

It was nighttime, so Halkara was home from the factory. Everyone was present.

"Not everyone knows the guidelines of Sandra's lifestyle yet, so tell me first if something bad happens. She might be dragged off to the bath again."

"Still, there isn't much that would cause problems. First, all I need for meals is water. Then I just need to stay in the sun. I'll grow on my own."

Getting by just on photosynthesis almost seemed like cheating.

"By the way, do you take meals like people? You have a mouth, after all," Laika said.

"Oh, I tried eating what humans eat a real long time ago, but it took ages for it to digest, so I avoided it after that... I can talk, but I guess my insides are different from other people's. It's way more effective to just absorb water and earth."

"So you don't hafta eat anything. Cool, that's like me." Rosalie nodded. Still, there was a big qualitative difference there.

"Understood. Then I will remember not to prepare food for you."

"That's fine. I won't be disappointed if I don't have a portion to myself. I'm generally a freewheeling wanderer without any roots, after all."

"But you do have roots. Your root is your whole body. Idiot."

"It's a figure of speech! You're so pedantic, Flatorte! Grrr!"

I chose to believe they'd get closer eventually... They also made a great duo in a way.

"Also, I just sleep whenever, so you might not be able to tell when I'm asleep. Well, if you want to wake me up, just do it. I'm usually dormant at night, but my body will still move like this."

"Got it," Flatorte replied. "I'll wake you up when I'm bored at night."

"There's nothing for me to do at night, so I'll call you sometimes."

Flatorte aside, Rosalie definitely wouldn't have anything to do at night. I didn't know what she was doing so late at night, though.

"Wait! Don't wake me up for no reason, okay?!" Sandra hurriedly added. She probably hated the idea of being woken up every day. "I guess that's it for me. Just think of me as a plant in your vegetable garden. That makes it easy for me. You don't have to fuss over me too much; plants are used to being alone. I'm happy enough being in an environment without any enemies."

So she said, but she had the overall tendency of putting on a front. For now, I'd take her statement with a grain of salt. Not many people actively asked to be coddled anyway.

"Is there anything else you want to point out to us? Don't bottle things up, now; just tell us everything you can. We don't really know how plants feel."

If she used her platform here at the family meeting to say what she needed to, it wouldn't devolve into fighting later. I had to be conscious of these potential issues now that the family was so big.

"Let's see... If I had to say anything... You're growing some vegetables in the garden here, right?"

"Right. There are carrots and cabbages and onions, lots of things."

The vegetable garden had already been here when I came to live in this house. I had just expanded it afterward, as part of my job as a witch with some knowledge of plants.

"Those vegetables are bad."

"Whu...?"

I made a weird noise.

I didn't expect her to shoot down the vegetables I was growing... I was expecting her to tell me that she'd be taking all the nutrients and that I should get rid of the veggies so they wouldn't be in her way. But it was totally different...

"How rude of you to say that to Lady Azusa. You're a plant, so you don't eat vegetables, do you? How can you know if they're bad or good or what?"

Laika took it as a criticism of me and gave her a dark look.

"I don't have to eat them to know. I've been a plant for a long time, so I know what kinds of vegetables humans think are the good ones. I know they'd taste bad compared to the ones from pros like farmers. You probably don't have enough fertilizer."

Why this...? I felt so defeated...

"Oh no, Madam Teacher is deflating! You have said too much, Miss Sandra!" Halkara came to my aid. "Sure, Madam Teacher's vegetables are tasteless, and the carrots aren't very sweet, and this is likely the reason why her daughters hate vegetables, but she is still putting her love into growing them!"

"Hey! You're discounting everything I do besides love!"

I feel like the conclusion we're coming to here is that I'm really bad at growing vegetables!

"Um, Madam Teacher... It's not a bad thing. That's how all kitchen gardens are, really. You're not a farmer, so you don't need to prepare such high-quality goods. It's only normal that you can't," Halkara said apologetically. *They're really tearing apart my work...*

"Falfa hates vegetables period, so I dunno."

"I feel the same as Big Sis. I don't think the things you make are deliberately bad. The concept of vegetables itself is bad."

Even if kids hated vegetables by default, nobody in my family was defending my vegetables... Not even Flatorte the glutton had any words of encouragement.

Wait—thinking back, nobody ever actually said my vegetables from the garden were good when they ate them. Maybe I made a compromise somewhere...

I never thought the subpar quality of the vegetables I was growing in the garden would be revealed here...

But this wasn't the end.

"If you want my help, I could turn them into the tastiest vegetables you've ever had," Sandra said breezily.

"R-really...?" I stared hard at her.

"Of course I can. I'm a plant. I know they can be high-quality veggies, no matter what kind of soil or fertilizer you use," Sandra said with confidence this time. And then she started talking even faster. "For example, it's almost time to harvest the cabbages and carrots, but— Right, I could make them insanely delicious in just two weeks' time. They'll be superior vegetables."

"In two weeks?!"

That was practically in the realm of magic.

"That must be an exaggeration... We'd have no troubles if we could make vegetables more delicious in two weeks." Laika wasn't fully convinced.

"Then I'll show you how good veggies can get in just two weeks. It'll take the food you eat here in the highlands up a level." Sandra grinned. She was already convinced of her victory. "First, I want to travel so I can search for some soil and fertilizer. I don't know any place names, so I can only point."

I see. Sandra didn't know stuff like that.

"Then Laika will take you on a search."

"Yes, I, too, am curious to see how much will change in just two weeks. Please allow me to help."

Laika was into it. She was particular about cooking, so vegetables fell in that category.

"The fundamental thing for plants is soil. The first and second most important things are earth. If we bring back good soil and help the vegetables absorb those nutrients, that'll make them insanely good. Leave it to me."

"Then yes, let's take a look at the soil of various areas. I'd like to see what they can do."

"Okay, well, that's all. I'm sleeping in the vegetable garden tonight."

Sandra didn't wait for anyone else to say anything before leaving the house.

It was kinda surreal seeing a housemate leave the house like that...



The next morning, they went off to begin their search for soil, just as enthusiastic as they had been the night before.

And yet, they came back that evening in high spirits.

"Yeah, we found good soil. We just need to put it in the ground here!"

"It'll be heavy lifting, so you should help out, Flatorte."

So they were going straight to work replacing the soil.

"All right, leave it to me, the great Flatorte! I'm a pro at manual labor!"

With the strength of the dragons, the replacing was over very quickly. We were a family of women, but we were good at the tough physical jobs.

Once the soil was ready, it was time to wait.

Laika and I would wait patiently for two whole weeks.

On the other hand, Sandra dove down into the earth. She was apparently applying some sort of treatment to the vegetables, maybe cheering them on. That stuff was a total mystery, but I trusted her as a member of the family.

"Right, you don't need to water the vegetables anymore. They're getting stronger, so they're absorbing all the water in the soil. Actually, they'll get greedy if you give them any more. You have to be strict with this stuff."

I obeyed everything Sandra said.

Maybe occasionally asking about plants to raise them was a good thing.



—And so, two weeks passed.

The day finally came to harvest the vegetables.

Laika and I brought in the cabbages and carrots to the house, and then we washed them off.

“These are the ‘most delicious vegetables,’ as Sandra called them.”

They looked just like regular cabbages and carrots.

“Try the cabbage first,” Sandra said haughtily, folding her arms.

“Very well, I’ll give it a taste.”

Laika picked up a whole head of lettuce and took a big dragon-like bite.

I could hear the satisfying, crisp sound as she chewed.

So how was it?!

Everyone was looking at her. Maybe this was the first time the carefree house in the highlands had ever gotten so excited over cabbage...

“I-it’s so good!” Laika’s eyes went wide. “It’s so sweet, you don’t need to put anything on it! It’s practically a fruit!”

“Wait, really...? It’s just a cabbage. Is it really that good?”

I thought she had to be exaggerating as I had a taste.

I’m sorry.

It’s really good.

“What is this?! This is the highest-quality cabbage! The king of cabbages! It’s so juicy!”

Sandra seemed delighted with our responses. Her arms were folded, and she was even leaning against the wall. “Right? Isn’t it good? It makes all the cabbages from before seem like failures, doesn’t it?”

I was ashamed at the harsh criticism of all the things I’d grown before, but I was no match for this...

“Try the carrots next. You’ll see how high the quality is if you take a bite of it raw.”

Raw carrot...? That was a tall order for me.

When I lived in Japan, there was this bougie store with a bunch of vegetable stick-type snacks, including carrots. To be honest, I didn’t really like them.

“I’ll try this first, too.” Laika bravely took a bite out of it. “What surprising sweetness! Are these truly carrots?! It’s almost like you put sugar in them!”

“Again? You’re exaggerating. They’re just carrots. Doesn’t it still taste like dirt to you?”

Even I thought she was acting as I bit into the raw carrot.

“Wait... I could eat a whole bucket of these raw... D-did they really used to taste like this...?”

It was a carrot, but it was delicious... Even Falfa and Shalsha would wolf them down if they tasted like this!

“And there you have it. I showed you what real veggies are like.”

You could combine a king and a cardinal together and Sandra would still have been acting three times more self-important. Well, she could be as smug as she wanted right now.

But then, if they were this good raw, that meant—

They’d be even more delicious cooked!

“Laika, let’s cook together!”

“Yes! I will do all I can!”

And so, Laika and I concentrated on our cooking.

We put plenty of vegetables in everything—in the side dishes, in the main dish.

Our targets this time were the two children who weren't the biggest fans of vegetables.

"All right, then, dig in! This time we have fried carrots and carrot cream soup, as well as a veggie stir fry with carrots and cabbage!"

Neither Falfa nor Shalsha gave a very enthusiastic response.

"Wah... There's no meat at all..."

"These are adult flavors... I believe Shalsha and Falfa might be too young for this..."

They didn't even reach for a fork or spoon at all, like I thought. If I told them they didn't have to eat it, then they'd take that option right away.

"Eat it like I'm pretending to trick you. It's good—I promise!"

"Mom, I don't want to live out my life with the memory of you tricking me."

It was hard to urge them to eat it when she said that.

"I think it's tasty, at least! Both Laika and I have put so much love into the food for both of you! Right, Laika?"

"Yes. I, too, wanted more meat, but today I concentrated on drawing out the delicious flavors of the vegetables!"

She wasn't hiding her honest opinion about the meat, but I'd allow it.

"If Mommy tells me she put her love into it, then I guess Falfa has to eat it..."

Falfa first gave the carrot cream soup a try.

Her expression steadily grew brighter and brighter. "Oh, it's really good! I can eat this!"

Yeah! I just crossed a huge hurdle!

Led on by Falfa, Shalsha also brought some of the food to her lips.

A smile grew across her face, like a flower blooming.

“Perhaps Shalsha has been misjudging the essence of vegetables this entire time...”

That's right—vegetables are actually really good!

Both of them completely cleared their plates of the vegetable dishes. There was no happier thing for a mother!

My daughters liking vegetables now meant I had taken a step up as a parent!

I made eye contact with Laika.

“So, now that both of you have eaten all your vegetables, we have a present for you!”

Laika brought in a carrot pound cake packed with its namesake vegetables.

“You can use vegetables in sweets as well! Please eat up!”

And there was nothing to worry about anymore. The two of them gobbled down the sweet dessert and even asked for more. Of course, I obliged.

But there were people in this house who ate way more.

“Mistress, I would like another serving!” Flatorte asked for her fourth serving of cake with an energy that suggested she could eat forever.

“You've had enough already. I think it's time for a little self-control...” Laika offered some candid advice. Flatorte wouldn't understand unless she said it outright...

“What? But it's still not enough for me! Vegetables *really* don't fill me up, so I can eat this forever!”

That capacity for never-ending consumption scared me.

“Fine, then I will make it again tomorrow... I hope you're fine with that...”

“Actually, I, Flatorte, will make it. Teach me how.”

Flatorte did have some skill as a cook. She even made cookies soon after she'd come here.

“Hmph. Very well. I will tell you everything, then.”

Well, it was even better if the two dragons could do the cooking side by side.

When I went to give my thanks to Sandra again, she was nowhere to be seen.

I stepped outside and found her lying down on the ground in the vegetable garden.

“What? I was just about to go to sleep for the day.”

“Thank you, Sandra. Everyone's so happy because of your help.”

I smiled at Sandra to show her how happy I was, too.

“I—I know you're taking care of me... So I just wanted to be useful...”

Sandra looked shyly away and slowly slithered underground.

There's no questioning that you're part of the highland family, Sandra.

“You'll do just fine.”



THE GIRLS STARTED GOING TO SCHOOL

It was a little complicated, since their ages didn't match their looks, but the youngest one in the house, both physically and mentally, was Sandra.

She was younger than both Falfa and Shalsha, somewhere between kindergarten and first grade. In comparison, my daughters looked to be in fourth or fifth grade.

Those few years of (apparent) difference actually made for a huge gap. And by huge, I mean that Falfa and Shalsha started to genuinely act like big sisters.

It was another day of teaching Sandra how to write.

“I-is this okay...?”

“Oh, that's backward. It's clockwise, not counterclockwise.”

“Uhhh, like this?”

“Yeah, that's it! Okay, try writing it ten times.”

“Why? Let's go on to the next letter...”

“You have to write it a lot or you'll forget!”

Incidentally, Shalsha sat there, nodding wordlessly as she watched them. She was like the old master who watched over everything. It was hard to tell if this constituted them teaching her... But she was participating in a class, so I would define it as teaching.

“Yes, very good! Okay, now try writing *apple*.”

“Don't underestimate me. Even I can do that. Watch!”

Shalsha shook her head. “That says ‘apel.’”

“I—I—I know that... I was testing you...”

She certainly was not. Her reaction was too easy to read!

"I won't get it wrong next time... Look, I got it right, right...? Right?"

As Sandra sat, worried, waiting for the answer, Shalsha nodded silently.

"Oh, good... I—I mean, I knew I had it the whole time!"

The two were acting as excellent educators. It was truly impressive.

Since Sandra had lived more than half her life in the earth, she never learned how to read. That would've caused difficulties in her life down the line, so she had to learn at some point. The ones who ended up taking charge in that were my daughters.

Sandra seemed to put up less of a resistance the closer someone was to her in apparent age, and she was obediently accepting their teachings.

"As the old saying goes, though the journey to Darc is fifty days, the first step is still the first step to see your neighbor. If you stack one stone at a time, you will one day create a tower to the heavens. That is what study is."

Shalsha suddenly said something that sounded like a proverb, but Falfa and Sandra didn't really seem to be listening as they continued studying their letters.

"It feels like I have more daughters now, except Sandra sleeps in the earth at night."

I thought Sandra heard exactly what I said. Her ears twitched. "I'm not your kid, Azusa. I'm me. You're not a plant. Stop being weird."

I didn't mind her rebellious streak, either.

I'd been raising Falfa and Shalsha so far, but they were too good. They were like kids who had been plucked straight out of an idyllic painting. Not only that, but they were smart. It almost felt like I was cheating with my children, too.

However, while I was grateful that they weren't a huge handful, perhaps the real charm of motherhood was the little hardships of child-rearing.

The keyword being *little*.

I'd hate it if I couldn't sleep because she was crying all night or if she was bouncing off the walls every day and damaging the house. In that respect, Sandra's slight rashness was the perfect amount of rebelliousness.

After I watched the girls, I went to do the laundry.

By the way, I was using waterspout magic as a replacement for a washing machine. I used all the water I needed from the remaining bathwater.

I could create water with magic, but the warmer water probably made it easier to clean off the dirt. I made soap from plants. That was just part of being a witch.

Magic really was convenient at times like these. A big family meant lots of clothes to clean, so doing it all by hand would be grueling...

"Okay, laundry's done for today!"

And then, once everything was washed, I went outside to dry it all.

"Hmm... Isn't Halkara's underwear a little too fancy...? But on the other hand, I don't see Flatorte's underwear anywhere. Don't tell me she's not wearing any because it's too much trouble...? I'll have to question her later..."

Though I had a few things on my mind, Shalsha came to me by herself as I was putting them up to dry.

"Mom, Shalsha has a proposal."

"A proposal, hmm?"

As usual, her word choice was stiff.

"Both Shalsha and Big Sis could be called children based on our human appearances. The same goes without saying for Miss Sandra."

Sandra was definitely a young child, but age-wise she was older than them, so they called her Miss.

"Up until now, Shalsha and Big Sis have been doing our own self-study. Now that Miss Sandra's joined us, I feel like we'll be broadening our horizons."

"You're right. That means you two are finally big sisters now."

Falfa was older than Shalsha, but that was a technicality, since they were twins. But now that Sandra was here, both Falfa and Shalsha—who had never been anyone's elder sister—had to act like real big sisters.

"And then a thought came to me. By being in an environment with more children, we could make even more discoveries. I believe it would benefit our lives."

She didn't speak like a child, so I needed to translate. In softer words, she meant—

"You want to go to school, don't you?"

"Yes. I hear there are educational institutions for children in larger towns."

Shalsha was nodding over and over. There was a faint smile on her face.

I see. So she wanted to go to someplace like an elementary school.

It wasn't that there weren't elementary school(-like places) in this world. However, just like Shalsha had said, they existed only in big towns. In our province, there was probably only one in the provincial capital of Vitamei.

The students there were the children of the commoners who lived in the town.

Children from nobility received specialized tutors, while children of poor farmers had to start helping out and working hard from a young age.

These places weren't as specialized for studying as elementary schools were, nor was there a concept of compulsory education. But they weren't just places for parents to leave their children while they were away; they apparently offered the minimum level of education. Literacy broadened your options for employment, so it was useful in many ways.

Bottom line, we had institutions that were similar to elementary schools.

"Could we have a trial visit?" Shalsha asked bluntly. She was being more insistent than usual.

"A trial visit... Hmm..." I wasn't 100 percent on board.

Falfa and Shalsha might look like children, but they had still been alive for fifty years. Wouldn't they stand out among real children?

I guess it wasn't terrible if that was all, but I wouldn't want to deal with people bullying them.

Bullying was inherently something that happened in groups of people. At least solitary hermits by definition were never bullied. It wasn't just elementary school; joining any new kind of group came with that risk.

I didn't think the girls would lose if they ended up in fights with other children, but they could still be left with bad memories.

"Hmm... I dunno..."

"I believe it would be a wonderful thing." For some reason, Beelzebub was standing next to me.

"You've been showing up way too suddenly recently... Stop popping in like you're my neighbor or something..."

"We have such an elementary education institution in the Vanzeld Castle town."

And she was ignoring my comments.

But I got the image that the demon world was much more advanced than the human world, so it was entirely possible that it was functioning as a proper school. That was an option.

"Though since it is so far from the house here in the highlands, I believe it may be best if they stay at my manor and go from there—"

"Yeah, that's not happening."

She was just hoping for the chance to live together with Falfa and Shalsha.

“By the way, you use summoning magic, don’t you? We could go to the demon lands if you taught that to me.”

I’d occasionally used summoning magic to call her into my house.

“Erm... Summoning magic takes quite a toll on the one being summoned as well. It is not something to be used for commuting to work and school. High-ranking demons like me have no trouble, but you should not use it on Falfa and Shalsha.”

Convenience did have its limits, and rightfully so. So that option was off the table.

As I chatted with Beelzebub, Shalsha stared at me.

She was putting silent pressure on me to enroll her in elementary school!

“*Sigh...* Fine. Do you want to go to school for a short time for a trial run? I can use invisibility magic while you’re there to watch you. It’s really easy to use, so I can keep an eye on you from behind.”

That way, I could see if they would acclimate to school.

“Understood. There’s no problem with that. That’s how I’d like to proceed with this.”

And that’s how we decided to put them in school.



Afterward, I went to the provincial capital of Vitamei to hear about what the elementary school-esque institution had to offer.

The school was called Senale Elementary Academy. So it was a private academy. I guess Senale was the name of the founder.

According to the people inside, it was for children between six and twelve years old, which made it exactly like an elementary school.

“We raise the children here to be honest, proper, and healthy, so there’s no need for their mothers to worry! I am sure you will be satisfied with our care!” the principal explained to me.

Oh, right, the mom is me...

"Wait... You are way too young to be a mother, aren't you...? You must be their elder sister..."

I now remembered that I appeared to be seventeen years old.

"Well, you see... I'd say we have a rather complicated household. But we are enjoying life together, so I suppose it's all right."

I wasn't lying, so it wasn't a problem.

"First, we here at Senale Academy allow the children a free trial week of classes. Afterward, if there are no problems, we will move forward with enrollment procedures."

"Oh, so you have a trial enrollment. That's perfect. I'd like to go ahead with that."

The three girls would make the commute on Laika.

And so the first day of their trial arrived.

I snuck into the classroom using invisibility magic. Inside, it looked way more like a Japanese classroom than I thought it would. The only difference was that the students sat at long tables with a bit of room between them. There were just under forty children.

As the three stood at the front, the young female teacher introduced them to their classmates. "Okay, everyone! Today we have three new friends joining us! How about you introduce yourselves?"

"I'm Falfa! Nice to meet you!"

"Shalsha. She's my twin."

"...Sandra."

Sandra was clearly embarrassed, but I was expecting that.

“All right, you three, go ahead and sit down.”

The three of them sat down side by side. Maybe they wouldn’t be bullied, since they came as a set.

“Now I’m going to hand out worksheets, so give those a try. I’ll start with the easier questions, so tell me when you’re finished.”

I see—so the system involved giving everyone their own problems and making them do it like that. But I guess if not for that, then Sandra and the twins couldn’t be in the same class.

I silently watched over them from behind and to the side. I was invisible, so the other students couldn’t see me. The children were saying things like, “It feels like someone’s here... Is it a ghost...?” but I paid them no mind.

Sandra practiced writing her letters with great difficulty.

On the other hand, a boy student was talking to Falfa. “If you don’t know anything, I’ll help you out. Ask me anything.”



Oooooh! I know my daughter's cute, but you're going straight for her, huh?! I won't give you my girl, not even if you're a kid!

"Thank you! You're so kind!" Falfa gave her thanks, then flipped through the worksheet. "But I know the answers to all these questions, so I don't need to. Let me know if there's anything you need help with~"

"Wait... You know it all...?" The boy was in shock.

Sorry, but Falfa's actual abilities could easily rival a university student's...

"I'm no match for my big sister, but even I can do arithmetic of this level. Shalsha would like to request the next set of questions."

Even Shalsha, who wasn't as good at math as Falfa was, wasn't tripped up by these.

The teacher looked at them in disbelief, but she seemed to tentatively accept it.

"Falfa, why don't you come up and try solving the problems in front of the class?"

"Okay!" Falfa quickly wrote the answer to every question on the board. "And that's all of them!"

"Yep... You can do it... I'll give you the next few... How about this?"

She handed the next set to Falfa, who flipped through them to the end.

"Falfa can do all of these questions, so I don't need it."

"Erm... I don't have any question sets more difficult than those, so I'll have to get them from the office..."

The teacher left the room with a bit less color in her face.

Oh no. At this rate, they would wreck the class in the opposite sense of the term...

After a few minutes, the teacher brought back an arithmetic book that appeared to be the real deal. "W-will these be all right...? This was the textbook I used in university..."

It didn't seem like Shalsha understood stuff at this level; she froze with the book in

front of her. I mean, it was a university-level textbook.

The teacher looked like she could finally relax, too.

I'm sorry for bringing in such problem children...

But it wasn't enough to stop Falfa. "Okay! I solved the proofs! Are these right?" She raised her hand and called the teacher over.

"U-uhhh... Yep, you've solved them, all right..."

"I understand most of these, so can I do the ones in the back?"

"I'm not that confident in those, but... Um, maybe you should go to university and learn them there..."

"Whoa!" yelled the boy. "She's smarter than the teacher!" And the class went wild!

"She's a genius!"

"Genius transfer students really do exist!"

"This is awesome!"

Oh dear... Everyone's in an uproar...

But the teacher had no grounds to scold them, and she stood there limp and exhausted.

"I lost so quickly to a child... Maybe I have no talent... Maybe I don't deserve to be a teacher..."

Oh no, what should I do? She's losing confidence!

"Falfa!"

"Falfa's a genius!"

"Falfa!"

"Falfa!"

The kids were starting to cheer for Falfa!

I guess someone who directly and fairly surpassed the teacher would be a hero among the children.

Now that the teacher had lost her authority, the kids started chatting about off-topic things... How dare they!

But the one who shut down the uproar was not the one you'd expect.

"Ohhh, sheesh! Shut up!" Sandra shouted. "We're in class now! Be quiet! Falfa might be great, but aren't we supposed to be doing our own individual work right now? You can compliment her during break time. You're childish if you can't wait until then."

The whole classroom fell silent.

Incredible. By scolding everyone, Sandra had quieted the class down. Of course. She was the oldest kid in the class (probably by three hundred years).

And it sounded like calling them "childish" was more than effective. Children hated being called that. They wanted to be considered adults as soon as possible. So when Sandra called them out for being immature, the ruckus quickly transformed into serious study.

"She's got a point..."

"Sandra, right? She's powerful... even though she's small."

"I feel like a grown-up is mad at me..."

She *was* probably older than their parents.

"Phew, it's finally calm. Now I can practice writing my letters." What Sandra was learning was the most basic of basics.

Class returned to normal after that, but Falfa and Shalsha were too smart, so they were treated like special cases.

"Miss, what should Falfa do next?"

“Falfa... Teach Shalsha arithmetic, okay?... I don’t even know what level you should do... It seems like you understand everything we can teach you here, s-so you probably don’t have to come... Y-you graduate!”

She was graduating Falfa!

“And it seems like Shalsha can do everything that we would teach her, so... you graduate, too!”

And Shalsha!

I guess it’s hard for a teacher to do her job with students who are too smart. The relationship between teacher and student is established on the assumption that the teacher has the knowledge. There’s no point if the student has the knowledge.

“Aww, Falfa’s graduating?” Falfa looked disappointed. She had come all the way here to study; her success was a damper on that early enthusiasm.

“Maybe you should teach, Big Sis,” Shalsha offered.

She was missing the point.

While there were still a lot of problems to be solved, the first class period finished.

“All riiight, break time!”

“Let’s play dodgeball!”

The children went to the field outside. This stuff must be universal.

And dodgeball existed in this world, too, by the way. The rules were simple, so it wasn’t surprising that it had been discovered here.

The other children invited my girls out into the field. At the moment, it didn’t seem like they were going to be bullied, so that was a relief. *Have fun playing with the other kids.*

Wait a sec...

They weren't as strong as Laika or me, but the two should be much more skilled and powerful than a regular child... Way stronger than a regular adventurer, even...

Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra were all on the same team.

"All right, here we go, Shalsha!" The boy on the other team threw the ball at her.

Shalsha easily caught it. She'd been spacing out, but she was good at athletics.

"Now it's my turn." Shalsha ran forward and threw the ball.

Pyuuuuuuu!

The blazing fastball connected with the boy.

He'd tried to catch it, but he was no match for such a powerful throw, and he fell right on his rear. The ball rolled behind him.

"Th-that's scary~! She's crazy strong~!" The boy started crying!

"Wimp."

"You're crying because a girl hit you with a ball? Aren't you embarrassed?"

"Yeah!"

His teammates were being pretty cold to him. I thought a boy that age tended to have a rough time if a girl made him cry.

But the meaner you are to that boy, guys, the more you'll regret it when the same thing happens to you.

To be honest, the boy wasn't crying because he was a coward. It really was because she was strong...

Falfa took the ball this time.

"Yaaah!"

Pyuuuuuuu!

The blazing fastball hit a nearby girl in the leg, bounced off her, and came right back to Falfa, where she snatched it up and threw it again.

This time it hit a boy in the back, apparently too fast for him to get out of the way.

“This is so scary!”

“It’s too fast!”

“Owww!”

She was making everyone on the other team cry!

Half the kids on their own team were saying, “This is amazing!” while the other half were terrified: “These sisters are crazy...”

Everyone clearly recognized the twins’ abnormal potential, and Shalsha seemed to pick up on it.

“Big Sis, everyone will be scared of us at this rate. We would be like idols... Maybe we should act in moderation here...”

“But it’s only fun if we give our all. It would be rude to them if we went easy!”

Falfa had the right idea, but she needed to go easy on them or else it wouldn’t be a game anymore...

“I think this might be the end of our trial week,” Sandra quietly said from behind them.

I thought the same. Sure, we could say it was fine because they were also ten years old, but it was like throwing a ten-year-old bear or tiger into the school.

In the end, Falfa’s and Shalsha’s unbeatable strength put a swift end to the dodgeball match, so they decided to go again.

The enemy team was consulting with one another on how to deal with the twins.

“It’s over if one of them gets the ball.”

“Let’s take care of the others first.”

"Break time will be over soon. When time's up, we'll have more people, and we'll win."

Their strategy was taking the time limit into account. They were crafty, but they had to be if they wanted to win.

At first, the team carried out their plan well and didn't let the twins get their hands on the ball.

But then came time for them to go after little Sandra.

"Take that!"

One of the "out" players from the other team went to aim at Sandra with the ball. *Oh no—she's weak; please don't dog-pile her!*

But then the children got another surprise.

"Gah! Oh no!" Sandra avoided the ball by diving underground.

The dirt on the field looked hard, but she could burrow in anyway.

I'm glad she avoided the ball, but that's gonna draw attention...

"She went underground!"

"How do you do that?!"

"Cooooool! I wanna do that!"

They're forgetting about the match!

"This is easy. There are always soft spots in the earth. That's where I stick my roots. Once I do that, I can go right in," Sandra explained. The leaves that made up her hair were the only things sticking out.

That's not easy at all. You're the only one who can tell where the soft spots in the earth are.

"You don't think. You feel. Feel the earth. Once you're used to it, anyone can do it."

How does anyone get used to that? I've lived for three hundred years, and I've never seen anyone besides you pull it off.

And then, the bell signaling the end of break rang. It was time for class again, and the teacher was distressed in all the classes afterward.

“Shalsha wishes to object to the concept of a true essence that’s mentioned in this book. In the end, such an idea only exists on paper, and I believe that arguments in favor of it are mere fallacies.”

“Um... Shalsha, I don’t really know how to answer that...”

Shalsha, an elementary-level educator probably won’t be able to handle deep philosophical discussions...

After the countless problems caused by the girls, their first day of trial enrollment came to an end.

“So? How was it?”

“Falfa had a lot of fun!”

“Shalsha very occasionally felt estranged, as though I was a foreign entity. But it was during those times that I felt exactly what sort of existence I lead. I would say that it was, overall, a very interesting experience.”

I think that meant Shalsha noticed that they didn’t exactly fit in all the time.

“How about you, Sandra?”

“It wasn’t bad, but... We probably won’t be allowed to go to school.”

She had the best grasp of the situation...



Days later, I went to Senale Academy as a mother.

“Your children are incredibly intelligent, so... erm... they’ve already exceeded everything that we can teach them here... Perhaps they should learn in a more serious institute...,”

the old principal told me sheepishly.

“I had a feeling...”

I caused a lot of trouble bringing in my overpowered children.

“We should be able to take care of Sandra, however—what would you like to do about her?”

I thought for about five seconds, but—

“...I think I’d rather have her learn from the twins at home.”

“If that’s all right with you...”

And so it became very evident that going to school simply wasn’t an option for my kids. That was fine. I’d make sure they got a proper education at home.

I expected they’d be disappointed but that they’d accept it without protest.

“I’m glad there were a lot of people,” said Falfa, “but studying wasn’t very interesting.”

“The level of the lessons was not very high. There is a limit to everything,” added Shalsha.

“From now on, you two will teach Sandra at home, okay? Teaching others is a valuable part of studying.”

“Okay!”

“Understood.”

“Oh boy,” Sandra said with a smile. “And now we’re right back where we started.”

“That’s right. We live in such a remote highland, there’s no real reason for you to go all the way to a school in town. You can stay and study here.”

“I know you’re acting important, Sandra, but some of your letters are still backward.”

“Wh-what can I do about that?! Plants never have to write!”

It seemed like Sandra was enthusiastic, and I was sure she'd gain some scholastic ability in the near future.

Honestly, I was relieved. If I put my kids in school, then I would be spending less time with them. I couldn't see myself letting go of them, at least.

"By the way, Sandra?" There was something on my mind. "If I say 'thank you' to you every day and make you listen to music, will you grow better?"

Was it true that making vegetables listen to classical music made them tastier?

"How should I know...? If you tell me proverbs every day, I'd probably become more cultured, though..."

At least Sandra had a good memory...

WE DECIDED TO OPEN THE CAFÉ AGAIN

When I went shopping in Flatta with Laika, the people were constructing something in the town square.

Since I'd lived nearby for a long time (three hundred years), I knew what it was right away. That was the scaffold they set up for the Dance Festival. They would toss petals from above to make the festival look more elegant.

"Okay, everyone, it's almost time for the Dance Festival again."

"Right you are!" called the villagers setting up the scaffold. "We'll dance till we can't no more!"

The Dance Festival celebrating the village's harvest had been going for about two hundred and fifty years. That being said, there was nothing ritualistic about it—merrymaking was the main objective.

But for some reason, Laika's gaze was fixed on the ground, and she seemed unhappy. What was going on? The Dance Festival wasn't the anniversary of killing a dragon or anything like that.

"I want to see you in your waitress outfit again this year, Laika!"

"Please open up the café again!"

The people working on the scaffold were calling to us excitedly, and that gave me the answer.

Oh, I get it...

On the festive day before the Dance Festival last year, we turned the house in the highlands into a café for a day—it was like a cultural festival.

And there, we wore waitress outfits—maid uniforms, essentially—for our customer service.

And Laika was absurdly cute.

I mean, *absurdly*.

Laika had transformed into the physical embodiment of the entire concept of “cuteness” on that day. You could tell from the energy around her—*this* was the ideal of a beautiful young girl.

It was almost like she was the spirit of cute.

She was really *that* fantastic, to the point where I’m going to stop talking about it so it doesn’t get weird.

The people of Flatta looked at her differently for a while—a Laika fan club seemed like a genuinely viable idea. But Laika herself had been embarrassed back then, and she didn’t seem any more excited about it now...

“Lady Azusa, will we be doing the café again...?” Laika asked, her face red.

The way she asked was already cute. *Oof, I'll take three!*

Her question was meant to tell me she was embarrassed and didn’t want to do it. I understood that much.

But still.

“Yeah... I feel bad, but you think you can endure it for just a day...? We can’t not do it after a reaction like that...”

We could also do it without Laika, but I didn’t want the shock of responses like, *What? It's just you, great Witch? No Laika?* Laika was so popular that it was bound to happen.

But I'm pretty cute, too, y'know? I'm forever seventeen, remember?

Still, Laika was a dragon girl who looked thirteen, and her good upbringing was like an aura around her! I couldn’t win against that! If this were sumo, she’d be the grand champion!

And as long as the customers didn’t get hurt, I’d want the grand champion on the floor all day!

Laika sighed but then immediately balled her hands into fists and opened her eyes wide. A switch had flipped inside her. "Understood!"

"I appreciate it, but you don't have to get that fired up about it..."

This was where Laika's personality shone through.

It was probably much more difficult for her to live a slothful and frivolous life. Her body would physically reject any attempt and just make her ill.

"Then we'll go ahead and work to open the Witch's House Café again this year! We managed it last year, so we should be fine!"

The people constructing the scaffold heard me and cheered.

"Yay!"

"That's more the main event than the Dance Festival itself!"

Erm, please place more importance on the festival you've been holding for two hundred and fifty years.



When I got home, I told the family about the plan for the café. We had more people than we did during the festival last year, so I needed to run another check by them.

"I don't have any problem with it! Ghosts are strong enough to carry cups and stuff!"

Rosalie immediately gave her okay.

"Cooking food for guests is a hassle, but if you tell me to do it, Mistress, I will. I can even freeze the annoying customers for you!"

Putting Flatorte in a customer service role might spell trouble...

"A shop? Do what you want. I'll be growing freely in the vegetable garden."

I sort of knew Sandra would say that.

I wasn't planning on forcing her to participate, and what appeared to be her legs were actually her roots. She would probably get tired more easily than the rest of us, and since she looked the youngest, making her work would be a crime.

My daughters and Halkara, of course, said they would do it.

"Well then, we will work toward opening round two of the Witch's House Café! Thanks for your help, everyone!"

"Yeah!" Falfa and Halkara cheered. They had good attitudes.

"We may as well find a way to make it even better than it was last year, but it's not a real shop, so you don't need to rack your brain over it."

Halkara then shot her hand up. "Ooh! I have several ideas for special mushroom dishes! A full-course meal of thirty-six different types of mushrooms!"

"Oh, that's dangerous, so let's not. But thanks for letting me know ahead of time."

"Whaaat? But, Madam Teacher, there definitely will not be any poisonous mushrooms in it! It will definitely be okay!"

The more someone repeated "definitely," the less you could trust them. I was starting to feel like this was becoming Halkara's trademark routine, but she seemed serious about the whole thing.

Actually, the problem was that she wasn't showing any symptoms of self-awareness...

"Ha-ha-ha, I believe you, Halkara. I'm not doubting you. But there's always that one-in-a-million chance. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

"That monotone laugh sounds awfully fake!"

What could I do? I mean, it *was* fake...

"I believe keeping our menu the same as it was last year should be fine. We were only open for a day anyway, so some people might want to order something different from last year. It would be distracting if we had even more things on the menu."

Laika offered a helpful opinion, and she was absolutely right.

“I, Flatorte, vote for super-extra-large portions of food!”

“You come up with good ideas sometimes. We won’t be adding any more food to the menu, so why don’t we include a super-extra-large portion service?”

Laika sided with her straightaway. The two dragons often ended up on the same page when it came to food.



The next day...

We put in an order for a waitress outfit for Flatorte at the tailors’, and they prepared it for us.

“I dunno—the whole thing just feels tight...”

Flatorte’s tail was whipping back and forth. She didn’t seem to be enjoying it, but whether or not it looked good was a different story.

In short, it looked great on her.

“You look lovely, Miss Flatorte!”

“It is well coordinated. It almost seems like the golden ratio is hidden somewhere.”

Falfa and Shalsha first paid their compliments.

They both were honest with their opinions. If they were saying so, then it was true. And with hearts as pure as theirs, there really was no doubting them. *I’m not just being an overly loving parent; it’s the truth.*

“R-really...? Personally, I think it’s hard to move in. If I have to wear this, I think I’d almost prefer being totally naked...”

“You can’t be naked! And don’t rip it or anything, okay?! These clothes were expensive!”

Flatorte could be irresponsible when it came to this stuff, so I wanted to be careful.

“It’s all ri— Oops, I almost ran into the jar of blueberry jam. That was close.”

Gah, this is nerve-racking! Putting such a careless girl in these clothes is kind of freaking me out!

Next was Rosalie.

I handled her case with magic.

I'd changed Rosalie's clothes into a dress with magic in the past. Back then, creating and casting the spell had given me a hard time. Rosalie had to imagine herself wearing a dress; otherwise a ghost's clothes wouldn't change.

We changed her clothes more easily this time than last.

Since everyone was wearing the same thing this time, it was probably easier for her to picture them.

"Ooooh! What a floofy waitress outfit! I've always wanted to wear something like this! Yay!"

Out of the whole family, Rosalie was probably the most excited about this. *Yeah, I guess ghosts don't get to dress up often.*

The further out of reach something was, the more both humans (and ghosts) wanted it.

"Rosalie, if you really like it, I can practice this magic even more. I'll try and have it so you can have different clothes every day."

"Wait, Big Sis... That's too much... I mean, it depends on my imagination more than anything..."

She always hesitated when it came to this stuff.

It was true that this magic depended on both my skill and Rosalie's, which made it more difficult, but I wanted Rosalie to be able to dress up as often as she pleased. That would be a task for me to handle later.

On the other hand, those of us who had also worked the year before were in good shape.

First, there was me. I was pretty cute. I was eternally grateful for my seventeen-year-old looks. It wasn't bad at all.

Then Halkara.

"It's too tight around my chest again this year... Actually, I think it might be even tighter than it used to be..."

"How am I supposed to interpret that? Are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

Why would it get even tighter around her chest over this past year...? She isn't still growing... What does this mean...?

Pop.

A button from her outfit flew off and hit me in the face.

"...You really did attack me... I knew you were trying to provoke me..."

"No, Madam Teacher! I am innocent!"

I hope she eats a mushroom that shrinks her breasts by accident...

And then my daughters. Yep, very cute.

"The clothes puff out when you spin around in them!"

Falfa was twirling around the room. *I'm happy you're happy, but please be careful of the blueberry jam. Actually, maybe I should just go ahead and put the jam away...*

Shalsha sat still in a chair, meditating. Apparently, this behavior of hers didn't change, no matter what she was wearing.

".....Zzz....."

Oh, she wasn't meditating—she was just sleeping.

I guess there were times she just wanted to sleep. *Get some rest, girl.*

* Also, Sandra said, "Not interested. Pass." And went back to the vegetable garden.

She was a free spirit when it came to this stuff. But she was also a plant, so what could I do?

And finally, it was time for Laika, the one who had gained the most attention last year.

"No matter how often I do this, I'll never get used to it... I feel restless..." Laika said, her cheeks slightly flushed. Her feet were pointed inward, unlike usual.

"You looked great last year, and—same goes for this year."

Every tiny movement she made was simply divine. If I were a middle school boy, I would've told her I loved her three times in one day. She'd probably burn me to a crisp the third time around, though.

"Sigh... You make such an elegant picture in that waitress outfit."

Even Halkara looked spellbound by her.

She was so beautiful, both men and women were head over heels for her.

"Yeah. And there's something so noble about her. She has grace, unlike the aggressive way you hold yourself, Halkara, which gives your boobs so much power, it makes people want to punch you."

"Madam Teacher, do you have a grudge against me...?" Halkara asked. That comment had a few more barbs than I'd intended.

"Ha-ha-ha. Of course I'm jealous. Ha-ha-ha."

"Don't acknowledge it with that flat laugh! It's not like I have any say in how large my breasts grow!"

"But I'm still jealous! I've brought up my level just by killing slimes, but my chest hasn't grown at all!"

People always wanted what they didn't have. That was the way the world worked.

"Well, let's set your unjustified resentment aside for now, Madam Teacher..." Halkara

breezed past that topic. “Don’t Miss Laika and Miss Flatorte look even better when they stand together?”

Halkara had noticed a great detail.

They were standing right next to each other.

“Please don’t stare too hard at me, Lady Azusa...”

“What’s wrong, Mistress?”

They probably just happened to stand near each other, but with Flatorte next to her, Laika’s good qualities stood out even more, and Flatorte’s personality and liveliness came to the surface.

It was like sprinkling salt on watermelon, though I also respected people who took their watermelon with sugar.

“They could take over the world...”

I imagined them debuting as idols.

There were the prim and proper Laika and the all-in-all irresponsible Flatorte.

When they came together, it was like a chemical reaction!

They would be a pair of idols dubbed—the Dragon Girls!

Yeah, I’m not very good with names...

Either way, it was fantastic.

“All right, I guess that’s it for our dress rehearsal today. I look forward to the day of.”

But then a figure came down the hall, as if she’d been waiting for this very moment.

“You are not finished!”

The one coming from the dining room was none other than... Beelzebub?!

Well, I could tell who it was by the voice, even if I couldn't see her...

But there was one more thing. She wasn't dressed like a villainous leader like she usually was but like a waitress.

Our clothes weren't off the shelf, but hers looked almost the same as ours. Maybe there were basic standards for what maid clothes looked like.

"Beelzebub, does that outfit mean you'll help us?"

"Indeed. I have already asked for time off, so it's no problem!"

Such willing outside help was hard to come by. She was way too enthusiastic about the café...

"Got it. Then we'll have you working right from the start this year."

I had been very thankful for Beelzebub's mobility last time.

It was all thanks to her that we managed to keep the café up and running until closing time, even when it seemed on the verge of failing.

"It looks like we won't have any trouble this year, then. Man, I'm so glad."

"But this isn't all," Beelzebub said, puffing out her chest.

What...? Was she going to tell me to add some super-spicy demon food to the menu?

—And then someone came skipping oh so cheerfully down the hallway.

"*Hmm, hmm, hmm~ ♪* What do you think, Elder Sister? Aren't my clothes cute~?" Pecora bounced in, wearing a waitress outfit.

"Somehow I knew you'd show up, and I was right!"

It looked really good on her. It wasn't just cute; it strangely felt like cosplay—like she was dressing up as a Pecora-themed doll.

Regardless—

"Is it okay for the fearsome demon king to interact with customers? This is service work, you know, right?"

I knew painfully well that Pecora wasn't the type to lounge on her throne, but this was still extreme.

"Of course! I've always wanted to try working in a shop~ But if I were to do it in Vanzeld Castle town, someone would come to stop me."

Of course they would. You're their ruler.

"And so I thought there would be no cause for worry in the human lands. That's why I'm here to help you now. Oh, and I hear you had outdoor terrace seating last year, so I plan to greatly increase the number of tables outside this year. We can install a rain cover as well. As long as it's not storming, we should be in fine shape. We demons can take care of that work, so all of you can just relax."

"...Oh, th-thanks."

Can I thank her for something like that? They're doing redecorating without my permission...

"And we've also prepared trial dishes for the new menu. Come out, you two."

At Pecora's prompt, Fatla and Vania appeared, carrying boxes. They were even wearing waitress outfits, too.

"The food is in here. Vania has refined these dishes to better suit the human palate, so I am confident they will accept it," Fatla informed me with perfect seriousness, as though this whole thing was a given.

Of everyone dressed as a waitress, she felt the most maid-like.

Yeah, this was how a maid should be—chic and cool, not working in a maid café and writing "I love you ❤️" on an omelette with ketchup. The kind to be harsh on her master and scold him when he did something weird (in my personal opinion).

"Leave all the cooking to me!" Vania declared with utmost confidence—deservedly so, since she was actually a cook.

“It felt like we were just putting together something for the cultural festival, and then a pro chef showed up...”

Halkara patted my shoulder and whispered to me, “Erm... At this rate, they’ll take over the café... I think they basically already have...”

“I was thinking the same...”

It was like someone taking 51 percent of a company’s shares and then interfering with operations.

“But it’s just for a day, so we may as well go all out, right? Let’s go for it!”

My attitude took a turn. I couldn’t exactly tell the demons they weren’t allowed to participate now. If I resisted and they opened up their own Demon King and Peons’ House Café next door, we’d have trouble.

“And now we know we’ll be much better than last year. This is perfect. The customers will certainly be satisfied. I guess it’s not a bad thing for an event that happens once a year.”

“You’re right. We’ll give it a go!” Halkara understood, too. “At this rate, I may as well cook a whole lot of specialty mushroom dishes and show the customers how great mushrooms are and just how many there a—”

“Oh, no, please don’t do that. I’m not kidding. I am forbidding the use of mushrooms in the food,” I said, giving her my usual serious look again.

“But we’ll be in a festival mood, so shouldn’t we go big?”

“If we get reports of a large number of people coming down with food poisoning, then we won’t be able to open the café again next year. If you make any mushroom dishes, I’m banning you from entering the building. I’m dead serious about this.”

“You can’t forbid your employees from coming in!”

I had to be very thorough about this kind of stuff, otherwise the safety of our customers was in doubt. I had to protect the lives of our guests!

But there was no questioning that this was going to be a fun event. It was already kind

of fun now.

“All right, then, everyone, we’ll give it our all on the day!”

““Yeah!!””

Everyone raised their hands at once.

I really did feel like we were putting on a display for a cultural festival.



And so the day of the event slowly approached, and we started making serious preparations for the Witch’s House Café again this year.

Too serious.

There was a significant number of tables lined up in the highlands.

I’m not talking twenty or thirty—the number of tables delivered to the house was in the triple digits.

Where had they all come from? Well—

The enormous leviathan floating above us.

Vania, in her true leviathan form, had put a large number of tables and chairs and other furnishings on her back and carried them all the way from Vanzeld Castle.

And because of that, the scale of the whole operation had been blown way out of proportion.

As for the construction, Fatla and Beelzebub gave orders to their demon employees—or temp workers, I don’t know—to get it all done.

“That table is out of place. Push it back a little more.”

“If there are any chairs with uneven legs, bring them here. We shall replace them with one of the extras.”

They were important demons, so they were used to giving orders when it came to this stuff.

I was fine just watching the tables spread all over the highlands.

It sure reminded me of a rooftop beer garden in a department store... By now, we were almost as big... Just how many people were they planning to accommodate...? Nothing about it felt like a “cute café in the highlands” anymore.

That would've been fine on its own, but it was way too different conceptually from the small, stylish café I originally wanted—it had suddenly transformed into a branch of some major chain.

“It sure is loud... I can’t photosynthesize like this...” Sandra burrowed through the earth and popped up beside me.

“Sorry. The scale of the whole operation’s gotten bigger than I imagined.”

“Hmph. Well, I guess it’s fine if it’s just once a year.”

Sandra sullenly watched the construction for a bit, but then she went off somewhere else. It looked like she had wanted to say something.

Then Laika and Halkara came back. “We’ve placed advertisements for the Witch’s House Café in the surrounding towns!”

The two had gone out to advertise the opening of the café on the day before the Dance Festival.

“Just as you said, we even made sure to place the ads in the faraway towns, although they probably won’t come all this way. I think our range is too wide...”

Laika was uncertain, but I personally believed the range was just right.

“Look how many chairs there are. It’d be sad if they were all empty. With our demon backups, we can do anything, so let’s just give it our all.”



And so came the day of the Witch’s House Café—is what I want to say, but things were

getting weird even the day before.

When Laika went to scout, she found that Flatta was overflowing with people.

I mean, it wasn't too strange for people to arrive a little before the Dance Festival, so there were some stalls out in town the day before the café opened—two days before the main event.

But this was nothing like how it was before.

She reported that the small inns were so overcrowded, people were even sleeping in the halls.

Not only that, but there were also plenty of other people who were starting to camp outside in empty lots.

According to Halkara, Flatta's neighboring town of Nascúte was also flooded with people arriving in large carriages.

I could already imagine what the big day would be like.

It was early in the morning on café day: five AM.

I'd had a bad feeling about all this, so I went to bed early the night before and woke up at 4:50. And I made sure the rest of the family got to sleep early, too.

I stepped outside, and my feeling was right on the money.

A strange line had already formed, and it went on for so long, I couldn't see the end of it. If it got any longer, it would actually reach all the way to Flatta...

"Can we even handle this...?"

Maybe we shouldn't have announced our opening? No, that wasn't the problem. We wouldn't have had this many people if that was all we did.

It was probably because the word of mouth from last year's customers was very powerful.

"It seems our fight has already begun," I heard Beelzebub say from behind me.

She had already changed into her waitress uniform. She was ready to go.

"Leave this to us. We will treat this as a day on the job, so we will do our work properly." Fatla appeared then, too. Yeah, I guess this was their job. "I will now go wake up Vania, so we should be able to start working at five thirty. We can have breakfast service as well."

Wait—sure, some cafés in Japan opened at five or six in the morning, and some people would go to those places every day to have breakfast before work, but that's not our kind of café!

I didn't want to make it a local mom-and-pop, hole-in-the-wall spot... I wanted a stylish café...

But that wouldn't happen anyway, since we were already big enough to be a beer garden...

"But we can't keep all these people waiting the whole time... I guess we have no choice but to open at seven or so... We'll take breaks when we need to..."

"All right! Leave it to us! The Demon's House Café shall flourish!"

"Erm... What did you just say?"

"The Demon's House Café... Ohhh, right, it was the Witch's House, wasn't it?"

She didn't even realize she was taking over!

"Doesn't matter! Just go for it! As long as our customers are happy, that's good enough!"

I made up my mind.

First, I would wake the rest of the sleeping family at six. But everyone except Flatorte was already up by six anyway.

Even Sandra came into the dining room.

"Well, do your best. I'll just watch the animals slave away."

“I guess we’re all animals from a plant’s point of view...”

“I won’t mind if you leave me alone today, so just do your job,” Sandra said, opening a children’s book.

Her words were condescending, but her support was genuine.

Okay, time to begin this year’s Witch’s House Café!

WE OPENED THE CAFÉ AGAIN

We each went to our positions.

I was the chief, in charge of supervising the whole operation and giving orders. When things got this big, there had to be a general director around, otherwise things would get messy.

I first went to the entrance of our shop and found Fatla seating the guests.

"How may I help you? All right, how many are in your party? Three, I see. Then please use a table inside the building. We ask that you be finished within ninety minutes once things start getting busy; I hope that's all right with you. Okay then, please follow me."

She was treating it like a diner...

But I guess she had no choice but to deal with them in an impersonal manner. Otherwise the numbers would be unmanageable.

The customers were led inside, where Rosalie was waiting for them with cups of water floating in her hands.

"Here's your water. Once you've decided what to order, please ring this little bell, and I'll send over an available member of the waitstaff. Ghosts have great hearing, so it'll be loud enough."

There were even call buttons installed. It was becoming more and more like a diner...

Despite the early-morning hour, the tables inside rapidly filled up, and the outside seating was steadily filling up, too.

It didn't seem like one full turnover of guests would be enough to relieve the line. The customers weren't complaining, though, since they were expecting a much later opening.

And as for the kitchen, it was utter chaos.

Laika and Flatorte were concentrating on nothing but cooking. Vania was preparing ingredients a little ways away from them.

The portions they usually made at home were so small compared to what they had to make now.

“Please pass the carrots!”

“Do it yourself! I’m also busy cutting cabbage here! Oh, give me the bacon!”

“When you won’t even give me the carrots? Please just be responsible for once!”

“Ooooh! This is why I hate red dragons!”

The two were snarling at each other. Maybe it was a bad idea to put them together...

“No matter what, mine will be much better than whatever you cook up, Laika!”

“And you’ll see that my food will be much more delicious than yours!”

...But on the other hand, they’d started competing with each other, so maybe this was okay?

“Hmph! I’ll sneak a bug into your food if I have to!”

I slid right over behind Flatorte. “I heard that, Flatorte. Do you want to say that again?”

“U-uh... It was a joke, Mistress... Of course I wouldn’t do anything to harm our customers... Ha-ha-ha...”

I was right to keep an eye on them.

“And if you two actually start fighting, you’ll be eating very healthy, vegetable-filled meals for three days straight as punishment.”

“You can’t! A meal without meat is like a river without water!” Laika cried.

Meat really was important to them...

“Then you two need to concentrate. The orders will start pouring in soon, so be ready.”

"Cooking food is also like training. I will not lose!" Laika was brimming with motivation. She didn't have to think of it as training, though.

My daughters were also putting in their best efforts in their own way. Actually, they really hit the ground running for us.

"I'll repeat your order! Two onion soups and two rye rolls with cheese, as well as five edible slimes! Thank you! Please wait a moment!" Falfa made no mistakes, apparently aspiring to work in a real store someday. "Order coming in! Two onions, two ryes, five slimes!"

I could hear Laika shouting "With pleasure!" from the kitchen.

Please don't say that! You sound like an overly energetic old bartender!

Shalsha wasn't very good at dealing with customers, so she was concentrating on clearing the tables. But I could still tell that she wanted to do more.

"Efficiency, concentrate on efficiency... If I put the plates here, I can save three seconds on each one..."

She was sounding like someone from restaurant corporate...

So I was back at the tables.

"Oh, recommendations? I'd recommend everything we have to offer! We have sourced a very delicious chicken, if I might add, and the flavor simply spreads through your whole mouth!"

It was hard to imagine who the voice belonged to given how she usually acted, but it was Beelzebub. She was a fantastic employee who even changed her manner of speech when she was dealing with customers.

But there was also another girl who was taking it ten steps too far.

"Here we go! Say it with me! Abracadabra, become deeelicious~!"

Pecora was doing what you'd commonly see in maid cafés. She even made a heart

shape with her hands, sending delicious light beams (not really, I just made that up) onto the food.

“Oh? Where I live? It’s rather far from here~ My family has a bit of money, so I’m free to live however I want, really~”

You’re not just rich! You’re a monarch!

Pecora was thoroughly enjoying herself. I guess taking up a role you normally wouldn’t was its own kind of fun.

And then, smoke quietly rose from a spot outside.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d think it was a fire or wildfire, but it was neither.

It was Vania’s outdoor kitchen.

“Here we go! I’ll begin cooking the steak! Yeah, yeah!”

A flame burst up from a large griddle. She probably brought that in. It didn’t belong to our house, at least. Or any other common house.

Vania quickly chopped the cooked meat into slices.

“There we go! The steak is finished!”

The customers watching from their seats applauded.

This is just like a teppanyaki restaurant!

This whole thing was pure chaos. It wasn’t a café anymore, at least.

But, well, the customers were clearly happy with what we had, so I guess it was fine...

Until something else soon came to my attention.

It was almost time for the first round of guests to finish up their meals and head home. All the plates would come back at once, so would the washing place be able to handle

it...?

It wasn't like we had someone dedicated to washing dishes. I'd have to do it when it came down to it.

I rushed back to the washing area.

And there I found someone cleaning off the dishes with great speed.

Not only that, but the clean dishes were wiped dry with a flash, then placed in a neat row. All of them were immediately usable.



We had a master managing it all on her own: the ex-slime Fighsly.

"Oh, Miss Azusa, wonderful work so far! No matter how much silverware comes my way, I can handle it all with my Fighsly-style dishwashing technique!"

"But this has nothing to do with martial arts."

I don't think you can just add on "Fighsly-style" to everything.

"Phew, I'm quite confident, since I've been washing dishes for such a long time."

Her hands moved as she spoke, with no wasted movement, and the plates she wiped dry glinted like new.

That was the result of a thorough (if very quick) washing.

It seemed Fighsly was okay handling it by herself.

"How did you learn to do this? Were you inspired by the power of the waterfall as you meditated under it?"

"Back when I was first able to preserve my human form, I invented this process when I had no money."

What did that have to do with being poor?

"See, if you go into a restaurant without any money, you can't pay for food and drink, right? So I was allowed to wash dishes for food."

"That has nothing to do with martial arts!"

"When you exercise doing the martial arts, you need to eat quite a lot in order to preserve your body. You mustn't skimp out on meals if you want to build a strong body!"

What she was saying was true, but it didn't quite click with me.

"The trick is to eat and drink as much as you can without worrying about how much it'll cost. If you think too much about how much money you don't have, it'll show in your attitude. And then people will start to suspect that you're broke and stop feeding

you."

I didn't want to know this trick.

"Once I've eaten it, it's in my stomach. Then, when you say you're out of money but can wash the dishes, they'll give in."

"So you're a serial thief."

She was almost defiant about this.

But still, the skills from her experience were working very well for us.

Halkara came into the kitchen.

"Miss Laika, it's almost time for us to switch. Please take care of the hall."

"A-all right. I-I'll do my best..."

Laika seemed very uneasy. *Maybe I should check on her.*

I saw the issue right away.

The moment Laika entered the hall, all the customers turned to look at her, and that wasn't even the worst of it. When she went outside, they stood and started trying to get close.

"This is the beauty!"

"I heard the rumors, but..."

"Laika! Laika, please look this way!"

"I can't believe it! I saw her in person!"

"She's sooooo cute!"

They were acting like they just saw a famous foreign celebrity!

"P-please stop... I-I'm not cute or anything like that... You're all mistaken..."

Yeah, I have to disagree. You're cute. Super-adorable.

And the way she acted all embarrassed just made her even cuter.

But I didn't think it'd escalate this far...

"I heard in the imperial capital that the most beautiful girl in the world was here, and it was true."

"I must write this down in my log."

"She should enter the Royal Beauty Contest."

Things were getting more and more serious...

I don't know what else to say, Laika, except that I'm sorry... It's just for a day, so hang in there...

There were a few problems here and there, but the Witch's House Café was going as planned.

All we needed to do was keep on keeping on until closing.

There was a line, as always, but—

"Please write down the name of your representative and the number of people in your party. If you are not here when I call for you, I will go ahead and call on the next group. Thank you for your cooperation."

Fatla managed the line appropriately, so there wasn't any trouble there.

As I wiped tables and walked around checking on everything, I made sure it all was running smoothly, but my input wasn't really needed.

It was my turn for a break, so I returned to the dining room in the house.

We weren't using this for the café; this was the family's spot for relaxation.

Sandra lay sprawled out on the dining room floor reading a book. She should probably use a chair, but she was still a kid—and a plant, at that. I didn't need to be strict with her.

"What, break time?" Sandra's gaze turned to me.

"Yep. Everything's running smoothly, so we just need to keep this going until closing."

We were fine, since this happened only once a year, but it must be really hard for restaurants that did this all day every day they were open. I could never do that.

After hearing my response, Sandra appeared to make a slightly sad face.

"I see. You managed to really get it going well. I'm impressed."

Oh, I saw this coming.

I went into my room and quietly brought back to the dining room something I'd prepared beforehand.

"Sandra, if you want, do you think you could join us for a bit in the hall? It'd be a big help, since the others could take more breaks."

Sandra's head shot straight up. I could tell straightaway by her expression that she was interested.

So she was a sweet-and-sour girl—or maybe she just wasn't very good at honestly expressing how she felt. I'd have to support and encourage her from now on.

But her expression cooled again, and her usual indifference returned.

"But I don't have a waitress outfit, do I? I'd be the odd one out. I'd just look like a special guest..."

She basically meant she wanted to dress like the others.

Man, am I glad I had this made. I presented her with a mini waitress outfit just for her.

"Ta-da! I made sure to ask for one when I ordered Flatorte's outfit!"

I could see Sandra's eyes sparkling. This was one of those moments when she had the pure look of a child.

"Th-then I guess... I suppose I can help..."

"Yes please!"

When Sandra emerged, a stir ran through the customers.

"Who's that little one?!"

"I was hoping we'd see a new face!"

The shop was filled with excitable people...

Sandra handled things a little clumsily, but she was doing her best at the jobs she had been given.

Even the customers watching her were giving their support.

This year's Witch's House Café was another huge success for sure.



The last customer went home after seven in the evening, and the operations of the Witch's House Café ended without incident.

There was steak on the menu and various other elements that made the label of "café" a little questionable, but I guess some cafés could serve some unusual dishes.

““Cheeeeers!””

It was too small in the dining room, so we pushed together some tables outside and held our finishing celebration.

Some of us couldn't eat or drink, but, well, the act of making a toast itself was an important ritual.

"The best drinks are the ones after work!"

Beelzebub gulped down her drink. But this wasn't work for her—she'd even taken time off to come here. Curious.

Still, it wasn't hard to find people back in Japan who would climb mountains on their days off, so maybe it wasn't a problem as long as they wanted to do these things.

"It sure was nice running a store~ I believe I did my 'Become deeelicious' at least thirty times."

The demon king sure was open when it came to this.

The leviathan sisters were guzzling down their alcohol with gusto. These two *had* come here for work.

Fighsly was very carefully counting the number of coins; maybe those were her earnings from the part-time job. She may be a martial artist, but she wasn't choosy about work.

Laika and Flatorte were chatting about this and that as they drank. I knew they were close.

The rest of the family was asleep.

Even Rosalie was asleep, and she didn't need sleep.

According to her, she'd exhausted herself carrying cups and dishes all day. I guess ghosts got tired, too.

Halkara had quickly fallen asleep long before she could drink this time.

Most of us were early risers, so that affected us, too.

My daughters and Sandra were all snoring softly.

It wore us out, but doing the café was the right thing.

The more people we had, the bond we felt as a family would get weaker and weaker. Not that it would put us all on bad terms, but... it would get harder for us to do things as a family like this. For example, going on a trip with a family of three was way easier than with a family of ten. The more people there were, the harder it was to do things

together.

But at the same time, it would be sad if we just ended up being a group of people who happened to live in the same building.

Maybe opening up a shop with everyone was perfect for times like that. As long as the Dance Festival kept coming back, we could open our shop the day before the festival and treat it as a semipermanent annual event.

I moved over to the leviathan sisters to show my appreciation.

It was all thanks to the demons' help that we could handle such a large group of customers that whole time.

"Thanks. It ended up turning into a huge project instead of being just for fun, but thanks for all your help."

"Certainly. It's our job, after all. The agricultural secretaries have a long list of duties," the serious Fatla responded. Okay, no matter how I looked at it, this was not secretarial work.

"It reminded me of when I was a student. It was a lot of fun!" Vania said, and I realized something.

That's right—getting together and doing something with a group like this only really ever happened in school.

When I lived as a corporate slave, I kept to myself and only grappled with the work in front of me. I hadn't gotten together with other people and worked with them to accomplish something in a very long time.

"Yeah, I guess that's what festivals are for. Everyone can get together and cut loose because it's a festival."

If someone from the village suddenly pointed to a day on the calendar and commanded everyone to make merry on that date, it wouldn't be very effective. Friends would just show up, and that's it.

But everyone naturally worked together for a festival. Plus, they made sure it would be as enjoyable as it should be.

I wanted to have a festival with my friends and family.

“You’ve gotten a little smarter, Vania.”

“Huh?” She looked at me with wide eyes.

Pecora rolled onto the grass and spread out her arms and legs. That wasn’t how the demon king was supposed to act, but she still seemed to be having a good time.

“Ahhh~ Sometimes it’s nice to do work that the lowly people do~”

“Don’t call us ‘lowly.’” I sat down next to her.

“Elder Sister, there’s no physical work for the demon king to do, don’t you know? I’ll be out of shape if I don’t get some exercise.”

“You might be right. It’s not really interesting if you’re only ever giving orders.”

“So you must hold another event. I will plan for it as much as I can!” Pecora sat up and leaned onto me like a playful cat.

“I’ll do what I can. I haven’t picked anything out in particular to do yet, though.”

“No need to sound so bureaucratic~ Promise me as my big sister!”

“Yeah, all right, all right.” I patted her head.

“Ooh, you’re treating me so nicely... You’ve been much more composed lately, Elder Sister, so there’s no point in teasing you...”

She was complaining, so maybe her earlier comment was an attempt to mess with me.

As her big sister, I had to reprimand her and patted her on the head even more.

“He-he-he~ Elder Sister’s affectionate touch~ She’s chastising me~”

“You have such weird tastes...”

Then Beelzebub came over with a flushed face. She drank often, but she held her liquor well enough not to black out. “Well, well, look at you two.”

“Beelzebub, do something about your boss. She’s in my way.”

“Your Majesty, we have many more things to do tomorrow, so perhaps it would be best if you leave it at this.”

Something Beelzebub said caught my attention.

Many more things to do tomorrow? What does that mean...?

The Dance Festival was tomorrow, of course...

“You’re right. I suppose that should be enough for today, so I may get ready for tomorrow. He-he-he~”

Pecora finally stood and skipped over to drink some water to sober herself up.

That day, we let the demons use our guesthouse and spare rooms, and we all stayed the night in the house in the highlands. We were practically like an inn.

“We could even pull off the Witch’s House Inn. No, that would be way too much work, so let’s not...”



THE DEMONS ALSO JOINED THE DANCE FESTIVAL

The following morning, we had breakfast in the shared space in the log house area, since there were so many of us.

This was the part of my house that we remodeled after Laika destroyed it a long time ago. It was directly connected to the original house.

It was much larger in terms of square footage, and we used most of the private bedrooms in this house. But for regular meals, we used the original dining room, which was right next to the kitchen.

We only really ever used this large shared space for things like the café, but it was perfect for this number of people.

Sandra was there even before I called her in. She didn't like being aloof; she wanted to be with everyone.

"I've come to observe the animals eat."

I wanted her to stop lumping us all together by calling us "animals," though.

"Sure, if that's what you say."

"That's all it is, Azusa."

And then she went and sat on my lap. Totally just like a child.

Falfa and Shalsha were too well-behaved, so it was fine having a rash girl like this.

"You helped us a lot yesterday, Sandra."

"Yes, thank you very much," said Laika.

"Good job, kid!" Halkara added.

"W-well, y'see... That was nothing... Absolutely no big deal..."

She wasn't threatening the other family members (who weren't me) today, either.

Maybe her rough edges were smoothing out. I hoped so.

And the person in charge of food today was a special one, since we had so many people.

"Phew! It was worth cooking so much! It put my skills to the test!"

And so began Vania's full-blown breakfast. High-class dishes you'd see at a fancy hotel came out one after the other. It was almost too much for this early in the morning.

Of course, humans with regular stomachs like myself and my daughters couldn't eat very much, but the two dragons munched away happily. The demons easily downed all this food as well.

"Oh my, Elder Sister, you're not much of an eater. Do you not have an appetite?"

Pecora was clearly smaller than me, but she was eating way more.

"Where does all that food go in your body...?"

"Now that you mention it, I've heard that demons tend to eat much more than humans do, since their metabolism is so fast. But it varies from person to person."

I didn't know if it was true, but both Beelzebub and Fatla were completely unperturbed as they chowed down on the greasy meat dishes so early in the morning. There was no questioning that they were big eaters.

"Aww, having a big family is so nice~" Rosalie said with great emotion as she floated above the table.

She had committed suicide after being betrayed by her family and had turned into a ghost, so maybe a harmonious family like this was her ideal.

"I have nothing to regret now... I've been able to stay smiling ever since I came here..."

That's weird; Rosalie's starting to fade away!

“Hey! You can’t be at peace now! Where would that leave us?!”

It’d be like we killed her! I’d hate to lose a family member.

“I don’t want to disappear, either, so I’ll think about my pent-up resentment from the past and get through this!”

I wasn’t sure if Rosalie’s determination was more forward facing or backward facing...

I thought the breakfast we had that day was the best one we’d ever had.

“Let’s go to the Dance Festival together, Elder Sister,” Pecora said as she came to my side.

Sandra made a little scowl. Mandragoras didn’t fear the demon king, either.

“Sure. Not going isn’t really an option, so of course I’ll go. But compared to how big the festival in the castle town was, this will be hilariously small.”

I wasn’t sure if Pecora would be satisfied by a little rural festival.

“He-he-he~ Perhaps this year’s festival might be a little over-the-top~”

The deviousness in her expression worried me.

“What are you plotting...?”

Meanwhile, Beelzebub said to my daughters, “Here’s a little something for the festival,” and gave them money. She was exactly like an aunt who fawned over her nieces.

But if all of us went to the festival like this, we’d stand out like sore thumbs. On the other hand, we already stood out, so maybe it didn’t matter that much...

“By the way, Sandra, are you coming to the festival?”

“I suppose I can accompany you.”

I had to be the one to ask her; she was a tough one to deal with.



Our little troupe went down to Flatta, and there we found that someone had been scheming.

WELCOME, GREAT WITCH OF THE HIGHLANDS AND COMPANY!

There was an enormous gate with words written across the top.

“Oh no... This is embarrassing... Who in the village came up with this...?”

We passed through the gate, and people who spotted us started yelling, “Long live the great Witch of the Highlands!” and “I went to the café yesterday!”

“Oh my, you are quite popular, Elder Sister~♪” Pecora was holding my hand tightly as we walked.

This was apparently the pseudosister style.

I didn’t know if it was real or not, but I just went along with it to avoid causing trouble for myself.

My other hand was holding Sandra’s, just to make sure she didn’t get separated from us.

“You’re walking too fast. Slow down a little bit,” she said.

“Sure. I’ll follow your lead.”

I’d fallen in step with Pecora at some point.

“Elder Sister, we’re walking a bit slowly, so why don’t we speed up a little?” And now Pecora was saying the exact opposite!

“What’s with you? You’re annoying. Grrr!” Sandra threatened Pecora. She was growling at the demon king!

“Is the little one in her rebellious phase? If you’re having trouble raising her, just let me know. I know a good nursery~”

Pecora wasn't angry, but her eyes weren't smiling.

A strange battle was breaking out between the two...

Getting too involved would just create more trouble, so I'll concentrate on the festival. Yep, that's what I'll do.

I noticed something right away.

There were clearly many more stalls than last year.

—And among the ones running the stalls, there sure were a lot of demons...

“Pecora, Beelzebub, what did you do?”

There was no questioning the looks of proud success on their faces.

“We negotiated with the village for permission to set up stalls,” said Beelzebub. “This is perhaps the greatest number of stalls in any festival in the Nanterre province. It will liven up the celebration, no?”

Flatta's festival was being supported by demons!

“Indeed. We must soon start thinking about our peace with the humans, so we decided to use Flatta as our model case. ↪”

Their intentions sounded honest, but they were probably most likely doing it because it was fun.

“*Sigh...* Just don't go overboard... You guys sometimes don't know where to stop...”

“Yes. We won't go overboard. Oh, that shop belongs to an acquaintance of yours, Elder Sister.”

I could see a banner advertising the shop of Eno, Witch of the Grotto, in the distance.

“Oh, she's at it again.”

As we got closer, I could hear Eno's spiel.

“Today we not only have our hit product, Mandragora pills, but every kind of product available! Collect all of them, each one created using our secret techniques! Starting now, for the next thirty minutes, and only the next thirty minutes, any purchase you make will be accompanied by three free bottles of Forest Elixir!”

She was offering freebies like something out of an infomercial! I had a feeling that she'd gotten better at selling than she was before... She was already singing to a much more lucrative tune.

“Mandragora pills are recognized by the great Witch of the Highlands! The people of Flatta must purchase them! They have even saved the great Witch’s life!”

And she was name-dropping me in her advertisement!

It wasn’t an exaggeration, either. A Mandragora pill saved me when I shrank after eating a poisonous mushroom...

“You’re having fun with life, aren’t you, Eno?”

When I showed up, Eno immediately snapped to attention. Apparently, she sensed a hierarchical relationship between us when it came to this stuff.

“I’m so sorry for causing you so much trouble the other day, Miss...”

Ah, the mandragora incident.

Sandra got ready to fight her off if she had to.

“Grrr! Grrr! Woof, woof! Mrow! Aroooo!”

Those were all animal noises!

Plants didn’t exactly have characteristic noises, so I guess she just borrowed them from animals...

“Oh, I’m not going to hunt you anymore, so you’ll be all right. I don’t have the courage to earnestly pick a fight with Miss Azusa!”

“I’ll choose to believe you. You’re here because the demons approached you about it, didn’t they?”

"Yes, they did. I wondered if I could make any profit in such a remote place, but they insisted they would pay me, so I came."

Flatta was a remote countryside village. It had its perks.

"I think plenty of other people have come here as well," Eno said. "Like her."

There I saw a banner that read GAME TOURNAMENT NOW.

"Oh, Pondeli's here."

This was turning into a reunion...

Before I knew it, Sandra and my daughters were already heading toward the game banner.

Pecora and Beelzebub had disappeared, too.

They were just taking their own course. The two sure liked to act on their whims...

But Laika and Flatorte had broken away and were buying a bunch of food somewhere else, so my family was no different. Flatta was so tiny that getting separated wouldn't create any problems, at least.

"We're selling here in the human lands for the first time! We have every game! We will have a board-game tournament starting in ten minutes, so be sure to stick around for that!"

Pondeli had a large area with many games on display.

The villagers and visitors from surrounding towns looked on curiously, and the children were quickly enraptured with the trial games she had out.

"Hey, it's been a while. I'm guessing the demons called you in, too."

"Oh, Azusa! I've published several new games, so I came to introduce them." This ex-graveyard security (read: NEET) catperson undead was full of life, too. "This is my new work, a game called Search for the Undead."

She showed me several cards. The name definitely sounded like something an undead would make.

"The players take on the role of the character on the card they pull. One of the characters is the undead, so the players negotiate every turn to decide on who might've turned. Then they execute them. On every turn for the undead, they pick one of the villagers to attack and kill. There are several other special villager cards as well, but I'll spare you the explanation."

Haven't I heard of this game before...?

"I have a feeling it'll be an enormous hit. The psychological warfare could be fun. I hope I can spread the word!"

"Yeah, I think it'll be a hit, too. But why not make it a werewolf instead of an undead?"

"No. Making it undead helps me be more serious about it. I also thought of such complex rules by tapping into the feeling of being hunted."

Maybe she had been a NEET in Japan in her previous life...

"Oh, right. I heard a famous singer was here and that she'll be doing a performance. It should be starting soon at the stage in front of the town square."

I already knew what was going to happen. The one performing had to be—

Kuku the minstrel. It was like the demons called on everyone.

The kids were playing, so I decided I'd go there on my own.

I pressed through the crowd and made my way to the stage.

The village chief was acting as MC. The Dance Festival had gotten pretty big thanks to the participation of all these new parties, so he was trying to help as one more familiar with the locals.

"Wow, I'm so happy to see such an unparalleled success at this year's festival. Next we will have what sounds like a famous singer from the capital."

Yeah, I know. It's Kuku.

"The girl who is immensely popular for her idol-style performance: Pecora!"

"Whaaaaat?!"

I wasn't ready for that!

Pecora stepped up to the stage in that idol outfit of hers. "Hellooo! It's Pecora! I'm joining the Dance Festival today to become the bridge between the demon and human worlds!"

I could hear innocent cheers coming from the villagers in the audience.

"She's so cuuuute!"

"Pecoraaa!"

You guys know she's the demon king, right...? You know the girl up there is a big deal, right?

"I've opened many stalls today to give your festival a shot of excitement! What do you think?!"

And then again, calls came from the audience.

"Yeeeah!"

"Only an important demon could do something like that, though, right?"

She was insanely important. The most important, actually.

"My dream is to be the demon king when I grow up!"

From the audience, I heard easygoing responses like, "I'm cheering for yooou!" as well as things like, "Wait, hasn't she come to the village before, calling herself the *actual* demon king?"

Either way, she is already the demon king, so unfortunately, all your support will go to waste...

I see... I knew she broke off from the group earlier, but not that this was why...

I saw that my family had also started cheering for Pecora, and among them were my daughters bouncing up and down.

"Miss Pecoraaaaaa! It's Falfaaaaa! Look this waaaaay!"

"I am feeling an urge to rock out."

It looked like they'd been naturally drawn to the big stage.

That was when Pecora spotted me, grinning. She was never satisfied until she'd played some kind of trick. As long as she didn't create actual trouble, she could do all she wanted. The affairs of demons were none of my concern.

"Here we go!"

Pecora's song was demonic, as it always was, and a little gory, but the poppy tune canceled that out—it wasn't bad at all.

The people of Flatta and the unfamiliar visitors from far away were super into it.

The village chief came to my side. "Wow, thanks to your café and your friends, this year's Dance Festival is the most exciting it's ever been. I truly thank you!"

He bowed deeply.

The café aside, I haven't helped with anything Pecora's done at all...

"The village has also gotten a lot of money, so our finances have benefited enormously. Thank you so much."

Well, as long as it livened up the town that had always taken good care of me, it was fine by me. I wouldn't want any developments that would make it too loud, though.

"Some of the things the demons do are out of my control, so if they're doing too much, then please tell me... They're typically a good-natured bunch, but they tend to operate on a larger scale than humans... Like, double, quadruple scale..."

"Understood. I will keep a cautious eye out for anything that could cause administrative

trouble. I am the chief, after all."

Now that I had his word, a good part of my responsibility lessened.

But the chief's power wouldn't be enough for everything, so I would have to keep a sharp eye out—

"And next we will have my elder sister, the Witch of the Highlands, up onstage!"

Pecora casually called me from the stage.

"Whaaaaaaaat?! I didn't know about this! I didn't hear anything about this!" I shouted back in protest.

"Of course. That's because I didn't tell you."

My little sister was playing around with me too much... I wanted her to be more well-mannered.

Not that I was very well-mannered myself, though...

Looks of anticipation all turned to me.

Nowhere to run.

"Fine... I'll do it..."

I gave an affected sigh and stepped up onto the stage.

It wasn't all that high off the ground, but I could pick out many people I knew.

I saw my family, of course, as well as the demon group of Beelzebub with the leviathan sisters and Fighsly, and Eno and Pondeli as well. In the distance, the droplet spirit Momma Yufufu was waving casually to me.

How did she even know to come here...?

“What do you think, Elder Sister? Don’t you think a festival is fun when you don’t know what’s going to happen next?”

“Pecora, you are devil-may-care in its most literal sense. So what do you want me to do?”

I didn’t know any songs. The most I could do was talk.

“To sing, of course!”

Pecora smiled like a real idol. I was sure she’d gain a number of fans if I brought her to the Japan I used to live in.

“Sure, but I don’t know any of your songs.”

“No need to worry about that. I’ll choose one you know.”

That number was practically zero, but that concern was quickly answered.

The person who appeared from offstage was—

Kuku, the almiraj minstrel.

“I haven’t seen you in a while, Azusa.” Kuku bowed, still holding her lute. Her long rabbit ears drooped downward.

“It’s been a while. I see; I get it now.”

I’d heard Kuku’s songs plenty of times when she practiced in our house, so I knew them to an extent.

“Will you sing along with me?”

“Yes. I might trip you up, but I’ll sing as best I can.”

The new Kuku was so calm. She had probably stood on enormous stages so many times since then, so a village festival was probably nothing to be nervous about for her.

“Here we go, then.”

Pecora and I sang along to Kuku's lute.

Even without microphones, our voices carried throughout the village. Before we knew it, the audience was singing along as well, and I felt then that all of us had become one.

Only two Dance Festivals ago, I'd been living on my own.

My life had drastically changed ever since the day I accidentally learned I'd maxed out my level.

At the pace things were going now, even more drastic changes were probably on the horizon.

But if I was to compare my three hundred years of the past and these (almost) two years, I could easily say with confidence that the latter had been much more delightful and fun.

I didn't mind my laid-back life on my own, but spending it with so many others was special.

This was all the result of slowly killing slimes, so I didn't know what I'd ever do without them. Still, there were slimes everywhere, so I didn't have to worry about that anytime soon.

It was different from last year's, but this year's Dance Festival was just as fantastic.



BONUS: A NEW INN OPENED IN TOWN



Since this year's Dance Festival brought in record-breaking numbers of tourists, the village of Flatta had apparently started talking about building a new inn.

I heard about it from Laika at home.

"I met the chief in the village today, and he asked me to come up with some ideas for an inn."

"I see. You'd be much more qualified to think about inn stuff than I would."

Near Laika's home with the other red dragons was a hot spring area. The place was full of inns, of course, so Laika should know a lot about it.

"Yes. Some of my very distant relatives run hot spring inns, and I might be able to provide input with regards to the inn's atmosphere."

She seemed rather happy. Finding genuine delight in helping other people was a sign of a pure heart, and I was happy that she was growing up to be such a good kid.

Then the three children of the house appeared: Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra.

"Falfa wants to give ideas, too! I'm good at playing store!"

I wasn't sure how it would turn out if she took it as a game, but—

"When she plays store, Big Sis's managerial sensibilities are subtle and keen. With her knowledge, I wouldn't be surprised if they called her the Cerberus of the lodging industry."

Cerberus of the lodging industry? Was that nickname supposed to be like "the mad dog of the martial arts world"?

"Why not just let her say what she wants? The people building the inn are making the decisions at the end of the day, right? It's the adults' fault if they put themselves in debt from taking a kid's suggestions seriously."

Sandra made a sound argument.

I hated sounding like a broken record, but she was the most childish-looking of them all. She'd probably get angry if I said that out loud, so I decided not to.

"Then you can do it—just don't be a bother."

"Okay! I'll make sure we turn a nice profit with attention to hospitality!" Falfa energetically raised her hand.

"Also, I've been asked to work on the construction of the inn," added Laika.

"Right, that's something you can take active part in."

With a dragon's power, the building could be finished in no time. Her help had turned the house in the highlands into what it was now.

"Got it. Then work hard, but not too hard. There's probably no need to worry, but if they are late in paying you, you tell me, okay?"

I didn't think it would happen in Flatta, but as a former corporate slave, I wanted to keep high standards for working conditions in my new life.

—A few days later... Really, only a few...

The inn was apparently already finished, and I received an invitation to see it.

Laika's help hadn't been for nothing.

And I, the Witch of the Highlands, had been called in. It was like opening a new theater. Maybe I was something akin to their guardian spirit.

I went and found a magnificent three-story building with a sign declaring it the FLATTA GRAND HOTEL.

"Ooooh, this is the biggest building in town..."

It was almost way *too* big for Flatta.

When I went inside, Laika was there waiting for me. “We’re ready for you, Lady Azusa. I will show you around.”

“Sure, thanks. This lobby is really tidy.”

This wasn’t an inn just for sleeping; there were even sofas next to reception so that people could relax.

“The rooms are also very high quality!” Laika was really enthusiastic about this.

All the rooms for guests were on the second and third floors. She first showed me a room on the second floor.

It was a simple yet stylish room, one that I could call “just fine” and have it be exactly what you expected. Both the bed and the desk were new, and sunlight filled the room. The smell of fresh wood was also comforting.

“I see. It’s like a chic boarding room you’d find in Karuizawa.”

“Karuizawa?”

“Oh, you can just ignore the place names.”

Suddenly, a round box sitting on the desk caught my eye.

“What’s in the box?”

“That is a suggestion of mine. Why don’t you look inside?”

I opened it, and inside were three familiar *manju* bun-looking sweets.

“These are the edible slimes I thought up!”

“Yes. We placed the edible slimes here to soothe our guests’ exhaustion with something sweet once they enter the room.”

I saw a little message card inside, so I picked it up.

Flatta's Local Confection: Edible Slimes



Edible slimes are sweets created by the Great Witch of the Highlands, who lives in the hills near the village. With their relaxing flavor, they are often part of everyday teatime for locals. They are also handy as a souvenir when traveling to faraway places.

*These sweets are for sale in the shop near reception.

This was totally in the style of a traditional Japanese hotel!

Laika sure was smart... I guess you just learned this stuff if you lived near a hot spring area... I never expected her to think of something like this...

"So there's a shop here in the inn, then?"

"Yes, we decided to set one up. It was Falfa's idea."

"That idea isn't just part of a game, then!"

Falfa was also giving it her all...

“The shop sells more than just edible slimes and leaf slimes—we also have preserved foods, like pickles, that are popular in this area. It takes a while for those to spoil, so we can keep them on sale for a long time.”

“Falfa really does have a manager’s eye... I’m sorry for treating it just like a game...”

“We also have wooden swords and metallic key chains with the name of the area engraved on them, as well as stationery sets with paintings of the local scenery.”

It was a real souvenir corner...

“Would you like to take a look at the shop? I can show you the large baths on the first floor while we’re there as well. Inns do need a large bathing space. They’re not hot springs, unfortunately.”

To Laika, inns and large communal baths went hand in hand.

“Got it. Then let’s head that way.”

The shop was a lot more like the kind you’d see in a traditional Japanese inn than I thought.

There were even Flatta butter cookies for sale—I didn’t know when she’d made those.

“Those four-packs of mini cupcakes used to have a very plain name, but Falfa suggested we change it to ‘I Visited Flatta,’ so we did.”

“That’s so touristy!”

“We have small sample bites in that little bowl over there, so please have a taste.”

We had little plastic containers for samples in Japan, too.

“Mmm, I’ve definitely tasted these somewhere before... I think that might’ve been at the Kinugawa hot springs or in Atami...”

Memories from three hundred years ago reached through time and space to replay in my mind!

“Kinugawa? Atami?”

“Oh, those are just place names. Don’t worry about it.”

“Then next, we have the baths.”

I didn’t expect any surprises in the baths, but on the way there, we passed a room that looked familiar.

The door said GAME ROOM.

Is this what I think it is...?

“Laika, I’m going to take a peek inside here first, okay?”

—When I opened the door, Falfa and Shalsha were playing pin-pone.

I knew it! That’s the game that’s almost exactly like ping-pong! It was even in the hot spring inn at Mount Rokko!

Sandra was acting as the referee.

“It’s nine to nine. Shalsha serves next.”

“Big Sis, try taking an underspin serve.”

“I’ll send it right back to you with a drive, Shalsha.”

And it was turning out to be a close match...

“Lady Azusa, we not only have pin-pone, but we also have an ayer hokey table here.”

“I feel like I’ve heard that name before...”

Farther into the room, the village chief and a villager were playing a game that strongly resembled air hockey.

They were hitting a thin disc back and forth on the table—it was *exactly* like air hockey.

“You always let it through when it comes in from an angle, Chief! You gettin’ old?”

“What?! I haven’t lost yet!”

I felt the urge to play for the first time in a long time. But more importantly, I wondered about its origin.

“Laika, is this ayer hokey game well-known among the dragon races, too?”

“Yes. People play it everywhere. When you insert a hundred gold for a game, the table creates a little wind magic that lets the disc slide around.”

That spell was way too convenient.

“I’ve got the gist of it now, so show me the baths...”

“Of course. I doubt anyone will be there at this time of day, so there should be no problem.”

That just sounded like foreshadowing to me, but I decided not to say anything.

“We could not construct an outdoor bath, so we separated the men’s and women’s baths.”

The entrances were set off by red and blue curtains.

“I see. For some reason, my memories of going to Kinugawa hot springs are coming back, even though I just hopped over to Flatta...”

We opened the door to the women’s bath.

There we found Flatorte, buck naked, hands in the air.

“Yesss! I can be naked and unashamed in here! Freedom!”

She seemed to be enjoying herself immensely.

I didn't even feel like snarking at her when I saw that smile. There was nothing better for a person than smiling.

But this was apparently unexpected for Laika.

"What are you doing here?! I don't remember calling you in!"

"I don't need your permission. You don't have to be a hotel guest to use the baths; you can just pay money for a day visit."

"Then at least put on some clothes!"

"But you're supposed to be naked in a bath! What's really against the rules is coming in with clothes on!"

I never thought the day would come when Flatorte was right!

"Urgh... I was just supposed to be showing Lady Azusa around..."

Having Flatorte refute her so soundly didn't sit very well with Laika. Her face was red.

I patted her on the shoulder. "We're already here, so why don't we join her? A daytime bath isn't so bad every once in a while."

"Y-yes, you're right... It's not bad at all..." Laika agreed, her face flushed with embarrassment. And that settled the matter.

"Oh, but we don't have any towels..."

"That's not a problem. Reception sells towels for a hundred gold each," Laika said, and a thought crossed my mind.

This is basically just Japan.

The End



* I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1500 Years,
and the Demon King Made Me a Minister *

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio



I WAS PROMOTED FROM **BOTTOM-TIER TO MINISTER**

My name is Beelzebub.

My name makes me sound important, but really, it's too important a name for me. It once belonged to a great demon of the past, and I was given that name, common as I am, so I may one day reach those same heights.

For the past 1,500 years, I've been quietly, plainly, and simply working as a public servant for the demon government.

The post I took was in the Agricultural Policy Organization, the lower branch of the Department of Agriculture.

To put it simply, it was the place that created projects and produced data for the country's agricultural administration. For 1,500 years, I was a clerk there—basically the lowest of the lowliest bureaucrats. You might believe my record was awful or that my attitude at work was terrible, but that wasn't true. I had stopped there intentionally.

Personnel prodded me, occasionally suggesting I become a manager at least, but I turned down every offer. I told them I didn't have those skills.

According to the rules governing public servants, if the person in question refuses a promotion, they are able to stay in their position. I could never be fired, because I was a government official!

I was going to live on lazily as a rank-and-file employee with no responsibilities!

Some people are suited for life in the fast lane, and some aren't. I was the latter. I didn't feel like summoning the drive to climb the bureaucratic ladder all the way to the top, nor did I feel like having a passionate affair.

It was far too much trouble, so I didn't have the confidence to establish a household, either.

And so I concentrated on working as the least important clerk—or, as they say, “the bottom tier.”

I didn’t even have the caliber to stand before people, much less to stand above them. I knew that best of all.

I wore clothes that were a little uglier than average, and my hair was pulled back only because it’d grown out and was bothering me. And although my eyesight was perfectly fine, I wore glasses to make me stand out even less.

I was just someone in the office. I was never a topic of workplace gossip, and if I disappeared, very little would change. Of course, the men I worked with would never even consider me as an object of romantic interest.

I’d managed to preserve my lifestyle of living in the shadows, undetected, for 1,500 years. It was my way of protecting myself.

My only miscalculation was that my coworkers always casually came to ask me for help because I was so plain, but I just endured it as an inevitable hardship.

You see, the frightening and domineering ladies stuck in middle management would never ask for help from the female employees beneath them. And a man always hesitated when it came to asking things from a beautiful, unmarried coworker. Someone else might be suspicious that he was interested in her. In that respect, I had no relation to office politics, and I was outside the fight for success.

Not only that, but with my nonexistent fashion sense, I appeared to have thrown away my femininity entirely.

Both men and women alike saw me as androgynous and approached me without hesitation.

And as a result, I turned into the one people came to when they were in trouble.

On my right, I would have an employee who didn’t know where the file room was, so I’d go with them to show them where it was; on my left, I would have someone frazzled by their boss’s very peculiar style requirements for any documents submitted, so I’d use my 1,500 years of career experience to help them.

I usually just got a piece of candy as thanks. For bigger jobs, I’d often get a drink at the

bar.

I mean, that was fine. I was totally okay with that, if the alternative was moving up in the ranks and being saddled with more responsibility.

And for that, I think I was pretty well-liked within the office.



My unrefined lifestyle would get even worse when I returned to my single apartment.

When I got home, I would immediately change into my roomy pajamas!

Then I'd lie on the floor!

And my shoes were dirty, so I took them off. "No shoes" was the rule in my house.

On the table would be empty bottles and cups of alcohol and nuts to snack on. The pile of books in the corner of my room was collapsing, but I hadn't put them back.

If a lady friend came, she'd retreat immediately, but honestly, I didn't have the courage to invite anyone here in the first place. I didn't even want to invite my family over.

But this tepid lifestyle suited me. My personality was perfect for these lazy, unchanging days.

I wasn't wrong. If I could live my long life with ease like this, I would consider it a victory. Perhaps one could call it my "win condition."



And wasn't it nice to just get drunk at home without anyone scolding you?

On the morning of my day off, the light streaming in through my run-down apartment woke me up. But—

“I stayed too long yesterday helping people. Maybe I should sleep a little more...”

That morning I fell back asleep, then finally woke up for real with bed head.

“What shall I do today? First I'll go to the restaurant with spicy hell pasta for brunch.”

That place offered large portions and allowed us to add extra spice for free during lunchtime.

“Then I'll pick something out from the bookstore—it looks like it's going to rain tonight, so I'll come back early, and I can just have the hell-pot and bread I made yesterday... I suppose I'm fine as long as I'm eating spicy food.”

Savoring the little things was a good way to live, in my opinion.

Sometimes I felt like the little things were too little, but big dreams would only leave me exhausted.

I was born as a daughter to greengrocers and spent some time helping with the store, and after I reached a suitable age for a long-lived demon, I took a test and became a civil servant. I was indifferent to the promotion ladder at that point. To be honest, I lacked any interest in moving up in the world, or in becoming important.

I yawned as I milled about Vanzeld Castle town.

As I walked along a market road, I saw a flyer:

CORONATION OF THE NEW DEMON KING ON THE XTH DAY OF THE XTH MONTH

Ah, indeed. It was finally time for the succession.

Now that the war with the humans had reached a cease-fire and the aftermath was mostly over, the demon king was apparently putting his daughter on the throne.

Her name is Provato Pecora Ariés, I believe.

I'd heard she was young and reform-oriented. Because of that, the people at the top of the organization were apprehensive that she might interfere with the status quo for the civil servants based on her whims.

When a new demon king was crowned, they often put the scalpel to the bureaucracy in order to freshen it up. The agricultural minister at the top of the department would probably change, but, well, that had nothing to do with me. I'd just go about my business quietly. There was no fight for power at the bottom. I didn't have any power to begin with.

I wolfed down my extra-large and extra-spicy pasta at my usual place.

A demon couple walked hand in hand in front of the bookstore. They were too lovey-dovey; they'd probably break up in six months. They should take more care so as not to deepen the inevitable wounds.

I sighed as I stored my warning away in my heart.

Some people out there just had brilliant lives.



And so coronation day for the new demon king came.

Us civil servants all attended to give praise to our new ruler up on the stage.

She was young. Far younger than I imagined.

The new demon king had a pair of sheeplike horns growing from the sides of her head and wore a black dress for the ceremony. She struck me as a well-raised girl, but she looked so much like a child that I heard voices of concern around me.

I understood their opinion; things could prove difficult if the demon king wasn't an

already battle-hardened individual, even if we weren't currently at war with the humans.

"I am the new demon king, Provato Pecora Ariés. I hope to work together with everyone to create an even better nation."

Her plain, generic general policy speech came to an end.

Still, if she could follow a template like that, she could at least keep the status quo. From the perspective of all the civil servants, that would be the most ideal—

And then.

The new demon king suddenly locked eyes with me.

I was standing way, way, way behind the agriculture minister, and yet it felt like she was looking directly at me. No, I had to be imagining things. The new demon king would never look at a low-level grunt like me. Our eyes had just happened to meet when she was scanning the audience.

"And now, I would like to announce each new cabinet minister~ I believe our new personnel will be more youthful than ever."

What she said was also something all too common.

The words meant she was breaking up the old ways, but it was normal to promote the powerful members of some faction somewhere.

If they had any interest, the minister would be selected from the same faction that supported the previous demon king, or possibly a different faction.

According to the rules, even someone of low standing could climb up to a higher position, but that was nothing but lip service to the idea. Every position at the top was and always had belonged to the privileged class. A noble title was necessary to be a minister, especially.

"First, our foreign minister shall be Nastas. Next, the home minister shall be Velts; the economic minister shall be Vector..."

She read names one after the other. It seemed the designated demons had no idea of

this announcement beforehand, so a few of them made victorious poses upon hearing their name.

Everyone seemed strong. If the war with the humans were still in progress, then they'd probably be dispatched to towers here and there as bosses.

The new demon king offered simple explanations for why she selected these first few people as ministers.

I paid no attention to it as I thought about who came from what faction.

She was appointing ministers from all different factions. Maybe that meant the new demon king's authority was weak.

"Now, I shall return to the personnel. The labor minister shall be Chanoir; the health minister shall be Mix..."

The rank-and-file workers weren't interested at all. Many people around me started yawning. None of it affected us personally, after all.

"...The agriculture minister shall be Beelzebub..."

At first, I didn't really understand what she said.

Actually, it might be more apt to say that I ignored it. This couldn't have to do with me.

Beelzebub was the name of a great demon from the past, so it wouldn't have been strange to hear of other civil servants with the same name. It was probably someone else, someone important in the agricultural department.

But all my coworkers standing in front of me turned around to look at me with blatant disbelief.

"Wait, can she do that?"

"How many ranks are you going up?"

Everyone was thinking I was going to be the agricultural minister...

"Wait, wait! This has to be a mistake! I've always been at the bottom; I can't be the minister!" I cried with conviction.

Such a personnel shift was unthinkable!

But the new demon king continued with her explanation.

"Beelzebub has worked dependably for one thousand, five hundred years in agricultural policy. She has also helped many of her coworkers and is extraordinarily popular. In the past, we received many comments in the suggestion box requesting she be placed in an important post. And yet, she herself never boasted about it, working for years as an unsung hero. I believe the time has finally come to raise her into a position of authority."

The new demon king replied with a lengthy and unbelievable explanation. Perhaps she was just trying to catch everyone by surprise with a sensational cabinet selection because she was young, but I wouldn't be part of this!

Once I took on the position of minister, a colossal amount of work would be waiting for me. I certainly wouldn't be able to continue the easy life I had now. My humble delights would crumble to dust...

I would not stand for this.

I leaped out of my row.

"I am Beelzebub! Your Majesty, I don't think this assignment will be possible!"

It was a rude thing to do to the demon king, but desperate times called for desperate measures, and no one was coming to stop me.

The new demon king looked down at me playfully from the stage. I could see on her face that she had predicted this very reaction.

Which meant I hadn't been imagining it when I thought our eyes met...

"It seems you are not satisfied with the situation," the new demon king said to me, blatantly ignoring our difference in status.

I wanted to applaud her for her frank tone, but my promotion was what was at stake here.

“Of course I’m not! The minister’s post is for a person who is already important! Someone fourth or fifth in the pecking order may end up becoming a minister, but there’s still no precedent for bottom-tier trash like me to take the position!”

I hadn’t been working for 1,500 years for show. I *knew* this was unprecedented.

“I see. What you say is correct. Then I will answer your question.” It wasn’t like the new demon king was using any kind of voice-enhancing magic, but it still carried really well. “You’ve been serving for one thousand, five hundred years; is that correct?”

“Yes. I was originally helping out with my parents’ greengrocery, so I only took and passed the civil service exam after I turned one thousand. And for the fifteen hundred years since then, I’ve been working where I am now.”

I wondered why I had to give my life story in front of everyone, but if this was going to create a scandal and make it clear that I shouldn’t be promoted that far up, then that was reasonable to me.

“So you’ve been working for the current public Agricultural Policy Organization for fifteen hundred years, Beelzebub. In that case, it should’ve been impossible for you to remain at an entry-level position this whole time. Yet there’s no record of you having been demoted.”

“I’ve turned down every offer of promotion because it would be beyond my abilities.”

My job was to just complete the tasks that came down to me from the top, no thought required. I’d always be in a position for others to use me, but I wouldn’t have to take on any heavy responsibility.

I could hear the other bureaus: “Someone’s been at the bottom for fifteen hundred years?” and “I guess that’s not a post that comes with a fixed term.”

It was true; the way I worked was not a common trick.

This might’ve been difficult to pull off if I were human, but demons were long-lived, and with my youthful looks, my low position wouldn’t seem strange.

“Indeed, and so I’ve calculated to see what would’ve happened if you had been continually promoted with your grades. Please look at this.”

A plan written on a large poster unfurled next to the new demon king—she must’ve had this ready beforehand.

“Taking into account your service record, service history, and reputation among your bosses and colleagues, you have accumulated results that prove there would be no problem if you became minister. Congratulations!”

“Wh-wh-wha...?”

I wanted to believe it was a dream and softly pinched my left arm.

Ow.

Around me, I could hear comments:

“I see. Making a big jump after raising your reputation by working hard for a very long time on the bottom is one way to do it.”

“Maybe it’s like trying to become the strongest by only killing slimes.”

Wait, wait, wait—why are they okay with this...?

The new demon king placed her right hand against her right cheek and sighed theatrically.

“*Sigh~* I also thought of a more orthodox personnel selection, but we discovered corruption as well as embezzlement from both the vice minister and employees in similar posts, so we asked them to resign~ I was truly lost as to who I should make the minister of agriculture~”

How far would
Beelzebub have gotten
if she had been promoted?



The new demon king eyed me again, chuckling softly.

Oh, so she's a prankster...

This was just a big experiment using me, a low-ranking employee...

Give me a break! I don't want to be your guinea pig!

"Then I thought that perhaps this was our chance to use someone who'd spent their career at the bottom and yet maintained an excellent reputation."

After she said that, the other bureaucrats around me offered more comments.

"Ohhh, I get it now."

"That's one way of going about it."

Why are you okay with this?!

Calm down; calm down. I'll be doing just what the new demon king wants if I get worked up here.

I was still a civil servant, so I should calmly refuse the offer as was afforded in the rules.

"Your Majesty, in this instance, I would respectfully recommend that I remain a low-level employee."

I bowed my head politely and folded my wings. They had spread in my excitement, and it'd be rude to keep them out.

"Oh, no. It's normal to appoint people who've shown great achievements."

"However, I'm the daughter of a humble greengrocer in the countryside. What I want to say is, I don't have any noble status or any similar rank. It has been the long-standing practice that those of noble standing take the position of minister. I am completely undeserving of this post, and I am terribly sorry to say that I can't accept it."

Despite how quickly the bureaucratic organization had developed in the past two thousand years, there were still slight traces of the class system among the demons.

Depending on the era, minister-level demons would sometimes command their subordinates to carry out massive wars against the humans, so it required someone with a rank worthy of such responsibility.

“I see now. What a pickle~”

“Yes, so if you would kindly choose someone else to—”

“Then I will give you an empty manor belonging to a former noble family. And I will also give you a title. You may introduce yourself as Lady Beelzebub. Problem solved.”

“.....What?”

She decided on that far too easily...

Then the new demon king stepped down from the stage and for some reason started walking toward me.

The civil servants on either side of her naturally parted the way for her. I also courteously kneeled before her.

“Beelzebub, this may seem unreasonable to you, but had you climbed up through the ranks normally, you would truly be a talent on par with the minister after working so hard for fifteen hundred years. The score that the personnel department gave you was unnaturally high. In reality, plenty of other posts requested you, but agricultural policy stopped them all.”

“Th-that’s because a clerk’s work is easy, so it probably just looked like I was working hard...”

“Raise your head, Beelzebub.”

I had to obey when she commanded me. There stood the new demon king, smiling with royal dignity.

She then plopped her hand on my shoulder.

“It was the previous demon king who settled the war with the humans. But there are a heap of problems yet, and the agricultural department is full of them. Right now, we require new forces without prior obligations tying them down. This is a request from

me, Demon King Provato Pecora Ariés.”

The new demon king graciously bowed her head to me.

All my options for excuses were gone. I’d shame her if I turned her down now.

Not only would I not be able to keep my easy low-level job, I wouldn’t even be able to live in Vanzeld Castle town.

“I—I humbly accept the appointment...”

And so I, Beelzebub, suddenly went from entry-level clerk to the minister of agriculture.



I had to bid farewell to my run-down apartment and its proximity to the market, which was really the only good thing about it. It was a sudden good-bye.

I was moving to a stout three-story building outside of the Vanzeld Castle moat. It reminded me of the main branch of a bank. The yard in front of the manor was even big enough to play sports on. There was a garden with a large pond in the back, and I’d heard that rocs sometime came to drink the water. Behind it was a whole forest, like a sea of trees.

When I stood before the building, I stared at it in blank amazement.

“If there was a coup tomorrow, I’d probably be one of the first to die...”

I checked every single one of the large, abundant rooms. One room was already bigger than my old apartment. There was even a ballroom.

I’d have to employ some kind of help in the future. Otherwise I’d have to take off every day to clean if I wanted to keep up. Or I could just use the minimum amount of rooms needed for my day-to-day life...

Then I saw something in the enormous mirror in the changing room before the chalky-white bathroom.

I was terrified.

Standing there was a woman with no hope of getting ahead, with no prospects for entering society, with no money—with nothing, because she'd thrown it all away.

It wasn't a ghost, of course. Demons weren't scared of ghosts.

The only thing in the mirror was my own face.

Indeed—standing out wouldn't do anything for a low-level employee, so I'd had no qualms about it. I'd treated my appearance as a good way to keep as many people on my side as possible.

But now I was a noble and a minister.

Someone in those positions couldn't look this plain. I wouldn't be mistaken for a minister's secretary, much less a full-blown minister.

Even if the new demon king acknowledged me, that didn't mean the other ministers from real houses wouldn't snicker behind my back. And my staff would undeniably laugh at me, too...

I made up my mind.

It was time to change my character.

I placed as many gold and silver coins into a bag as I could fit and went out onto the main avenue.

I bought everything that caught my eye at a women's clothing shop and returned to the manor. Then I carefully tried on each item before the mirror.

It would have been nice if I had had friends for a time like this, but I didn't have any. Seriously, zero.

In reality, after working at a low level position for 1,500 years, I had watched all the people I'd joined with go to higher ranks, and there was no one in the workplace I got along well with. It was all my own doing.

Glasses didn't fit my character, so I took them off. I didn't have bad eyesight in the first place, so it was no problem.

I chose my outfit. It was a little revealing, but ministers were like dungeon bosses, so I figured this was fine.

Next up was my style of speech. I couldn't stay as a bottom-ranking employee—I had to master an appropriate style of speech. Your word choice clearly changed depending on your status, so I had to learn how to speak like a minister.

I underwent a strange, intensive training.

I practiced all through the night until the sun rose, and I established my form.



"Ha-ha-ha! My name is Beelzebub! I am the great lord of the flies! Prepare yourself, for I will make you painfully aware of what agriculture should be!" I recited, making a pose in front of the mirror.

No—I *introduced* myself, taking my stance before the mirror.

"I am Beelzebub, demon noble and minister of agriculture. Adequate results will not be enough for those of you beneath me. Oh, talking like this might end up putting pressure on my subordinates, so I'll have to be careful... Oh, shoot, now I'm talking like I used to..."

I'd been practicing my transformation this entire time.

Ten out of ten people might think I was joking around, but—

I wasn't joking around at all! I was super-serious!

Without these drastic changes, I didn't have confidence that I could carry out my work from now on...

And I wasn't *the* great Beelzebub, lord of the flies, of course. I could use magic that could turn me into a fly, and I did sometimes eat the bruised fruit at my parents' greengrocery back when I was working there. Actually, they were tastiest just before or just as they were beginning to rot.

Oh, no, no... I mean... Oh dear. Sheesh. I have to keep my inner voice consistent with my character.

I stared at myself in the mirror.

My clothes left my shoulders bare, and my hair was straightened to give me a more powerful image.

All I needed to do was show confidence on my face and hold myself high.

"I am Beelzebub, minister of agriculture. I am Beelzebub, minister of agriculture. I am Beelzebub, minister of agriculture, and so I shall act as of today. My inconspicuous self is a thing of the past."

And so I went to work at the Agricultural Policy Organization for the first time as the new Beelzebub.

'Twas my debut as the minister of agriculture!

"Good morning. How fare my underlings?!"

My coworkers stared at me blankly.

Surely they were surprised by my noble carriage! Perhaps they thought I was a pure-blooded noble!

A lowly woman who was once my coworker slowly raised her hand and said—

"Beelzebub, you're the minister of agriculture; I don't think this is where you're supposed to work..."

".....Indeed. Old habits die hard."

I left the room, my face bright red...

"I should not have left my comfort zone..."

COMMUNICATING WITH MY UNDERLINGS IS A PAIN

There was a huge sign that said MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, and I stood before the building where it hung.

“So this is my workplace...” I looked up at it and recoiled. “I am suddenly working at the main office, and as the minister herself, no less...”

I’d been told that working in the ministry building was much harder than working at the related organizations, and I had been planning on consistently working not here but at the Agricultural Policy Organization.

It was once my path to victory...

“I can no longer go back... I cannot quit after two or three days; I have no choice but to work as the minister of agriculture...”

Bureaucratic officials busily came and went around me like ants hard at work.

It was now a new era with a new demon king, and that probably brought with it plenty of paperwork.

I watched it all for a while.

I had changed my image from a plain-glasses character to a high-ranking demon, and not only that, but no one recognized me as the minister because I barely knew anyone. That made it easy.

But on the other hand, when I entered the building, people stared at me, wondering who I was.

“...I should have come through the back door...”

I went up the floors by a staircase that wasn’t being used.

The minister's office was a big room on the top floor. *Whew, I managed to get this far in secret.*

Then, when I slipped into the office—

I found a whole line of officials.

Everyone was gathered already!

I saw all sorts of different horns, as demons had. I even saw a Minotaur and a Cyclops among them.

They all turned to face me at once, noticing my arrival.

This was bad for my heart. They were wondering why such a low-ranking worker was promoted to minister and thinking of how incompetent I was, I was sure...

Then a woman with unique horns took a step forward.

“Pardon me. I don’t recognize you, so you must be Minister Beelzebub, yes?”

“I-indeed... It is I, Beelzebub...”

“Then I ask that you make a few comments as you assume your post now. Oh, pardon me—I am Fatla the leviathan, secretary here at the Department of Agriculture,” she said, unsmiling.

Leviathans were high-ranking demons in their own right.

At the moment, she resembled a human, but I’d heard that a leviathan’s original form was like an airborne battleship that could carry hundreds of people.

So she must be a career civil servant...

I knew what she was thinking: *What a terrible joke, making a small fry like this into a minister.*

My stomach started hurting. My body wouldn’t be absorbing anything I ate now.

“Some initial comments, you say. Very well. I don’t want to cause you any trouble, so

I'll finish it quick... er, I shall finish this promptly, so stay there."

It was hard to play my supercilious character before officials who were *actually* important. But it would be awful if I made a fool of myself at first contact.

I stood before the officials. Walking just those few steps to reach my spot was spiritually exhausting, like walking through a deadly poisonous bog.

"Erm... I am Beelzebub, and I am the minister of agriculture as of today... In all honesty, I am powerless and unable to do much of importance, but I believe that together, we may overcome this... so..."

Was that okay?

But I was calling myself powerless; was I just making a fool of myself? Wouldn't that just tempt them to underestimate me?

I thought I heard someone snickering.

It was probably just paranoia, but I definitely thought I heard someone!

I have no choice but to toot my own horn now!

I spread out my wings in a snap.

"'Twas but a joke! I have been chosen to take this place by the omniscient and omnipotent demon king! As such, I possess a great power that will guide you! So, so... er... Should there be anything you do not know or any problem you may have, you come to me!! I shall brilliantly solve all your problems as your superior!"

"'Yeah!!!'"

The officers raised their voices in admiration.

That was the right answer. I got through it without acting servile.

I heard whispers:

"She looks like she has it together"

“Maybe she really is from a high-ranking family.”

My first impression wasn’t bad.

“Perhaps she really is a policy expert.”

“Maybe she was, like, a right-hand man for the previous demon king.”

“You can keep an eye on a lot if you stay down at the lower levels.”

“She must be the reason all the high-ranking officials’ scandals were exposed at the same time!”

Mm... Now I suspect they are overestimating me!

“I was wondering what we’d do with a shabby entry-level worker, but that isn’t the case at all.”

“She’s a secret bigwig.”

“With her, we could even win our disputes with the finance ministry.”

“She must have the next hundred, two hundred years planned out for the demon race.”

“Long live the new minister!”

Their hopeful looks hurt more this time...

I’m not a policy expert, not even in a worst-case scenario...

I was just someone from a tiny, distant corner of the agricultural ministry. I was only ever confident in my abilities to do miscellaneous chores... I wasn’t even thinking about what was going to happen in a month. The most I ever thought about was whether I was going to drink at home or at a bar on the weekends.

I thought I had to start showing results fit for a minister right away, otherwise things would be bad...

“Then you are dismissed... Get to it now...”

The officials poured out of the minister's office.

Phew, that was stressful. I was finally free...

But there were still two left in the room.

One was the earlier leviathan, Fatla. The other was another leviathan who looked a lot like her.

"Well done, Lady Beelzebub. Allow me to introduce myself again. I am Fatla, the secretary. It is my job to assist the minister of agriculture. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Right, she did say she was a secretary earlier, too.

Oh man, I already had someone so square and straitlaced attached to me. I wouldn't be able to relax like this...

"Yes. A pleasure. And who's that beside you?"

The second girl flung her hand into the air. "Hello! I'm Vania the leviathan. I'm the assistant secretary and Fatla's little sister! It's nice to meet you!"

I see. It was the sisters who were assisting me. Their personalities were exact opposites.

"Right, right. Well, it's—'tis lovely to meet both of you."

I stuck my hand out toward Fatla. A handshake was a general way to show respect.

Fatla grasped my hand, still not smiling. Maybe that was her default.

Asking her to smile didn't seem like the right way to go about this, though.

"By the way, Lady Beelzebub?"

"What?"

"You've made quite the transformation. Is this your attempt at a debut as a minister?"

She hit me right where it hurt. The attack was surprisingly close to home.

“I don’t... do not understand what you mean.”

“That manner of speech of yours is a mere facade, and I can see your faults surfacing. You clearly rushed to create this whole charade after being forced into the position of minister, correct? You were planning on living your whole life as a lazy low-level clerk, weren’t you?”

This conversation was draining my magic dry...

“Q-quite the opposite... Now that I am a minister, I’m able to be myself, and, you know, it’s like the persona I’ve hidden all this time is rising to the surface...”

“Is that so? I see. I see now.”

This leviathan woman didn’t smile at all, so it was hard to see what she was thinking. But from the circumstantial evidence, I was undoubtedly being cornered...

“My only duty is to make sure that the new minister is comfortable doing her work. Let me know if there’s anything I may help you with.”

“Yeah... All right.”

Our hands were still clasped together, but Fatla wasn’t letting me go.

I was above her in status, but I was from a family of scruffy demons, so I was nervous in front of a leviathan.

“However—”

Oh no. That “however” told me straightaway that what she just said wasn’t how she really felt!

“I’m not working because you’re paying my salary, Lady Beelzebub. I am at most a bureaucrat working to support our country. If you are not fit for the office of minister and I judge that agricultural policy has regressed, then I will be taking the appropriate measures.”

“So you’re kicking me out if I don’t do a good job...”

It wasn't hot at all, but I was starting to sweat.

This is scary! The bureaucratic world is terrifying! I wanna go back to the bottom!

"I don't appreciate the term *kick out*. I will simply take the proper steps to deal with the situation as a public servant," Fatla continued in a monotonous voice. "In the event of any major mistakes, I will suggest that you make it public instead of attempting a cover-up; I will question you if I see any dishonest accounting; I will suggest you quit if you find yourself unable to bear the weight of your duties as minister because you are unwell—and any other such measures I deem necessary."

Ahhh! She's totally gonna kick me out!

"And so I would be perfectly fine if you considered me as a regular secretary."

This is intimidation! What am I supposed to do if my own secretary is my enemy?! This is like putting the demon king in the hero's party! I wanna quit!

But if I quit, then the demon king would be responsible for appointing someone new, and I suspected I'd be erased from existence for the crime of besmirching the demon king's name. There was no real assurance that I would be safe if I quit.

There was no way out...

"I got it. I've spent fifteen hundred years at the bottom of the ministry, after all. I am not a complete amateur. I will do everything in my power!" I told her sharply.

But she was still speaking sharply to me.

"Very well. I sincerely hope you are right." Fatla finally let me go.

These leviathan sisters weren't my assistants. They were monitoring me.

Once my handshake with the elder sister was finished, the younger sister, Vania, immediately skipped over to me and shook my hand.

"Can't wait to get started, boss!"

"Yes, of course."

I had to keep my guard up—she could be acting like a sunny, cheerful girl when she was actually the mastermind behind it all.

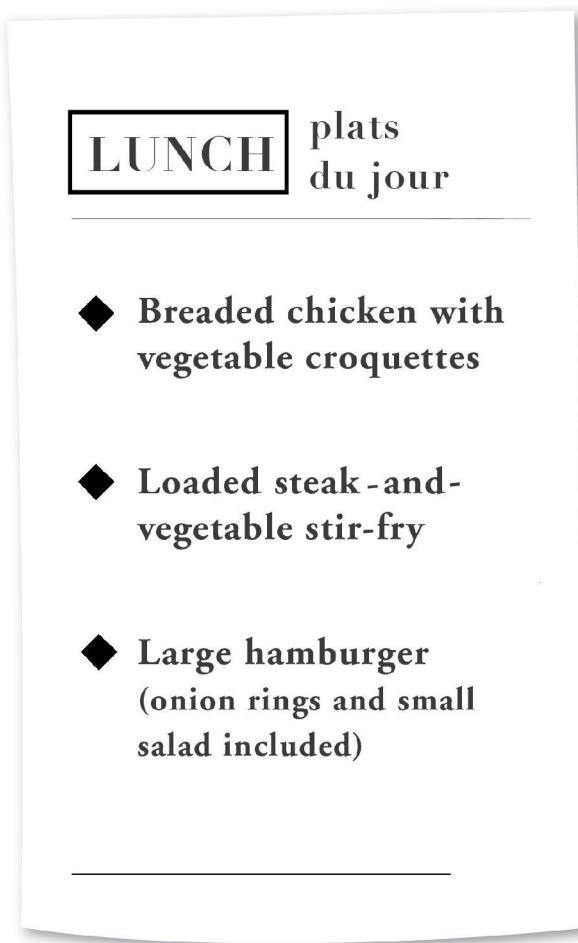
In the action novels I read in the past, the more a character smiled, the stronger they were, and they wouldn't bat an eye when it came to killing others.

“All right, then, boss. There's something I need for you to pick.”

“And what might that be...?”

I didn't know if I was being tested or anything, so I was extremely uneasy.

Vania produced a piece of paper.



“We need to contact the traders who deliver lunch soon. Which one do you want, boss?”

These choices had nothing to do with work!

“Vania, you can leave this for later...”

Fatla, the elder sister, looked at her with annoyance, silently asking her not to ruin the mood.

“Whaaat? Picking what to have for lunch is so important, though! It helps give you another push in the morning.”

The younger sister had the energy of an entry-level worker. There sure were all sorts of people on the career ladder...

“Then... I suppose I shall have the loaded steak-and-vegetable stir-fry...”

“Okay! I will put in that order right away! Oh, and by the way, I’m very good at cooking, so as long as you let me know beforehand, I can make lunch for you about once a week.”

“That’s not secretary work!”

The big sister, Fatla, was angry again.

Maybe they had been appointed together as secretaries because they canceled each other out and worked well together as a pair?



My work as the minister of agriculture started that day.

My main job was signing things.

The signing itself took only a fraction of a second to do, but when it came to matters that needed the approval of the minister, the matters themselves had to have some weight, and occasionally they involved the movement of astronomical sums of money. I couldn’t just scribble on these and call it a day.

Having said that, if I vetoed all the things that had been considered okay up until this point just because I was at the top, I’d be a tyrant.

And so I had to sign things while also carefully checking the contents.

Luckily, I had a very knowledgeable secretary with me, so that made it easy.

Fatla was the perfect bureaucrat.

The new demon king must have had a say in these personnel appointments beforehand, so maybe she put them here as my personal support, regardless of what Fatla herself thought.

“This farm should not pose any problems, yes? I believe they could produce this more cheaply, though.”

“You may check anything concerning the budget in the attached document.”

“Can I ask you some things about this application for authorization?”

“Certainly. There isn’t much time to ruminate on it, however, so do make up your mind quickly.”

In a word, I’d say I was doing pretty well. But I wasn’t exactly enthusiastic about it all; I was just desperate. There was no room for me to slack and do sloppy work.

For the first three months, I dedicated a lot of time to getting a grasp on the current state of the agricultural administration.

I had lunch with people beneath me who were responsible for relevant matters as much as I could, and then I examined each department’s own problems and what they perceived to be problems.

I could do only what I could, so that was what I did.

I put everything I learned down into my notes.

It was a lot of trouble, but I ended up creating volume after volume of notes. This was my strategy for dealing with things, one that I had cultivated when I was a low-level employee.

Write and remember. Write and arrange.

When things felt difficult and confusing, they could be conquered in this manner. Learn a strategy to deal with it and understand the precedents!



Six months went by in a flash.

"You are quite the stickler for notes, Lady Beelzebub," Fatla said to me as she was checking documents on the desk beside mine.

She was making her little sister, Vania, do mostly menial tasks, like disposing of or retrieving documents.

It wasn't too odd for her position, since she was a lower-ranked secretary, and she personally enjoyed moving around.

"'Tis much harder for me to forget things when I write them down with my own hand like this. No matter how many documents I collect, I have such trouble remembering the government's style. If I make a little list of all the things in the library, I can find them immediately; I wouldn't be able to find them without one, no? It's the same idea."

I'd even gotten quite used to my grandiloquent minister speech after six months.

At the moment, I hadn't made any big mistakes. I hadn't been impeached yet, at least, so I supposed that meant it was going quite well.

I didn't have any opportunities to do anything untoward, so I wasn't involved in corruption at all. Well, I didn't even belong to any faction, so I suppose there was little to be gained by abusing my power...

"I see. You are a different breed from all the past ministers, Lady Beelzebub." Fatla finished her checks and placed the documents on my desk. "They all have been eager to be political—or should I say, eager to wield the power they'd accumulated. Perhaps it's a given, considering this is the highest position they may reach without the blood of a demon king, but in exchange, they tended to neglect the fundamental work."

"That's because I started from the bottom—well, more like I leaped from the bottom straight to the top. Of course my perspective is different."

Recently, I started to be able to pinpoint where the main point of a document was amid the complicated language. Practice was everything. I determined that there were no problems and gave my signature.

"To be honest, I said some brash things to you when we first met, but now I realize that my comments were unwarranted," Fatla said suddenly. She stood to face me, then

bowed her head. "Please forgive me for testing you."

I turned my gaze right back to the documents. It was nothing to apologize for.

"'Tis only natural to worry that an unknown was suddenly the minister of agriculture. While they were not as open about it as you were, others were certainly thinking the same way. If a newbie is angry at being called a newbie, then a cow might as well be angry at being called a cow."

"Thank you." Fatla bowed.

I thought I saw a little smile on her face, but I couldn't really tell because I was focused on paperwork.

"There's no reason to give your thanks. Now get back to work. After you do a bit more, you should take some time off and spend it with your little sister. I can keep things moving without a secretary for a day, at least. I have most things memorized now."

"Very well. I will strive to match your clerical prowess, Lady Beelzebub."

"I doubt there is much difference between our skills."

"No, you are truly the most capable of all the recent ministers of agriculture, Lady Beelzebub."

That was probably because I didn't conspire with other high-up officers.

The role of a worker at the bottom was just doing clerical tasks as the situation called for it. When someone climbed up from such a position, people would start one-upping each other with what sort of projects they did in their time.

I was still merely a clerk at heart. I acted all high-and-mighty for show, but I hadn't changed the way I lived.

"That being said, it's always around the six-month mark after beginning a new post that people tend to let their guard down and make bigger mistakes, so do be careful."

"Yes, of course. I understand. I am still not relaxed enough to let my guard down yet."

Now, next was some work relating to the construction of a seed nursery center. Many

people were going to be removed from the land as part of that process, so I had a large number of valuable documents asking for consent to remove the residents there.

“Mmm? All the documents that should have been here are gone.”

The things I had placed next to Vania’s spot on my left were missing.

Vania was up from her seat, burning documents we didn’t need anymore in the furnace.

“Vania, the set of seed nursery center documents is gone. Where is it?”

“Huh? I thought you didn’t need those anymore? You always put the documents you don’t need anymore to your left, right?”

“No, I placed them to the open spot on my left because it would take time to check them.”

Vania’s face went white. “I—I—I—I—I—I burned them...”

“You did *whaaaaaaaaaaaaat?????????*”

The one who let her guard down six months after taking the post wasn’t me but my secretary!!!!

Vania fell to her knees, and Fatla pulled her up with a blank expression. There was no emotion on her face, but I could tell she was furious.

“You were supposed to double-check every single document you take from this room before destroying it. Did you do that?”

“I-I’m sorry... I thought they were in a discard pile...”

“This is a huge question of liability. You will most certainly be demoted, and according to precedent, we might have you resign at your own convenience.”

“Wait, I’m fired? Am I going to be fired...?”

“Those papers included documents asking for the consent to remove over fifty civilian households, as well as those of various other related parties. It would take an immense

amount of time to go around and ask each and every one of these people to write them all over again, please and thanks. In the worst-case scenario, this would delay construction by one or two months..." Fatla's voice was growing louder and louder. "Quitting is the least you could do!"

Fatla's hand slowly wrapped around Vania's neck.

That was a leviathan hand, so her grip was probably insanely strong.

"E-erm... Isn't there any way we can find an amicable compromise, Big Sis...?"

"You will have to bear the blame. Otherwise, the responsibility rests on Lady Beelzebub's shoulders! Secretaries have disappeared after taking the fall for such incidents! Although I suppose the secretary really was at fault this time..."

Fatla's hands were shaking.

It was definitely hard for her to say such things to her sister.

But it was also true that we needed a scapegoat in this incident. It wouldn't resolve itself.

Oh well.

I slowly stood.

We'll just have a scapegoat, then.

"Fatla, rearrange the schedule. Once we've estimated how long this will delay the project, we will go apologize to each party. Most people will have no choice but to forgive us if I apologize. If the minister herself goes, I doubt anyone will lose face."

"B-but you have absolutely no fault in this matter, Lady Beelzebub..." Fatla said hesitantly.

It was her own relative who made the mistake, so it was probably especially difficult to stick up for her.

"Don't be a fool. 'Tis the boss's job to take responsibility for her subordinates. I had many bosses bow in my stead when I was a low-level clerk. Now I must be the one to

apologize. If all I do is offer my apology, then there is nothing more you need to do!"

We just needed to get this nonsense done and out of the way.

"Now, Fatla, create the necessary documents. The quicker we apologize, the lesser the damages. And while we are at it, we shall also create preventative measures to ensure this does not happen again. There should be no more problems if we only place documents for destruction on a separate desk."

"Y-yes!" Fatla tensed her shoulders and responded with a high, strained voice.

"But first, take a deep breath. That is all."

Fatla inhaled deeply as she was commanded, then gave a very long exhale.

"Understood. I will devise remedial measures right away."

Afterward, Vania and I paid each party concerned a visit, apologized for the loss of the documents, and spent almost the whole time with our heads bowed to the floor.

The minister herself appearing for the incident had a tremendous effect, and it was understood that we would be re-creating the documents internally at the ministry.

Thus, we went on our apology pilgrimage, and thanks to Fatla's efficient schedule, there wasn't much damage done in terms of time.

It was times like these that I was thankful we could fly on the leviathans' enormous forms.

But I couldn't go too fast, so I clung to Vania when we went to certain places.

We were finally done apologizing and recreating documents after about two weeks, and we somehow managed to settle the matter without any delays to construction.

"Phew, that's finally over!"

After I had carefully gone over every re-created form, I stretched my body and wings.

Fatla was stretching at her own seat as well.

"There is no need for you to bow your head anymore, Vania! How many times do you think you've bowed in total this time?" I said, intending to make a joke—

But it fell completely flat.

"I... I am truly sorry, so very sorry..."

When Vania had gone out with me to apologize, she had been frightened and jumpy the whole time, like a frog before a snake.

I wouldn't approve if she'd been laughing the whole time we were out apologizing, but the constant doom and gloom made things difficult, too.

This was one of those times I had to act like a boss. I patted Vania on the shoulder and said, "Are you free today? I would like to have a drink with you—how about it?"

"A-all right..." Vania's face went even paler.

Wait, don't tell me—maybe bosses aren't supposed to invite their subordinates to drink in this day and age...?



I didn't take Vania to a loud tavern but instead to a fancy bar.

I'd heard from my officers that this place had a good reputation.

"Order what you like. The food here is quite good."

But even after I'd brought her all the way here, Vania was stiffer than before. I almost mistook her for a gargoyle instead of a leviathan.

"Relax. You're quite important yourself—take up as much space as you need."

"I—I can't..."

Hmm? This was strange. I read in a how-to book that the boss jovially treated everyone at times like these, but this was feeling more like a funeral...

Was she afraid I would boast on and on about the past or force her to split the bill at such an expensive restaurant?

I was paying for everything. And since I had been a bottom-tier worker, there was nothing for me to brag about. From the way she was acting, I had a feeling she was afraid of something else.

What else could there be?

Maybe she'd made an even bigger mistake...? If she did, then I wasn't sure how much more I could cover for her...

"If there is something that troubles you, speak up. That is why we've come here. My lips are sealed. I am your boss, after all."

I had subordinates now. I would act like the boss I was supposed to be!

"A-a-all right... Then let me ask you bluntly..."

"O-okay..."

"Um... You're demoting me, aren't you...?"

I almost fell from my barstool. "What do you mean, 'aren't you'? When did I ever mention demoting you?"

"I mean, I've smeared your name with this whole incident... I thought some form of retaliation was inevitable..."

"Wait, wait, wait! That makes no sense! Why do you think I went to apologize with you?!"

What a shock! I wasn't telling her to be thankful for everything I did for her; I just wanted her to be glad that she wasn't being punished!

"That's what I thought at first, but... then you invited me alone to such an expensive restaurant, so I thought, 'Oh, she must be announcing the end of my clerical life...' "

That's how she interpreted this?!

“And then I started imagining all sorts of things, like how I’d be put in a windowless room to count the number of rejected papers...”

“There is no such job.”

“I spent this whole time thinking, ‘Maybe it’s fine because I’ll still get paid; maybe it’s better than quitting; no wait, maybe I should just quit anyway...’”

Didn’t that go against her obligation to give her undivided attention to her duty?

I patted her on the shoulder.

“Ahhh... the fabled shoulder tap... I knew I was being demoted! I’m going to be flown out to the far, uninhabited reaches of the north and placed at a counter where no one will ever come!”

“You need to let this go already.” I gulped down some of the expensive alcohol. “Look, I invited you out to drink today because you have been looking down. Drink as much as you want to forget your troubles. That is all I wanted to say.”

“Th-then... you’re not demoting me...?”

“Of course not. Drink and forget the pain of the past. Order freely: I shall pay for it all!”

“...Boss... are you a god?!”

“Not at all. I am a demon.” I grinned like a high-ranking demon.

That was the first time in my life I treated someone as a proper boss would.

I was maturing, too.

I didn’t mind the bottom-tier life, but perhaps the minister life wouldn’t be so bad after all.

—Two hours later.

I walked through the city with a drunk Vania on my back. “I never expected she’d be

causing me problems in this way..."

"Eh-he-he-he... Booze, booze..."

Vania was completely gone, so I had to take her home myself. I did such things when I was a lowly clerk and my bosses drank themselves into a stupor, but to think I'd do this as the minister of agriculture...

I wanted to fly her home, but I was drunk, too. Causing an accident while flying under the influence was a grave offense...

I somehow managed to reach the residential district, and there was Fatla, standing at the corner.

"I am so sorry, Lady Beelzebub. My sister is so irresponsible..." She bowed to me with a tired look.

"You've been putting in quite a lot of work as well, haven't you? But I clearly see why you were chosen to be my secretary."

"What do you mean?" She looked at me quizzically.

"Your hands are quite full taking care of your little sister. That is why they deemed you capable of handling a minister who did not know her right from her left."

Fatla's mouth opened in surprise.

She had treated me rather gruffly at first but was still a solid assistant for me after all that. She worked hard, exactly as she needed to as a good secretary.

Otherwise, my efforts on my own were insignificant; my work as minister wouldn't be very effective.

Had Fatla not created countermeasures for Vania's mistake this time, things would have been more complicated for much longer. And if that happened, I would probably have had to drop the problematic secretary after all.

"Fatla, do you think I can become a minister good enough for you to serve?"

"As of now, you're about seventy-five percent there."

I wanted eighty, but that was still a passing grade.

“Now do something about your sister” I handed over Vania.

“Lady Beelzebub, I am truly glad you are our minister” Fatla gave me a gentle, natural smile.

“And I’ll take you to a good spot next time, too.”

The night breeze on my way home felt perfect.

I think I’m starting to enjoy my work as the minister of agriculture.

The End



AFTERWORD

Long time no see. This is Kisetsu Morita!

We are already at Volume 5 of *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years...!*

There are always plenty of new characters appearing in the main series, and this time, a girl named Sandra joins the fray.

She's a mandragora child (at least, she looks like one) with a bit of cheek. Basically, she's a plant.

I've had mostly members of the animal kingdom until this point, so I tried my hand at something new.

Sandra will live at the house in the highlands, too. For the longest time, Falfa and Shalsha were the (apparently) youngest residents there, but they now have a little sister.

Age-wise, Sandra is much older than them, but I'm excited to see how all the kids(?) will run around together now. It might be weird for the author to be excited to see what happens, but I really am.

That's because the goal of this story isn't something so grandiose as defeating the most powerful enemy or becoming the best at sports but a haphazard and unplanned tale.

I could be traveling and happen to see something odd, which sparks a story in me—that happens rather frequently, in fact. So it's a mystery what sort of chemical reaction will happen after I add new members to the family. Even to me.

The family at the house in the highlands, especially, has grown without much planning ahead of time, but I believe I've created a fun community. I want them to keep living interesting lives through trial and error in an environment full of different races as well as a ghost and a plant.

Also, the latter half of Volume 5 includes two chapters of the Beelzebub short story spin-off, which was posted on GanGan GA. They take place when Beelzebub was still

pretty low on the ladder.

Thanks to all of you, we reached the greatest number of page views of all short stories on GanGan GA when it was posted. Please take a look!

<http://www.ganganonline.com/contents/slime>

Now, the first volume of the comic version went on sale at the same time as this Volume 5!

Yusuke Shiba's illustrations of Azusa, Laika, Falfa, and Shalsha have a different type of cuteness from what Benio gives them.

If Benio illustrates a cuteness with hints of cool, then we could call Yusuke Shiba's a soft cuteness.

Anyway, both of them are fantastic, so I would love it if you picked up a copy of the comic! There are original sketches in there that weren't in the GanGan GA serialization!

Depending on the bookstore, it's very likely that the comic will be in a different section from the novel, so be careful when you go looking for it!

I have collaborated with many more people than usual this time around!

First, a special edition of Volume 5 that was bundled with a drama CD came out at the same time as the regular edition! To all of the voice actresses—Aoi Yuki as Azusa, Kaede Hondo as Laika, Sayaka Senbongi as Falfa, Minami Tanaka as Shalsha, Sayaka Harada as Halkara, and Manami Numakura as Beelzebub—thank you so much!

When I went to the recording studio, I hadn't been that nervous since my university entrance exams. I was most honored to be there.

I was overwhelmed by the amount of information a human voice can contain. I think it felt close to going to a live music club and hearing live music for the first time. I hope I can utilize this experience in future works.

Of course, many people besides the voice actresses helped with the production. It's

really a miracle that something I thought up on a whim and posted as a story online became this big.

Also, this series was rated twelfth in the books and novels category of *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi! 2018* at the end of this year. Thank you so much to all who voted.

Also, Fuse-sensei of *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* fame has left a comment on the dust jacket wrap of the comic version!

It is truly encouraging to have Fuse-sensei, the pioneer of slimes in the online short story world and an author solidly at the top of his game, say something about my work. Thank you!

Also, a huge thank-you to Yusuke Shiba, who is in charge of the comic serialization in GanGan GA! I believe Halkara and Beelzebub will make their appearances soon, so I'm looking forward to that!

Benio-sensei created such wonderful pictures for the book this time!

Since this volume includes the Beelzebub spin-off, he drew a very imposing-yet-cute color illustration of her! Thank you so much!

And finally, I thank all of you who have supported the *Killing Slimes* series in all different mediums, be it as an online short story, GA novel, or comic, from the very bottom of my heart.

Like I said before, it has to be a miracle that a work I just thought up on a whim would be seen by so many people. I want to keep doing the best I can so that this miracle will continue to grow. I would be very happy to see you stick around!

Kisetsu Morita

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