

Spider So So 12

So I'm a What?

OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU



SO I'M A SPIDER, SO WHAT?

– Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka? –

- VOLUME 12 -

-AUTHOR-

Baba Okina

-ILLUSTRATOR-

Tsukasa Kiryu

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Agner must be terribly wounded, too. I can see that he is bleeding in several places.

And yet, his wide-open eyes, despite being bloodshot from the smoke, are just as full of the will to fight as ever.

“I have dedicated my life to the Demon Lord because I determined that was the only way to help demonkind. I was ordered to conquer Fort Kusorion and to defeat the hero. So I must not stop fighting until I accomplish those goals.”



...Stop this massive thing
from moving?

Is that even possible?

No, I can't get intimidated now!

I knew going in that my chances
of winning were slim!

The queen taratect is a living
creature, too.

It's not invincible, nor is it immortal.

That means I can beat it.

I can, and I will!

I'm so a **spider**, so what?

12

OKINA BABA

Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU



 YEN

New York

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Okina Baba

Translation by Jenny McKeon
Cover art by Tsukasa Kiryu

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**Bloe Phthallo**

SEVENTH ARMY COMMANDER

Formerly the Fourth Army Vice Commander, but due to the Demon Lord's purges and reorganization, he was put in charge of the Seventh Army, which consists of the former rebels. He fell hard for White the moment he laid eyes on her and has no idea how to handle his first love.

**Wrath**

EIGHTH ARMY COMMANDER

A reincarnation who retains memories of his previous life in Japan as high school student Kyouya Sasajima. He was reborn as a goblin and lived peacefully until he lost his village and family to an attack conducted by the empire army.

**GÜliedistodiez**

NINTH ARMY COMMANDER

An administrator who oversees the world and the system. As part of his authority, he rules all dragons and wyrm. He is as awesomely powerful as one would expect an administrator to be.

**Balto Phthallo**

STAFFER

Formerly the Fourth Army Commander, but since Ariel took over as Demon Lord, he's began serving more often as her secretary, so he vacated the seat of commander. A hard worker who has been devoted to the recovery of the demon race since the previous Demon Lord's era.

Sanatoria

(Second Army Commander)

Kogou

(Third Army Commander)

Darad

(Fifth Army Commander)

Huey

(Sixth Army Commander)



Ariel

DEMON LORD

An ancient Divine Beast, the Demon Lord, and Ruler of Gluttony. Her true identity is the Origin Taratect, the progenitor of the race of spider monsters.



White

TENTH ARMY COMMANDER

Also known as Shiraori. A reincarnation who retains the memories of Hiiro Wakaba, a high school girl in Japan. By absorbing the energy of a bomb that was powerful enough to destroy a continent, she successfully became a god. She's now working behind the scenes as the Tenth Army Commander of the demon army, leading her troops on shadowy missions.



Sophia Keren

The only child of Lord Keren of Sariella. A reincarnation who retains memories of her past life in Japan as high school student Shouko Negishi. In this world, she was reborn as a Progenitor vampire, a race that otherwise did not exist in this world.



Agner Ricep

FIRST ARMY COMMANDER

A lord who has controlled Ricep, the area of the demon realm that borders the human territory, since the Demon Lord two generations prior. Well-known as an exceptionally impressive demon, he is powerful enough that it would be no surprise if he was appointed Demon Lord.



Merazophis

FOURTH ARMY COMMANDER

Though once a human who worked for the Keren family as a butler, he was turned into a vampire by Sophia to escape a near-death situation. Since his employer Lord Keren is gone, he has devoted his life to protecting Sophia.

HUMANS

Character

INTRODUCTIONS

ADVENTURERS

EMPIRE ARMY



Kunihiko

Originally named Kunihiko Tagawa. He was born to a tribe in no-man's-land, the border region between demon and human territories. When he was young, his entire clan was wiped out by Merazophis; from that point on, he became an adventurer on a quest to become stronger. He wields a magic sword and specializes in direct combat.



Asaka

Originally named Asaka Kushitani. She was born in the same no-man's-land clan as Kunihiko. They were already close childhood friends in their previous lives, but since being reincarnated, they've come to see each other as irreplaceable partners. She specializes in magic combat.



Ronandt

The strongest living human mage. He commands the magic forces of the Renxandt Empire Army and was once the teacher of Julius the Hero. About ten years ago, he encountered a spider monster in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, which led him to push the limits of human potential.



Aurel Stadt

The youngest daughter of a low-class noble family in a remote part of the empire. She is one of Ronandt's apprentices, and even he acknowledges her innate knack for magic.

Nyudoz

An old knight known as the Divine Sword in the empire. An unbelievable muscle head.



Julius Zagan Analeit

The second prince of the Analeit Kingdom. He has traveled the world as the hero from a young age, fighting to keep the peace for all humanity. Excelling in both physical and magical combat, he has strength only a few other humans can compete with.



Yaana

A girl who was chosen as the saint for her honest, straightforward personality. She specializes in healing and support magic; her abilities as well as her generally positive demeanor have made her an indispensable part of the hero's party.



Hyrince Quarto

The second son of Duke Quarto of the Analeit Kingdom. He is Julius's childhood friend and the dependable shield bearer of the party. Has a phoenix feather that allows him to escape death just once.



Hawkin

Formerly a gentleman thief known as the Thief with a Thousand Knives. Now he is an unsung hero in charge of negotiating and coordinating the hero's party. Rather than head-to-head battles, he prefers a trickier combat style, taking advantage of items, traps, and so on.



Jeskan

A former A-rank adventurer who can use all kinds of weapons. He is a wise mentor who gives useful advice to Julius, who is still a novice in terms of pure combat experience by comparison. He's adored by the rest of the hero's party as an older-brother figure.

DEMON TERRITORY

Second Army Commander

Sanatoria

MYSTIC MOUNTAINS

Eighth Army Commander

Wrath

Third Army Commander

Kogou

Fifth Army Commander

Darad

First Army Commander

Seventh Army Commander

Agner

Bloe

Fourth Army Commander

Merazophis

Sixth Army Commander

Huey

Fort Okun

Nyudoz

Fort Kusorion

Hero Julius

Kunihiko, Asaka

Fort Dazarro

Ronandt's army

HUMAN TERRITORY



Observations by Future Historians: Prologue

The Great Human-Demon War.

Battles between humans and demons have been going on for centuries, but only one clash is known as the Great Human-Demon War.

There's no need to be a scholar of history to know how unique this battle was.

Humans and demons, each fighting for the very survival of their respective races. It is small wonder that this alone is worthy of being called a Great War.

Many details are unclear, as few extant records remain due to the subsequent chaos, but it is widely accepted that each side mobilized forces numbering in the seven digits.

Some theories even suggest that the total number of people involved in the conflict reached eight digits.

The biggest battle in recent memory until then was the Tragedy of Zatona, and even then, the combined numbers of both the Ohts Alliance and the Sariella Army totaled less than six digits. Sariella was a powerful nation and fielded a formidable military. To challenge them, their neighboring rivals formed a coalition and mustered a massive army.

Considering their populations at the time, it's clear this would have been considered a relatively large-scale battle.

And yet, the Great War easily dwarfs it in scope.

In spite of all this, the Great Human-Demon War lasted a surprisingly short time.

Given the number of soldiers mobilized, it would be natural to expect the fighting to go on for many months, perhaps even years.

In reality, it lasted a few scant days.

Again, due to the lack of surviving documents, the precise number of days is unclear; however, historians agree that the Great War ended after ten days at the most.

A conflict of such enormous scale ended almost as soon as it had started.

But what is truly terrifying about the Great Human-Demon War is not its scale or its brevity.

It is the percentage of casualties.

The precise number is once again unknown, due to the dearth of explicit figures, but the most commonly accepted theory is that at least half of each side's numbers was killed.

And that is the minimum.

Extrapolating from the surviving demon population after the war's conclusion, it's safe to say that at least that many were killed in battle.

Some scholars even propose that it may have been as high as 70 or 80 percent.

In other words, out of a seven-digit number of participants, no less than half died in the span of just a few days.

This is clear evidence of the sheer ferocity that characterizes the Great Human-Demon War.

Of the few remaining documents from the time, the words recorded in one soldier's diary have become quite famous. Most will have heard this somewhere before:

"All hope is lost. What remains is only despair."



White 1

The time has come at last!

Yes, it's finally time to show off the tactical command center I made all by myself!

"Uh, White... what the hell is this?"

The Demon Lord looks shocked all right.

Balto follows her in and scans the room with an equally dumbfounded expression.

Heh-heh-heh.

Whaddaya think? Caught you by surprise, didn't I?!

Check out the wall of monitors I set up.

Each one displays a live feed of the various fortresses where our armies have been dispatched.

How is that possible, you ask?

By using my mini-mes, of course!

I sent my tiny palm-size spider clones to every single fortress.

That's right—my clones are essentially serving as super-high-tech self-propelling cameras!

And everything they see gets displayed right here on a monitor in my tactical command center.

It can even pick up sounds and voices.

Which means the Demon Lord can get up-to-the-minute info from the battlefield, even when she's all the way over here!

This world has skills and stuff, but they haven't developed communication technology comparable to what you can find on modern-day Earth, so this tactical command center will totally revolutionize the battlefield!

Ahhh, it's so scary.

The depths of my genius are so infinite, they scare even me!

"Okay, uh, cool. I guess I shouldn't think too deeply about it."

The Demon Lord sits down in the commander's seat in the center of the room.

...Um, I feel like you could stand to react a teensy bit more dramatically here.

Like, stammering *B-but how?! or something.*

Even Balto's giving me more of a reaction. He's still frozen in the doorway.

"Balto," the Demon Lord calls to him. "How long do you plan to space out over there?"

"I-I'm terribly sorry!"

At that, Balto quickly returns to his senses and hurries into the room.

Still, his eyes keep darting around the room, so he clearly hasn't gotten over his shock.

See, this is what I'm talking about!

That's the kind of reaction I was hoping for from the Demon Lord!

Why's she just casually accepting it like it's no big deal?!

"...If we react to every little thing White does, we'll never get anywhere, got it?"

"...Of course."

Balto finally manages to collect himself after hearing the Demon Lord's extremely

heartfelt warning.

...Well, that definitely doesn't make me feel like my efforts have been totally blown off or anything.

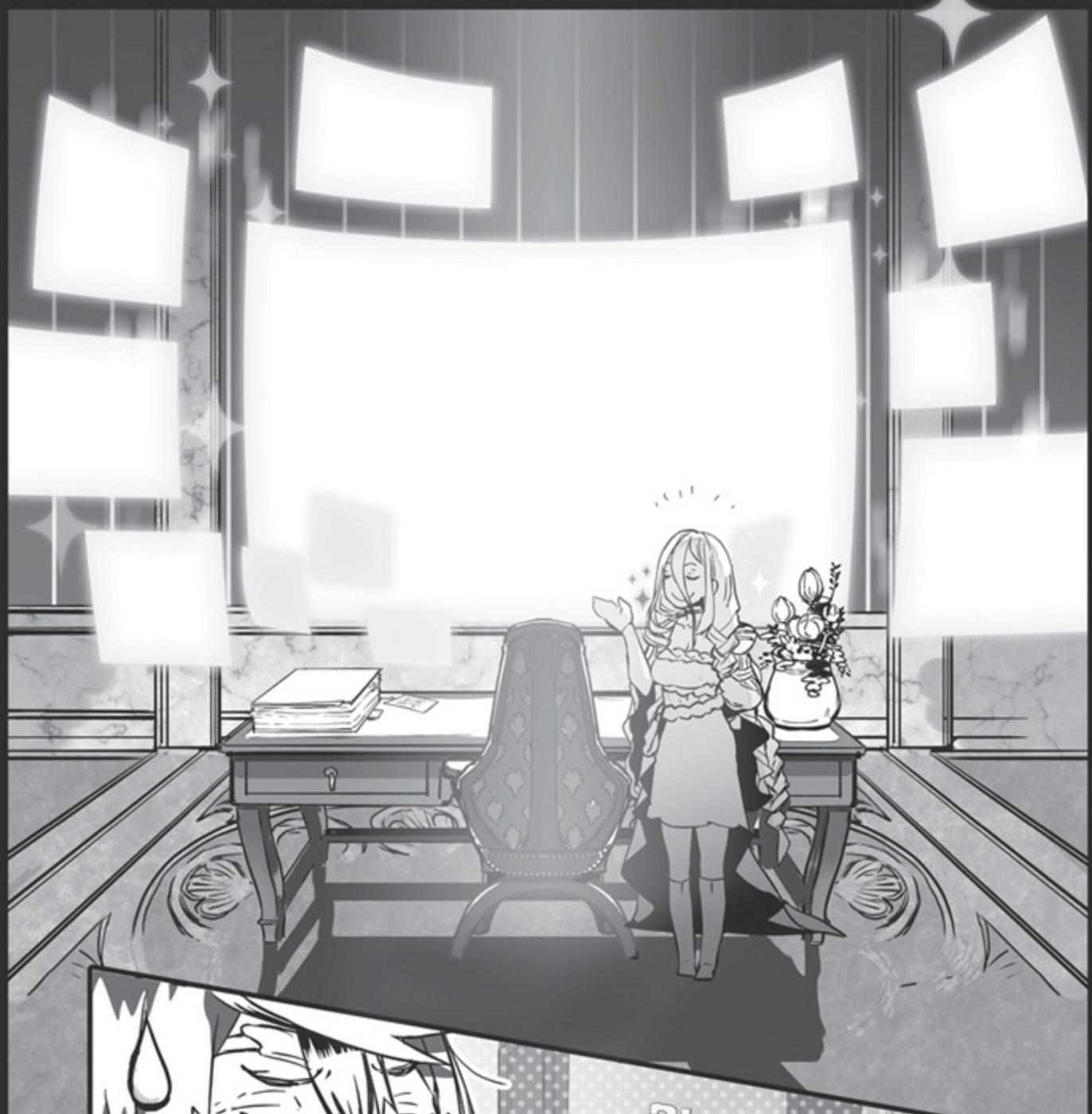
Nope. All good here.

Got that? Cool.

"All righty. I guess I'll just chill out in here and watch everybody work their butts off, then."

The Demon Lord smiles faintly as she scans the monitors.

On each of the many screens, the battle is just about to begin.



A fight to determine the fates of demons and humans alike.

“All right, White. You’ve got this, yeah?”

I raise a hand in acknowledgment.

Then I use Teleport to leave the room.

Guess I’ve got my own work to do.

I

MYSTIC MOUNTAINS



Second Army
Sanatoria

Fort Okun

THE FORT OKUN BATTLE THE KEY POINTS!

Welcome to White Explains It All!

As you can see, the fort Boobs is supposed to attack is surrounded by mountains!

That's right: mountains!

The dangers of mountains cannot be overstated!

Obviously, it's common sense that whoever holds the high ground in a battle has the advantage.

It's easy to shoot arrows and stuff from a high place into a low place, but the reverse is waaay harder, because now you're fighting against gravity, too.

What's worse is that foot soldiers have to push uphill to attack, so they're bound to get tired quickly.

Can you imagine huffing and puffing your way up a mountain, then having to fight the moment you finally reach the top? That's gotta suck.

Common wisdom says the attacker should outnumber the defender three to one for a confident attack on a fortress, but when that fortress is nestled in the mountains, it gets about a million times harder!

That's why lots of castles and stuff on Earth are built in high places.

It's definitely not just 'cause royalty prefers to look out from high places!

I'm pretty sure! Totally!

So how is Boobs planning to bring down a mountain citadel?!

We're about to find out!



“Lady Sanatoria, battle formations are complete.”

“Mm.”

I scarcely even respond to the report from my aide.

There's no need to tell me what I already know.

My command, the Second Army, is positioned on a hill where we can see one of the key positions of the humans: Fort Okun.

Fort Okun is built quite close to the Mystic Mountains, so it is protected by terrain nearly as treacherous as the mountain range itself.

From our vantage point, we can clearly see the sheer cliffs that block our way like walls and the imposing fortress that seems half-fused with its rocky surroundings.

As the stronghold that has repelled demon invasions for countless years, it's obvious at a glance just how difficult it would be to take it down.

Hardly an encouraging thought for yours truly, since it is my mission to do just that.

But this isn't even a particularly tough assignment.

The humans have often had to endure invasions by us demons throughout history, and so they've built up nigh-impregnable defenses.

In other words, regardless of the invasion route, we're in for a bad time.

Or to put it another way, we're screwed no matter where we go.

Honestly, what a headache.

As I heave a sigh, my aide surreptitiously looks away, his face somewhat red.

He's been my aide ever since I became a commander, yet he still doesn't seem used to being around me.

You see, I come from a line of what they call succubi.

We possess a rare skill called Salacious that we hone and use as a weapon, helping our family to maintain its noble rank for generations.

As the name implies, Salacious is highly effective on anyone attracted to the opposite sex, and any behaviors that might entice the target only enhance the skill's effects further.

The members of my family played to our strengths, thoroughly cultivating every aspect of our mannerisms to make us look as bewitching and seductive as possible.

As a result, I tend to give off a certain allure without even trying, to the point where some of my all-male battalion complain that it's too much of a good thing.

The main effect of the Salacious skill is brainwashing. It's a skill that allows the user to control others as they please.

Though, sad to say, the effect has its limits.

The brainwashing automatically wears off after a certain amount of time, and I can't exactly force my will on others, either.

If I give an order that the target has a strong aversion to, it can even break the brainwashing effect entirely.

Yet, in spite of all these restrictions, the success rate of the brainwashing is also quite low.

It's a terribly unwieldy ability, and to top it all off, the skill is incredibly difficult to level up.

People often question whether it's even possible to trust someone with the power to brainwash others, and... well, it's a fair concern.

Many men are always worrying that I'm going to brainwash them, too.

Which is exactly why most people don't attempt to acquire or train the Salacious skill.

But my family has gone against the current.

You could say we found a very specific niche to fill.

Still, having a brainwashing-related ability often means being the subject of undue suspicion.

That's why, I'm told, my ancestors have been bending the knee to the Demon Lord, and to other nobles as well, for generations.

They spread the word themselves that ours is not a particularly strong ability and made it common knowledge that we would never brainwash someone for nefarious purposes.

My ancestors went around fawning and bootlicking like you wouldn't believe, projecting the idea that they were to be used, not the other way around.

So, after generations of that, we scraped together enough influence and authority to call ourselves a noble family.

In the present day, the succubus line is actually known better for their subservience than their Salacious skill.

You must admit, it's quite amusing that the representative of such a family is someone who doesn't hold an ounce of loyalty toward the Demon Lord.

But maybe that was inevitable.

The previous generation's Demon Lord was killed, and the next one disappeared not long after.

How could anyone maintain a sense of loyalty without a demon lord to revere?

Especially when the one currently sitting on the throne is some no-name little girl who appeared out of nowhere. Who would accept her wholeheartedly simply because she claims to be the Demon Lord?

And right as we were enjoying a time of peace, she suddenly declares that she's restarting the war.

I let out another sigh, this time laden with sorrow.

Not far away, I hear someone gulp.

My aide shoos them away silently.

At first, this aide used to get adorably flustered by everything I did, but lately he's been spreading rumors to the soldiers that just looking at me could poison them. Can you believe that?

Talk about rude.

And he's even started asking me things like, "*Could you please try to uphold military regulations and discipline?*"

Why should I? I never wanted to join the military in the first place.

The army's job, of course, is to fight the humans.

But that was in the era of demon lords of past generations. Since the throne was more or less vacated, our focus has been on rebuilding our territory.

And that was for the best.

It's far easier to deal with monsters and criminals than to wage war.

If nothing else, it meant a commander like me was much less likely to die.

But that's certainly not the case in an open conflict with the humans.

If I make one wrong move, it could easily cost me my life.

And obviously, that's the last thing I want.

Which is why I attempted to put an end to the cause of the war.

Namely, the current Demon Lord...

But that was a big mistake.

Crunch. Crunch.

The noise still echoes in the back of my mind.

Nereo, the Ninth Army Commander who tried to oppose the Demon Lord with us... he was eaten by the Demon Lord before my eyes.

A political purge.

The gruesome chewing sounds from that encounter are still stuck in my ears, even now.

That was the moment I realized what a deadly enemy I'd made.

A monster.

I had moved against the one person I never should have crossed.

By the time I realized that, it was already too late. I had no choice left but to try to ingratiate myself with this Demon Lord.

Who would've thought that I'd end up on the same path as my ancestors after all?

Honestly, you've got to laugh.

But there's no other option—it's either that or be killed.

I have to cast everything aside, especially my pride, and lick her boots—literally, if she tells me to.

But I doubt a little bowing and scraping will be enough for that monster to let me off the hook.

In truth, I was doomed the moment she became the Demon Lord.

Because her goal isn't to win the war—it's for as many demons to be killed in the war as possible.

No, not just demons. Humans, too.

Essentially, she only cares about the number of lives lost, with winning or losing being secondary.

If demons and humans wiped each other out entirely, she wouldn't be able to ask for a more favorable outcome.

In other words, our only job is to kill as much as possible and be killed in return.

When you put it that way, I'm really only deciding whether I want to be killed by the Demon Lord or fall in battle against the humans. It might just be a matter of whether I die sooner or later.

The worst part is that this war against the humans still seems to offer a higher likelihood of survival than defying that horrifying Demon Lord.

And even then, the chances are slim...

But I'll attack Fort Okun as best as I can.

I don't have any clever way of putting this, but it looks like the definition of an impregnable fortress.

Attacking it head-on would make for a tough battle—that's for certain.

Impossible? I wouldn't go quite that far.

But whether we win or lose, it's inevitable that we would suffer some serious losses.

If we attack head-on, that is.

"Here they come."

As I watch, a change begins to occur.

But it's not the fortress. It's on the surface of a mountain nearby.

The mountain is moving.

Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that's not a mountain at all.

It's a swarm of countless monsters.

The mountain is covered in them so completely that you can't even see the surface.

And the swarm is heading straight for Fort Okun.

These monsters are called anogratches.

But they're also known by another, more sinister name: revenge monkeys.

A single anogratch is hardly a major threat, but the real danger lies in their group behavior.

Swarms of anogratches form strong bonds. If a single one of them is killed, the rest will go after the offender with all their might.

Even if it means every last one of them is wiped out.

Once someone has provoked a swarm of anogratches, it can only end in one of two ways: wipe out the entire swarm or sacrifice the person who set them off.

But if anogratches attack a place where a large group of people is gathered, anyone who kills anogratches to defend themselves will only make themselves new targets of the swarm's thirst for vengeance.

And as this spreads, eventually everyone involved will become a target.

In which case, the fighting will simply continue until one side is completely wiped out.

So now the people in Fort Okun must either defeat the entire swarm of anogratches or be wiped out themselves.

On top of that, this happens to be the monkeys' breeding season.

At their height, the swarms of anogratches that overflow from the Mystic Mountains become the greatest threat that demons face this time of the year.

And it just so happens that I captured one without killing it and had a brainwashed

soldier carry it inside the fortress.

The results are playing out right this very moment.

The horde thunders down the mountain and across the plain, charging straight toward the fortress.

Attack Magic shoots out from the fort, whittling away at the monkeys' numbers.

As if that will do them any good.

There are still plenty more where those came from. The anogratches already cover the entire mountain face, and they still keep coming.

The monkeys are quickly clambering over the walls of the fort, pressing onward even as their comrades are shot down.

Overwhelming numbers.

When I imagine what would happen if their vengeance was directed toward us instead, I can't help but shiver.

A rather cruel fate, if I do say so myself.

"Looks like it went off without a hitch."

"Yes, ma'am. Perfectly executed."

My aide and I nod at each other.

I never intended to bring Fort Okun down with the Second Army in the first place. It's simply far too risky.

Instead, we merely watch as the first wave of anogratches crests the fort's walls.

At this point, our victory is already assured.

Once those monsters get inside the fort, it's only a matter of time before the entire thing comes down.

“And without a single loss for our side.”

“As you say. Although now we will not be able to approach the fort for some time.”

I suppose that’s true.

That the fort simply belongs to the anogratches instead of the humans now—we still can’t carelessly attempt to attack it.

But that doesn’t matter one bit.

“A trivial concern. Besides, our goal here was never to take the fort for ourselves. This is perfectly acceptable.”

“That is very true. I must say, that was an ingenious move, ma’am.”

“Oh, you flatter me.”

I did use the Salacious skill to brainwash an enemy soldier into bringing the anogratch into the fort, but even without that, we still could have found another way to sneak it inside.

This strategy didn’t require me to succeed.

I do think of myself as a rather competent commander, even among my fellow demons.

But in the end, it’s only the smallest of edges.

I don’t defy definition like the Demon Lord.

There’s a limit to what an ordinary individual like me can do.

And yet, even so...

“I’m sorry, Demon Lord. I’m afraid I have no intention of meekly going along with your wishes.”

If I defy her, I’ll die.

If I obey her, I’ll die all the same.

The only reasonable decision is to obey her as best I can while looking for a way out.

If I simply do as she says, eventually she'll have no further use for me, I'm sure.

"You may think it inappropriate behavior for a demon, but I have achieved my mission nonetheless. Perhaps you'll let this one slide?"

I know it's a selfish wish, but the best I can hope for is that she'll overlook my insolence.

As I hang on to that slim hope, I continue to watch as the anogratches overrun Fort Okun.

SANATORIA PILEUY

Second Army Commander of the demon army. The head of a clan known as succubi, famous for possessing the Salacious skill. She is a bewitching woman with overflowing allure. She subscribes to the philosophy of "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" and hates anything that might be troublesome or get complicated. At first, she saw the Demon Lord Ariel's plans as nothing more than a thorn in her side, so she and several other commanders plotted a coup d'état. However, it was crushed before they could put it into action, and she was sent to the battlefield instead. At the moment, she's attempting to win points with Ariel by any means necessary to avoid being purged. She and Balto are childhood friends.



Sanatoria
PILEUY

Collection

II

Sixth Army

Huey



Fort Dazarro

Ronandt's army



THE FORT DAZARRO BATTLE THE KEY POINTS!

Welcome back to White Explains It All!

As you can see, the fort our little Shota is supposed to attack is surrounded by rivers!

That's right: rivers!

The dangers of massive amounts of moving water cannot be overstated!

Did you know that it's super hard to cross a river?

If you're finding it difficult to imagine, maybe pay a visit to a countercurrent pool or something.

Try to cut across that without getting swept away and see how well you do.

And since we're talking about an army here, that means everyone's gonna be carrying weapons and armor and all kinds of other stuff.

Depending on the depth of the water, sinking and drowning are real threats.

Horses and supplies will get swept away by the current, too.

Even with stats, you can't afford to underestimate the power of Mother Nature.

Plus, they'll be defenseless while they're trying to cross, meaning the enemy can snipe at them as much as they please.

That's how you end up with two armies just glaring at each other from opposite sides of a river.

Neither of 'em wants to make the crossing!

Looks like our pal Shota is going to try to attack the enemy with long-distance magic instead of attempting to ford the river.

Go, go, Shota! Don't lose, Shota!



Sixth Commander of the demon army.

This is the role that I have been assigned.

I know better than anyone that it's hardly a suitable role for someone of my stature.

By demon standards, I'm very young.

And I have an extra-youthful appearance, so people always look down on me.

Demons live longer than humans, and some grow faster than others.

I seem to be the sort who ages slowly, given that I still look like a child.

Supposedly, our family line has some elf blood from a few generations back, so maybe that has had an effect on my growth, too.

I say "*supposedly*" because it's hard to believe that an elf would really have a child with a demon, considering the typical elven contempt for other races.

But our family line has long been blessed with a high affinity for magic, just like the elves, so maybe there's some truth to it after all.

And the slowness of my growth is highly unusual for demons, which only makes the elf theory even stronger.

My younger brother is much the same, so the trait probably runs in the whole family, not just me individually.

My classmates and upperclassmen often made fun of me in school for how I looked, and even the underclassmen didn't take me seriously.

And a slowly developing body means that my physical stats are slow to grow, too.

I invariably lose in any kind of hand-to-hand combat, which has been a great source of embarrassment.

However, that holds true for only purely physical battles. With magic, it's a different story.

In a contest of pure magic, I'm confident that I'm stronger than any other demon.

Such pride comes naturally to the count of a prominent magical family.

To uphold that pride, I've always used my magic to turn the tables on anyone who mocks me.

And once word of my power spread, it wasn't long before I was named one of the commanders of the demon army, the highest rank a demon can be awarded.

Now the same people who once slighted me have to serve me.

That definitely feels good.

But at the same time, I know I'm not really worthy of being a commander.

The only reason I became one is because there wasn't anyone more qualified.

Frankly, I wasn't selected for my personal merits—I was merely the most acceptable choice by process of elimination.

The truth is, the demon race is desperately short on manpower, since we lost many of our best and brightest in the war against the humans.

There are few surviving veteran leaders aside from Commander Agner of the First Army, and most of the other current commanders were once young novices who distinguished themselves through service during the long years of the previous war.

But even then, there weren't enough, so they had to choose someone from a newer generation who seemed promising and appoint them as a commander.

Namely: me.

In other words, I'm just a stopgap measure.

Of course, I was chosen because of my abilities—there's no denying that.

But compared to the other commanders, I have far less strength and experience.

I do think my magic abilities are on par with the other commanders, but if in a real fight, I'm sure I would be the weakest of all of them.

And since I don't have a great deal of experience, I'm still inept at managing an army.

I know that people call me things like Kid Commander behind my back.

During my time in school, I could silence any teasing with my magical prowess, but now that I hold the role of commander, that alone isn't enough to convince everyone.

I doubt people will stop mocking me until I catch up to the other commanders.

But for someone as young as myself, that's easier said than done.

No matter how shameful, I have no choice but to bear it.

And then the current Demon Lord appeared.

It seems that demon lords, by nature, have the urge to wage war against humanity.

Older generations of demon lords certainly did, to the point where the most recent Demon Lord who disappeared may be one of the few exceptions.

But when that Demon Lord disappeared, it was actually a stroke of good luck for the demon race.

We had sustained serious losses in the long battle against the humans, to the point where we no longer had the resources or personnel for a war.

This lack of bodies is the reason I became a commander at such a young age, so I have mixed feelings about it.

Since the Demon Lord disappeared, the demons were able to establish a temporary truce with the humans and focus on rebuilding.

However, the current Demon Lord is undoing all that effort.

In fact, she's clearly not thinking about the future of the demon race at all.

The previous Demon Lords continued the war with the humans, too, but this particular Demon Lord doesn't seem to have any concept of moderation.

Previous Demon Lords always took the overall state of the demon race into consideration and marshaled forces accordingly, but the current one doesn't care about any of that. She seems to fully intend on gathering up every last demon and sending them into battle with the humans.

Most of the commanders disapproved of this.

Even I could tell what would happen if we went down this route, so of course I was in agreement with the others.

And of course, the commanders wouldn't just sit around and wait for our destruction.

Sure enough, a secret plot to overthrow the Demon Lord began to brew.

I thought this was the perfect chance, so I joined in on the coup d'état without hesitation.

What better way to build a reputation for myself than by bringing down the Demon Lord leading our race along the path of destruction?

We had a good chance of winning I thought.

The Demon Lord looked young.

No doubt she was just getting carried away with the thrill of being recognized as Demon Lord and trying to do the impossible.

What an idiot.

I discreetly joined the revolutionaries and carefully started sending soldiers to join Sir Warkis's Seventh Army.

The plan was for Warkis to gather the rebel army and attack, at which point I would move the Sixth Army in support.

Miss Sanatoria's Second Army was cooperating as well, so we were ready to bring down the Demon Lord's stronghold from the inside and outside at once.

Balto's Fourth Army was supposed to defend her, but he didn't seem to want to serve the Demon Lord, either, so we doubted that his soldiers would stay loyal to her.

If we reached out to them, no doubt many would be willing to change sides.

Since the Ninth Commander Nereo, who was in charge of personnel management, was also on the rebellion's side, it was easy to shuffle people around.

We assembled our forces discreetly so that the Demon Lord wouldn't notice anything unusual, and soon enough, our rebel army would be complete.

By then, it would be too late to stop the coup d'état.

...Or so we thought.

The next thing we knew, the rebellion had been utterly crushed.

I witnessed the exact moment the mastermind, Sir Warkis, died by his own sword.

And shortly thereafter, all the commanders who'd been participating in the rebellion received a warning from Sir Agner.

It was then that I realized we had failed.

Sir Agner, the most seasoned of the commanders, universally considered the strongest of all demons, was siding with the Demon Lord.

I didn't understand why he would do such a thing.

But that alone was enough to convince me that the rebellion was a lost cause.

Sir Agner's influence was simply that immense. With him as an enemy, our chances of success were slim.

I had placed my bets on a losing horse.

Now the only thing that mattered was finding a way to recover somehow.

Just as I was beginning to panic, I was summoned by the Demon Lord.

It was then I learned exactly why Sir Agner had chosen to obey her.

I wasn't the only one she'd summoned.

Sir Nereo, Miss Sanatoria, and me—the commanders who were working with the rebellion in secret.

Compared to Nereo's undaunted attitude and Sanatoria's usual relaxed smile, I'm sure I looked pathetically shaken.

I was trembling with fear that we would be sentenced to execution, but instead, the Demon Lord simply told us that the Commander of the Ninth Army was being changed.

It seemed anticlimactic.

The Ninth Army has long been little more than a name.

Its commander, Nereo, was in charge of all matters dealing with personnel, so the majority of his efforts is devoted to that and not his near-nonexistent army.

The Demon Lord announced she was going to appoint a new commander and make the Ninth a proper army.

That was all.

I'd come into the meeting worried I might be executed, so I was relieved to hear this.

But a moment later, I would realize how wrong I was to think the danger had passed.

Terribly, horribly, unforgettably wrong.

The Demon Lord spoke.

"Which means we won't be needing the current Ninth Army Commander anymore."

And with that, she casually disposed of Sir Nereo like a tool that had outlived its usefulness.

A mere execution would have been kinder.

No person should be subjected to what I witnessed that day!

To be devoured without a trace...

No one should have to die like that, and no person should be able to do such a thing.

The Demon Lord might look like a little girl, but on the inside, she's a foul beast.

Considering how long I've suffered because of my own youthful appearance, it's unthinkable that I misjudged the Demon Lord for the same reason.

From that day on, we were plunged into hell.

Where did we go wrong?

That's obvious. We never should have tried to defy the Demon Lord.

We were fooled by her appearance, mocked her seemingly stupid plans, and foolishly assumed she was nothing more than a young idiot who had let her ambition go to her head and was going to mess up everything.

But we were wrong.

It's all too clear to me now.

The Demon Lord knows exactly what she's doing and is deliberately trying to send us all to hell.

She is truly a heartless beast.

A horror who enjoys nothing more than watching us struggle, suffer, and die!

She could kill me on a whim at any moment.

I have to do as she says, serve her devoutly, and do anything I can to improve her opinion of me however I can...

"Then kill a lot and die a lot."

Those were her orders.

So we have to kill as many of the enemy as we can.

Otherwise, we'll all be killed instead!

"Sir Huey! We can't take any more! We have to retreat!"

My aide is insisting that we retreat.

We're attacking Fort Dazarro, one of the anchors in the humans' defensive lines.

The Sixth Army was ordered to take it down.

Frankly, the balance of power is not in our favor.

In fact, it's going even worse than I imagined.

My troops, the Sixth Army, are chiefly magic users.

This is partly because I myself specialize in magic, but mages are also more effective in large groups, which is why I deliberately organized my troops with a heavy emphasis on magic.

The role of a mage in war is to decimate the enemy army with the trump card called grand magic, a special kind of group-cast spell that causes damage on a massive scale.

It's no exaggeration to say that the amount of grand magic an army is able to cast can be the deciding factor between victory and defeat.

And in order to cast it, multiple magic users need to use the Cooperation skill to work seamlessly together.

Hence the importance of having a large amount of mages, enough to use grand magic.

Ever since I was appointed as a commander, I've been increasing the number of mages under my command by teaching any promising soldiers I found and even negotiating to recruit soldiers with an aptitude for magic from other armies.

Thus, I believe the Sixth Army now boasts destructive power equal to that of any other force.

Unfortunately, that means our frontline soldiers are noticeably weaker than most, and so there is a distinct danger of the enemy breaking through their ranks and reaching our all-important mages in a field battle.

But when laying a siege, we can really put our destructive power to work.

As long as they didn't sally out of their fort to attack, we could keep hammering them with grand magic from a safe distance until we annihilated the entire fort itself and secured our victory.

I was sure of it.

So why is everything going so horribly wrong?!

“Damn it!”

“Lord Huey, we must retreat!”

As I curse, the aide repeats his plea.

The Sixth Army is in such dire straits that we have little choice.

My aide's panic makes it even clearer how desperate our situation has become.

We should've been able to win this.

It was a contest for magic supremacy, after all!

Yes, our opponent was using long-distance magic as well.

They challenged us to a battle of magic, the Sixth Army's greatest strength.

At the time, I chuckled to myself.

I was certain that we could win.

And yet!

How can we be losing?!

We still haven't been hit with a single grand magic spell.

Although we haven't been able to land any attacks, either, since they keep crushing our attempts somehow.

Hitting the enemy with grand magic is truly the key to winning a battle.

Naturally, it takes a great deal of time to prepare, and the large amount of magic power involved makes it immediately obvious that grand magic is about to be used.

The goal, then, is to protect one's own grand magic while preventing the enemy from using it.

Occasionally, grand magic is even used to distract the enemy.

That's how central its use is in battles like these.

In that sense, we are evenly matched.

They interfere whenever we try to use grand magic, but we've been defeating their attempts, too.

That means neither side has been able to utilize their most powerful attacks.

In other words, we've simply been shooting normal magic back and forth.

So why is our side the only one taking losses?!

Demons have higher stats than humans!

In a magic shoot-out, surely the side with higher stats should win—in this case, ours.

But the reverse is happening instead.

It doesn't make sense.

What's going on here?!

I'm told the enemy general is a human mage called Ronandt.

He's a legend among humans who has allegedly lived since the days of the previous Demon Lord.

I did not believe I had underestimated him.

But still, I was confident that we wouldn't lose in a pure contest of magical strength.

And yet—and yet!

I grind my teeth.

At this rate, the Demon Lord will kill me.

"We can't... retreat."

"But why?! If this continues, we'll just keep losing more troops!"

"We just can't!"

If we retreat without producing any success, the Demon Lord will be furious.

I'll be killed.

Eaten.

No! I don't want to die like that!

I have to produce some kind of results, no matter what it takes.

Which leaves only one option...

"We're going to use grand magic. Back me up."

"There's no point trying to use grand magic now! We must retreat!"

"Just do it."

I'll cast grand magic with my own hands to crush the enemy.

Otherwise, there's no way to turn the tides of battle.

But while I'm trying to prepare, no one else is moving a muscle.

These dimwits!

"Hurry up and help me!"

I stomp a foot in frustration.

Just then, something in my head snaps.

"Eh?"

Then, before I can figure out what's going on, my consciousness fades to black.

HUEY GUIDEK



Sixth Commander of the demon army. The current count of a family that has boasted powerful magic for generations. He is the youngest of the pure demon commanders and appears very young as well. Due to this appearance and the loss of his parents at a young age, he's faced many struggles throughout his life.

A hard worker, he's found a way to overcome such hurdles with his own strength. However, he's aware that he lacks experience compared to the other commanders, and he is willing to take extreme measures to compensate. As a result, he steps on the tail of the tiger known as the Demon Lord and experiences the fear of running into a wall that he cannot possibly overcome.



“Aren’t you a sight for old eyes.”

“Good to see you again, Master.”

It has been a long time since I last saw apprentice number one, also known as Julius the hero.

We haven’t been face-to-face like this in many years.

Thanks to interference from the Word of God Church, I’ve scarcely been allowed anywhere near him.

What an irritating lot.

“Glad to see you looking well, eh?”

“You too, Master. It’s amazing that you’re still active at your age.”

“Who do you think I am, boy? I’ll be out and about until the day I die, fool.”

“You haven’t changed one bit.”

Apprentice number one chuckles demurely.

When I first looked after him, he was still rather innocent, but he’s done a lot of growing since then.

“Julius... Ah, and Elder Ronandt. When did you arrive?”

A boy enters the room without even knocking—Hyrince, I believe his name is? One of my old apprentice’s friends.

“Just a moment ago.”

“He teleported in out of nowhere. I keep asking him to stop scaring me like that...”

“If you can’t even detect incoming teleportation, you still have a long way to go, boy.”

I ignore his complaints.

We have to meet secretly like this, or the Church won’t get off my back.

“Guess the old man hasn’t changed, huh?”

Hyrince sighs, though his general impertinence hasn’t changed much, either.

“So, did both of you need something?”

“Indeed. But your bratty friend Hyrince can state his business first.”

My business isn’t anything important—just a touch of meddling, really.

It can wait.

“Bratty, huh? I guess that’s fair if it’s coming from you, but still, c’mon.”

“What’s wrong with calling a brat bratty? If you’ve got a problem with it, let’s see you get strong enough to defeat me first.”

“Give me a break, please.”

The brat flashes a grin, then turns serious.

“Elder Ronandt, this information is technically top secret military information, so...”

“Very well, child. I promise I shall not repeat anything I hear in this room.”

I’m sure the brat was hoping I would leave, but he should know better. Given how long we’ve been acquainted, this much should be obvious.

Sure enough, he quickly shrugs and begins his report.

“The scouting party didn’t return at the appointed time. It’s safe to assume they’ve been wiped out.”

At this, my first apprentice's face turns grave.

The troops stationed here on humanity's first line of defense are no ordinary soldiers.

They're as elite as it gets.

Even so, their scouting party failed to return with any information—a clear sign of just how dangerous the enemy is.

"Hrm. How many groups have failed to return?"

"All of them."

What a mess.

It's even worse than I thought.

Before a major battle like this, scouting parties tend to split into smaller groups before gathering information. That way, even if one group is caught and killed, the others can still bring back anything they find.

But this time, not a single group came back.

Which means that the enemy's intelligence network and detection capabilities were superior to all the scouts', and on top of that, they were strong enough to wipe out the elite scouting parties with ease.

It's also likely they have enough numbers to attack several scouting detachments at once.

Surely, the scouts had ways to contact one another even after splitting up. They must have been trained to quickly withdraw if any of the other groups ran into trouble.

But since that didn't happen, they must have been taken out at the same time.

The detection skills to locate the scouting parties.

The combat strength to destroy them.

The enemy has soldiers capable of both and has them in great enough numbers to at

least match the scouting parties.

“Sounds like this will be a bloody battle,” my apprentice murmurs.

He must be dwelling on the scouting party members who were killed.

“Apprentice.”

It’s time for me to knock some sense into him once again.

“Knowing you, I’m sure you’re thinking of the soldiers who were lost, but that’s a waste of time. Better to think about yourself instead.”

“Master! What do you mean, a waste of time?!”

Normally, my apprentice’s voice never wavers, but he’s sensitive when it comes to the life and death of others.

“I’m saying that the deaths of the scouting parties are not what you need to focus on right now.”

“Master, there are some things that aren’t okay to say, even for you. If you keep it up, I’ll get really angry.”

“Oh-ho? And how do you plan to act on that?”

The brat flinches at my threat.

My apprentice doesn’t show any fear, but I know that’s just an act.

“*You* say that you’ll get angry with *me*, hmm? Surely, you do not think you could defeat me in a fight?”

I put more emphasis into my voice, keeping it low and even.

Did that audible gulp just now come from my apprentice or the brat?

“Do not get ahead of yourself, boy. There is always someone stronger than you. Even if you are the hero.”

With that, I relax my threatening aura and rap my apprentice lightly on the head with my staff.

"The same is true of the scouting parties. They did their job to their best ability and died in battle. It is not wrong to lament their deaths, of course. But it *is* wrong to feel as if you are somehow responsible. You do realize that even a hero cannot save everyone all the time, yes? Or are you so foolish as to think that you should've joined the scouting parties? Even when that would have been the most disrespectful thought of all, acting as though those who perished were not worthy of the duty. Surely, the great hero would not dare think such a horrible thing?"

At that, my apprentice looks lost for words.

He hangs his head in silence.

Apprentice number one has always been like this. He tries to take on everything, even burdens that are not his to bear.

When someone falls in battle, the blame lies with them alone and no one else.

But somehow, this boy feels guilty unless he's able to save every single person.

He seems to still not understand that would be impossible for anyone but a god.

"Julius."

For once, I call him by his name.

Slowly, he raises his head.

"On the battlefield, you must think only of yourself."

If you get distracted by anything else, you could die in a battle you might have otherwise survived.

"There is always someone stronger. You know that as well as I do, yes? And only the strong can protect others. But you are weak, too weak to even defeat me."

"That's easy for someone as strong as you to say, Master..."

Julius retorts half-heartedly, and I chuckle.

"I am no exception, either. You know there are those who are stronger than me, too, hmm?"

Julius has encountered the master before, too, so he must understand.

Such power is far beyond the reach of any mere human.

"Do you understand? If things get dangerous, you must flee without a second thought. In the end, you are still the hero, yes? A hero who flees is far less of a problem than a hero who dies. You must get that into your head."

"Don't worry. I'll be there to protect Julius."

What is this brat babbling about?

"Hardly reassuring when coming from one even weaker than my apprentice."

"Oof, that's harsh!"

I'm sure he's reacting so absurdly in an attempt to lighten the mood, trying to cheer up my apprentice so that he doesn't go into battle still forlorn.

I admit the brat is a good friend, even if his strength is lacking.

"Ha-ha. I guess I'll take you up on that."

"Good. You've got nothing to worry about."

Sure enough, my apprentice's mood recovers a little.

"Still, Elder Ronandt, you came to check in on your darling apprentice, huh? Guess you've got a kind of cute side."

"Th-that was certainly not my intent!"

What is this idiot blathering about?!

I thought he was a good companion for my apprentice, but clearly I misjudged him

after all!

“Aw, look, he’s blushing.”

“I certainly am not! Honestly! I’m leaving now, you brats!”

“Okay. Thanks for today, Master.”

“Harrumph.”

I use Teleport to make my exit.

That was just a few days ago.

“The enemy army is in full retreat.”

“Indeed.”

I nod at one of my apprentice’s words.

Ever since I took Julius on as my first apprentice, I’ve shifted my focus from training myself to raising apprentices.

I have grown old.

My end is in sight, no matter how much I train.

Better, then, to pass on what I have learned in my life to future generations.

Perhaps one of my apprentices will even go on to someday gain power beyond that of any human.

A faint hope, to be sure.

I gathered applicants from many different lands and put them through rigorous training as my apprentices.

Most of them were unable to handle my training and ran away before long...

Of course, that simply gave me more time to spend on the worthy ones who have remained.

Now they can finally handle the first level of my training.

Some have even learned to use Space Magic.

Still, they have a long way to go yet.

None has surpassed my first apprentice thus far.

Since my first apprentice is the hero, that much is inevitable, but disappointingly, none has managed to surpass my second apprentice yet, either.

My second apprentice, Aurel, was originally my helper.

I simply made her my apprentice on a whim because she seemed to have a knack for magic.

As a result, she's not particularly motivated.

Even so, her strength is still second only to Julius among my apprentices, so I don't know which is more infuriating: the inadequacy of the others or the fact that she could be even stronger if she only made more of an effort.

But in any case, the base potential of mages today has far outstripped that of previous generations.

That much is clear, especially after this battle.

We scored a decisive victory after engaging in a ferocious magical exchange with the demons.

A spell's power is generally fixed, with very little variation based on the difference in the user's stats.

This has long been accepted as common knowledge.

But after my meeting with the master and my later training with the spiders, I realized that it is indeed possible to increase the potency of spells.

The key is the caster's Magic Power Operation skill level.

Until this discovery, it was thought this skill was necessary only to initially learn to use spells.

But I discovered that if you raise your Magic Power Operation skill level, you can alter the very structure of your spells and make them weaker or stronger.

This is a fundamental change in our understanding of magic.

It makes it possible to deal major damage to the enemy without using large-scale magic, which requires multiple casters and a great deal of time.

The demon army we faced seemed to specialize in magic, too, but they were focused on grand magic, the strategy of the past.

That is not enough to defeat the likes of me.

The enemy general appeared to be a little boy, but I finished him off easily with an enhanced long-range attack spell.

I doubt the demon even realized that he had died.

It's difficult to tell a demon's age from their appearance, but given his looks, he must have been fairly young.

His inexperience was obvious from how he commanded his forces, so I imagine I'm not far off the mark.

To become a general at such a young age, he must have had a great deal of talent.

It is a shame to see such potential go to waste.

But it would be foolhardy to show the enemy mercy.

As a general myself, I know there are soldiers who have put their lives in my hands, too.

You mustn't think less of me for it.

But still, I believe I can at least spare a moment to pray that this boy's soul passes on in peace.

"Our casualties are minimal. I was frightened that our forces might be too understrength, but at this rate, we should be able to defend the fort after all."

"It would appear so."

I nod at my cheerful-looking apprentice.

We were outnumbered, that's for certain.

The exchange of spells was intense. We were able to win because the apprentices I'd trained had an edge over the demons' antiquated magic techniques, but it was by no means an easy victory.

If it had been anyone but myself and my apprentices in Fort Dazarro, perhaps this place would have fallen by now to those demon mages.

Our victory came down to nothing more than a stroke of good luck.

If armies of that scale have been sent to the other forts, too, several might very well fall.

And for some reason, I am still haunted by a sense of unease.

I cannot help but worry that it might be a sign that something terrible is going to happen.

"Do not let down your guard. Our enemies are demons. They are bound to have stats higher than we humans."

"Ah! Of course."

My apprentice reins in that overflowing excitement and regains some composure.

"Make sure the wounded are treated right away."

“Yes, sir!”

My apprentices scurry out of the room.

There are more preparations we must make.

I only hope this premonition of mine turns out to be an old man’s groundless fear.

III

Fourth Demon Army

Merazophis



Kunihiko, Asaka



MERAZOPHIS'S BATTLE THE KEY POINTS!

Welcome back to White Explains It All!

As you can see, the fort Mera's attacking is situated between a lake and a forest!

And a lake can mean only one thing: NAVAL BATTLE!

Or so you would think, but this world's sailing technology isn't actually very advanced.

I mean, most bodies of water here are home to super-strong monsters.

If you try going for a swim in the ocean, a water dragon will pop up to say hi in no time flat.

Lakes are a little better, but if you try to sail on one, you're still definitely gonna sleep with the fishes.

Is that scary or what?

Anyway, that means the lake is just a no-go zone for both sides in this battle.

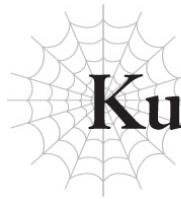
The fort has the advantage of being able to just ignore the flank that's covered by the lake, letting them focus completely on the land.

Still, you can't rule out sneaking around to the back of the fort by using the forest as cover, so the defenders can't let their guards down, either.

Both sides have their own advantages and disadvantages given the terrain.

Guess that means it's gonna come down to pure strength.

Well, Mera should be fine on that front!



Kunihiko

I've got memories of my previous life, see.

A life where I grew up on a planet called Earth, in a country called Japan.

Hate to say it, but in that life, I was pretty much your average, run-of-the-mill high school boy.

Basically the only notable thing about me was that I had a childhood friend.

It's not like my childhood friend, Asaka Kushitani, and I were especially close or anything.

At the same time, it's not like we didn't get along, either.

If I had to pick one, I guess I'd say we got along pretty well?

We lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same school from kindergarten to middle school. We went to the same high school, too, and even wound up in the same class, although we didn't plan it that way or anything.

Basically, we were stuck with each other.

She never came over to wake me up in the morning, and we didn't usually walk home from school together, either.

If anything, I usually left for school pretty late, so most of the time, meeting in the morning wasn't a thing.

On the rare occasion that I woke up early enough, we'd run into each other and walk to school together once in a while, but that's about it.

But weirdly enough, I had the vague feeling that I was probably gonna end up marrying her one day.

For some reason, it just felt relaxing to be around her, like she understood me even if I didn't say anything.

Yeah, I knew I was half-assing it, and that if I kept trying to play it cool, then eventually some other schmuck would probably come along and steal her away.

But I just kept putting it off, dragging my feet and staying as nothing more than childhood friends.

It was so casual that we barely had anything connecting us except the fact that we were childhood friends.

Not like I minded that, of course.

"Normal's not a bad thing" and all that.

But I guess I did feel like something was missing.

I wanted to go on an awesome adventure in a faraway land.

To have something exciting happen to me, like in a game or a light novel.

And yeah, I knew that wasn't gonna happen, 'cause all that stuff is bullshit.

...Or so I thought.

But next thing you know, I wound up getting reborn in this world.

I'm gonna be honest: I don't remember dying, and I don't remember much about the moment I was reborn, either.

It's like I was dozing off or something, and next thing I knew, I was a freakin' baby.

When I woke up, I was like, *WHA?!*

Like, come on, the last thing I can remember from my old life is just sitting there in classical lit class, y'know?

Not exactly a thrilling end.

What the hell even killed me?

And then I was a baby somehow.

Who wouldn't be weirded out after going through that?!

But the reason I didn't totally panic is that Asaka was lying there beside me.

Yeah, that's right.

My classmate and childhood friend, Asaka.

For some reason, she got reincarnated, too. We were childhood friends all over again.

She looked different—I mean, we were both BABIES—but for some reason, I could tell right away it was her.

And when I asked later, she apparently had the exact same feeling.

Not much crazier than that.

But more importantly, I figured this had to be fate.

Like the gods were telling us to stick together or whatever.

So while there was this vague distance between the two of us in our old lives, after reincarnating, we became super close.

Asaka couldn't forget our old lives and was afraid she'd lose sight of herself if I wasn't around.

And having Asaka meant I had someone to talk to about finally getting to go on a real adventure.

The world we were reborn into is some sorta fantasy setting, with monsters and adventurers—exactly the kinda thing I'd wished for back in my old life.

So I didn't hesitate to announce that I wanted to become an adventurer and travel the world.

If Asaka wasn't by my side, I dunno if I could've been that bold.

It'd be scary as hell to suddenly get shoved into an unfamiliar world where you don't know a soul.

Seriously. I'm so lucky to have Asaka.

As soon as I was able to talk, the first thing I did was confess to her.

"I can't live without you. Please marry me someday."

I blurted this out in the middle of the day, with our moms watching and everything.

It was a public confession, but to hear Asaka tell it, it was more like a public execution.

Okay, yeah. In retrospect, I was getting a little ahead of myself.

Our moms just looked at me funny, saying stuff like, "They just grow up so fast."

To be fair, there's no way they could have known that I was actually a high school student from another world on the inside.

Maybe it was for the best that they just saw it as a kid imitating a confession for fun.

Asaka did seem super embarrassed and all...

But miraculously, she gave me the okay on the spot.

In our old life, I always figured I'd have to talk to her properly someday, but I never found the right timing, so our relationship was always stuck in limbo.

I never imagined that'd change when we got reincarnated or something crazy like that, but I guess it all worked out in the end.

In terms of dramatic timing, getting reborn together is about as good as it gets.

Thanks to that, even someone as dense as me managed to be honest about my feelings, so I kinda thought being reborn wasn't so bad after all.

Asaka did seem to miss our old world more than I did, 'cause sometimes she would

remember it and cry and stuff.

Whenever that happened, I just sat with her and comforted her in silence.

I'm probably the weird one for adjusting so quickly, y'know?

But Asaka's got a good head on her shoulders, so she pulled herself together pretty fast.

...Which is a little bit of a shame, since she was really cute and clingy when she was depressed.

Still, I'm glad she was able to cheer up and all.

I got reborn in the fantasy world of my dreams and managed to propose to my childhood friend.

Definitely sounds like the makings of a bright future, right?

I knew tons of fun times were waiting for us—Asaka and me, traveling the world together, having the time of our lives.

I never doubted it for a second...

...until that day came.

“Ooooh, check it out. Here they come.”

“Kunihiko... why do you seem a little excited about it?”

As I check out the enemy army from atop the fort, Asaka frowns slightly at me.

“You kidding me? C'mon! Look at that and tell me it's not cool.”

I point down at the giant army of demons.

You'd rarely see armed forces in these numbers in this world, never mind Earth, and now a whole mess of them is marching right toward our fort.

“Awesome.”

“It’s not that I don’t get where you’re coming from, but you realize we’re about to have to fight all those people, right?”

Asaka heaves a sigh.

The demons have gathered their armies and are attacking humanity.

Until recently, there was nothing more than a couple of quiet rumors, but once the guild started assembling adventurers to fight in the war, it all became very real very fast.

On top of that, participation was mandatory for B-rank adventurers and up.

C rank and below were given the option to decide for themselves whether to participate or not, but the guild made it clear that they wanted as many people as possible to enlist.

Asaka and I are A-rank adventurers, so we don’t have the luxury of choice.

All the high-rank adventurers are being sent right into battle, even the ones who normally protect towns and cities from regional monsters.

That means those places will be temporarily unprotected, but that just goes to show how bad this war situation is gonna be.

If that wasn’t proof enough, they’ve opened up the teleport gates, which are normally off-limits to ordinary folks, in order to transport soldiers and adventurers to the battlefield.

Although this is all just me repeating what Asaka told me.

I don’t think about stupid little details like that—I’m just gonna follow my orders and fight demons.

“Heh! It don’t mean squat how many of ‘em there are as long as you and I are on the job.”

“Kunihiko, don’t get cocky.”

Asaka sighs again, but she doesn't look particularly worried, either.

A lot of the other adventurers here are high-key nervous—I can tell.

Can't blame 'em, either. People say demons have better stats than humans, and there's a hell of a lotta demons coming our way right now.

From what I hear, it's been years since any demons attacked, too.

Before that, there were small scraps every couple of years, but then even those stopped, so the only humans who've ever actually fought demons are walking fossils at this point.

In other words, this'll be the first time most human warriors have ever faced a demon, not just youngsters like Asaka and me.

Adventurers usually fight monsters, and occasionally some bandits or whatever, so we've never experienced battles like this.

Not to mention, most adventurers don't work well with anyone except maybe their own party, but now we have to form up in a big group and cooperate? Yeah, right.

We're not trained for that kinda crap. Not a chance in hell.

But I guess the big shots on our side get that, too, so they pretty much just told us adventurers to do whatever we want.

We've been gathered at the fort's last line of defense, while the soldiers who've actually been trained for this are on the front lines.

You're allowed to stick around here and defend the fort if you want.

Or you can go out on raids to take the fight to the enemy army.

But if you do something crazy and get yourself killed, that's on you!

...Is basically the idea.

Even if we don't do anything crazy, I'm pretty sure lots of people are gonna die anyway, given how huge the enemy army is.

Which is why just about everyone's nervous.

The only ones who aren't are the ones like Asaka and me, who have total confidence in our own strength, or the veteran fighters who've been champing at the bit to stand on a battlefield like this.

"Kunihiko, Asaka."

Hearing someone call our names, I turn around.

"Hey, good to see ya, Master."

"It's been a while, sir."

"Yeah, yeah. You don't look nervous at all, though, Kunihiko. Dunno if that's a good thing or not."

I already had an idea who it'd be before he said anything, but sure enough, it's our adventuring mentor, Mr. Gotou.

Gotou's an A-rank adventurer who's been looking after Asaka and me and saving our butts since we were kids. He showed us the ropes when we first became adventurers, too.

"I've heard the rumors about you two crazy kids, y'know. They say it's only a matter of time until you hit S rank."

"Yes, just a few more years now."

"Whatcha think of that, Master?"

"Damn, and you used to be such scrawny kids, too. Where'd the time go? Now you're gonna pass me before I even realize it!"

Mr. Gotou sounds just like an old-timer.

Asaka and I have traveled the world as adventurers and taken on all kinds of tough quests.

That's how we wound up reaching A rank, and we've even hit all the S-rank

requirements except the minimum number of active years.

All we gotta do is keep going as adventurers for a little longer, and we'll automatically get S rank.

Which means we'd technically be ranked above Mr. Gotou, but...

"If you wanted to, I'm sure you could hit S rank anytime, Mr. Gotou."

Mr. Gotou's crazy strong, even for an A-rank adventurer.

And that's coming from me, a guy who's been all over the world, so you better believe it's the truth.

We've even met a couple of S-rank adventurers out in the field, but let's be honest, me and Asaka were stronger than the best of 'em.

But anyway, Mr. Gotou's no slouch next to any of them, either.

After adding in the power of his magic sword, it's probably no exaggeration to say he's almost in the same league as the top S-rank adventurers.

His nickname is Lightning Sword, referring to the power of lightning that lives in that iconic weapon of his.

It's one of the craziest things I've ever seen—they say its lightning is on par with a grand magic spell.

But there's a downside: Some dumbasses claim that Mr. Gotou reached A rank only thanks to his sword.

He didn't even get that sword until *after* he hit A rank! Idiots!

"Eh, too much pressure. My strength's all thanks to this guy here anyway."

Mr. Gotou pats the sword on his belt.

I know he's simply being modest, but saying stuff like that just makes people even more jealous.

"Besides, I only work in my hometown anyway, so A rank's more'n good enough for me."

"I know I should keep my trap shut if you're happy with that, but still..."

Noting my dissatisfaction, Mr. Gotou grins.

"That reminds me, Mr. Gotou. Wouldn't Fort Okun have been closer to your hometown?"

Oh yeah, Asaka's got a point.

The fort we're at now is pretty far away from Mr. Gotou's home turf at the base of the Mystic Mountains. A place called Fort Okun is a lot closer to there.

And from what I hear, the demons are attacking all the forts on the border at the same time.

Why didn't Mr. Gotou go there instead?

"Mm. Yeah, that's true, but..." Mr. Gotou hesitates and looks around before continuing in a low voice. "This stays between us, but they're gathering all the real strong adventurers here. See?"

Mr. Gotou gestures with eye movements toward a few of the other adventurers.

Following his gaze, I realize that every last one is a top-class adventurer, famous enough to have a nickname.

"How come?"

"...Because the soldiers here are weak," Mr. Gotou whispers even more quietly, sounding frustrated. "The guy in charge of this fort is a buffoon who only became a general thanks to his social status. So obviously his troops are no good, either. Which is why they made sure to station extra-strong adventurers here."

"Seriously? What the hell?" I can't help raising my voice. "I thought the empire was all about strength! Why would they put some bum in charge of a fort?"

"In the old days, sure, everyone used to work together because of the constant threat of demon attacks. But ever since that danger went away, I guess there was some

internal conflict."

Asaka and I both sigh openly.

"The decline of the Vicow house was especially tough. You've heard about how the heirs and heads of the family died one right after the other, yeah? If they were still around, things might be a little better in the empire..."

"...You seem very well-informed about all this."

As Mr. Gotou explains the situation in the empire, Asaka looks at him curiously.

"Nah, not really. I hear this sort of stuff whether I want to or not. The amount of info that's leaked about 'em is proof enough that the empire's in shambles."

Mr. Gotou scowls and shrugs.

"And it's 'cause of that mess that I wound up out here." He pauses and studies the demon army. "But this assignment ain't so bad."

"It's not?"

"Sure. I told you the general here's an idiot, yeah? Worst case, he might've used us adventurers as sacrificial pawns by sending us out to keep the demons busy, then shooting at the ensuing melee or something. He's just putting us off to the side like we're in the way, so we got off easy."

"Yikes..."

In other words, this general is so inept that he might've gotten us all killed?

Lucky for us that we don't have to do what he says, then.

Technically, we're under his command, but he told us adventurers to do whatever we please. He must've figured out that was for the best.

Huh? Hold up. How would this dumbass general be able to reach that conclusion on his own?

"Ah, this only got set up thanks to his much smarter aide making all those

arrangements.”

Mr. Gotou’s timely explanation clears up my confusion.

He adds that this aide doesn’t have any personal ties to the general and was sent by the imperial court mages.

Unlike the general, this guy seems to know what’s up, which basically makes the aide the one who’s really in charge.

On paper, the general’s still technically the head honcho, so this guy is having trouble getting things done.

“And why do you know all this?”

“Oh, I just happen to know the aide, that’s all. She damn near chewed my ear off complaining about the general over drinks last night.”

“I suspected as much. So you’re getting all this information by cozying up to some big shot, hmm?” Asaka shakes her head at Mr. Gotou. “And you said ‘she’—is this person a woman?”

“Huh?! Wait, oh man, are you and her—?!”

“What?! No! ’Course not!”

I thought maybe Mr. Gotou was finally gonna get some romance in his life, but seems like I was wrong.

Not surprising, I guess, since he’s pretty much given up on marriage at this point.

“She’s practically a child compared to me. I ain’t thinkin’ about gettin’ hitched at my age. Though I gotta admit it would’ve been nice to have a partner picked out early on, like you kids.”

He looks warmly at Asaka and me in turn.

I hear a snort of annoyance from someone in the group.

Since we were chatting away in the middle of a bunch of tense adventurers right before

battle, I knew we were sticking out like a couple of sore thumbs, but I guess that line pissed off some of the forever-alone types.

Glancing around, I see a good amount of guys glaring at us like we're ruining the moment.

Guess we better shut up. If we keep chatting like this much longer, they're probably gonna really start complaining.

"Hmm?"

But among all the glares directed at us, I sense that one gaze is different from the rest.

Following it to its source, I find a little kid in a robe.

I can't make out a face with the low-hanging hood in the way, but someone that short and tiny has got to be a child. What's a kid like that doing here?

"Damn, that doesn't look good..."

The thought gets pushed from my mind when I hear Mr. Gotou murmur in a stunned voice.

"What the hell?" I blurt out.

I just laid eyes on something so bizarre that I couldn't help it.

We're not the only ones who are shocked—pretty much everyone else around is staring at the same thing with their jaws on the floor.

In a word, it's a spear.

A huge jet-black spear suddenly appeared above the demon army.

"Dark Spear?! No, wait! Is that a Black Spear?!"

Black Spear, as in a Black Magic spell, the advanced version of Dark Magic?!

Isn't that a grand magic spell?!

And even if it is, how's that thing so damn huge?! I can feel my insides churning!

"Asaka!"

Just as I call out and start moving, the giant Black Spear shoots toward the fort.

I draw the magic sword at my waist, charge it with magic, and fire.

My magic sword has the power of lightning, just like Mr. Gotou's.

It's a katana-style magic sword, made from the parts of a lightning dragon we defeated.

At the same time, Asaka starts casting a spell.

Her staff, sorta like my sword, is made from the parts of a wind dragon we defeated, so it's a magic staff that enhances the power of Wind Magic.

My lightning attack and Asaka's wind spell both crash into the Black Spear.

Those aren't the only ones, either—another spell, probably the Light Magic spell Light Beam, shoots out from elsewhere inside the fort and hits the spear, too.

The three attacks all counter the Black Spear, but it's not enough to cancel it out.

BOOM.

From where I'm standing, I've got a clear view of the moment the Black Spear blows a huge hole in the front wall of the fort.

It's gotta be at least thirty feet around, I think?

What's left of the wall is already crumbling.

"What in the...?"

Mr. Gotou mutters under his breath.

Big picture, the damage isn't too catastrophic. The fort has several walls.

Even if one is damaged, we can just abandon it, retreat to the next one, and keep

fighting.

This does mean that we can't use that wall to attack the enemy without fear of retaliation anymore.

Those guys are out of our range.

No normal magic can reach that far. The Black Spear that just flew at us defies known logic.

Especially since it managed to blow through three different counter-spells from our side and still damage the damn fort.

If me, Asaka, and some other person hadn't put up some resistance, it probably would've wreaked even more havoc.

What'll happen if a couple more of those come flying at us?

We'd be toast in no time flat.

"We gotta go out there and take 'em on."

The enemy is way beyond our firing range, but somehow, we're in theirs.

That means we're gonna have to charge 'em and close the distance.

Since everyone's gone dead silent, my voice echoes loudly.

"You mean out there? Are you crazy?" The adventurer who snorted at me speaks up, looking pale. "Didn't you see that thing?! How are we supposed to stand against that!?"

"That's why I'm sayin' we gotta go out there and do something about it!" I shout at the wavering adventurer. "Let's go! Anyone who can fight, come with me!"

With that, I run out of the fort.

Most are too damn scared to follow.

In spite of what I said, I'm guessing most of 'em can't fight right now anyway.

But that's fine.

As long as Asaka is by my side, that's all I need.

"...We might've taken this all a bit too lightly."

"Yeah."

The two of us talk as we run.

Me and Asaka are strong.

The only times we've really come close to eating it were when we fought the lightning dragon and the wind dragon. Other than that, we've won every fight without a problem.

When we heard we'd be fighting demons, we weren't too worried.

I figured there was no way they could be worse than those dragons.

Even if we lost the battle, I kinda just assumed that Asaka and I at least would survive.

Seeing that Black Spear changed all that in an instant.

There's a real possibility we could get killed here.

But if Asaka and I run away now, then humanity's gonna be doomed.

You can bet I'd lose some sleep over that one.

So we might as well fight for all we're worth, am I right?

I can see the demon army coming into view.

Their spears are at the ready to fend us off as we come toward them.

"Yaaaaah!"

Charging on in anyway, I activate my magic sword's power and bring lightning down around me.

The furious bolts toast a bunch of demons, sending them flying.

Then Asaka's wind spell sweeps the rest of 'em away.

In this world, high stats can make you crazy powerful, enough to take on an army.

And I'm pretty sure Asaka and I are way past the limits of a typical human.

The most legendary human warriors have stats around 1,000, but Asaka's and mine are more than double that.

Demons' stats are supposedly higher than humans', but it looks like they're not much stronger than the two of us, if at all.

We can take 'em!

Which must mean that Black Spear was cast by a whole bunch of people together, right?

...Nope.

Even using Cooperation to cast a spell, all the people involved have to have the right skill to use it and be at the proper skill level, too.

Black Spear is a Black Magic spell, the advanced version of Dark Magic.

You gotta be really good at Shadow Magic to even get Dark Magic, so I seriously doubt that a whole slew of people all managed to reach Black Magic.

No, there's probably only a handful of users in the whole world who know that skill.

So what the hell is going on here?

“Ngah... uraaaaaaaaah!”

Trying to ignore the sinking feeling in my chest, I focus on just blasting as many enemies as I can.

Nearby, I can hear similar lightning striking other enemies.

I guess Mr. Gotou must've followed Asaka and me into battle.

Maybe we'll inspire some of the other adventurers to join, too.

We gotta take a stand, right here and now.

So we can crush whoever cast that Black Spear before they can whip up another one!

As soon as that thought flashes through my mind, I sense a huge amount of magic power swelling from deep in the demon ranks.

Another huge jet-black spear appears.

“Kunihiko!”

“I know!”

As if we'd just stand here and watch!

Ha! Thanks for showing us exactly where you are, stupid!

“Let's goooooo!”

I unleash my magic sword's lightning toward the source of the Black Spear in one powerful arc.

It blows away any demons in its path without a trace, flashing as it reaches the base of the Black Spear, and vanishes.

At the same time, the Black Spear melts into thin air without shooting forward.

Got 'em!

But just as I start grinning, I realize it's too soon to assume we've won.

As the dust clears, my smile quickly vanishes.

My big attack hit the target dead-on—but the caster is still standing there looking cool as a cucumber.

“Seriously?”

That one word is doing a whole lotta work right now.

There's the shock that he withstood my attack without a scratch.

Then add in the dread of knowing that the Black Spear was created by just one caster, not a bunch working together.

And most of all, it's the fact that I recognize this man.

There's no way I could ever forget him.

He's the bastard who showed up when I was a kid, destroyed my delusion that our lives were gonna be fun forever, and taught me what hell looks like in this world.

It's the man who wiped out the entire clan who raised us.

“Who woulda guessed we'd meet again in a place like this! Merazophis!”

My mortal enemy who I've never once forgotten is standing right before my eyes.



Sometimes, nightmares can come to life.

...I'm sure this strange thought was just my way of trying to escape reality.

Kunihiko and I are special.

You might think that sounds like a delusion of grandeur, but the simple fact is that we're much stronger than any average person in this world.

According to Kunihiko, gaining overpowered skills when you're reincarnated in a different world is apparently a common occurrence.

I'm not sure whether to take him seriously, since he's talking about fiction, but... we really did get special powers, so I suppose I can't say he's wrong.

It doesn't sit well with me that we're seemingly playing out tropes from storybooks or perhaps even being forced to do so.

But these powers really have helped us a lot, so my feelings on the subject are complicated.

We've gotten stronger as adventurers, gathering fame and rewards so smoothly that it really has felt like a montage in a story at times.

As soon as we reach the required years of service, we're guaranteed to hit S rank, the peak of adventurer rankings.

Once we hit that level, it might not be an exaggeration to say that the two of us would be considered higher in status than some lesser nobles, depending on the country.

In fact, if we wanted to stay someplace permanently, we could probably acquire a title

of peerage if we really wanted to and live in peace for the rest of our lives.

I'm sure there would still be times we'd be asked to help out as adventurers, but I can't imagine we'd have to fight anything as strong as a wind dragon or lightning dragon very often.

Monsters come in different classes, too. The kinds of dragons I'm thinking of are S rank, and there are even creatures of legend that humans could never hope to compete with.

But monsters like that rarely appear and cause trouble.

If they went on a rampage that often, humanity would've gone extinct ages ago in this world.

So as long as we didn't foolishly venture into any dangerous areas where those kinds of monsters live, I was confident that the two of us would never be killed.

That's just how strong Kunihiko and I have become.

People often tell me that I'm very methodical and reliable.

Sometimes there are comments that I'm cool and mature.

But honestly, I can't say I agree.

The truth is that I'm a slacker who will do just about anything to avoid trouble.

I'm only "*methodical*" and "*reliable*" to avoid doing any more work than I have to.

And my so-called "*coolness*" and "*maturity*" are because I can't be bothered to get worked up about every little thing, so I always opt for the path of least resistance.

Naturally, a dangerous and unstable job like being an adventurer is the last thing I want.

The only reason I'm doing it at all is to go along with Kunihiko.

I don't like to be sentimental, but even I couldn't help but get emotional about reincarnating and later watching the destruction of our entire clan.

Kunihiko is the one who helped me get through all that.

Without him, I'm sure I never would've gotten back on my feet.

I want to repay him for that. Besides, I want to be with Kunihiko.

That's why I became an adventurer for him, even if it wasn't what I wanted.

I would put up with just about anything for Kunihiko.

...Pretty sappy, if I do say so myself.

I certainly wouldn't have imagined this in our old lives.

Back then, Kunihiko and I were just childhood friends who couldn't quite take the next step into dating.

I always imagined I might end up marrying him someday, but I never once thought I would be so head over heels for him.

And since Kunihiko always flies by the seat of his pants, I took it upon myself to form a methodical plan for us.

When we became adventurers, I asked Mr. Gotou to teach us things so we wouldn't end up neglecting the basics.

I manage our supplies, carefully assess the requests we take, research our destinations, and so on.

I do it all for Kunihiko.

And it's for Kunihiko's sake that I'm participating in this battle, too.

Of course, it was mandatory for B-rank adventurers and above, but it's not as if we couldn't have gotten out of it somehow.

If I really thought it was too much trouble, I could've pulled some strings and found a way to avoid participating.

But the reason I didn't do that is because I suspected a certain man would be

participating in this battle, too.

His name is Merazophis.

He's the demon who wiped out our clan.

And Kunihiko's goal is to someday defeat Merazophis.

He might not say it out loud, but I'm sure of it.

Kunihiko's gotten stronger than necessary even for an adventurer, but he still never stops training, no doubt in hopes of getting revenge one day.

To free himself of the shame of being too helpless to do anything and being spared after everyone else we knew died.

Of course, there was no way of knowing that we would actually come face-to-face with him in this battle.

But I'm sure a demon who's strong enough to wipe out an entire clan on his own must be fairly high-ranking, so it wouldn't be so strange for him to be a commander in a large-scale engagement like this.

If anything, our chances of running into him outside of a major battle are probably far slimmer.

So I thought it might be worth taking the one-in-a-million chance.

I'm definitely regretting that decision now.

A blade flashes past Kunihiko's face, a hairbreadth away.

If he had leaned back even a second later, the sword would likely have pierced his head.

The thought makes my blood run cold.

My body is warmed up from running around, but somehow I still feel a chill on the inside.

Kunihiko and Merazophis are locked in a furious sword fight.

With every swing of Merazophis's sword, my heart nearly stops in fear that Kunihiko might be cut down.

My breath comes fast and hot, but I'm freezing cold at the same time.

I'm scared.

I've never felt this scared, even when we fought the lightning dragon and the wind dragon.

Those battles were about as desperate as this one, but they were completely different in an important way: the indomitable will of our opponent.

Dragons are still just wild monsters.

They act according to their survival instincts, and while they were determined not to be killed, that was ultimately just part of their nature.

But Merazophis is different.

I won't lose.

I refuse to let you kill me, no matter what.

His resolve is so intense that I can almost hear the thoughts residing within his silent determination.

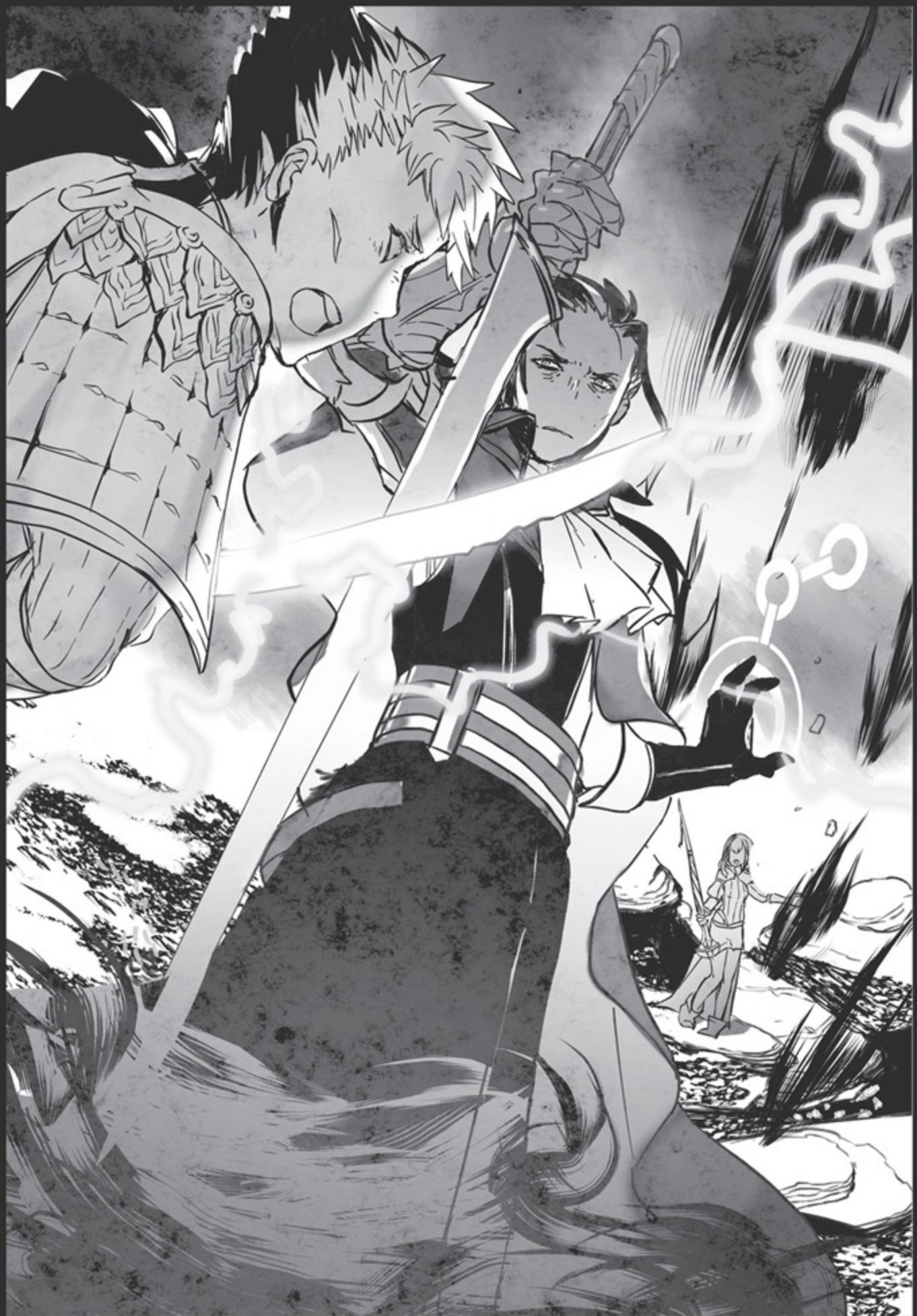
The powerful intent in his eyes, the likes of which I didn't see once in the lightning or wind dragon, is so strong that I can't help fearing for Kunihiko's life.

I don't know what kind of person Merazophis is, but I've learned one thing from this fight already.

Merazophis is strong.

Too strong.

And not just his stats, which are undoubtedly high. From his fighting style, it's obvious how much training he's gone through.



His textbook, flawless swordsmanship is evidence that he's repeated each of these motions countless times.

Mr. Gotou made Kunihiro and me practice our sword swings, too.

But I'm sure this man has repeated those far more times than either of us.

Thanks to our reincarnation cheats, Kunihiro and I have higher stats than other people, so sometimes it can actually be frustrating that our techniques can't catch up to those high stats.

But for Merazophis, it's the opposite.

He's the type whose stats have risen to catch up to his incredibly polished techniques.

His grasp of the fundamentals of combat is incomparable.

I made sure that we studied the basics so we wouldn't someday get overly reliant on our high stats, and Mr. Gotou trained us accordingly.

But Merazophis is on a whole other level.

They say that demons live longer than humans, but I can't even begin to imagine how many long years of training it would take to reach this level of performance.

The lightning dragon and wind dragon were dangerous because of their high stats, powerful breath attacks, wide-range magic attacks, and so on, but Merazophis is a completely different beast.

The dragons might have had higher stats, but Merazophis is undoubtedly more dangerous.

We haven't been able to land a single attack on him yet.

I start forming magic.

Since I've been using powers beyond my limits to fire off spells at top speed, my head is starting to ache, but I ignore it and cast my next spell.

A compressed shot of air shoots toward Merazophis.

This spell was even able to hurt the lightning dragon—but Merazophis counters it with a Dark Magic spell that cancels it out.

As soon as the two spells crash into each other, Kunihiko slashes horizontally at Merazophis's torso.

But Merazophis blocks that, too, without breaking a sweat.

We've both been attacking wildly for the past several minutes—Kunihiko with his magic sword's blade and lightning alike and me with magic.

But Merazophis has expertly fended off both our attacks.

He blocks Kunihiko's blade with his own sword or dodges it, then uses Dark Magic to cancel out the lightning or my wind spells.

My pounding head is already paying the price for casting magic nonstop, but Merazophis is keeping pace with a perfectly calm expression.

All while carrying on a sword fight with Kunihiko.

He's fighting two of us at once and doing better than both of us combined.

He looks like an ordinary human, but clearly he's a living nightmare, more powerful than any dragon.

Yes, we faced death when we fought the lightning dragon and wind dragon.

But our defeat never seemed so imminent as it does now.

If our attacks were doing damage to him, then it would be a matter of who runs out of strength first.

But right now, we're not causing any damage at all.

My breath quickens.

I have to constantly shift my position to keep up with the constant, tempestuous movements of Kunihiko and Merazophis, so I've been running around like mad.

For each spell I cast, I immediately have to start preparing the next one.

My head hurts, and my feet ache.

I can barely breathe.

I'm fighting on sheer force of will alone, but my body could give out at any moment.

Kunihiko must be the same.

I can tell he's breathing hard, too, and sweating like a waterfall.

While Merazophis still looks coolheaded as ever.

It doesn't seem like he's tiring out at all.

Even if that's partly just an act, the fact remains that he's clearly not as exhausted as Kunihiko and I are.

And as soon as either one of us runs out of strength, this already fragile balance will fall apart completely.

On top of that...

"Ah?!"

A Dark Magic spell grazes my face.

Launched by Merazophis, of course.

And at the same time, he brings his sword down toward Kunihiko.

"Nnngh!"

Kunihiko parries with his blade, but Merazophis's strength is starting to overpower him.

Panicking, I shoot a Wind Magic spell to separate them.

Merazophis jumps back easily, still unscathed.

We've both been bearing down on him with attack after attack, but he isn't focused solely on defense. Somehow, he's blocking all our attacks and still finding the time to hit back at us.

If either of us lets our guard down for a second, we could be killed.

So will we collapse from exhaustion, or will his attacks bring us down first?

As Merazophis looks completely unfazed despite our desperate attacks, I can't see any way that we might win.

All I see is our inevitable loss.

What should I do?

We're still hanging in there for now.

But if this keeps up much longer, we're going to fail sooner rather than later.

And yet, if we let this nightmare run free, humanity itself will lose all hope.

Merazophis is just too powerful.

He could easily take on an army and win.

I frantically calculate in my mind.

...The lives of Kunihiko and me versus all of humanity? It's not even a contest.

To be honest, I don't really care about the fate of humanity or anything like that.

And I don't think there's any real purpose in risking our lives here just to slow down Merazophis for a few moments.

That means the best thing to do is run.

The question is whether Merazophis will really let us get away that easily.

Frankly, I doubt it.

Unless we can buy some serious time, he'll kill us as soon as we turn our backs.

But how would we keep him occupied long enough to get away?

Can we even distract him at all if we haven't been able to land a single attack on him?

No.

There's nothing we can do.

I've already hit my limit.

If only we had a little help...

Just then, Merazophis suddenly bends his upper body.

An instant later, a blast of light passes through the space where his torso was just moments before.

What was that?

Magic?

I glance in the direction it came from, but I don't see any possible caster in sight.

It came from the direction of the fort—but it couldn't have, right?

We're quite a long distance away from there.

If it really did come from the fort, it must've been cast by a powerful mage.

And not only that, but another shot follows right after the first.

Aiming solely at Merazophis, who moves around rapidly to dodge the attacks.

How could anyone manage to snipe at Merazophis from such an incredibly long distance without hitting Kunihiko?

I know I wouldn't be able to.

This is exactly the help we needed.

And yet!

Merazophis is still weaving around Kunihiko's attacks, my Wind Magic, and the magic sniper all at once.

He's strong.

Too strong!

The addition of the sniper means Merazophis can't counterattack as much, which allows us to press the attack.

But we still can't break through his defenses.

In fact, I have the feeling that if we let up for a second, it will all be over.

It's like we're dancing on the thinnest ice.

Even with the extra help, it's still not enough.

"Hrgh?!"

Suddenly, a Wind Magic spell hits Merazophis square in the back.

But it wasn't me who fired it.

It was someone else—a child in a robe?

The child hit Merazophis with Wind Magic from behind and is already readying another spell.

I guess they're on our side.

In that case, I'll accept their help, child or not.

Besides, while they look small enough to be a kid, that magic was considerably fast and strong.

It doesn't seem to have done that much damage to Merazophis, but the fact remains that it was able to hit him.

None of our attacks has managed to land all this time.

That means Merazophis wasn't able to dodge this person's attack.

Only with a four-on-one battle can we finally hope to be a match for him.

Since the hit didn't do much damage, our chances of victory remain slim, but it's still much better than the situation was before.

This is our only chance.

As soon as I decide that, I stop my constant barrage of magic for a moment and focus my energy on weaving a bigger spell.

Sensing that, Merazophis changes focus to target me with his next spell.

"Urgh!"

Kunihiko steps in with a quick slash to stop him.

Merazophis blocks his attack with his sword.

At the same time, the magic sniper and the child attack Merazophis with more magic.

"..."

For just a moment, Merazophis grimaces.

If he redirects the spell that was meant for me, he can cancel out the other two magic attacks.

He's pulled it off all this time, so I don't see why it should be any different now.

But Merazophis doesn't do that.

He lets the sniper attack and the Wind Magic hit him dead-on, and instead of counterattacking with Dark Magic, he uses it to attack me instead.

“?!”

The sniper's attack hits him in the chest, followed by the Wind Magic hitting the back of his head.

And a spear of darkness pierces my stomach.

But!

I finished constructing my magic!

Bearing the pain, I activate the spell.

Tempest Magic: Dragon Wind!

The spell engulfs Merazophis instantly.

“Ngh!”

Even Merazophis can't dodge Dragon Wind, a spell that's usually meant to cause destruction on a huge scale.

And it's ultra-grand magic, which normally can't be cast by a single person.

Ultra-grand magic surpasses even grand magic in power and is strong enough to take down a dragon.

I know, because this is the spell we used to defeat the lightning dragon.

Surely, even Merazophis couldn't survive...

“Agh!”

A shout of determination.

The flash of a blade.

Just like that, my most powerful spell dissipates into thin air.

This can't be happening... Can it...?

Of course he's not unharmed, but Merazophis is still standing firmly on two feet.

Even though he was blasted in the chest and hit in the back of the head with magic right before the Dragon Wind hit, it's as if he took virtually no damage from those at all.

How high must his stats be to make that possible...?

We're doomed.

"AAAAAH!"

Just as the thought sinks in, Kunihiko slashes down at Merazophis.

Immediately, Merazophis prepares to parry.

But an attack from the sniper pierces his hand, and Wind Magic stops him from moving.

Then Kunihiko's full-body strike cuts into Merazophis's shoulder.

"Ngh!"

But while normally this diagonal sword slice should have cut straight through him, it just sinks into Merazophis's shoulder and stops.

His defenses are too strong because of his sheer stats.

Kunihiko's attack failed to deal enough damage.

Merazophis swings his sword and knocks Kunihiko away.

Then he puts a hand on his shoulder and bellows.

"Withdraw!"

With that, he turns his back and runs away from us.

That was a clear call to retreat, almost overly dramatic.

So much so that it practically seems put-on.

Kunihiko stares after him in silence for a moment.

Then he comes back to his senses and runs up to me.

“Asaka!”

“Mm. I’m okay.”

“You call this okay?!”

Right now, I’m lying faceup on the ground.

Merazophis’s Dark Magic hit me in the gut.

I’m guessing it blew a hole right through me.

Kunihiko hurriedly pulls out a recovery potion and pours it on the wound, where it sinks in stinkingly.

“Don’t die! Don’t you dare die on me!”

“Don’t worry. I don’t think I’m going to.”

I’m not putting on a brave face—I genuinely feel like I’ll probably survive.

Stats really are an amazing thing.

Normally, with a hole like this in your gut, you’d die for sure.

But between the HP Auto-Recovery skill and the Healing Magic I’ve been casting on myself, I think I’m going to make it.

“He let us live again.”

“I know.”

Once he figures out that I’m really not on the verge of death, Kunihiko mutters quietly as he continues treating me.

If that fight had continued, we would've lost.

We managed to injure Merazophis, but that's it.

Each of us attacked him with everything we had.

And even then, the most we could manage was a scratch.

Even if we'd fought with the will to sacrifice ourselves in the process, I still don't think we could've won.

"I'm no good. I still gotta get stronger."

You don't need to get that strong, really.

That's what I want to say.

I never want to experience danger like this again.

There's no guarantee that he'd let us live again next time.

They do say the third time's the charm, after all.

This is now the second time that Merazophis has decided to spare us.

When he wiped out the clan that birthed and raised us, he let us go free purely on a whim.

And today, it happened again.

Although I don't know what his reasoning was this time.

"Are you all right?!"

As I'm lost in thought, the child in the robe comes running over.

She really helped us get through this battle. I should thank her.

"Thank you very much. Your support was greatly appreciated."

“You can thank me later! First, we have to heal you!”

“It’s all right—I can stand.”

My wound has mostly closed up.

It’s certainly still painful, so I can’t push myself too much until it’s fully healed, but I should be able to get up and walk around at least.

We’re still on a battlefield, meaning I can’t just lie around, so I start to sit up.

I catch a glimpse of the hooded figure’s face: a young girl, looking wide-eyed and surprised by the speed of my recovery.

I couldn’t tell in the middle of battle because her hood was pulled over her eyes, but she’s a real beauty.

And judging by her overall appearance, now I understand how she was able to fight so well.

“Aah, so you’re an elf.”

The girl’s pointed ears give it away.

Elves live even longer than demons, and they’re said to be especially skilled at magic.

As a result of their long life spans, they age relatively slowly, so this girl is probably a lot older than she looks.

This girl and one other.

I look to the fort.

I don’t know who it was or what they look like, but there was a mage supporting us by sniping at Merazophis throughout our fight.

Without the help of these two, we wouldn’t have even been able to begin to fight Merazophis.

Exhaustion is becoming harder and harder to ignore, but there’s no time to waste. I

push away the desire to simply lie down and sleep.

Kunihiko reaches out his hand, and I let him pull me to my feet.

“How’s the battle looking?”

“Seems like they’re retreating.”

Looking around, I can just barely see the demon army pulling back.

And I see the adventurers who were fighting them, too, with Mr. Gotou among them.

Maybe Merazophis noticed that their battle was going poorly for the demons and decided to make a tactical withdrawal.

If so, we owe a lot to Mr. Gotou and the others.

“I suppose we should head back, then.”

“Yeah.”

Both of us are too exhausted to fight anymore anyway.

If we tried to chase the retreating demons, Merazophis might actually kill us once and for all.

No, we should quit while we’re ahead.

“Are you coming?”

“Yes.”

The elf takes off her hood and nods.

“But first, I should introduce myself to you... Tagawa and Kushitani.”

For a moment, I’m so tired that it doesn’t register as strange for her to know our names.

But then I realize: Kunihiko and I have never used our old family names in this world.

So how does this girl know them?

"My name is Filimøs Harrifenas. But in your case, perhaps I should give my old name instead: In my previous life, I was Kanami Okazaki."

Kunihiko's eyes widen in shock, and so do mine.

Because that's the name of our old homeroom teacher.



Hiya!

It's everyone's favorite (BLEEP)-year-old, Aurel!

Yep, my age is a seecret.

I *am* the daughter of a noble family, y'know!

Even if we're damn broke.

But being a cute little noblelady who's still unmarried at my age, I'm starting to fall behind the curve here.

According to my life plan, I was supposed to be married by now and have popped out a kid or two, so what the hell happened?

See, I'm the second daughter of a poor noble family in the boonies of the empire.

Yep. I'm from the sticks, I'm poor, and to top it all off, I'm not even the oldest.

At that point, being nobility doesn't really mean a damn thing.

If I were the eldest daughter, I mighta still been able to get married off into some other friendly noble fam, but since I'm not, I wouldn't hold my breath.

Besides, there's not a thing to be gained by getting close to a poor noble family like ours anyway, so I doubt there are gonna be people lining up for a marriage with us in the first place.

Oh, by the way, my older sister did manage to get married off to someone in a neighboring country.

And my older brother's gonna take over as head of the family, so I really gotta get

hitched someplace.

But since we're dirt-poor and all, finding someone is a huge pain in the ass.

We really don't have coin or anything to offer, either, so yeah...

That's why I was shipped out as a live-in assistant so I could raise some dough and make a few connections at the same time.

It's not super unusual for a noble family's second or third daughter to be sent out as a live-in servant to a higher-ranking house.

You get paid, and if you're lucky, you might even meet someone special.

Depending on how good a worker you are, there's a chance you can stay on with that family permanently.

'Cept, since I'm from the boonies and I have the mouth of a sailor, I more or less got thrown out before I even made it through the damn interview.

I guess I just ain't got what it takes to act like a proper lady, so I never get picked for that kinda crap.

But while I was practically going on a damn world tour of failing every interview, I was lucky enough to run into Mr. Ronandt as a potential employer.

Ronandt is the number one strongest court mage in the whole empire, the elite-est of the elite.

Basically, he's a damn living legend.

But I thought, for a guy that important to hire some chick from the boonies like me, there's gotta be a catch, yeah?

Oh, there was a catch, all right.

If I had to sum up that geezer in a word, I could go with *perv, magic-obsessed moron, freak, total brute*, and so on.

Oops, that was more than one word, huh?

Basically, the dude is unhinged.

But if I ran away from this job, I'd never be able to find work again.

So I bravely held my tears at bay and served the damn weirdo.

Looking back, this is where my life started to get real weird.

Work for the geezer, save up money, and get married to someone who's loaded enough to at least make sure I won't go hungry, even if they're a commoner.

That was my highest goal at the time.

Best I can hope for, with my damn dirty mouth.

I shoulda given up on the idea of marrying into a noble family from the start.

My poor-ass family is barely any better off than commoners, so I didn't really mind getting out of the nobility game anyway.

If I can just be a commoner with a half-decent life, that's good enough for me, dammit.

And yet, my prime marrying years are pretty much over, and I'm still friggin' single.

But maybe not being married is the least of my problems right now.

Why the hell am I on a shitty battlefield anyway?

"Goddamn, this is a real mess."

I end up grumbling out loud despite trying to rein it in.

How does the second daughter of a poor noble house from the boonies end up as a court mage?

If you're confused, that makes two of us.

Basically, it's all that damn geezer's fault for saying "*You have a talent for magic!*" and forcing me to be his apprentice.

Mostly 'cause the hero Sir Julius, who became the geezer's apprentice first, barely survived his insane training.

You can't even call that training at all. It was straight-up torture!

He literally looked like he was gonna die, so I used Healing Magic on him on the spot, and that's when everything went to shit.

The old geezer saw me do it and assumed I was good at magic or something...

But the only reason I knew how to do it in the first place is 'cause when we were traveling in a carriage a while back, the old man used Healing Magic to fix up my sore butt, so I thought *Hey, that's pretty damn handy; I should learn it* and practiced in secret.

There wasn't any real reason for me to hide it, but looking back, I think young me really made the right call.

Because the moment the geezer found me out, my life turned into a living hell thanks to the torture he calls "training."

I've tried to escape him tons of times since then, but that old man is a Space Magic master.

No matter where I run, he always chases me down with teleportation!

So I figured my only choice was to learn Teleport, too!

But learning Space Magic just wound up making things worse.

The government itself started taking notice, and before I knew it, I got shoved into a court mage seat and even got a fancy title.

All I wanted was a roof over my head and food in my belly. Instead I found myself moving up in the damn world instead...

All 'cause Space Magic is super rare.

But since I've got a personal noble title now, maybe someone will actually wanna marry me!

Except I've been so damn busy with work that I haven't had time to even worry about that.

Imperial court mages have a lot of crap to do, y'know!

And even when I'm free, I end up having to teach things to the other court mages and their apprentices and stuff, for the sake of future generations or some junk?

One day, I'll be like, *Sweet, I don't have any work today!*

And then the next day, I'm suddenly drowning in more crap I have to do.

Where am I supposed to find the time to meet someone to marry now?!

Honestly, though, this war takes the cake.

Why is a sweet young maiden like me giving orders on a battlefield, huh?

"Ughhh. I just wanna retire, dammit."

Right now, I'm giving directions to restore a fort wall that got wrecked.

Luckily, the damage was fairly light, so the other court mages and I can get the wall back into half-decent shape, even if we can't fix it completely.

"Ma'am, could you help us instead of complaining, please?"

One of my fellow mages starts whining, but I'm having none of that crap, thanks.

"I just worked myself half to death, dude. Just lemme rest a little, okay?"

Damn right.

That's literally what happened.

In fact, if I had made one wrong move, I really would've died.

I was pushing my magic to its limits in that crazy long-distance firefight, y'know?

Who the hell was that freak?

Since when does the demon army have someone like that?

I hear the guy who messed up our fort's wall is a demon called Merazophis or something, but his magic might've even been on par with my master's, which is ludicrous!

Master Ronandt already falls way outside the normal limits of human strength, but I dunno if even he could bust the wall of a fort like this from such a long distance...

Although the scary thing is that maybe he could.

"D'you think my master coulda pulled this off?"

"Surely, this would be madness even for Elder Ronandt... although I can't say for sure that it'd be impossible..."

My colleague seems to have the same opinion as I do on the matter.

"I mean, yeah, Master's pretty wild, but this Merazophis guy seems absolutely monstrous, too."

"Ma'am, that makes it sound like Elder Ronandt isn't human."

"Well, yeah, he's definitely at least half given up on being human by now."

"Ahhh..."

The way that guy simply nodded like it all made sense really goes to show what the people around Master actually think of him.

But that also means that the guy we just fought was so bizarre that he might've even been a decent match for my master.

Honestly, if those young adventurer kids hadn't held him off, this whole damn fort might be a pile of rubble by now. It was seriously that bad.

My master likes to say, "*The truly strong can fight any number of riffraff with ease.*"

Might as well have been talking about himself.

Forget dozens—it'd take hundreds or maybe even thousands of people to try and take down that geezer.

Since I've seen that geezer fight up close, I can understand this Merazophis guy's insane level of power to an extent, but that doesn't mean I'm happy he's on the enemy side.

I felt sorta bad for the demons who got sent to the fort where my master was stationed, but who decided I gotta fight a demon even stronger than those guys?

Am I being punished for something I did or what?

All I can think of is that time I snuck some poison into the geezer's food.

"Bah! You'll need ten times this amount of poison if you want to kill me!"

Yeah, he was totally fine...

Is that geezer really human?

Honestly, sometimes I half-seriously think he might be some super-strong monster in disguise.

I mean, the whole reason my life went off the damn rails is 'cause that monster of an old man set his eyes on me...

"I was supposed to be making out with my super-hot husband by now..."

"You're back on that again, ma'am?"

I'm always talking about how I just wanna marry half-decently and retire, so I think my colleagues are sick of hearing it.

"Ma'am, if you really want to get married, all you'd have to do is rub that chest of yours up against whatever guy you want, no?"

"You know what comments like that are called? Sexual harassment, dammit."

Yeah, my chest is on the large side, that's for sure.

It's one of the few things I can be proud of, but it also comes with a lotta problems.

Like creepy stares from lots of dudes and some major back pain to boot.

Even that purehearted Sir Julius always glances at 'em whenever we meet...

"Well, the real problem is there aren't any guys I wanna marry."

"I think your standards are just too high, ma'am."

"Nnngh!"

I can't argue with that, since it's kinda true.

Especially since Julius happens to set the bar extremely high.

Good looks! Perfect pedigree! Great personality! Power to spare!

I know it doesn't make sense to compare other people to someone like that, but it's hard not to when you know an actual hero.

The one downside is that being the wife of a hero sounds like a huge pain.

But compared to that...

The guys usually around me are all mages who are a buncha weirdos, especially the geezer.

I look at my colleague's face and heave a huge sigh.

"Ma'am, isn't that a bit rude?"

"Whatever. I'm allowed to sigh at grown-ass men who call a younger lady '*ma'am*.'"

That's right. All the other court mages, not just this guy, are older than I am!

But they all call me "*ma'am*" for some reason!!

And not even to be rude—they seriously mean it.

For imperial court mages, your magic power decides your position.

And since I'm second only to the geezer in strength, that means I get almost as much respect as he does.

I guess some people might fancy the idea of a buncha older guys falling all over themselves to heed your every word, but really, it just means I'm surrounded by damn magic-loving weirdos, okay?

Not exactly the kinda guy I'm looking to marry...

But most of my days end up being spent with these guys from morning till night.

I hardly ever meet anyone new, and even if there's someone who catches my eye a little, I rarely get a chance to talk with them.

Besides, most of those people are already engaged or married to boot.

The best ones always get taken early, y'know?

Next thing you know, everyone half-decent's already spoken for, and there's hardly any damn singles left who're near my age.

...I might seriously be screwed at this point.

"Aaargh! Aren't there any awesome guys who're my age lying around somewhere?!"

"Hmm. I mean, I can think of one..."

"Huh? Who?!"

Is my colleague gonna throw me a bone here?!

"You know—Sir Hero."

"Argh..."

Makes sense.

But that isn't an option.

“Sir Julius is way outta my league, dude.”

“You think so? But you seem to be pretty close with him, so I do believe you have a chance, ma’am.”

“Like hell I do. Me and him aren’t a good match.”

“Why do you always sell yourself short like that, ma’am?”

I don’t think it’s much of a stretch to say that Sir Julius, who’s a prince *and* the hero, could do a hell of a lot better than some poor noble girl from the boonies.

Besides...

“Besides, me and Sir Julius just aren’t like that.”

I know he’s super amazing and all, but that makes it even harder to see him as more than a friend.

“Sir Julius is a light, dammit. A light that draws people to him. All kinds of folks end up gathering around him and decide to walk alongside him of their own free will, y’know? That’s what makes him a hero. A legend.”

Yaana the saint once said that he’s like gentle sunlight or something.

But I don’t think so.

He’s way more intense than that, like a fire blazing wildly in the darkness.

You know it’ll burn you if you get too close, but people can’t help moving toward him anyway.

And then they sacrifice themselves in his name.

Now, I’m not saying that’s a bad thing.

It just shows how much charisma Sir Julius has, to the point that people want to dedicate themselves to him.

“But I just wanna live in peace, so that light’s a little too damn bright for me.”

Sir Julius is noble and all, but staying by his side kinda seems like a heavy burden to bear.

Personally, I think he could stand to take it a little easier, y'know?

But he's always been super uptight, ever since he was a kid, so I don't think he'd be able to change the way he lives at this point.

"So being a step behind him as a friend is the right place for me."

"I see."

"I just hope he's not doing anything too crazy in this war..."

But knowing Julius, he'll end up doing something reckless no matter what anyone says to him.

"But that sort of sounds more like a worrying older sister than a friend, don't you think?"

"I guess you could call it that."

"How fitting for you, ma'am."

"Ugh."

I can't say he's totally wrong, so I just quietly give my colleague's back a shove to send him off to finish fixing the wall.

Right now, I'm more worried about whether Merazophis is gonna attack again than my stupid marriage prospects.

Between those three adventurers and me sniping at him from here, we managed to chase him off, but I dunno if it's gonna go that well again next time.

He seemed totally fine even after I landed a direct hit on him. I aimed right for his heart, too...

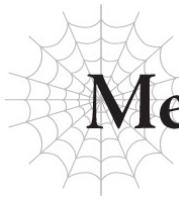
I doubt there's a lot more freaks like him out there, but either way, it seems like this battle's gonna be harder than I thought.

So much for the rumors that the damn demons being in such dire straits that we were even getting refugees at the border...

I don't think folks like Master and Sir Julius are gonna go down easily, but I wanna make sure they know to be extra careful.

But I guess I'm in no place to worry about other people right now.

Better get down to business.



Merazophis

I have to get stronger to protect the young miss.

How long has it been since I made that resolution?

Along the way, I somehow gained the position of Fourth Commander of the demon army.

I'm sure it's primarily because I'm an acquaintance of the Demon Lord.

But in spite of my becoming their commander due to that connection, the Fourth Army has been loyally following my orders.

To them, I am just an unknown man who showed up with the Demon Lord and suddenly became their leader.

They would be well within their rights to doubt me. I am not even a demon but a vampire.

I have been hiding that truth and living as a demon, so I am sure even my identity is still a mystery to them.

So I feel nothing but gratitude to my men for treating me as their commander nonetheless.

Technically, I did need to put in the work to earn this position.

Originally, the Fourth Army was commanded by Sir Balto.

However, he was so busy with his work that his younger brother, Sir Bloe, was generally in charge.

I joined the Fourth Army under Sir Bloe's command and quickly worked my way up the ranks.

When Sir Bloe became the official commander of a different army, everyone remaining moved up a rank, myself included.

From then on, my rank continued to go up, and by the time Sir Balto officially retired from his post as commander to focus on his political responsibilities, the Demon Lord Lady Ariel personally appointed me as the new commander.

It's open knowledge that Lady Ariel brought me to the demon territory.

Thus, I imagined that many people would object to a newcomer becoming commander so quickly.

But to my surprise, there were no complaints from either the other commanders or the rank and file of the Fourth Army.

I thought it strange, but Lady Ariel simply smiled.

"You really don't give yourself enough credit, Merazophis," she said.

And, "There's nobody more qualified to be a commander than you."

Although Lady Ariel claims I do not give myself enough credit, it is my belief that she gives me far too much.

The truth is, I am nothing more than a humble servant.

Even if I've been reborn with the unusual race of a vampire, my fundamental nature has not changed.

For an ordinary human such as myself to become a vampire, there is little change other than gaining a bit more power.

And even that is nothing more than strength borrowed from the young miss, who is a Progenitor vampire.

It does not reflect any excellence on my part.

But when I said all this, Lady Ariel simply warned me: "Too much modesty just comes off as obnoxious, you know."

...The truth is, I know she's right.

With my power, I am more than capable of being a commander.

Those around me are simply accurately gauging my value.

But there is a part of me that does not want to admit this.

For most, I imagine being valued highly would be cause for celebration, not denial.

But there is a reason that I feel I must react in such a way.

I am afraid of letting myself get too comfortable.

Many things have gone wrong in this life of mine.

Of course, I'm sure many people feel the same way.

Like countless others, I ran into quite a few obstacles as an ordinary person.

The first of these was unrequited love.

The woman who I served, now the deceased mother of my young mistress.

As her servant, I fell in love with her, a love that was doomed to failure.

She was already loved and in love with her fiancé, who of course was the young mistress's father.

Given my position, and out of respect for their relationship, naturally I could not act on my feelings, and so the curtain fell on my first love.

And the next great obstacle I encountered was their deaths.

My love would never be fulfilled, but I wanted the woman I loved to be happy, at the very least.

Thus I served her, and eventually her husband as well.

And yet, both their lives were taken in an act of senseless violence.

I still feel deep hatred toward the Church of the Word of God, who backed them into a corner, and most of all Potimas, who took their lives with his very own hand.

But I was not strong enough.

I did not have enough power to save them.

These two are the biggest obstacles I have been unable to overcome, but I have encountered a great deal of smaller ones, too.

Many times have I stumbled due to my lack of ability and lamented my own incompetence.

In short, I have spent my life running into one insurmountable barrier after the next.

Thus, I am unaccustomed to being respected by those around me.

My lord found me dependable, but hardly in any manner that earned me a reputation.

I have never been given a role such as commander that puts me in charge of many others, nor have I ever been assessed as someone worthy of such a role.

That was why I was afraid that such high praise would go to my head, tempting me to rest on my laurels.

What if I start to feel that this is good enough?

That I've worked hard enough already?

I am still not nearly strong enough.

I decided long ago to dedicate this life of mine to the young miss, so it's all the more important that I am ready to protect her from danger.

But her enemies are terribly powerful, and such meager strength as mine cannot shield her from them.

Potimas, the leader of the elves.

The Word of God religion, who drove my lord and lady to their deaths.

Both are far too powerful for me to do anything about alone.

But still, I must hone myself so that I can at least begin to resist them.

I never wish to experience again the powerlessness I felt when I lost my lord and lady.

And yet, it is difficult not to lose heart.

I am an ordinary person.

No matter how hard I might struggle, I can never reach the strength I desire.

I know the incredibly powerful people around me are rare and exceptional, but I am still ashamed that I cannot muster even a fraction of their power.

And what is hardest of all for me to accept is that the young miss, whom I am supposed to protect, is quickly leaving me behind.

The young miss has grown a great deal.

She was but a baby when we resided in Sariella, and still only an infant when we journeyed to the demon realm, so I thought she would remain a child even after we arrived.

But now, the young miss is beginning to grow into a beautiful young woman, resembling her mother.

When I was still human, an elderly person once told me that children grow up fast.

I thought the young miss was still a child, but she started to climb the stairs to adulthood before I even realized it.

Not only in her appearance but in strength, too.

The young miss is already so powerful that I could not hope to match her.

I am far weaker than the person I am meant to protect.

That knowledge weighs heavily on my heart.

And when I see how much she's exceeded me, so far that I can never catch up no matter how much effort I devote, a part of me is tempted to give up on moving forward at all.

I am a coward.

Truly, a pathetic coward.

Even if I cannot reach her—no, especially *because* I know I cannot reach her—I must not stop striving for greater heights, or the gap between us will only grow more.

Even now, when I'm running with all my might, the gap is already widening.

So I must not allow the praise and acknowledgment of others to dampen my resolve and commitment.

I cannot content myself with the way things are.

I absolutely must not stop trying to catch up to her.

Even if an ordinary person like me can never catch up no matter how hard I might try, I still cannot stop walking forward.

Coward though I am, I must always stay steady.

Especially after what I just experienced.

“I still have a ways to go.”

After our retreat, I admonish myself back at the camp.

I failed.

My wounds have already closed up. They were light to begin with.

If I kept fighting, I likely could have won.

But I am the one who decided to retreat.

I gave up on victory and chose failure of my own volition.

Because the sun was out, the weakness of vampires such as myself.

Because there were several reincarnations among our opponents.

Because the other adventurers were stronger than I expected, and my army was being pushed back.

Yes, I can think of any number of excuses.

But that does not change the fact that I failed.

I was fighting the reincarnations who were survivors of the clan I'd destroyed with my own two hands long ago.

That young boy and girl have grown quite strong.

Not nearly to the extent of other reincarnations like my young mistress and Wrath, but those two are likely far beyond the realm of the ordinary. I believe the pair I fought today was still quite formidable.

I could not completely defeat them.

Since they are reincarnations, I knew I was supposed to hold back so I wouldn't kill them—but the truth is, I wasn't holding back.

I fought to the best of my ability, but I still couldn't bring them down.

My stats and skills alike were unquestionably superior, but somehow, they still held their own against me.

The boy's swordsmanship was skilled, his footwork sharp and precise.

Even his blinking and breathing were methodical.

He used the powers of his magic sword at just the right moments, never leaving an opening for me to exploit.

The young girl was perfectly in sync with the boy, too.

She managed to constantly pressure me with a hail of attack magic without ever getting in the boy's way.

The way she wove her spells was smooth and flawless, and they were quite powerful.

Truly, I cannot help but envy their natural talent.

I have no such thing myself.

Each swing of my sword is unsteady, and my command of magic is laughable.

To cover my shortcomings, I train without rest.

I practice swinging my sword over and over in a desperate attempt to steady my hands.

I cast one spell after another, hoping the next will come together more smoothly.

Repetition, repetition, repetition.

And if I finally manage to pull it off perfectly, it's merely the product of dogged practice, not talent.

But if I cannot do as well in live combat as in practice, it is all for naught.

I cannot stand still in battle, like I do when I practice my swings.

If I pause in the middle of fighting to construct a spell, I only make myself a tempting target.

So I practice while moving around, as well.

Once I started doing that, I simply became even more aware of my lack of talent.

I stumble. I falter.

There is nothing to do but correct these failings.

To take another step forward, to start over.

Even if I sometimes take a step backward and must start over yet again.

Those with natural talent may find it easy to handle such things, but it is not so simple for me.

My only choice is to keep practicing until these things are second nature and carve the memory of every action into my body.

But even that is difficult for me.

On occasion, I'll manage a sword swing that I'm satisfied with.

But other times, I cannot re-create it no matter how many times I try.

Sometimes, I can do something perfectly one day but not the next.

As I test things out, there are even occasions when I can't cast a spell correctly.

All this experience doesn't necessarily add up to progress.

I'm sure the truly strong, like Lady White or the young miss, cannot relate to such struggles.

Since they are constantly moving forward, they know not what it is for an ordinary person to stumble, stop, or even slide backward.

"Why can't you do this?"

They have no idea how cruel those words can be.

I've finally reached the point where I can wield my sword and magic simultaneously, but not yet to the point where I can seamlessly shift from one movement to the next.

If something unexpected happens, my reaction is inevitably delayed.

I am sure the likes of my mistress or Lady White would never fail to make a snap decision in such situations.

Simply another thing that illustrates the difference between those with talent and those without.

I only managed to retain the upper hand in this most recent battle because my stats

and skills were simply higher.

Because I lack any talent myself, it is easy for me to identify: The reincarnation boy and girl have both been blessed with far more natural ability than myself.

Their capacity to hold their own in a fight against me, even though I was theoretically stronger, is proof enough of that.

Quite worrying.

Today's battle ended with only minor injuries, but who knows how the same engagement might turn out in a few years' time?

The difference in our natural abilities will translate into differing rates of growth.

If people make the same amount of effort over the same time, the ones with more talent will grow more.

Thus my only choice is to work even harder to close that gap, but time moves at the same rate for everyone and waits for none.

The amount of time one can spend training is limited, too, which is one of the few cases in which the playing field is even regardless of one's natural talent.

Even so, life is still unfair.

Compared to those of us without talent, who must make more effort, those with talent are given the same amount of time to make as much effort as they choose.

I know it is no use to bemoan things I do not have.

And yet, I cannot help thinking, *If only I had some talent...*

The thought never fails to drag me down.

Perhaps that just goes to show how big of a shock this most recent loss was to me.

To calm myself down, I examine my stats with Appraisal.

And in my skill column, I see the word *Perseverance*.

Perseverance... a skill that Lady White once had.

It is one of a small amount of special skills known as ruler skills.

I do not know why one as lowly as myself would be given such a skill.

But I admit, it does seem fitting.

All I know how to do is persevere.

For one such as myself, without natural talent, there is no other way.

Endure, persevere, and press on.

That is the only way I can keep moving forward.

As I gaze at this skill, I begin to feel that perhaps I can persevere and move forward again after all.

Even if I know I cannot catch up to my young mistress and the others as they run on ahead.

Even if the other talented youngsters who are running to catch up with me now will someday surpass me.

I shall grit my teeth and keep on running as well.



Phelmina

My name is Phelmina.

Just Phelmina.

There was a time once when I had a family name as well, but no longer.

I was born into a distinguished demon family and wanted for nothing in my life.

My father is the head of the ministry of finance as well as the Tenth Commander of the demon army, a rock-solid position by any measure.

To be precise, I should say he *was* the Tenth Commander, but it was still the case when I lived with my family.

There was no actual Tenth Army, so it was a paper title, but it still paid well enough that our family was quite affluent.

But while we wanted for nothing, my family was accordingly harsh.

Those who stand at the top must be in possession of the corresponding amount of strength and spirit.

I'm sure all noble demon families raise their children with such beliefs, not just mine.

The rumors that my family is far harsher with its children than the others are entirely unsubstantiated.

Rote learning, training, etiquette lessons.

From a young age, that is how I spent my days, and I believe I became a proper young lady who would not shame my family name.

At least, I used to believe that.

Because after a certain incident, my family disowned me...

Under cover of my hood, I cast a stealthy glance at the person next to me...

“What?”

...only to be noticed right away.

This person, who is now frowning at me, is Sophia Keren.

She is the cause of my expulsion from my family.

Even now, just thinking about what happened makes my blood boil.

“Oh, nothing.”

“I see.”

A brief exchange.

We are not close enough to carry on a friendly chat, nor is now the time or place for it.

Right now, we are hiding in a forest, waiting to ambush the enemy.

Looking around, I see other members of our white-cloaked band hidden around the area.

Since all of us are using a high-level Stealth skill, it would be nigh impossible to see any of them without knowing beforehand they were there.

This small group of exceptionally talented soldiers is the Tenth Army.

When my father was in charge, the ranks were solely filled with our family's private soldiers, most of them of little use in battle.

But those days are over.

When my father stepped down from the position of commander and a new one took his place, the Tenth Army was reborn as a small but incredibly elite force.

Compared to the other armies, ours is scarcely even a tenth of the size.

But each individual can fight as well as a hundred from any other.

I would even be willing to wager that we could hold our own in a head-to-head battle with one of the other armies.

That is how powerful the Tenth Army soldiers are.

The most terrifying part is that these elite soldiers were trained over the span of just a few years.

I can hardly pass judgment, since I am one of them.

But the other armies do not know the true strength of the Tenth Army.

It hasn't been long since we were established, and we are quite small as armies go, so we haven't yet had a chance to demonstrate our power.

But we've been working that much harder behind the scenes, under the orders of our commander: gathering information, carrying out assassinations, and other various missions.

As such, people seem to assume that we specialize in this sort of subterfuge.

They're not entirely wrong, but in reality, that is merely one aspect of our talents; we excel just as much in normal combat.

Sadly, we haven't yet had a chance to prove this.

Nor will today be an exception.

The other armies are all boldly invading the human territory, but we are still lurking in the shadows.

I am sure the fact that we cannot boldly display our prowess in battle is the reason for Sophia's foul mood, too.

Sophia has a powerful desire to be in the spotlight, and she also simply loves fighting.

However, in a way, this is the most important battlefield of all.

Which is exactly why we're here.

"....."

Pure silence.

The entire Tenth Army shifts to take their positions and make ready.

Our senses, sharpened by our skills, have detected footsteps of people moving through the forest.

So we still our breathing and wait.

Since all our members have the Silence skill, no one will detect us from our breathing or heartbeats, and the Odorless skill will prevent us from being detected by smell, too.

In addition, we've undergone all manner of training to avoid detection.

The only possible way to spot us would be with a skill like Clairvoyance.

There is no real way to defend against it, but with skillful use of skills like Stealth and Concealment, we can minimize the risk to a certain extent.

I doubt our target is constantly using detection skills, so as long as they do not know we are here, they almost certainly will not spot us.

And as we quiet our breathing, we wait for our targets to pass underfoot.

We do not look in their direction, for even the slightest of motions might be enough to alert them.

The footsteps come closer and then begin to pass by our hidden unit.

Judging by the sound, there are likely about a hundred of them.

The only paths through this forest are animal trails, so it's hardly suited to marching through with a large amount of troops.

Consequently, it's that much harder for anyone to monitor it.

Such is the nature of the no-man's-land that lies between the human and demon realms.

There are human forts positioned anywhere it might be possible for an army to march through.

The areas in between are known as no-man's-land, where small skirmishes between humans and demons frequently occur.

This forest is one such area.

And it would appear that while the majority of the demon forces are marching into battle, the enemy has been planning to pass through the no-man's-land to invade demon territory instead.

As the Tenth Army, our job is to annihilate that incursion.

Our other members have been positioned at the other sections of the no-man's-land as well, tasked with destroying any enemies who attempt to make their way through, as well as any humans who already lived in those areas.

But the main thrust is right here.

I hold my breath and wait for the signal.

Before long, it arrives.

A thread so thin that the eye can scarcely see it is wrapped around my finger.

I feel a tug.

On that signal, all of us jump into action at once.

We emerge from our hiding places and attack the enemy as one.

My specialty is a throwing weapon called a chakram.

I hurl it past Sophia as she charges straight ahead, and it embeds itself in the skull of

my target.

A moment later, Sophia slashes at another enemy, and after that, the rest of the members strike as well.

Our first surprise attack is a complete success, leaving our victims no time to defend themselves.

We press the attack against a stunned enemy as they try to figure out what's happening.

Less than half of them are able to counter the second wave of attacks, so it deals a significant amount of damage as well.

Only when we begin landing our third round of attacks does the enemy finally understand that they've been ambushed and begin to defend themselves.

By this point, they've already taken heavy casualties.

The fact that they were advancing down a narrow trail in single-file works in our favor as well.

We struck their thinly stretched line from both sides in a pincer attack, dividing them up and defeating the isolated elements.

Besides, it's difficult to move on the narrow trail even at the best of times.

There's no hope of mounting an organized defense here.

The fighting will come down to a pure contest of individual strength.

Unfortunately for our enemies, our initial attack has already thinned their numbers, and they still haven't recovered from their confusion.

Not to mention our sheer strength.

Truly, I do not see how we could lose.

"Ambush! We're under attack!"

"What?! Damn it!"

While the enemy panics, the Tenth Army soldiers simply attack in silence.

“POOOTTIIMAAAAS!”

Correction: all except for one, who’s bellowing as she swings her broadsword.

“So you were waiting for us, hmm?”

Standing opposite the bellowing Sophia is an elf man with a nasty gleam in his eyes.

Our primary target: Potimas Harrifenas.

Him plus the elves under his command.

“You have my permission to use your weapons. Kill them.”

Potimas gives an order in a calm yet piercing voice.

Immediately, the elves begin to change.

Some of them transform their hands to reveal something called a gun barrel.

Others draw similarly shaped weapons or produce glowing blades in their hands.

Right away, the guns begin to chatter as they spit out bullets.

But since we expected all of this, we react without panicking.

Some of us create magic walls to shield ourselves, while others predict the paths of the bullets and dodge them.

“Wha—?!”

As the elves recoil in surprise, it’s time for our counterattack.

Even Potimas seems taken aback by this development, judging by how his expression becomes fractionally darker.

That’s right—we know all about you.

How you elves use strange weapons called machines.

Because the Tenth Army Commander is none other than the master herself.

“Hmph!”

Sophia’s broadsword bears down on Potimas, who blocks it with his right arm.

I’m sure that arm is made out of some kind of machine or something, but Sophia’s sword cleaves through it easily.

“Tch.” Potimas clicks his tongue. “I have no choice. Anti-Technique Barrier—”

The elf leader’s words cut off mid-sentence.

Because his head and neck have abruptly been separated by the person who suddenly appeared behind him.

“...Would you mind not interrupting just when things are getting good?”

Sophia looks sulky that her opponent has been stolen from her.

But the culprit doesn’t respond, instead silently crushing Potimas’s severed head.

At around the same moment, the destruction of the elves’ forces is complete.

Zero escapees. Zero survivors. And zero casualties on our side.

As soon as I confirm this, I kneel.

“Mission complete, Master.”

The rest of the unit follows my example and kneels toward Master as well.

Only Sophia remains standing.

Master simply nods silently without sparing us a glance.

Our master, the Tenth Army Commander... Lady White.

If you were to ask where my life went off the rails, the answer would be simple.

The day that Sophia appeared at the academy.

From then on, everything was wrong.

Aside from undergoing strict training to ensure I wouldn't bring shame on my family name, I lived a life without any difficulties.

Never had I experienced events so far out of my control.

My parents chose a fiancé for me, so I suppose my future was not for me to decide.

But my fiancé, Sir Wald, was a perfect gentleman, and it is the duty of any noble to live out whatever future has been chosen for them, so I wasn't particularly unhappy with this arrangement.

In fact, I was rather fond of my fiancé, Sir Wald.

But those feelings were more akin to friendship than romance.

Or perhaps, since I knew I was engaged to marry him in the future, it was an almost familial affection.

At any rate, my feelings were not romantic.

And I believe it was the same for Wald.

But this was not an issue; even if we did not have a tumultuous love affair, I was confident we could build a family on the basis of mutual respect.

Until Wald fell in love with another woman and betrayed me.

Yes, you guessed it: The woman in question was none other than Sophia.

When she transferred into the academy, Sophia immediately captured everyone's attention.

The high society of demons is a small world.

Since the overall population is so tiny, it stands to reason that the number of nobles is even tinier.

Naturally, I had met most of the other noble children long before we entered the academy.

Even if I didn't know them personally, most were at least acquaintances or friends of friends, so I had a basic understanding of their character through word of mouth.

But Sophia was an exception.

Her origin was unknown, and no one had ever met her before.

The only thing we knew for certain was that she was staying in the mansion of Duke Phthalo before she came to the academy.

As such, the speculations ran wild: "*Is she the illegitimate child of Duke Balto Phthalo?*" "*Is she the daughter of the previous Demon Lord who disappeared?*" "*Is she related to the current Demon Lord?*"

Now that we know the truth, it's obvious that none of those theories is correct, but at the time, no one knew how to approach the mysterious new transfer student.

So in a way, it was only natural that Sir Wald would be the first to approach her as a representative of the class, since he has the highest social standing in our year.

But Sophia turned out to be more exceptional than I expected, and since Sir Wald is quite competitive, I believe he soon forgot his original goal in establishing contact with her.

Yes, that's right.

Despite her horrid personality, Sophia is quite gifted.

And while Sir Wald appears friendly, the truth is that he's extremely prideful and competitive.

Since I've spent many years with him since a young age thanks to our betrothal, I know

him quite well, but most are easily fooled by his appearance and flowery words.

Wald has a talent for building up his following by pretending to be nice while making it clear that he's superior. He'll casually mention his own talents in such a way that most come to believe *I can't beat this person*, while also acting friendly so that they'll think *But he's so nice!*

Quite a character, I must say.

Although knowing that side of him is exactly why I couldn't develop romantic feelings for him.

Still, Wald's scheme assumes that he is in fact superior to the person he's trying to impress.

He comes from a high-ranking noble family and makes a great deal of effort accordingly.

But Sophia outstripped him in every way.

Sir Wald, who has always been at the top of our class, lost to someone.

Naturally, this lit a fire in him.

It didn't help that Sophia was obviously smirking and looking down her nose at him.

Yes, they're quite a pair, all right.

From then on, Sir Wald's one-sided battle began.

He started challenging Sophia whenever he got the chance and lost every time.

Whether it was test scores, sparring practice in our combat classes, or even dance lessons, Sir Wald fell short of Sophia in every category.

"You really are amazing, Ms. Sophia."

He would smile lightly and compliment her, but I could tell that on the inside, his sense of rivalry only blazed even brighter.

I doubt anyone else noticed that somewhere along the line, his compliments became

genuine.

Maybe even Wald himself didn't realize it right away.

Wald had always come first in just about everything. I don't think he'd ever had so much trouble winning at anything before.

On occasion, I didn't hold back enough and bested him by accident, which always led him to work that much harder to come out on top again next time.

That's the sort of person Sir Wald is.

I know that he constantly works hard to keep up his position of first place, so I've put in effort to stay in second place as well.

Hee-hee. As clever as Sir Wald is, he never noticed that I was carefully restraining myself to ensure he remained first, you know.

But I still respected Wald a fair amount for his work ethic and lofty ambitions.

I thought that together, perhaps we could help lead the demon race out of its decline.

We are high-ranking nobles, the leaders of the future.

We could not tolerate failure. We needed to always stand at the top.

But Sophia, who knows nothing of such struggles and difficulties, continued to win without mercy.

And Sir Wald, who has always constantly won and gained the admiration of the losers, began to admire the one who was constantly defeating him.

...Rather simpleminded logic, is it not?

Wald began to spend increasing amounts of his time and money on Sophia, and it only worsened as the years dragged on.

She was already beautiful when she first arrived, but her appearance only grew more beautiful and her aura somehow more bewitching.

Most of the male students had long since started serving her.

That wouldn't be so bad if they were simply developing crushes on her.

It would certainly not be ideal if all the noble young men around our age fell in love with the same woman, but it wouldn't be the first time boys were entranced by beauty.

As long as they eventually snapped out of it.

But the situation was far more serious than that.

Sophia had sunk her fangs into them.

There are few skills that can induce the Charmed status effect, but they most definitely exist.

Victims will begin to worship the person who charmed them.

And now most of the young men meant to lead the next generation of demons had been spellbound by one woman and obeyed her every command.

And that I certainly could not overlook.

Not only that, but when I say she sunk her teeth into them, I mean it literally.

As it turns out, Sophia is actually a vampire, the stuff of fairy tales.

At the rate she was going, I was genuinely concerned she could very well take over the entire demon race.

Fortunately, Sophia seems to have no such intentions and didn't even appear to be consciously creating the Charmed effect.

But she was still dangerous, so I consulted with my father to find a way to deal with her.

Unfortunately, she caught wind of my plans.

I suppose I might have been in more of a panic than even I realized.

Sir Wald and the others turned on me, showering me in false accusations.

No, I suppose not all of them were false.

I really was planning to do away with Sophia if I could manage it.

Thus, I was chased out of the academy, and to make matters worse, my father declared that he was disowning me.

I will never forget his disinterested face when he told me so.

As I later learned, since Sophia is connected to the Demon Lord, Wald's father and some of the other nobles came to the conclusion that I had to be cast out.

Sir Wald himself was behind this manipulation.

I have always deliberately held back to ensure that Sir Wald could have first place, so perhaps I was overestimating my own strength.

Deep down, I thought that if I went all out, I could do anything.

But before I could get rid of Sophia, Wald got rid of me instead.

If you were to consider this a contest, you could say I lost to Sir Wald.

This might've been the first time I gave it my all against Wald and still lost.

There was a time when I hoped that Sir Wald would become stronger so that I would no longer be able to defeat him even if I tried my hardest.

But this was hardly what I had hoped for.

Nor did I ever imagine that my defeat would result in my expulsion from high society...

Even if we were not in love, I thought we at least had a certain degree of trust in each other.

But I was betrayed by my fiancé, disowned by my family, and plunged into the depths of despair.

Fortunately, my father did not kick me out without a single coin to my name; he arranged for some money to take with me and a place to go.

Namely, the Tenth Army.

Nearly at the same time I was disowned, the Tenth Army changed hands from my father to its current commander, Lady White, and began recruiting troops.

My father knew Lady White, since she was his successor, and recommended me. She was kind enough to take me in, and that is how I became a soldier of the Tenth Army.

Ever since, I have served Lady White.

I feel nothing but gratitude toward her.

I was but a young girl at the time, so if she had not made a place for me, I am sure I would have died a dog's death long ago even with the money my father gave me.

Moreover, Lady White never treated me like a mere child and always entrusted me with jobs and training.

Those were days of madness—erm, I mean hard work and bizarre, that is, *unique* training methods. At any rate, every moment was filled with... excitement.

Since I was too busy running around all the time to wallow in despair, I started feeling better before I knew it.

I don't know if that was Master's intention, but either way, I was able to make a complete mental and emotional recovery.

It probably helped that I got so painfully beaten up and broken down every day that being betrayed by my fiancé and kicked out of my family seemed to hardly compare.

But thanks to that, my stats got far higher than I could ever have imagined.

I learned that people can surpass their limits.

Before Lady White took me in, I believed I was training to the best of my ability as the daughter of a noble family, but I've since discovered through personal experience that while anyone can work hard, not just anyone can surpass their limits.

My fellow trainees, now fellow members of the Tenth Army, all gave up a part of themselves to become this strong.

Master calls it power-leveling.

The bonds connecting those of us who went through the same hell of power-leveling are very strong.

And through the course of serving as Master's hands and feet in the field, we've learned some of the darkest secrets of this world.

As the daughter of a noble family, I thought my future was to help lead the demon race.

But those plans vanished in an instant, and now I walk a much weightier path on the heels of my master.

You never know where life might take you, I suppose.

Or when your ex-fiancé who ruined your life, as well as the vampire who prompted him to do so, might enlist in the Tenth Army alongside you.

“Sit.”

As Sophia frowns at Master for stealing her prey, Master says a single word.

Suddenly, Sophia is kneeling facedown on the ground.

“Nnngh... grrr!”

Sophia trembles with the effort of trying to stand, but instead, her forehead keeps pressing into the dirt.

I'm told this is a curse that Master placed on Sophia as a punishment that forces her to prostrate herself.

Master placed this curse on her on the very same day that I was disowned.

In other words, she did it for me!

...Or so I'd like to think, but in truth, it was more likely intended to teach Sophia some manners.

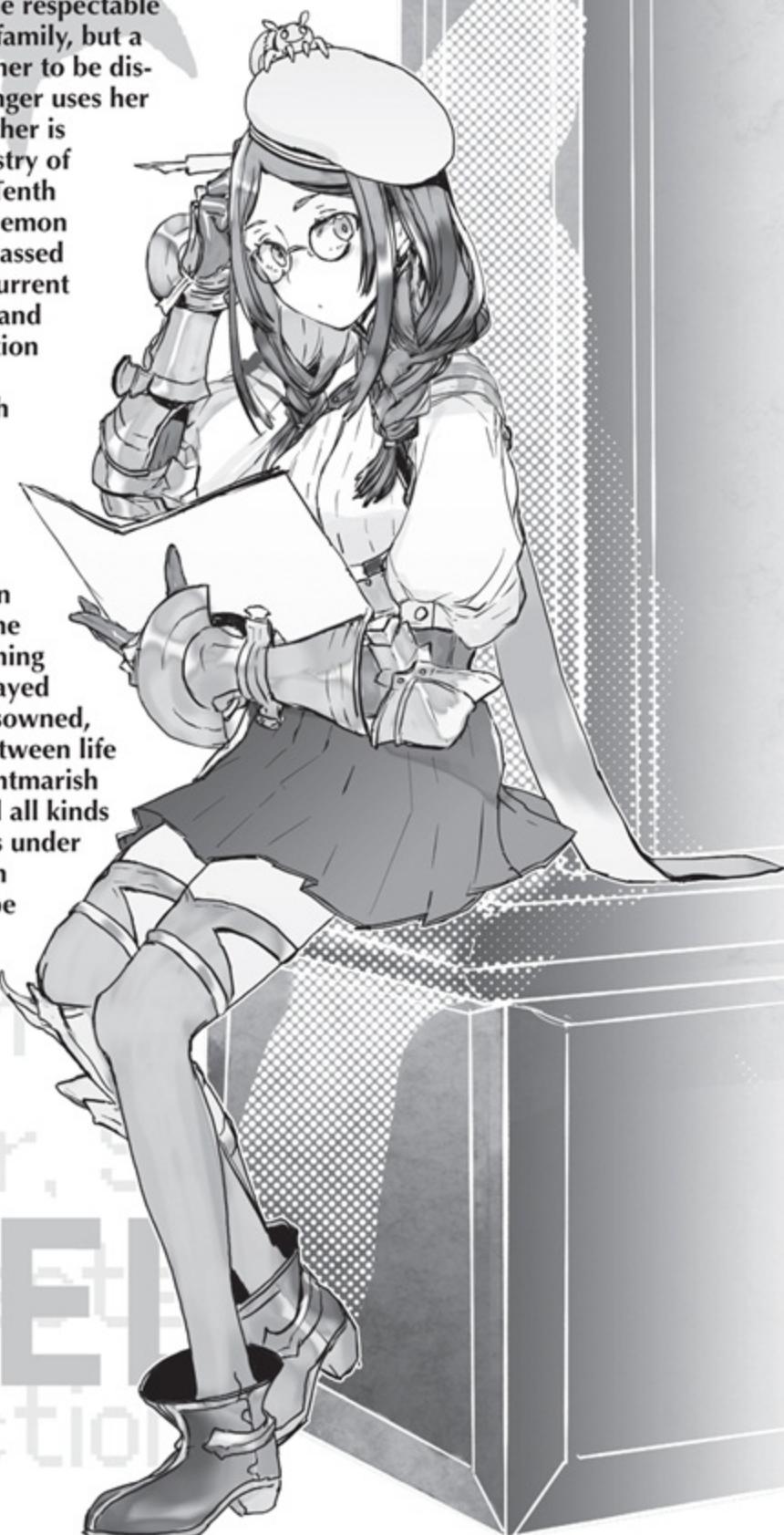
But for me, that curse feels like revenge.

So indulge me in saying this:

Serves her right!

PHELMINA

She was originally the respectable daughter of a noble family, but a certain incident led her to be disowned, so she no longer uses her family name. Her father is the head of the ministry of finance and former Tenth Commander of the demon army. He has since passed on that post to the current commander, White, and through this connection had his daughter inducted into the Tenth Army. Phelmina endured hellish training under White's watchful eye and is now one of the top assassins in the world. Despite the fact that she did nothing wrong, she was betrayed by her fiancé and disowned, straddled the line between life and death in her nightmarish training, and learned all kinds of unfortunate truths under White's command; in short, she seems to be rather unlucky.



So I'm
Spider,
PHE
Collection



“Attack!”

On my command, spells shoot forth.

The magic devastates the enemy ranks, wiping out most of them.

“Forward! Don’t let a single one escape!”

But before I can even finish speaking, a white blur flashes past me and takes down the surviving enemies.

From the looks of things, my second command was unnecessary.

They would never have let anyone escape, even if I didn’t say so.

That’s the Tenth Army for you. Terrifying.

Every single member of this unit is powerful enough to be considered a legend.

Some of them even stronger than that.

Normally, the upper limit of most people’s stats is said to be around 1,000, whether human or demon.

Only a select few ever reach that peak, and surpassing it instantly earns you a place among an elite few.

But if that’s true, everyone around me right now is a legend in the making.

So why am I the one giving orders to such powerful warriors?

Frankly, I’m the weakest member of the Tenth Army.

I was born to a duke's family, the highest-ranking of all the demon noble families, yet I cannot beat any of my fellow soldiers.

Long ago, if you had told me this would be my future, I would've laughed scornfully.

Well, I'm certainly not laughing now.

I was put in charge purely because I formally studied the art of war in my education as a young noble, not because I'm strong.

In other words, because I'm capable of giving orders and nothing more.

When you're commanding such elite, skilled soldiers, even an inexperienced leader like myself could hardly mess it up.

To be honest, it doesn't have to be me.

Anyone can do it.

It's stressful to command soldiers who are stronger than I am.

My stomach is constantly churning.

To make matters worse, the people I'm commanding are not actually fond of me.

The reason for that is one of the longest-serving members of the Tenth Army: Phelmina.

She is my former fiancée... the one who I betrayed and drove out of noble society.

I fell in love.

And not with my fiancée.

That meant she, Phelmina, was only in the way...

Which is why I broke off the engagement and got rid of her.

A coldhearted move, if I do say so myself.

But I don't regret it.

Even if others denounce me, look down upon me, or think the worst of me, I will never regret it.

If I was given the chance to go back in time and do everything over, I'm sure I would make the same choice.

That is how deeply I've fallen in love with Sophia.

The only problem is that the rest of the Tenth Army knows exactly what I did to Phelmina.

And since they went through hellish training together, they have forged very close bonds, so they don't exactly look kindly upon me, since I joined after the fact.

Fortunately, since they're almost excessively loyal to our commander, Lady White, they won't let their personal feelings affect how they treat me.

Even now, they're obeying my orders.

That doesn't change how uncomfortable the situation is, though.

But this is all so that I can be with Sophia.

Even if she'll never see me the same way...

I first met Sophia when she transferred into the academy.

Rumors of a mysterious new transfer student preceded her, and none of us knew how to approach her.

So I decided to talk to her.

My first impression was that she was a beautiful girl.

She looked so fragile, like a porcelain doll.

My second impression was that, contrary to her appearance, her personality was awful.

When I started talking to her, she made zero effort to hide her annoyance.

I'm the son of a duke, so Sophia was the first person who was ever openly impolite to me.

To be totally honest, it pissed me off.

I'll knock her down a peg or two, I decided.

My original plan was to try to befriend her, probe her background, and figure out the best way to interact with her. But all that was forgotten as soon as she was rude to me.

She started it when I was only being friendly, so it was well within my rights to put her in her place.

But it would be a pain if Sophia's background turned out to be a problem later.

Many people suspected that she had direct ties to the Demon Lord, so I would have to mock her carefully enough that she wouldn't even notice.

So I figured that first, I would show her who was on top.

Until I found out exactly who that was.

No matter what I did, I couldn't beat her.

At first, I was shocked to the point of disbelief.

How could I—the eldest son of a duke, the elite cream of the crop—keep losing to this nasty girl from nowhere?

And whenever Sophia won, she would always laugh at me.

I was furious.

Normally, I was always on top, so I couldn't accept this girl mocking me.

I was so mad that my real personality threatened to show through the cracks in my friendly golden-boy act.

So I studied hard, trained harder, and swore that I would win next time.

And still my losses kept piling up.

I couldn't believe it.

Why couldn't I beat her?

Why did I keep losing?

Why, when I was working so hard?!

But as I continued to lose to Sophia, I started to actually respect her somewhere along the way.

In a romance novel I once read on a whim, there was a line that went like this: *"When one has loved someone, the hate it turns into when things go wrong only runs that much deeper."*

For me, it was the opposite: The anger and humiliation I initially felt morphed into respect and admiration.

I had no choice but to admit it: Sophia was just far better than I was.

Once I acknowledged that truth, my heart grew lighter.

When I looked at Sophia with nothing but respect, I could see her charms more clearly.

I always thought she was beautiful, but she had only become more so with every passing year.

Her naturally disdainful personality isn't exactly great, but unlike me, Sophia never hides how she really feels.

Once I began to see that as honesty and sincerity, I was actually impressed.

All nobles wear masks of a sort, myself included.

We use our words as weapons to jab at one another without ever revealing our true emotions.

In spite of her awful personality, I liked that Sophia made no effort to hide it.

She's so powerfully conceited that she doesn't care what anyone else thinks.

In fact, I don't believe she's interested in anyone else at all.

When I joined the Tenth Army, I understood why.

If this was the world that Sophia was accustomed to, it was no wonder that she saw us academy students as boring riffraff.

That's even clearer to me now that I know her true nature.

For a Progenitor vampire, the kind of being that only ever existed in fairy tales, someone like me is just another boring face in the crowd.

My position as the heir to a duke's family is important only to fellow demons.

Sophia isn't limited by trivial matters like that, so she doesn't care.

Ever since I met Sophia, I've learned time and time again just how small I really am.

Especially when I turned on Phelmina.

I have to admit, even I'm horrified that I had no compunction about shoving my longtime fiancée out of the picture to get a shot at the girl I really love.

I knew all the guys in the academy were falling heads over heels for Sophia's charms; I felt smug that I was in love with her of my own free will, not because of some status effect.

Yeah, it's a stupid reason to be smug, I know.

But that's nothing compared to the fact that I took advantage of the way everyone at school worshipped Sophia to purge Phelmina so she'd be out of the way.

After all, I even ended up involving her guardians and my father just to ruin Phelmina's life.

I must say, though, it went pretty well.

As long as I was engaged to Phelmina, I couldn't be involved with Sophia.

Not to mention that Phelmina had decided Sophia's powers were dangerous and was trying to get rid of her.

So I didn't hesitate to get rid of Phelmina instead.

Did I hate Phelmina? No, I don't think so.

We weren't in love, but we did respect and value each other.

I'm sure that we could've built a good life together, even without romantic love.

But then I learned what real love feels like.

Once I had a taste of the emotion that borders on insanity, I could never accept such a tepid future.

I do feel bad for Phelmina, who did nothing wrong.

But not enough to do anything to help her.

What a horrible fiancé I am.

So maybe it's karma that I'm in such an uncomfortable situation now.

I should have started working for my father when I graduated from the academy, but I wanted to follow Sophia, so I joined the Tenth Army.

I had no idea what I was getting into.

The members underwent hellish rituals that could hardly even be called "training" without batting an eye.

And Sophia joined in without a problem.

As a bonus, my ex-fiancée, Phelmina, was among them.

That was definitely a shock.

I fell far behind the other members as they carried out the truly insane training exercises, while Phelmina looked at me coldly, and Sophia seemed incredulous that I couldn't keep up.

The only reason my heart didn't break on the spot was because I had plenty of experience losing to Sophia already.

Without that, I would've definitely lost all confidence and gone into hiding by now.

Even now, that's barely enough to keep me hanging on.

To be honest, I really have lost just about all my confidence already; I just haven't gone into hiding yet.

Unlike my academy days, when I only ever lost to Sophia, I'm at the bottom of the totem pole in the Tenth Army—and Phelmina, whose life I once destroyed, is far above me.

The difference between our stats alone has widened dramatically in her favor.

Despite how it might sound, I've been doing all that crazy training since I joined up.

But since Phelmina's been doing it since the current Tenth Army was first formed, she's gotten way ahead of me.

She used to always be below me, but now she's leaving me in the dust.

It definitely adds insult to injury, but the last scraps of my pride have motivated me to fight through the misery and try to improve.

I've been working like a madman to catch up.

But Phelmina was always exceptional, and now she's been doing this hellish training for years.

There's no way I can make up the difference between us that quickly.

If anything, it looks like the gap might get even bigger.

Finally, I cast aside all shame and went to Sophia on hand and knee to beg her to turn

me into a vampire.

...I know this might sound like a bad excuse, but I always intended to ask her eventually.

I want to be with Sophia forever, and the easiest way to do that is for her to make me a vampire.

Besides, becoming a vampire means I become Sophia's underling.

This was also a way to offer her my body and soul.

It was almost too good to be true.

There was just one concern that made me hesitate to become a vampire.

It wasn't because I would no longer be a demon or anything silly like that.

I'd already given up on my pride as a noble long ago.

I mean, I tossed aside my fiancée in order to be with Sophia.

Obviously, I'm willing to sink as low as it takes.

I'll follow my heart, no matter how selfish or irresponsible it might be.

My apologies to my father, but I no longer have any intention of fulfilling my duties as the heir to a duke's family.

No, the only thing that was stopping me was my appearance.

They say that vampires live forever, without aging or decaying.

But that's the problem.

Specifically, the problem is Merazophis, the other vampire besides Sophia.

He hasn't aged at all since he became a vampire.

A human his age should be starting to look old, but he's still perfectly youthful.

If that means vampires stop aging once they reach adulthood, then that's perfectly fine.

Sophia certainly has been growing.

But she's a Progenitor vampire, a special case.

So do normal vampires age and grow?

That's why I wanted to wait to become a vampire until I looked like an adult.

Specifically, when I could pass for the same age as Merazophis, the apple of Sophia's eye.

Given the danger that I might stop growing, the safest bet would be to wait until adulthood before I asked her to make me a vampire.

But I didn't have the luxury of waiting around anymore.

I had to do something to get off the bottom rung of the ladder, and fast.

And becoming a vampire would make me strong!

It's just a matter of sooner rather than later, really.

Even if I'm stuck looking this age, it could be worse.

Thus, I pleaded with Sophia until she finally gave in and turned me into a vampire.

All at once, the whole world looked different.

At the same time, I felt some sort of unbreakable connection to Sophia.

I was thrilled.

Ah, this is the moment I've been waiting for all my life, I thought.

But that didn't change my position in the Tenth Army.

I'm still at the bottom.

My stats definitely rose when I became a vampire, but not enough to catch up to the monstrous power of the Tenth Army.

"Well, obviously. It'd be unfair if just turning into a vampire made you that strong, right? No cheating," said Sophia. Then she added dreamily, "Merazophis was frustrated after he first became a vampire, too. But he was so determined to protect me... Ah, he was just so cool then."

How good for him.

Sophia only has eyes for Merazophis.

She made me the same race as her, but the difference in how she treats us is like night and day.

All Sophia wants is Merazophis, and no matter how much I might want her, she's never going to return my feelings.

When I turned into a vampire, I gained the right to be with Sophia forever.

But at the same time, I might've just sentenced myself to an eternity of suffering that will never bring me the happiness I want.

Even so, I have no regrets.



Sophia

So I was forced to go to some stupid school, and as if my days weren't stressful enough, I accidentally messed up the whole academy with this Charmed power I didn't even know I was using, and now I'm being punished for it with this bizarre curse.

It doesn't make a lick of sense!

In the first place, I was already a high school student in my old life, so sending me to school with a bunch of snot-nosed brats in my second life was an awful thing to do.

I had to hang out with these annoying kids day after day, and I didn't get to see Merazophis at all.

Do you know how hard it was not to go crazy from the stress?

And after a few years of enduring everything, you're going to randomly throw a curse on me as "punishment"?

Is that horrible or what?!

Worst part is that I can't even fight it, because that's just how the curse works.

Look, I did think it was a little strange when those stupid boys all started worshipping me out of the blue, all right?

But I sort of assumed it was puberty or whatever.

How was I supposed to know I was unconsciously applying a Charmed effect on everyone?

To be fair, I probably should've suspected something was up when Mr. Goody Two-shoes and the other boys teamed up to chase Ms. Class Rep away. That was weird.

Turns out that was also because of Charmed...

Oh, incidentally, Mr. Goody Two-shoes's real name is Wald, and Ms. Class Rep is Phelmina.

Wald really does have a nasty personality that he hides under a friendly demeanor, and Phelmina is ridiculously prim and proper, so that's what I've been calling them in my head.

Phelmina was always lecturing me, so I did feel a bit smug when Wald chased her out of school, but the tables turned when Master cast this stupid curse on me right after finding out what happened.

Well, I suppose I do feel a bit sorry for what happened to Phelmina.

She might be a total nag, but what she's saying is usually right.

She definitely didn't actually do anything to deserve being driven out of school by those boys who worshipped me.

It's not like *I* told them to do it, and I certainly didn't help, but I do feel a tad responsible, all right?

That still doesn't justify me getting cursed at *all*, but I even got scolded by Merazophis afterward...

"Young Miss, what would your parents think if they saw you the way you are right now?"

I've never seen him look at me so sternly.

"Young Miss, I have no doubt that simply following your vampire instincts and doing as you please must be satisfying. No one will turn against you, nor can they disobey you. After all, you yourself made them that way. Did it feel like a dream? Or did you perhaps think it really was a dream, with no real-life consequences?"

Even if I didn't mean to, it's true that I did use that Charmed power.

And it seems that due to changes in my body via secondary sexual characteristics, I unconsciously targeted men, who I, as a vampire, instinctively see as prey.

"Your parents had only one request for me: to take care of you, Young Miss. That is my sole mission in life."

Those words show just how deeply Merazophis still cares about my parents.

"They entrusted me with your safety. I will protect you until I die. I shall never forsake you. And if you make a mistake, I will tell you so. I will raise my hand as many times as it takes to keep you on the right path."

With that, he slapped me lightly on the cheek with his palm.

"I will watch over you to ensure that you live a life that your mother and father would be proud of, Young Miss. If you do wrong, I will use this hand again if I must. But please, do not ever make me do so again."

That's just not fair.

How can I do anything but obey when he says things like that with tears in his eyes?

Ever since then, I've been on my best behavior.

And yet!

"Grrrgh!"

Here I am, being forced to my knees.

Master?

Don't you think you're using this curse just a teensy bit too often?

Unlike Merazophis, you're just punishing me for every little thing you can think of, aren't you?!

It would be one thing if you only used it to discipline me when I've done something wrong.

But is it just me, or are you using it whenever you're in a bad mood and feel like taking it out on someone?!

"Pfft."

As my forehead presses into the ground, I hear someone snort out a laugh.

PhelminaaaAAAAAA!

Look, I get why you hate me for messing up your whole life, all right?!

But do you really need to laugh at me whenever I'm forced to kneel like this?!

Yes, I do feel a tiny bit responsible for what happened, and maybe even guilty.

But I definitely still despise this girl.



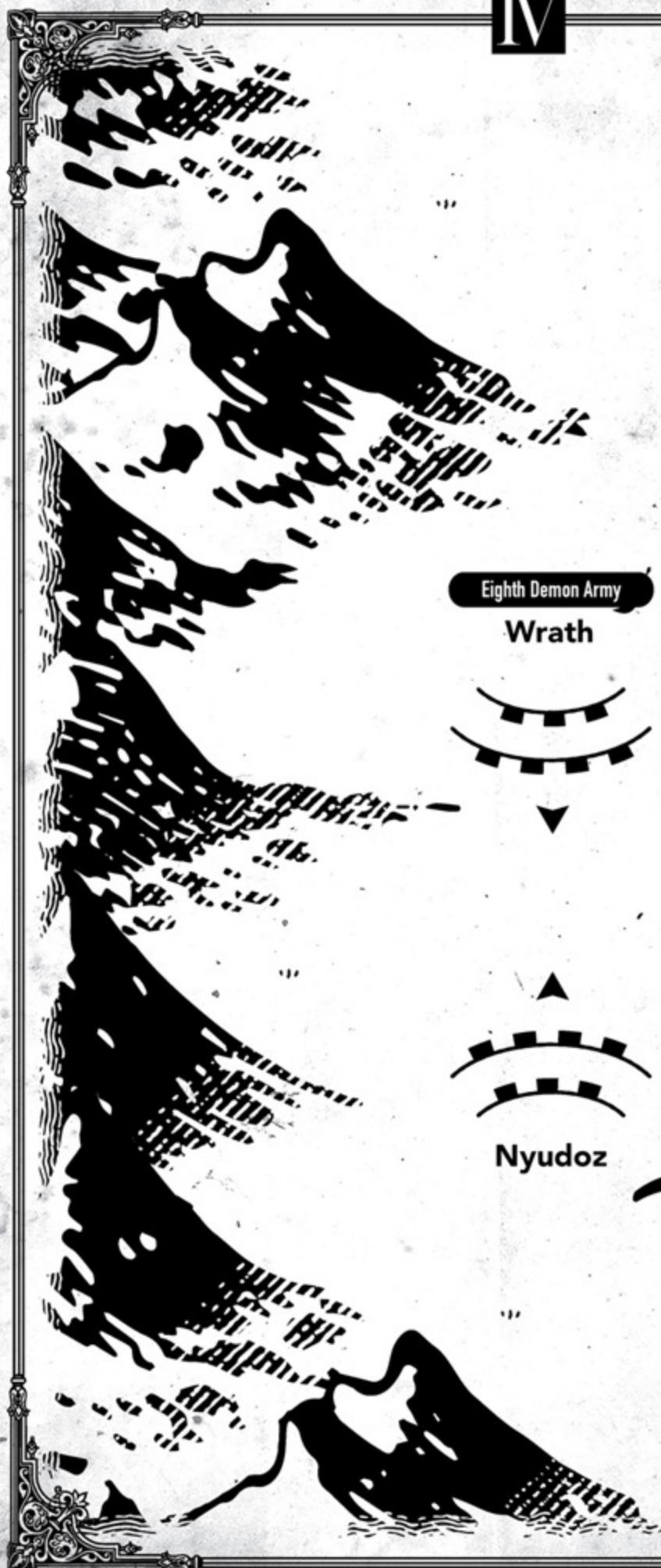


Eighth Demon Army

Wrath



Nyudoz



WRATH'S BATTLE THE KEY POINTS!

Welcome back to White Explains It All!

As you can see, the fort Wrath's going to attack is surrounded by mountains.

Basically, it's a fort built in a basin.

The fort's not actually on elevated terrain like the one Boobs attacked, so in that sense it might be easier to attack than that one.

But since it's still surrounded on all sides by mountains, the only option is to attack it head-on.

The folks in the fort can see the enemy coming no matter how they approach, making it easy for them to plan and mount a counterattack.

With no room for any schemes or clever tactics, the only option the attackers have is to force their way in right through the front door with brute strength!

Sounds like a good old-fashioned brawl to me!

...Except, there's just one little problem.

The person who's attacking is Wrath.

Can you really see him just obediently setting up siege works and stuff?

If anything, he could probably bring down the whole fort by himself, don't you think?

It won't be a siege so much as a demolition.

...Yeah, probably best to just let him take care of everything!



Wrath

I won't call this atonement.

And it's certainly not justice.

It's just that I don't want all the lives I've taken to be in vain.

That is the most I can do with these bloodstained hands.

The battlefield is a messy jumble of humans and demons.

There are no tactical formations or organized maneuvers, only chaos.

No amount of stratagems will make any difference here; all either side can do is try to defeat the enemy in front of them.

And I certainly can't give any commands on the battlefield.

Whether in this life or my previous one, I've never had any experience leading troops into battle.

Since being put in charge of the Eighth Army, I've learned quite a bit, but the staffers who have been with these troops long before I came along can give much more precise orders than I can.

Honestly, I'm not cut out to be a commander.

In terms of strengths, I'd be better off fighting on the front lines as a simple soldier.

But considering the goal of this battle, it's better that I don't go too wild on my own.

If I did, there would certainly be plenty of losses on the humans' side, but not so many

on the demons' side.

Which wouldn't be good. We need the human and demon sides to suffer equal casualties.

So I can't lead the charge on the front lines, but that doesn't mean I can hang back and just give orders, either.

I'm not good at it, for one thing.

And if the Eighth Army soldiers figured that out, they'd lose all respect for me.

To put it bluntly, the Eighth Army is a bit of a motley crew.

Originally, the Eighth Army existed mostly in name only, with very few actual soldiers.

But the former Eighth Army Commander gave up the empty title and is currently focusing on politics.

The handful of soldiers who originally belonged to the Eighth Army were all merged into other units.

So where did these new soldiers come from? Well, the private armies of certain demon feudal lords were disbanded and cobbled together to make a new force.

The former Ninth Army Commander Nereo... he tried to assassinate Miss Ariel, the Demon Lord, and failed.

Before that, he also assisted the former Seventh Army Commander Warkis in attempting to start a rebellion.

After their plot was exposed, Nereo's private army and those of the nobles who were affiliated with Nereo have all been consolidated and forcibly enlisted from their respective regions to form the current Eighth Army.

As a result, their overall morale isn't exactly high.

Some of them are even downright mutinous.

All I'm doing is forcibly keeping them in line.

If they start to believe for even a second that I'm not in control, it's over.

I'm sure there would be plenty of deserters. Some of them might even take that opportunity to attack me.

Since I've made a point to show them how strong I am, I'd like to think that wouldn't happen, but if it did, I'd probably wind up having to turn my blade on my own subordinates.

I guess that'd ultimately add to the number of deaths we need, but obviously I would prefer to avoid that if I can help it.

So in the end, my solution is plain and simple.

If I'm no good at giving orders, I just won't give them.

Instead, I'll make this battle so chaotic that orders would be pointless.

And if I can also ensure there aren't any deserters, it'll be perfect.

Easy to accomplish by just setting up some land mines behind the ranks of the Eighth Army.

That made it clear there's no turning back.

And if they try anyway, I'll cut them down.

When I announced that, they were so shaken up, it was almost funny.

After that, there was only one thing left for me to do: start destroying the fort.

By throwing magic swords from a long distance so I wouldn't be seen.

That means the humans have to run out of the fort to escape, so they have no choice but to face us.

My magic sword attacks can bring down their defenses with ease.

There's no point trying to hide out inside. That would just cause more casualties.

And I'm still throwing swords to keep the pressure on.

The demon army can't retreat, and the human army has to advance.

The only option left is for them to crash into each other.

If they're basically being forced into combat, there's no real point in trying to strategize or give orders on this mess of a battlefield.

As chaos reigns, I keep throwing magic swords at the rear of the human army and only cutting down the humans who come toward me directly.

Even with my magic swords, I'm trying to keep the damage to a minimum.

If I destroy too much of the human army, there won't be as many demon casualties.

They are my allies, like it or not, so theoretically, I should be trying to minimize their losses, but what I'm doing is the opposite.

I'm a cruel commander.

These men are deeply unlucky to be stuck with me as a leader.

I feel bad for them, but I don't have any other option.

Because that's what I swore I would do.

As I keep chucking magic swords and taking down the humans who come toward me, I hear a strangely loud bellow that cuts through the insane racket of the battlefield.

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

It goes on for so long that I have to be impressed by the sheer lung capacity.

The cry is coming from a knight, swinging his sword as he charges toward me.

Through the gaps in his helmet, I can see that he's a thoroughly wrinkled old man.

He looks pretty elderly to me, but he's fighting more fervently than just about anyone else here.

And he looks familiar, or at least his sword style does.

It's the same old knight who attacked me a while back when I was still just an ogre.

"Harrumph! Such a fearsome aura! I can tell you must be the leader of this demon army! They call me Nyudoz! Let us have a fair and honest fight!"

Oof, this guy's intense...

Once he gets close to me, the old knight Nyudoz starts yelling about single combat, heedless of the chaos swirling around us.

It seems kind of tone-deaf, to be honest.

We're way past a "*fair and honest*" one-on-one battle at this point.

What kind of idiot would try to challenge someone to a duel in the middle of a chaotic battlefield?

This kind, apparently.

But his stupidity is almost... refreshing.

He's an idiot, all right, but he's clearly devoted to his chosen path.

The guy's living a stupidly earnest life, staying true to his beliefs and values.

I'm a little... well, more than a little jealous actually.

It's a far cry from someone like me, who's been indecisive and uncertain all my life.

"Fine. I accept."

I only went out of my way to answer him on a whim.

I had the urge to have a "*fair fight*" with this person, that's all.

Mr. Nyudoz doesn't seem to remember that we've fought once before, long ago.

To be fair, I was an ogre back then, and I look pretty different now.

But I'm not going to bother telling him that.

A guy like this probably doesn't care about the past anyway.

For me, though, I guess this is a chance for a rematch?

That makes me feel a little strange, but it doesn't change what I have to do.

"Let us begin!"

Mr. Nyudoz lunges forward sharply.

It's hard to believe he's supposed to be an old man, never mind one wearing tons of heavy armor, from the speed of his movements.

Humans are supposedly lower in stats than demons, but he has better footwork than your average demon for sure.

How many of the Eighth Army soldiers could move like this?

"?!"

Still, though, he can't keep up with me.

I've gotten a whole lot stronger since I was an ogre.

My magic sword cuts clean through his blade.

It was probably a pretty nice sword, but between my stats and my handmade magic swords, a single strong slash separates it into two pieces.

My sword flashes toward Mr. Nyudoz's neck next.

Before he can even attempt to defend himself, his head rolls on the ground.

This way, at least, I figured he'd die peacefully without feeling any pain.

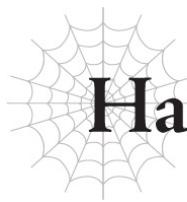
It might be presumptuous of me to think about that, but it's the best I can offer him.

It seems like Mr. Nyudoz was pretty important to the human army. The soldiers who

witness his death fall back in horror, obviously shaken.

As soon as that cornerstone crumbles, the rest of the enemy soldiers go down like so many dominoes.

Just like that, the Eighth Army has secured its victory.



Hawkin

“Hawkin. You should sit this one out.”

It's the night before the big battle when my boss, Jeskan, drops this on me.

“Can I ask why ya say that?”

“...You know the answer better than anyone, yeah?”

Can't say nothin' to that, I guess.

Yeah, I know why.

It's 'cause I'm the weakest member of the hero's party...

The five-person party consists of our leader, Julius the hero; his childhood friend Hyrince; Yaana the saint; plus the boss and me.

As the hero, Julius is top-notch in both magic and swordsmanship.

Hyrince is his shield bearer, a dependable tank who protects the team from most damage.

Our all-rounder magic user, Yaana the saint, ain't just limited to Healing Magic—she can also dish out magic attacks and other support.

Boss Jeskan is an expert in all kinds of weapons, the best attacker after Julius.

By comparison, I'm more of a behind-the-scenes guy, so I'm not much use in battle.

My job is to keep the party running smoothly: sorting through requests and negotiating rewards, keeping our supplies stocked, travel-related paperwork, maintaining relations with the different countries, that sorta stuff.

Basically, everything that ain't about fighting.

Of course, I do support the team in battle with my throwing knives and magic items and all that.

But I know better'n anyone that I ain't nearly as strong as the rest of our crew.

Everyone else is a world-class expert in whatever they specialize in, but me? I'd prolly lose in a fistfight with the average soldier, tell ya what.

All I really do in battle is give whatever support I can and use every last trick up my sleeve to keep things runnin' smoothly.

"Tomorrow's battle is likely going to devolve into chaos. And if it does, I won't be able to protect you."

Basically, the boss is trying to flat-out bench me.

I know he's doin' it for my own good, 'course.

But still, can ya blame me if it stings a little to hear it out loud?

We're at war with the demons.

This ain't like anything the hero's party's faced before.

So far, we've mostly just fought some real strong monsters.

Usually, one big monster against the five of us.

Since we normally have the upper hand in numbers, that means it's a sight less likely that the monster's gonna target me.

Even if it did, Hyrince would always cover for me, so I hardly ever end up in danger.

But this battle's gonna be against a big ol' demon army. Like the boss says, good chance it's gonna be a mess, so even Hyrince ain't gonna be able to protect everyone.

In other words, I'll have to fend for myself, but even I'll admit that's a tall order for li'l old me.

"I don't suppose I can change yer mind?"

“.....”

The boss gets even frownier than usual and crosses his arms, thinking for a minute.

“...Obviously, the person in our party who needs to survive more than anyone is Julius the hero. But other than him, I think the life that’s most important to preserve is yours, Hawkin.”

“?!”

Now, that I wasn’t expecting.

“I’m a top-class warrior. Hyrince is blessed with quick wits. Our dear Yaana was chosen out of all the other sainthood candidates. But that doesn’t mean we can’t be replaced.”

“Now, hang on a minute, boss. You can’t mean that.”

“Oh, but I do.” The boss takes a long drink. “I’m an A-rank adventurer. There are S-rank adventurers way above me.”

“But you got to A rank solo, didn’cha?”

An adventurer’s strength ain’t all about rank.

Some folks prove their worth in a party to raise their rank; others do it with achievements outside of battle.

The boss made his way up to A rank all on his own.

There’s a huge difference between someone getting A rank in a party and getting it all on their lonesome. A solo A-rank adventurer like my boss here is more than strong enough for S rank.

If he was to join a proper party somewhere, he’d hit S rank in no time flat, no doubt about it.

He joined the hero’s party before that happened, though, so he’s considered one of the hero’s followers by society, not an adventurer.

'Course, that means what he does in our party don't count toward his adventurer standing, so he's still A rank.

"That's true. I'm probably strong enough for S rank myself."

No more than a handful of near-legendary adventurers ever make it to S rank.

It's a height that only the most gifted adventurers can reach.

"But that's all. There are other S-rank adventurers out there. Meaning there are other warriors as strong as me or stronger."

And yet, here's my boss saying that achievement is hardly worth squat.

"Same for Hyrinse and even Miss Yaana. There are any number of other candidates for sainthood."

"But, boss..."

"Of course, we've got a lot of experience fighting alongside Julius. We work well together. Even someone of around the same strength as one of us wouldn't be able to swap in that easily. But that'd still just be a matter of time."

The boss tilts his glass for another gulp of liquor.

"We're not *truly* irreplaceable," he concludes self-deprecatingly.

"But don't that mean I'm the most easily replaceable of all...?"

The boss just said other S-rank-level fighters could replace him, but we're still talkin' about a top-notch bunch of elite warriors.

Sure, there are other folks around as strong as he is, but that doesn't mean they'd jump at the chance to sign up with the hero.

A lot of adventurers have their own tight-knit parties or work for a specific country.

It wouldn't be that easy to get one to change jobs.

On the other hand, the stuff I do isn't really much more than plain ol' boring chores.

No need for any kind of special talent, so just about anyone could do it.

Without a doubt, I'd be the easiest one to replace in the party.

"Nope. It's the opposite. After Julius, you'd be the toughest to replace."

"You don't need to try and make me feel better, boss."

"I'm not, you idiot. Just listen." He pours some booze into my cup. "You know Julius isn't replaceable, right? Why's that?"

"Well, 'cause he's the hero, of course."

"Exactly."

The boss nods like that's obvious, which it is.

"But that's not the only reason. It's also because he's Julius."

"Cause Julius is Julius...?"

I stare at the boss blankly. If this is a riddle, I don't get it.

"If the hero dies, the next hero will be chosen right away. But it'll be someone else, not Julius. So there's another hero if this one dies, but there sure won't be another Julius."

"Well, yeah, I suppose so."

"Now, this is just hypothetical, so don't get mad, hear? But if Julius died, and you were told to serve the next hero instead, would you say yes?"

"Hrm..."

That's a tough one.

I'm serving the hero because he's Julius, so if I had to switch over to some new hero I've never met before, I imagine I'd have a hard time accepting that right away.

"Exactly. It's because he's Julius." Then the boss continues: "And it's the same for you."

“Uh-huh...”

“You don’t exactly sound convinced.” The boss shakes his head, drains the rest of his cup, and pours himself another round.

“Hyrince, Miss Yaana, and I are all more or less tools. I’m a weapon, Hyrince is a shield, and Miss Yaana’s a potion.”

“Ain’t that a little harsh?”

“Well, it is an extreme comparison. But as I said, we can all be replaced. But just like Julius, there’s no replacement for you ’cause you work behind the scenes, and you have connections to all kinds of people.”

It is true that I have quite a few.

I manage the party’s requests, negotiate with the adventurers’ guild, the Church, and more, not to mention chatting it up with the nobles and royalty of wherever we travel to fulfill those quests.

And when I’m managing our supplies and equipment, I get a chance to rub shoulders with not only many merchants, but also some of the other folks on the shadier side who I can’t go into detail about.

I might be my boss’s slave, but folks ain’t usually rude to me, since I act under the hero’s authority and all that.

Julius is real friendly, so sometimes he handles it himself, but in terms of practical experience, I think I got the most business relationships of any of us.

“But what’s that got to do with anythin’?”

“There’s plenty of other folks who can fight as well as we can. But relationships are built up over many years atop hard-earned trust. Even if we put that aside, it isn’t easy to learn how to negotiate and communicate with others well.”

“I suppose not.”

I might not be a big shot, but I have been working behind the scenes of the hero’s party for many years.

Even if they put out a call for someone else to do my job, I guess it wouldn't be easy to pick up where I left off right away.

"We just have to go to the battlefield and fight, but you're the one who takes care of everything that comes before and after. And it's only because you do those things for us that we can focus on fighting. Without a doubt, you're the one who keeps our party going."

"Well, I'm happy to hear that."

It really is reassuring to hear.

As far as word on the street goes, I'm the only member of the hero's party who doesn't stand out.

Julius is real popular, and Hyrince is a hit with the ladies, since he's got stupidly good looks.

Miss Yaana's earnestness, dedication, and friendliness make her well-liked, too.

And lots of older ladies tend to be fans of my boss.

Meanwhile, all people think when it comes to me is *that item guy, the guy who just throws knives*, and even *oh yeah, I forgot about that guy...*

Hrmمم? Ain't that funny. Feels like there're tears in my eyes...

I know perfectly well that my job in the party ain't fancy or exciting, but I gotta admit it does sting a little to be so unpopular.

It wouldn't be so bad on its own, but some folks even say nasty things about me...

Once in a while, I'll hear things like "*How'd that guy get into the hero's party when he's just a slave?*"

Believe me, I feel out of place enough as it is sometimes.

Everyone else supporting the hero is amazing: Hyrince is a duke's son and Julius's childhood friend, Miss Yaana's the saint, and my boss is a skilled adventurer who got to A rank all on his lonesome.

Since I'm the only member who ain't anything special, people are bound to scoff at me from time to time.

That's why it means so much to me that somebody values my work.

"I know very well that every good relationship we've got is thanks to your hard work. Be proud."

"Sure, I'd like to do that, but I got no reason..."

I don't got anything to be proud of, really.

I don't have high social status like Hyrinse—in fact, I'm a slave.

I wasn't chosen out of a whole lotta other candidates like Yaana.

And I can't shut people up with sheer strength like my boss.

There ain't a single impressive thing about me.

"No reason? That's rich coming from the Thief with a Thousand Knives."

"Please don't call me that..."

That was my old nickname.

"Why not? In a way, you might be more famous than any of us."

The boss grins at me.

I guess it's true that lots of people've heard of the old Thief with a Thousand Knives.

That's what I was called before I became the boss's slave.

At the time, I went around stealing from corrupt nobles and merchants and the like. Then I'd sell off the goods and use that cash to anonymously buy food for orphanages and stuff like that.

Those stories got real popular with ordinary folk, and eventually there were even plays and minstrel songs about me.

From there, the story of the Thief with a Thousand Knives spread far and wide, which is how a lowly bandit like me became famous.

On the one hand, I wound up meeting some huge fans who helped me during my thieving days 'cause of that, but then again, there were people who didn't take so kindly to my fame...

Turns out, being famous ain't all sunshine and roses.

Once word about me spread, it got harder and harder to move around without being noticed, and in the end, I got caught while trying to investigate some nasty group of human traffickers.

They sold me as a slave, the boss bought me, and now here we are.

"Oh, I was young and foolish back then, y'know?"

At this point, the Thief with a Thousand Knives name is more embarrassing than anything.

"Whatever you say—all I was doing was thievin', really."

"Well, I think it was admirable. Many a nasty noble and merchant had their evil deeds exposed because you robbed them, and they were judged accordingly. And there are plenty of orphans who were saved by your donations, too."

"I am pleased about that, I suppose."

"Then why not take pride in it?"

I smile wearily at the boss's encouragement.

"Just hard to be proud when I look at Julius."

The boss doesn't have any immediate response to that, so I continue.

"Julius is amazing, ain't he?"

There are many words for praising a person, but there's no point being fancy about it.

When I see Julius at work, all I can think is that he's amazing.

"Watchin' that kid go at it, I always think, *so that's what a hero's supposed to be.*"

"True."

The boss nods in agreement. Nobody's as worthy of the word *hero* as Julius.

He pursues what he thinks is right, no matter what.

Even more incredible is that he's been doing that since he was just a kid.

"Compared to what Julius has done, all my deeds really amount to is runnin' away."

I didn't have the guts to face evil head-on, so I used the less proper path of thievery to avoid a straight-up fight.

I don't regret what I did, but I'm sure Julius would never do anything as cowardly as stealing. He always chooses to fight evil directly.

No matter how hard it'll be.

When I think about that, I get to feelin' embarrassed about how I've lived my life.

If I fought evil by stealin', don't that make me a hypocrite?

Seeing the real thing in Julius just makes me feel like that much more of a fake.

"I see." The boss nods, like he gets where I'm coming from. "Well, I won't deny your logic. But I can't say I agree entirely, either. Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses, hmm? Julius is powerful enough to right wrongs directly. You weren't, so you did the best you could with what strength you do have. What's wrong with that?"

"I guess you could put it that way."

Julius is a royal and the hero.

I was just a plain old thief.

That puts us in real different positions when it comes to taking on corrupt nobles.

I could've yelled about injustice till I was blue in the face, but it wouldn't have made a lick of difference to the folks in power.

And if I tried to take those nobles on without any tricks or a plan, you can bet I would've been torn to shreds.

"Well, that just goes to show how young and stupid I was, not to mention weak."

Even if I couldn't fight, there must've been other things I could've done besides stealing.

Now that I'm working behind the scenes of the hero's party, those options have only become even clearer.

I don't have the power to take on corrupt merchants and nobles myself, but I could've convinced someone else to do it.

But such a simple thing never occurred to me, so I just went on thieving.

Even if I was doing it for the right reasons, stealing is a crime.

The fact that it might've helped some folks doesn't mean it wasn't wrong.

"Oh, you're so stubborn."

My boss heaves a sigh.

"'Fraid I was born that way."

"Heh." Still shaking his head, he smiles a little. "Ah, we've gotten off topic. Oh dear."

"...Sure you're not just woozy from drinkin' too much?"

We've got a big battle tomorrow, but the boss has been downing a whole lot in front of me.

"Bah, you fool! How can I go into battle without drinking first?!"

"Won't getting drunk affect your ability to fight?"

"I'm not so weak that I'd get drunk on this much liquor."

I dunno if that's something to brag about so confidently...

"Drink I shall, no matter what anyone says. Every drink could be my last."

"Boss, that's..."

"Those of us who fight for a living must accept that truth. You understand, hmm?"

"...I suppose."

Since I'm a member of the hero's party, I do go into battle, too.

Being weaker than the others, I've definitely had my fair share of brushes with death.

I always knew that if I kept this up, I was gonna die one of these days.

If I feel that way when I'm usually supporting them from the back as much as I can, I'm sure folks like my boss who're fighting on the front lines are even more aware of death all the time.

"I'm not even sure if Julius will make it back alive, never mind me. But Julius needs those connections of yours. And in the worst-case scenario, if Julius dies, you'll be a huge help to the next hero."

So that's why the boss wants me to stay behind.

But...

"I'm still comin' with you, boss."

"...No matter what I say, eh?"

"No matter what."

The boss shakes his head again and drains the rest of his drink in one gulp.

"Thought you might say that."

"Sorry, boss."

Even if it's only a formality, I'm technically a slave disobeying his master's orders, but I can't back down on this one.

I got my pride as a member of the hero's party, too.

I can't be the only one to run with my tail between my legs.

As part of the hero's party, I already resolved long ago to go into battle no matter how harsh it might be.

"I really am happy to hear ya say I'm that important, boss. But any strength I got is all for Julius. I might not be Hyrince, but I still can't go lettin' Julius die before me. We're here because of Julius, every one of us."

The boss was trying to say that if something happened to Julius, I should lend my strength to the new hero, but I dunno if it'd go so smoothly.

Lots of us are only pitching in because Julius is who he is, and I'm no exception.

I dunno who the next hero might be, but it'd be a tall order for me to throw in my lot with them right from the start.

So my best bet is to do everything I can to make sure that doesn't happen in the first place.

That Julius doesn't die.

Even if it means that I die in the process.

"So stubborn."

"Yep, I was born that way."

Repeating the same exchange we had just moments before, we both end up grinning.

The boss doesn't try to talk me out of it after that.

I'm sure he knew from the start that I wasn't gonna agree to stay behind.

He only brought it up anyway to let me know that I had the option.

Honestly, a master ain't supposed to be that thoughtful with a slave.

Although that sorta thing is exactly why I don't mind bein' a slave if this guy's my master.

"Boss."

"Hrm?"

"Thank ya kindly."

"Uh-oh. Cut it out, will you? That sorta thing is bad luck to say before a battle."

Since thanking folks specially and stuff like that the day before a battle makes it seem like you don't expect to survive, it's seen as bad luck by most.

But I still felt like I had to say it.

"Boss. If I start to hold you back out there, please don't hesitate to toss me aside."

"Now, look here—"

"My role is to make sure the hero's party can fight without any worries, ain't it? Then it ain't right if I slow you down instead, eh?"

"..."

"So focus on the fight, not on me. And most of all, make sure Julius is safe."

"...Got it." The boss closes his eyes, crosses his arms, and reluctantly nods. "Guess we better get some rest, then."

The boss has finished the last of his bottle, and the food's all gone, too.

It's getting late, so now's the time when we should retire and start saving our strength for the battle.

"Suppose so."

"Hawkin."

As my boss stands up, he utters my name.

"This doesn't change the fact that you're important. People need you. Remember that."

"...All right."

With that, my boss leaves the room.

Even I'm not dull enough to miss the fact that he's telling me in his roundabout way not to die.

"You too."

I mutter a final response even though he's already gone.

HAWKIN

Since he's a commoner, he doesn't have a family name. He was once a famous gentleman thief known as the Thief with a corrupt nobles and merchants and However, he was caught while organization and wound up sold officially became his master, but may be the least powerful of the the shadows by doing all kinds of

Thousand Knives, who stole from spent their wealth on the poor. investigating a human-trafficking into slavery. Jeskan purchased him and they treat each other as equals. Hawkin hero's party, but he supports them from important odd jobs.



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Fate.

The idea that our paths are determined for us from the moment we are born and we cannot stray from them.

For better or for worse, all things are decided by fate.

What a foolish way of thinking.

But while it is not fate per se, there does exist a certain flow of events that cannot be disobeyed.

I have spent my entire life fighting against that current.

Namely, I have been fighting to keep the demon race from hurtling toward destruction in the hopes that some of us might yet survive.

Certainly, I am now one of the eldest veterans among our people, but of course there was once a time when I, too, was young and inexperienced.

Even then, the demon race was already on the verge of extinction.

The everlasting war against the humans was driving us to ruin.

The difference in our populations is simply far too large.

Even if demons have higher stats than humans, this war has continued for so long that even the history books cannot pinpoint when it first began, so it was inevitable that the scales would begin to tip in favor of the race with numbers on its side.

If we continued fighting the humans, our loss was only a matter of time.

In fact, even if we did nothing, the demon race was already beyond the point of

recovery.

All we could do was delay the inevitable.

And yet, no one but myself seemed to realize this.

No, perhaps some did realize it and refused to acknowledge the truth.

The future was already set in stone...

But it has still yet to pass.

This tragedy might be inevitable, but it would not happen in our generation.

To most, it must have been easier to simply continue on the same path.

Change is always difficult to accept, no matter the era.

And since the needed changes were based on acknowledging our eventual destruction, it is small wonder that other demons wanted to close their eyes to the truth.

Most of all, the Demon Lord would not allow any such change.

The Demon Lord is a puppet of the system.

A sacrifice, one might even say: a villainous scapegoat who must force the demons to continue fighting the humans.

I do pity those who carry the title of Demon Lord, for they are hated not only by our mortal enemy the humans but even by their fellow demons.

However, the demon race cannot ignore the Demon Lord's influence, and so it is because of the Demon Lord that the demons are unable to stop the war against the humans.

The fate of the world takes precedence over the fate of the demon race.

I suppose that is only natural.

The world will continue to exist even if demons go extinct, but demons cannot survive

without the world itself, so it is obvious which should be prioritized.

It is difficult to accept, as it forces us to walk the path of destruction, but in the grander scheme of things, that is a trifle.

The demons understand that, which is why we have always obeyed the Demon Lord, even if many of us were discontent about it.

We had no other choice.

Even I could only seek to minimize our losses while continuing the war, all the while burying my shameful feelings in my heart.

Was it my fate to simply sit and watch as my race continued marching toward its own destruction?

As I tried to fight against a current that I knew was irresistible, I was filled with anger, grief, and finally resignation.

But that all changed when an unexpected new era dawned: one without a demon lord.

The Demon Lord is the ruler of the demons and, at the same time, a mouthpiece for the system.

It is the Demon Lord's sole purpose to inform the demons why they must continue to fight against the humans.

The truth is that demons are not simply obeying the powerful influence of the Demon Lord—we are swallowing our bitterness and continuing to fight because we have learned the terrible truth of the system.

Of course, that is only the case for the highest-ranking demons who can have an audience with the Demon Lord.

But that is more than enough.

Even now, I still remember the face of the previous Demon Lord, contorted with madness.

"We must atone..."

The previous Demon Lord repeated this often.

He changed drastically after gaining the title of Demon Lord.

Because of the Taboo Level-10 skill that came along with it, to be precise.

That Demon Lord looked more haggard by the day, sending us into battle and even fighting on the front lines himself, as if desperate to outrun something.

By now, very few people remain who know how gentle that man was before he became an overwhelming and fearsome demon lord.

But watching those changes firsthand made it difficult to write off the truths of the system he told us about as mere ravings of a madman.

Thus, the high-ranking demons obeyed him, and so those below them followed suit.

We had to, even knowing that it would one day mean the annihilation of our race.

That is how things were intended to be.

But then that Demon Lord vanished, and without a mouthpiece for the system leading them, the consciousness of demons began to change.

Many finally realized that we could not afford to keep fighting the humans.

Until then, the madness of the Demon Lord had pushed us into continuing the war, but without him leading us, we regained our senses.

Once there was no longer a demon lord shouting that the world would be in danger if the war did not continue, it was far more logical to worry about the more immediate danger before us than some far-off, hypothetical future.

And so, in an era without a demon lord, we refrained from fighting the humans more than necessary and focused on the recovery of our nation.

For once, time was on my side.

That was more than enough to bathe my half-broken glimmer of hope in a fresh wave of light.

Better yet, the next Demon Lord was almost certainly going to be yours truly.

With the Demon Lord missing, and knowing that I was the likely successor, we could focus on healing the demon race for two generations and improve our survivability a great deal.

Even still, it was simply delaying the inevitable.

And there was also the fearful possibility that I might change as my predecessor did once I became Demon Lord.

But I prepared for that possibility by instructing my trusted aides to lock me away and continue working toward the revival of our race if I was to drastically change. I even prepared a cell for my own confinement.

I wanted to be ready for every possibility.

But then I was stymied by a shock I could never have predicted.

If that alone was the issue, then I could simply call it a miscalculation, not a shock.

The system's method of choosing a Demon Lord is unclear.

I was considered by many the most qualified, but that did not mean there were no other worthy candidates. Balto, for example, could have been a possibility.

But the Demon Lord who was selected was no one I had imagined.

In fact, it was no one I even knew of at all.

No, that is false. I had heard of them.

As a character in fairy tales, that is.

The most ancient Divine Beast who served the goddess: that is our current Demon Lord, Lady Ariel.

She was the stuff of legends, someone whose very existence I doubted.

Even if she once had, it seemed all the more impossible that she could have survived

until modern times.

In fact, she has the appearance of a young girl, so who would believe her when she suddenly appeared calling herself the Demon Lord?

To be completely honest, my first reaction was one more of confusion than disbelief.

This unfamiliar child visited out of nowhere, declaring that she'd become the Demon Lord and even going so far as to claim that she was actually the Divine Beast from the legends? How absurd.

But she must have predicted that reaction, for she presented me with an Appraisal Stone and demanded that I Appraise her.

When I saw the results, I could no longer doubt her claims.

Her stats, all around 90,000 or above.

Her enormous list of various powerful skills.

They say that anyone whose stats surpass 1,000 is already in the realm of legends.

Only the smallest percentage of humans ever reach that mark, and even demons cannot do so easily, though our stats are naturally higher.

There have been a handful of exceptions, mostly heroes and demon lords, who achieved twice or possibly even three times that amount.

But I had never seen or even heard of anyone with five-digit numbers, let alone six.

Her number of skills, too, was several times that of any ordinary soldier.

But more frightening than even the number was the quality.

The higher a skill level grows, the harder it becomes to level it up further.

It can take half a lifetime of training to raise a single skill to its maximum level. Without natural talent, many people cannot manage it even once.

And there are some skills that are considered impossible to bring to the maximum,

even if one does have the talent for it.

Yet, the number of skills she had at their highest level was unthinkable.

I was stunned.

I have never doubted my eyes so much as I did that day.

Nor have I ever felt such despair.

I did my best to predict and prepare for every possibility in my efforts to heal our race.

But Lady Ariel being appointed Demon Lord was beyond anything I could have imagined.

I had just begun to see the light at the end of the tunnel. But then I was plunged into the depths of darkness by Lady Ariel's declaration of all-out war against the humans.

Past Demon Lords may have been the system's scapegoat, but they still defended the existence of the demon race to the end.

But Lady Ariel had no qualms about tossing all that aside.

Lady Ariel was the Demon Lord, without a shadow of a doubt.

And to me, she was also the bringer of despair.

Her sheer individual strength makes her undoubtedly the strongest being in the world.

The only beings who could hope to stand against her would be administrators or the likes of Potimas.

With that awesome power, she threatens to chase us demons to our final end.

If that is not true despair, then what is?

We cannot deny her, lest she turn her fangs on us instead.

Lady Ariel would not hesitate to do so.

From the moment Lady Ariel became the Demon Lord, there were only two options left.

It had to be one or the other: wage all-out war against the humans as Lady Ariel demands or attempt to fight the Demon Lord herself.

I chose the latter.

Let me be frank: That was a mistake.

Who would I prefer to face: Lady Ariel or the entirety of humanity?

At a glance, some might assume that defeating one individual must surely be easier than taking on an entire race.

But no. That is undoubtedly wrong.

A demon lord or hero can easily take on an army alone.

That is what it means to have exponentially higher stats.

And Lady Ariel's stats are easily ten times that of any other demon lord or hero.

An army? That would be nothing to her.

She could very likely destroy the entire world all on her own.

Even if the demon race was to somehow combine forces with humanity and challenge her, I cannot imagine how we would win.

If fighting Lady Ariel is the alternative, one would have better odds against all of humanity.

I understood that, and yet, I still made the wrong move.

I had no choice but to do so.

Even if we did defeat humanity, the demon race will eventually be destroyed as long as Lady Ariel is still the Demon Lord.

And this is no distant fate for future generations to fret over but a tragedy very much close at hand.

I continued to fight the current, trying to put off the destruction of demonkind by any means necessary.

That dark fate, which I once assumed would never occur in my lifetime, was now looming closer than ever before.

I could not accept that. To do otherwise would be to admit everything I have done in my life has been for naught.

Rationally, I knew it was ill-advised, but this was a matter beyond reason.

My situation was rapidly approaching checkmate.

I had to do something to try to avoid it, even if I knew it was the wrong move.

And as I expected, it did not end well.

My last-ditch scheme naturally ended in failure.

In fact, it was even worse than I could have predicted.

I worked to form a rebel army with the former Seventh Army Commander Warkis at the head, and I even involved Potimas, the contact who I thought had the best chance of dealing with Ariel.

My intention was to pit them against each other, but the rebel army was crushed before it could even be fully assembled, and Potimas withdrew before making any major contribution.

Far from fighting each other, Lady Ariel did not take a single step outside her castle.

She had no need to.

My plan failed to defeat Lady Ariel—it did not even move her one iota.

Worse yet, she knew that I was behind the rebel army and Potimas's involvement.

With that, the only remaining path forward was to defeat the humans.

It was a small mercy that I was not killed on the spot.

...Though I am tempted to ask if that was truly a mercy?

As long as I am alive, I can do everything within my power to delay the demise of demonkind.

But that has become harder to accomplish than it ever was before.

As long as Lady Ariel is in charge, our extinction cannot be avoided.

Lady Ariel has lived since ancient times and is likely to survive far into the distant future.

And this nigh-immortal being continues to force the demon race into war.

Unavoidable destruction.

I could not stop it; I am not strong enough.

Is there any point in continuing to struggle, knowing that anything I try to do will end in vain?

Would it not have been a better end to be executed on the spot, my defeat made final?

There is no point in wondering.

I am alive.

My only option is to continue doing what I think is best.

Change becomes increasingly difficult with age.

Ultimately, I am sure I will simply go on fighting in vain against the current until I die.

There will be no glorious end awaiting me.

Better, then, to crawl onward through the mud, gnashing my teeth until my very last breath.

“.....”

A certain man stands glowering at the fort in the distance.

“Calm down, Bloe.”

“I am calm, dammit.”

Despite his response, Bloe is tapping his foot impatiently.

No one could mistake this for a sign of composure.

“A foul mood will not improve our position. As a general, part of your job is to set a calm example for your subordinates. Look around you. Are your soldiers not worried enough as it is?”

Bloe scans the expressions of his men.

Clearly, his restlessness is only exacerbating their anxiety.

A leader’s state is reflected in his followers.

It is important to maintain a composed attitude and expression at all times.

“...My bad.”

Realizing his anxiety is having a negative effect on his soldiers, Bloe apologizes awkwardly.

“Well. It’s not as if your troops on the front line can see your pitiful state anyway.”

“Urgh!”

Bloe snarls to hide his shame.

Bloe’s Seventh Army and my First Army are currently attacking Fort Kusorion: a notably impregnable fortress anchoring humanity’s main line of defense and occupying a strategically crucial position as well.

Its importance is plain to see, considering how we are attacking with two armies,

while all the other border forts have been assigned to one army each.

However, only the Seventh Army is actually attacking at the moment.

In a reckless manner that simply invites casualties, no less.

Of course, there will be a great deal of losses to our side following our current strategy.

Fort Kusorion is not the sort of place that can be conquered in one day. It has fended off demon invasions for many years, gaining countless expansions and improved fortifications along the way.

Conquering such a bastion would normally require several times their number, and even then, the fighting would carry on for months or even years.

But of course, the demon race does not have the population to field that large of an invasion force, and our advantage in stats does little in the face of an array of impenetrable walls.

And we are hardly in any position to commit to a years-long battle.

We have some supplies from subjecting our populace to high war taxation, but the humans undoubtedly have far more to spare, and our ability to produce more supplies is greatly limited.

And while we demons have enlisted far too much of our population to be sustainable as it is, the humans could easily call for aid from other countries and get any amount of reinforcements.

In short, we have no chance of winning a drawn-out battle.

Hence this short-term strategy.

However, our reckless attack is meeting with considerable resistance, and the Seventh Army's losses are already heavy.

Their role is not to clear a path for us with a suicide attack.

No, the Seventh Army's purpose is to serve as bait to draw out the enemy.

They will sustain heavy losses but will extract a price from the enemy.

Meanwhile, the First Army will reserve its strength until this fierce battle winds down.

My heart goes out to the Seventh Army for their sacrifice, but we have no other choice.

Bloe knows all this, too, which is why he is reluctantly going along with this strategy in spite of the cost.

The Seventh Army, after all, is composed of soldiers who were involved in the earlier rebellion.

Since the plot was discovered and crushed long before it could be put into action, they never actually got the chance to rebel. A minor quibble, but as a result, their leader, Warkis, was executed, while the soldiers were not punished.

...At least, not officially.

You can guess how the Seventh Army is truly being treated by the fact that they've been thrust onto the front lines as bait.

Essentially, these would-be rebel soldiers are the living dead, mere sacrificial pawns.

By entrusting them to Bloe, who has always opposed Lady Ariel, she has gathered all her dissenters in one unit.

Since Warkis and Neroe were executed, and I have expressed my submission to Lady Ariel, it should be clear to anyone with half a brain that to rebel against Lady Ariel is a fool's errand.

Anyone who failed to understand that is now under Bloe's command.

This is all very deliberate.

Whether Bloe tries to lead them into a rebellion or is forced to bow to Lady Ariel, she comes out on top regardless.

If they rebel, she can crush them as an example and use them to replenish the system's energy; if they bend the knee, they will simply be crushed in battle instead.

So far, Bloe has been made to keep them all in check, wrangling them into an army just to sacrifice them here.

He is certainly a skilled leader.

But Bloe is too emotional and has been too open in his defiance of Lady Ariel.

It is both tragic and fitting that his idiocy has been used against him, forcing him to lead an army of sacrificial pawns.

But even backed into a corner and given such harrowing tasks, Bloe has continued to lead the Seventh Army with resolve.

He is a determined man and a passionate one.

Which is why he fears for the sacrificial Seventh Army from the bottom of his heart, mourns their deaths, and roils with anger and anxiety.

Hoping that they will draw out the enemy as quickly as possible.

“Bloe. It looks like they took the bait.”

And so I update him as soon as I notice.

“!”

“Get ready.”

Bloe looks up quickly, and I give him a fast order.

Their goal has been accomplished.

But that was only the first step.

We succeeded in luring out the enemy only at great loss to the Seventh Army.

And the real battle begins now.

We must defeat the enemy we've drawn into the open, or we cannot win.

"The hero's arrived."

The hero: humanity's greatest hope.

We must strike him down here and crush the humans' morale.

I could not defeat Lady Ariel, the Demon Lord.

And now I must make yet another risky wager.

But I have no choice but to gamble, even if the odds are stacked against me.

Just like Bloe, I am heading toward a disaster of my own making.

V



First Demon Army

Agner



Seventh Demon Army

Bloe



Fort Kusorion

Hero's Party



Jeskan



Hawkin



Hyrince



Julius



Yaana

FORT KUSORION BATTLE THE KEY POINTS!

Welcome back to White Explains It All!

The Colonel and Deadbeat are attacking a fort surrounded by... nothing!

What? There's gotta be something, you say?

Tsk, tsk, tsk.

The fact that there's nothing is what's so special about it!

A flat field with no special features means that it's easy for troops to march through here.

Any spot easy for a big army to punch through is an important one!

For the human side, it's a place where they have to hold the line no matter what. Otherwise, a whole army could waltz right on in.

They've gotta defend this place to the death, whatever happens to the other forts.

That's Fort Kusorion in a nutshell!

Which is why we sent two whole armies to conquer this very important fort.

Same goes for the other side—it looks like the humans committed way more people to protecting this one.

On top of that, they've got their strongest fighting force of all at this fort: the hero.

So in one corner we've got the Colonel, who's the strongest of all the regular demons, and in the other is the hero, the symbol of hope for humanity.

Talk about a big showdown.

You could even say that this battle will decide the outcome of the war.

Even I'm on the edge of my seat over here!

...Man, this fort's got a pretty stupid-sounding name, though, huh?



I became an adventurer solely by chance.

Call it a coincidence if you like.

It just so happened that the fastest way for a no-name brat to earn money was working as an adventurer—that's the only reason.

I was born in the middle of nowhere.

You couldn't even call it a village. It was just a couple of run-down shacks bunched up in the same shabby place.

There were no walls to keep out monsters, just an almost useless fence made of some skinny twigs.

If the place was ever attacked by monsters or bandits, we'd all die.

But for some reason, no one ever tried to leave. Everyone assumed it'd somehow be fine, simply because it always had been.

As if that could possibly be true.

Since I seemed to be the only one who realized that, I left home at a young age and became an adventurer.

Sure, it was tough getting by at first.

I mean, I was just a kid.

An adventurer's main job is culling monsters, but kids can't manage that kind of thing.

When a monster kills humans, its level goes way up, and sometimes it'll even evolve.

That's why there are rules in place to keep adventurers from dying.

The role of the adventurers' guild is to distribute appropriate jobs so that kids and newbies don't take on anything they can't handle.

Meaning while anyone can be an adventurer, not just anyone can earn money doing it.

The highest-paying jobs are monster hunts, but kids obviously aren't allowed to do those, so I only got odd jobs and errands at first.

I ran around all day long, barely earning enough money to pay for food and lodging for the night.

And so it went for some time.

It's not unusual for street urchins to become adventurers like I did.

In most cases, those kids can't keep up that lifestyle for long and eventually resort to petty crimes like pickpocketing instead.

Sounds a bit stupid, but with one good pull, a skilled pickpocket could get the same amount of money it'd take a whole day's worth of honest work to earn.

It's no wonder so many kids end up choosing that path when they see how much less grueling it is.

Even if not all of them might make it to the next year.

Sure, pickpocketing might be an easy way to make money, but it's at the cost of ruining the rest of your life.

Those kids made fun of me for sticking to honest hard work, but to me they were the stupid ones.

It's not like I avoided pickpocketing because it's bad, really. It just wasn't worth it.

You might get money in the short term, but odds are you'd end up in prison in the long run.

Lots of them kept doing it anyway, with the groundless confidence that they'd never

be caught, but that obviously wasn't true.

Just like the folks in my hometown, they assumed they were special, and I have no idea why.

In the end, my hometown got destroyed by bandits, and every last one of the kids who were pickpockets got caught.

I never thought of myself as special. I just made a point of avoiding danger.

That's the only difference between them and me.

Who'd have thought I would go on to be successful as an adventurer and end up in the hero's party?

If you told me that when I was a kid, I never would've believed it.

Even now, no one's as surprised as I am.

I became an adventurer by chance, but as it turns out, I guess I had a knack for it.

People call me an expert who can use all kinds of weapons, but when I think about how that happened, I can't help laughing.

The only reason I'm good with a bunch of different weapons is because I didn't have any of my own.

How would having no weapons lead to knowing how to use so many of them? That's what most people ask when I tell them that. All it really means is that I used whatever I could get: hand-me-down weapons from older adventurers, broken ones that belonged in the scrap heap, stuff like that.

I didn't have any money, after all.

Beggars can't be choosers, so I just used anything and everything in reach.

Since they weren't bought in a store or anything, nothing I laid my hands on lasted long, either, so I used whatever I could find for all it was worth.

Eventually, my earnings started to stabilize, and by the time I could afford to buy real

weapons, I was experienced with all kinds of them.

If the young adventurers who look up to me ever found out the boring truth, they'd probably be heartbroken.

I've heard there's a fad among the rookies to imitate me by using multiple weapons.

I dunno if that's a good thing or a bad thing, though.

The advantages and disadvantages of using multiple weapons are obvious.

On the one hand, you can react to more situations.

Different kinds of attacks work on different monsters.

Cutting, impact, piercing, shock: Each one is more effective against certain foes and less effective against others.

If you can keep track of that and use the weapon best suited for your target, battles get a whole lot easier.

So what's the downside? Your skills grow more slowly, you have to lug around a whole slew of bulky weapons, and it's a pain keeping them all in good shape.

Obviously, the most effective way to raise a skill level is to pick a single kind of weapon and keep using it. If you use a bunch of different kinds, that just means more skills you have to level up, and you'll be dividing your experience among them all.

If I had to have a sword fight with an adventurer who only uses swords, I'd probably be the one to lose.

Then there's the bulkiness.

If you wanna switch weapons depending on the situation, that means you've got no choice but to carry a ton of them around at any given time.

That's fine if you got a bag with Space Storage on it or something, but Space Magic items are really expensive.

There's not much supply and a ton of demand, so they sell as soon as they hit the

market, even when they're priced super high.

Then the prices get even higher, so it's a vicious cycle.

But I happen to have one that Hawkin got for a steal, so I can hit the battlefield without worrying about lugging around a ton of clunky weapons.

Until then, I put all that heavy stuff on my back...

I really owe Hawkin for that.

But even with that problem solved, I still have to maintain all these weapons constantly, and that isn't cheap.

Weapons are tools that protect your life. If you neglect 'em and they break in battle, you could be in serious danger, so it's important to keep them in tip-top shape at all times.

I had to use tons of broken secondhand weapons when I was starting out, so I know exactly how dangerous it can be, let me tell you.

Those experiences made me who I am now, but you're better off using a proper weapon in the first place.

Wielding several proper weapons costs serious cash.

Buying them and maintaining them, too.

A weapon's price is relative to its effectiveness.

When you're an adventurer at my level, you gotta use some decent-quality stuff.

If I use a weapon that can't hold up to my stats, I'll have to replace it after every swing.

Stronger adventurers reap higher profits, but they have to spend more on equipment, too.

And on top of that, I gotta buy several different kinds of those pricey weapons.

It can't just be expensive for no reason, either. I need an artisan I trust to craft 'em and

make sure that's the person who does maintenance on 'em, too.

Usually Hawkin takes care of that kind of thing.

When I was investigating a human-trafficking organization on a certain country's request, I just happened to spot Hawkin for sale and bought him, but that's frankly gotta be the best decision I ever made in my life.

Without Hawkin, I'd be bankrupt by now...

The reason I joined the hero's party is because I sensed that I was starting to reach the limits of my solo career. That's the truth.

But to the rest of the world, it seems like I reached the limits of my ability to fight solo and finally went looking for a group who could keep up with me.

There are a handful of adventurers who work solo, but most of them don't get far.

Since this occupation means constantly dancing with death, it's simply too risky to strike out on your own.

Unlike a party, where the other members can help out if one of them makes a mistake, the smallest misstep can mean death for a solo adventurer, and a foe that would be easy to defeat with teamwork is far more difficult to challenge alone.

All good reasons why most people team up with other adventurers of similar strength to form parties.

But I've always worked solo.

It's not that I was particularly set on working alone or anything.

It's just, when I started out, no one wanted to team up with a broke little kid.

So I kept working solo, and next thing I knew, I had reached A rank, and there were no other strong adventurers around me.

Just like the reason I became an adventurer, I stayed solo because of chance and nothing more.

But that was for the best.

With my strength, I can tackle most monsters alone.

I just have to avoid fighting any monsters I can't handle.

The true limit of what I could accomplish in my solo career wasn't decided by any lack of strength.

If anything, it's because of a lack of money...

Adventurers earn money by defeating monsters, with the amount depending on the monster's strength.

But powerful monsters worth a lot of money don't appear all that often.

If you go to dangerous areas where ordinary people never set foot, you can find dangerous monsters of A rank and above, but few adventurers ever return from those places.

If a solo adventurer like me went somewhere like that, you can bet I wouldn't come back in one piece.

Sure, I could maybe survive if I avoided being spotted by any monsters, but then I wouldn't earn any money.

But it's not good to overhunt the weaker monsters, either.

It's important to keep their numbers low, but if you hunt them too much, you can wreck the fragile balance of the ecosystem and cause unintended consequences.

Best to keep the culling to a reasonable level.

With my strength, I don't have to worry about not having enough to eat, but that strength also requires high-quality weapons that can hold up to heavy use. Multiple weapons, no less.

I might not be in danger of starving, but it costs a lot of money to maintain a proper stock of weapons.

It's not easy to find requests that keep enough money rolling in.

The highest-paying requests involve defeating powerful monsters or working for a government.

A rank or not, as a solo adventurer, I wasn't rolling in either kind of request.

Since there weren't enough requests appropriate for my strength, I started falling into the red, which was why I felt I'd reached the limit of my solo career.

A pretty embarrassing limit, I gotta say.

Again, sorry for ruining the dreams of you young adventurers who looked up to me...

In any case, investigating that human-trafficking organization at the behest of some government or other and joining the anti-human trafficking force was exactly what I needed.

Governmental requests pay accordingly well, and the force was funded by many nations.

On top of that, the force consisted of elites from all over the world.

If everything went well, I might get invited to work for one of those countries.

With that in mind, I joined the force with Hawkin in tow.

Hawkin was purely worried about the young hero, but my reasons were much more pragmatic.

And when the force was disbanded, I ended up joining the hero's party.

...That was a surprise to me, too.

I only spoke to Julius at the wrap-up banquet on a whim, a casual urge to give some life advice to the young boy who already carried so much responsibility.

Through our activities on the force, I got a good idea of young Julius's nature.

To be honest, he seemed naive to me.

I've experienced a lot as an adventurer, both good and bad, so it was almost embarrassing to watch someone so earnest and simple... and concerning, too.

It's not a bad thing to be honest.

We need people with a strong sense of justice.

But the truth is that the world's problems can't be fixed with sentiments alone.

Real adults have to be able to take the bad with the good in equal measure.

Those who are overly focused on chasing the good in this world can get crushed when they're confronted with the dark and dirty.

It's one thing if they can manage to pretend they didn't see anything, but someone whose sense of justice is too strong might get heartbroken right then and there.

I suspect part of the reason Julius was in the anti-human trafficking organization force was for him to get exposed to the darkness early on, so that wouldn't happen.

That night, I figured I'd give him a little advice while also feeling out whether he really understood that.

And what do you think he said?

"I learned in my time with the force how easily people can turn to the path of evil, too. But that's exactly what my power is for."

"I am the hero, a symbol of hope for the people. An emblem of justice. And the enemy of evil. I'll become the hope of humanity and show them that I'll never let evil win."

"I am here. I am the hero. That's what I want to let everyone know. As long as I do that, I'm sure the future will be full of hope."

He clearly understood the dark and the light, but instead of turning a blind eye or being heartbroken, he declared that he would change the very darkness into light.

So this is what a hero's supposed to be, I thought.

I understood then why he was the only person fit to be called the hero, even if he was

just a kid.

And next thing I knew, I was offering my services to him.

Even now, I have no idea why I did that.

Or why Julius accepted without hesitation.

One way or another, that's how I ended up as a member of the hero's party.

You never know where life's gonna take you.

But I don't regret it for a second.

For one thing, a member of the hero's party doesn't have to worry about money.

I've been able to fight to my best ability without fear of going broke, although it's mostly because Hawkin runs around taking care of everything.

And being in the hero's party means a lot of fame, too.

What more could a guy want?

For a kid who started out practically as an orphan, I think I've gone further as an adventurer than I ever could've imagined.

I'm perfectly content.

Seems like I don't have a whole lot of ambition, I guess.

I didn't even become an A-rank adventurer because I wanted to get stronger or anything.

I was just trying to make my life a little better, struggling to get out of poverty, and next thing you know, that's where I ended up.

As a member of the hero's party, I've got more wealth and fame than I ever needed, so I'm not looking to get anything more than that.

People say I'm not greedy, but I don't think that's true.

I've got desires just like anyone else.

I wanna eat good food to my heart's content and spend my nights with a good woman.

Having money makes me happy, and it feels good to have people fawn over me because of my fame.

But if you get too greedy or ambitious, that can lead to your own doom, so I don't want anything more than what I've got.

Julius's hyper-noble dedication to justice seems a little heavy to me, but I do think you have to live your life by a code.

Rules are made for a reason, and breaking them usually isn't worth it.

I'm not noble and pure of heart—I just never break rules if it's not worth the risk.

In that sense, I'm probably the only member of the hero's party who isn't a good and virtuous person.

Actually, no, I guess there's Hyrince, too...

But I guess Julius probably needs someone who sees things from a different point of view.

Maybe he even keeps Hyrince close at hand because he realizes that.

Since I'm the oldest and all, I sometimes end up being like the teacher who guides the other members of the hero's party.

At first, I didn't think that suited me, but I've gotten used to it over the years.

So now I sorta feel like their guardian.

But that's not a bad feeling.

...Maybe I'm getting soft as I grow older.

Back in the day, I probably would've died rather than watch over a bunch of brats.

The main reason I always worked solo is because there wasn't anyone else around who was about the same level or strength as me, but it's also because dealing with other people is a pain.

Where I come from, gossip and envy were all fairly common.

People sometimes suspected me of picking pockets, although it was always a false charge.

With that unpleasant history, I decided not to team up with anyone unless I knew I could really trust them.

And when it comes to Julius and the rest of the hero's party, they're so damn nice that there was never any doubt.

It's like these guys have never even heard of jealousy or envy.

In that sense, I had nothing to worry about, but I wasn't used to being in the position of relying on others or even guiding them.

But now I've gone so soft that I've even considering teaching young adventurers once I retire.

I'm getting old, all right.

Technically I'm still on the younger side, but as adventurers go, I'm undoubtedly a veteran by now.

It's the nature of the job that you can't do it for all that long.

The gradual weakening and slowing down that comes with age can make the difference between life and death in battle.

And it gets harder to balance your strength and earnings, just like what happened in my case.

If you get married and have kids, you obviously have to take care of them, too.

Once an adventurer reaches a certain age or level of strength, they usually start to look for a more stable line of work.

Many people even wash their hands of this dangerous job long before they reach that point.

The time has come for me to start thinking about what I'm gonna do when I quit being an adventurer, too.

Julius and the others are grown adults by now.

They're strong enough that they'll do just fine without me.

Once this all-important battle with the demons is over, I'll begin looking for a successor and figure out what I'm gonna do with myself from now on.

I haven't had much of a chance to form a deep connection with anyone over the years, so maybe I should look for a good woman, too.

But I guess I can take time to think about all that after I survive this fight.

We've been deployed to Fort Kusorion.

It's the most important of all the major forts, making it a fitting place to be personally defended by Julius the hero, humanity's trump card.

The enemy knows this, too, which is why they're attacking so aggressively.

Our commanding officer shouts orders, and the soldiers hurry into action.

But even their resolute attempts at defense are being pushed back in the face of the demons' almost self-destructive recklessness.

"Down you go!"

I kick a ladder that's been propped against the wall of the fort.

The demon that was climbing it takes a tumble, too, but another ladder almost instantly appears just a few paces over.

By the time I knock that one over as well, the first one is already propped back up

again.

There's no end to it.

Nearby, another soldier deals with a similar situation, but the enemy proves too strong for him to push the ladder down; a fight breaks out as the first demon climbs onto the wall.

"Hiyah!"

Julius cuts down the demon with one strike.

"Healing, now!"

Little Miss Yaana uses Healing Magic to help the wounded recover.

"Get back!"

Hyrince raises his shield at the outer edge of the wall to repel an enemy spell that comes flying toward us from the distance.

"Here's a little somethin'!"

Behind Hyrince's shield, Hawkin tosses something down at the soldiers below the wall.

Judging by the resulting screams, it must've been some wildly dangerous item.

We're holding down our section of the wall well enough, but there are just too many enemies.

Fort Kusorion is huge. With attacks coming from all sides, there's no way we can cover everywhere at once on our own.

"Eek?!"

"Careful."

The wall trembles, and Miss Yaana stumbles a little.

Julius quickly catches her and finds himself propping her up for a moment.

At a glance, it looks like they're embracing, and they both certainly seem flustered.

But this is the hero's party.

They're not stupid enough to do something like that in the middle of a battle.

The two of them quickly separate and scan for the source of the tremor.

"...That's not good," Julius murmurs gravely.

Immediately, there's another tremor at our feet.

It's coming from a siege engine shaped like a massive pillar being smashed into the main gate.

"Dammit! What are the guards down there doing?!"

Hyrince curses, but I'm sure the soldiers aren't slacking off, either.

They're doing their best to stop the enemy from ramming the gate, but the siege engine has too much momentum to be stopped completely.

The demons draw back to drive the siege engine home again.

Defenders shoot magic at them to try to stop it, but even a direct hit doesn't slow them down.

Even as they're scorched by flames, electrocuted by lightning, and lose limbs to Earth Magic, the demons crash into the door once more.

"They broke through..."

I barely even notice that the words are coming out of my mouth.

The demons flood in through the shattered gate.

Of course, Fort Kusorion won't fall just because a single door was broken down.

There are more layers of defense inside, and the attackers might even expose themselves to a pincer attack if they aren't careful.

So there's no need to panic just yet, but the fact that the famously impregnable Fort Kusorion has been breached at all is a considerable shock to our allies—which isn't good when they were already intimidated by the demons' viciously aggressive attacks.

At this rate, our side's morale could take a serious blow.

"Julius, what's our move?"

"...Let's go."

Julius hesitates for a moment, then starts running toward the front gate.

"We're going to take care of things down there! Don't worry! Just hold steady up here for now!"

With a brief call of encouragement to the soldiers, I follow on Julius's heels.

If the soldiers up here started flagging because we left and that gave the enemy another opportunity to break through, our efforts would be completely wasted.

We need them to keep digging in their heels even after we leave.

The hero's party rushes toward the gate, Julius leading the way.

When we reach the wall closest to it, Julius takes a running jump right into the fray.

"Haaaah!"

With momentum and gravity on his side, he brings his sword down on a group of enemies who are clumped up.

A boom echoes off the walls as Julius lands on the remains of an enemy soldier.

He's annihilated the whole swathe of demons in a single attack.

Just like that, the enemies who made it inside the gate have all been wiped out.

Julius isn't satisfied with that, though, and runs out through the broken gate.

"We're going, too! Hang on!"

Hyrince scoops up Miss Yaana and jumps down after Julius.

I pick up Hawkin and follow in the same way.

Of course, it did occur to me to just leave Hawkin there. But after he showed me last night how determined he was, I couldn't betray his trust.

I use Dimensional Maneuvering as I land to make sure it isn't too rough on Hawkin.

Julius is already locked in battle with the enemy's frontline troops—or rather, he's already cutting right through them.

With every swing of Julius's sword, another demon goes down.

Their stats are higher than ordinary humans', but as the hero, Julius is even stronger.

I'm sure only a handful of the strongest demons could even hold their own in a fight against Julius.

...But I guess now isn't the time to stand around being impressed.

"Don't run off on your own!"

Hyrince catches up to Julius and raises his shield.

I come over to stand at Julius's other side. "Let's push them back right here and now."

Charging into battle like this, both armies are bound to notice.

Our allies' morale will improve when they see how dependable the hero is, while the enemy will falter in the face of the hero's fearsome strength.

It's better to set Julius loose on solid ground where he can fight to the fullest than have him defend a tiny section of the wall.

Julius seems to be in agreement with my plan, as he keeps pressing onward.

He slashes his way forward through the enemy as easily as if he's cutting through an empty field.

I finish off any enemies Julius missed, while Hyrince protects Miss Yaana and Hawkin as we advance, the two of them supporting with long-distance attacks.

Our teamwork is in perfect sync.

We've never fought in such a huge battle before, but the cooperation we've polished fighting monsters and bandits is working perfectly here.

The enemy had a lot of momentum before, but now they're definitely quaking in their boots.

"Out of the way!" Julius shouts. "We have no quarrel with any who turns back now!"

But none of the demons get ready to run away.

Why would they?

"Uh, Julius. I don't think they're gonna understand human language, yeah?"

Hyrince's calm observation is right.

Demons speak their own language, after all...

Julius turns a little red with embarrassment.

An awkward silence ensues, even though we're smack-dab in the middle of a battlefield.

"But it did work as a threat," Yaana suggests encouragingly.

"Yeah, and your crazy strength is scarin' 'em for sure."

Hawkin is right, too: Even if they didn't understand what Julius said, his power certainly requires no translation to be understood.

"It'd be great if they would take that as a cue to retreat..."

Julius makes a hopeful comment, but I'm sure he knows as well as the rest of us that's

not going to happen.

Even now, there's a commotion spreading from the back of the enemies' ranks.

"Julius, something's coming."

I'm sure he realizes that, but I warn him anyway.

The demons open up a path.

And an enemy on horseback appears.

"Hero! Prepare yourself!"

The mounted warrior shouts in human language, albeit a little falteringly, and slashes down with his sword.

Julius parries the blow head-on, but despite his attack failing, the fighter on horseback simply pulls his horse aside and gallops briefly away.

...This guy's strong.

The fact that he wasn't defeated in that exchange with Julius is more than enough proof.

Julius was able to defend himself but couldn't counterattack.

Even if it was a sudden strike from a fighter on horseback, Julius is the hero, so the fact that he couldn't turn the tables instantly means that the enemy must be powerful.

This has got to be one of the demon elites.

"?! Hyrince! Above us!"

Sensing something strange, I call out a warning to Hyrince.

Hyrince moves instantly, protecting Yaana with his shield from something raining down on her from above.

"Urgh!" he groans.

There's the dull thud of a weapon crashing against the shield, but before the echoing dies down, the culprit has already escaped.

The damn thing's fast.

I put away the ax I was holding and ready my bow instead.

The enemy, a giant birdlike monster, is flying through the air.

And riding on its back appears to be a man in the prime of his life.

This newcomer is bad news.

My Danger Perception gives me a shrill warning: That man is strong.

The warrior on horseback was already a formidable foe, but this guy is even worse.

"I am Bloe, Seventh Commander of the demon army. Let us do battle, Hero!"

The demon called Bloe introduces himself in human language and readies his sword.

"I am Julius the hero. I accept your challenge."

Julius draws his blade as well.

"Hmph."

On the other hand, the man on the flying mount looks at Bloe with something resembling exasperation.

"I suppose I shall introduce myself, too. I am Agner, First Commander of the demon army. Prepare to perish."

In contrast to that Bloe guy's stammering human language, this one speaks quite clearly.

I knew he had to be an elite of some kind, but to think they are both commanders...

They must have been aiming for the hero's party, or specifically Julius the hero himself.

If they can defeat the hero, it will be a huge blow to the human race.

That must be their aim.

But the reverse is true, too.

If we can defeat two commanders in one battle, I'm sure it'll have a serious effect on the demons.

Guess that means it's time for a showdown.

"Julius! You take that one!"

"Right!"

I'm sure Julius can handle a commander on his own.

The problem is the other one.

"Hyrince! Protect Miss Yaana and Hawkin!"

"You know I will."

"Missy, Hawkin, you're on support duty."

"Of course."

"You got it!"

It'll be four against one, but that might be our only chance.

Agner starts weaving magic.

I figured as much. The air is the perfect position to launch a long-distance attack.

Our only options are to either counter with long-distance attacks of our own or figure out a way to bring him down.

Whereas he can attack us however he wants.

On top of that, he can dodge in any direction, including up or down.

As long as he's in midair, we're at a disadvantage.

We've got to take him out before he can finish his spell!

I nock an arrow to my bow and loose it at once, but at that same moment, Agner finishes his spell and casts it.

The arrow and spell crash into each other, and of course the magic wins out.

I take a quick step back to avoid the spell—a black spear that pierces the earth.

It must be the Dark Magic spell Dark Spear.

What a troublesome opponent.

Dark spells are the opposite of light-based spells and are seriously dangerous.

They're stronger than other kinds of magic on a comparable level, and since they're made out of something as abstract as darkness, they're difficult to dodge.

It's also impossible to cut them apart completely with any ordinary sword.

The only option is to block them with a shield, and even then it won't work if the shield isn't powerful enough.

Hyrince's shield should be able to handle it, but my only choice is to dodge.

On top of that, he constructs spells incredibly fast.

It takes him no longer to cast than it does for me to ready and loose an arrow—except his attack is inevitably stronger.

On top of that, he's got the better position, since he's in midair.

This really isn't good.

...I guess I might have to get a little reckless.

"Cover me, please, missy."

I give a nod to Little Miss Yaana, then shoot another arrow.

Agner fires another spell, too, but this time instead of crashing into my arrow, it flies right toward me.

So fast!

But since I know it's coming, it's not so fast that I can't dodge.

He must've timed it to match when I shot my arrow, but the arrow was actually a feint—it flies off in some random direction.

If I had lined it up properly, the magic might've landed a direct hit, but I was just pretending to aim at him as I started my next move.

I put all my strength into my legs, jump over the spell flying toward me, and then activate Dimensional Maneuvering.

It's difficult to control, but as long as you maintain your focus, for a brief moment you can run in the air as if you're on the ground.

Using the skill to make footholds beneath me, I sprint straight toward Agner.

What?!

His spell construction is even faster than I realized!

Dimensional Maneuvering is too difficult to use for making precise movements.

It's easy to dodge a spell if you know it's coming and start moving in advance, but otherwise it can be nigh impossible.

He's got me!

Bastard! That must not have been his top speed before!

Was he testing me or just getting warmed up?

Either way, he wasn't fighting at his full strength before.

I'm screwed!

The burst of Dark Magic flies toward me but crashes into a beam of light that comes flying from behind me: Miss Yaana's Light Magic!

I'm saved!

Dark Magic and Light Magic are opposites.

Spells of the same level from either are evenly matched, and neither has physical substance, so they simply cancel each other out on contact.

Moreover, Miss Yaana has studied the Ronandt method of magic enhancement, so her spell is more powerful than it normally would be.

Yaana's magic will come out on top.

But even as relief floods me, it's replaced by a sharp pain in my stomach.

I don't have to look down to know what happened: His spell just ran me through.

What a powerful bastard.

His magic actually beat Miss Yaana's.

Luckily, it seems like her spell slowed it down considerably; judging by the level of pain, it's not too grave an injury.

Bah, it's just a hole in my stomach the size of a pinkie finger.

Not enough to slow me down!

Pushing down the pain, I keep using the Dimensional Maneuvering skill and pumping my legs to quickly shorten the distance between myself and Agner.

Since I'm too close for him to fend me off with magic now, he pulls back the reins of his bird monster to fly away from me.

"You're not getting away!"

I'm not on top of him yet, but I still swing the weapon in my hand.

The sickle and chain!

It goes flying, and the sickle cuts through the giant bird's wing.

The creature lets out a shriek of pain and thrashes around.

I yank on the chain as I keep closing in.

Agner pulls out his sword, but even he can't get into a good position while on the back of a thrashing beast.

In a matter of seconds, Agner and I clash in midair.

I yank hard on the sickle, taking off the bird's whole wing in the process.

As retribution, Agner's sword bites deep into my shoulder.

Seems like he was aiming for my neck, but the bird's wild movements made him miss.

Luck was on my side.

But this is still a serious wound.

Agner and the bird both go crashing to the ground.

Unable to control my Dimensional Maneuvering, I fall down not far behind.

"Uh-oh!"

Right before I crash into the ground, Hyrince catches me in midair.

Immediately, Miss Yaana begins casting Healing Magic on me.

"If I gotta catch someone like this, I'd rather it be a cute girl than an older dude..."

"Yeah, yeah."

Hyrince jokes, but I pull myself out of his arms and stand.

The battle's not over yet.

He lost his flying mount, but Agner still landed on the ground unharmed.

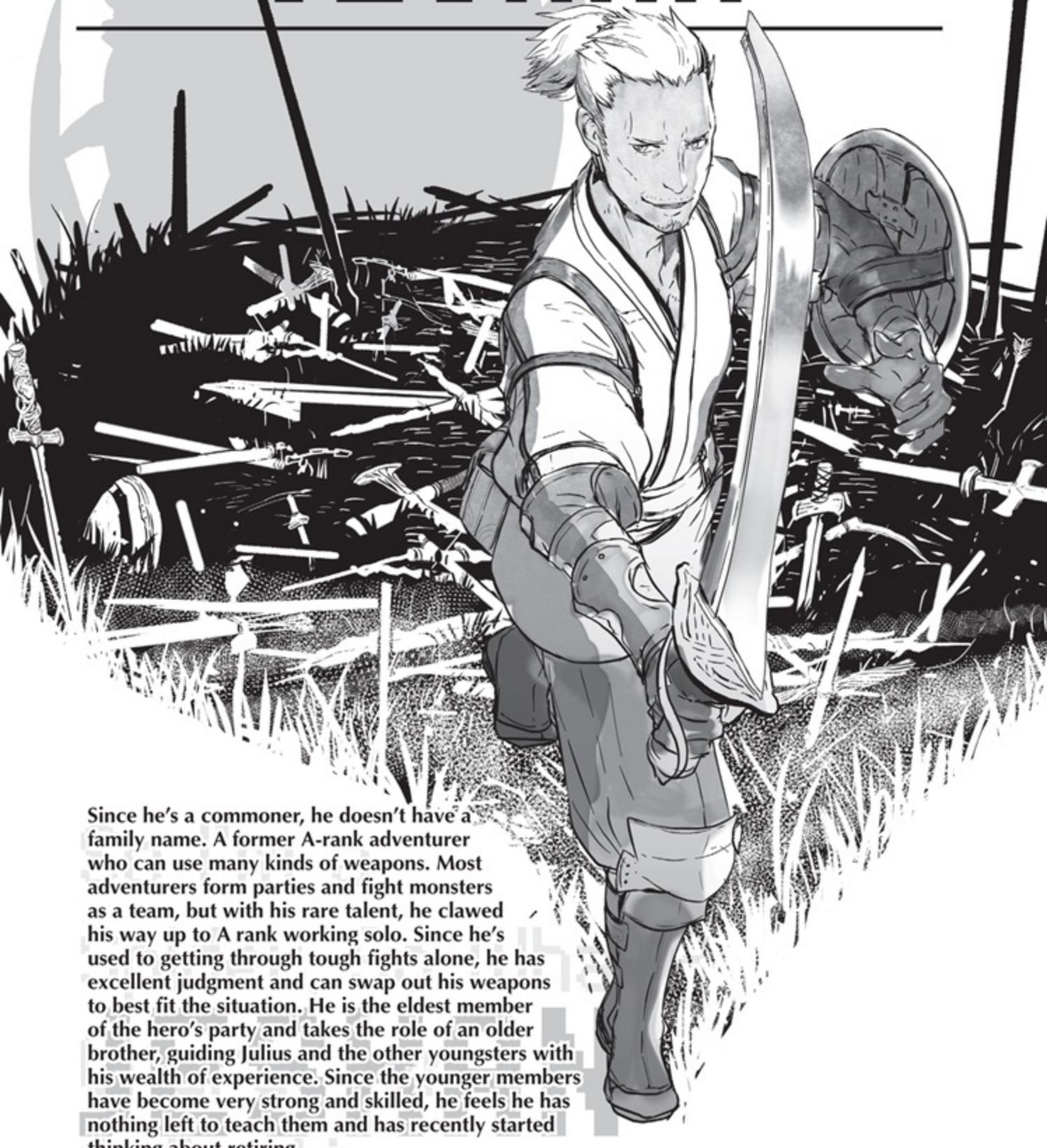
It was worth taking a risk to bring him down out of the sky, but the real fight's just getting started.

"Focus. He's strong, all right."

At that, Hyrince and the others shift into battle mode.

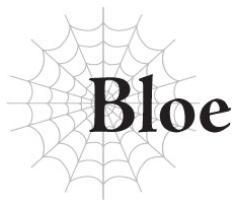
Facing off against us, Agner calmly readies himself.

JESKAN



Since he's a commoner, he doesn't have a family name. A former A-rank adventurer who can use many kinds of weapons. Most adventurers form parties and fight monsters as a team, but with his rare talent, he clawed his way up to A rank working solo. Since he's used to getting through tough fights alone, he has excellent judgment and can swap out his weapons to best fit the situation. He is the eldest member of the hero's party and takes the role of an older brother, guiding Julius and the other youngsters with his wealth of experience. Since the younger members have become very strong and skilled, he feels he has nothing left to teach them and has recently started thinking about retiring.

Collection



Spurring on my horse, I dodge the hero's barrage of light missiles.

If I stop moving, I'll get torched on the spot!

My opponent is the hero, the mortal enemy of the Demon Lord.

I knew it wasn't going to be easy—but I still gotta beat him.

Unfortunately for me, the hero's attacks are relentless, as if they're meant to crush my last dregs of hope.

He looks like a mild-mannered kid, yet he's coming in for the kill without a second's hesitation.

It's hard to believe I can survive in the face of all that intensity.

How much hell has this kid been through to get this strong?

The hero fights like a magic knight, primarily using magic, but he also wields his sword like a master.

From the moment he blocked my attack from horseback with his sword, I knew he was physically stronger than I am.

But he seems to specialize in magic more.

If I stay too far away, I'll become the perfect target for his magic.

If I keep close, though, he's still got his sword.

He has no openings.

Usually, people have their own strengths and weaknesses.

I kinda suck at magic, while Huey from the Sixth is no good at close combat.

The whole point of a one-on-one battle is to figure out where the enemy excels and where they come up short, keep the fight on your own terms, and prevent the enemy from using their best weapons.

But the hero doesn't seem to have any weaknesses at all.

His skill levels have all gotta be crazy high.

Normally, that'd be impossible, but this is the hero we're talking about.

Guess that means he plays by his own special set of rules, huh?

You need tons of time to raise skill levels.

When you try to raise all of 'em at once, most people end up just being half-assed at a bunch of random things.

If you wanna get strong, you're supposed to pick one and focus on it to raise its skill level.

Even among us commanders, the only person who's got a wide balance of well-trained skills is Agner.

And he's been fighting since the reign of the Demon Lord from two generations ago, y'know?

Being around so much longer than the rest of us, it's no wonder he's got more experience.

But Agner is pretty much the only exception to the rule.

It'd be ideal to raise all your skills to a high level evenly, but it sure ain't practical.

But the hero is like that ideal come to life.

...Can I really win this?

No, I can't wimp out now!

I'm gonna win! I have to!

With a flick of the reins, I change my horse's course.

I'm better at close combat, especially when I rapidly string together powerful attacks.

Kogou from the Third has me beat for heaviest single attack, and Darad from the Fifth has more finesse than me for sure.

But when we actually spar, I'm the one who comes out on top.

In close combat without any magic, I'd wager I could hold my own even against Agner.

I know how strong the hero is from that first exchange, whether I want to or not.

But I won't stand a chance of winning if I let that scare me.

Keeping my distance is just gonna get me killed by his magic.

My only chance of victory is to force a close-combat fight, where I excel the most.

“Aaaargh!”

With a roaring battle cry, I charge at the hero.

He readies his sword to meet me.

The fight is on!

And I'm gonna win!

I have to! No matter what!

“In tomorrow's battle, the Seventh Army will have to be sacrificial pawns.”

Agner bluntly told me this yesterday.

He said my troops would act as bait to lure out the hero.

Fort Kusorion is particularly secure, even out of all the human forts.

There's no way to bring it down by attacking it fair and square.

So our strategy was to draw out humanity's strongest fighter, the hero, and destroy him to crush the humans' fighting spirit.

It seemed like a risky move to me.

Would we really be able to lure out the hero by putting the entire Seventh Army at risk?

And even if we did manage that, would we be able to defeat him?

On top of that, if we were able to bring down the hero, would that be enough to destroy their will to fight?

Would this really be enough to bring down Fort Kusorion?

Agner's plan seemed to be based on an awful lot of optimistic assumptions—to me, the whole thing sounded like a huge gamble.

There was no way I could risk the lives of all my soldiers on such a dubious strategy.

I told him so directly.

"I thought as much. But you're going to have to do it anyway. Gamble or not, it's the only chance we have for victory."

Agner wore an uncharacteristically listless, self-deprecating smile.

"We've been put in a difficult position, you and me both."

With that statement, Agner looked around.

At the time, we'd cleared out all the men, so no one else was there.

"Could I ask you to step out for a minute? Why, this is just a trifling chat between two men. We're not going to make any foolish moves this late in the game."

But for some reason, Agner spoke as if someone was standing right nearby listening

in, and he addressed this invisible presence directly.

My Presence Perception skill didn't pick anything up, but Agner seemed sure that someone else was there.

"Well, there's no telling whether that worked or not..."

"Mr. Agner? What was that about?"

"Don't worry about it. There's nothing you could do anyway."

I felt a chill.

It was like Agner was saying that someone was watching my every move, without my ever realizing.

Is something like that possible even for the Demon Lord?

Even now, I have a hard time believing she's as untouchable as my older brother claims.

But in that moment, for the first time, I felt a certain indescribable fear.

"Even I can't tell whether our observer really left or not. But I wasn't going to say anything that would get us in trouble either way."

Were we being watched by someone even Agner couldn't detect?

Instinctively, I looked around, which made Agner chuckle drolly.

But of course I couldn't sense anything, so I just turned back to Agner in puzzlement.

In response, Agner's expression sobered, and he began to speak to me.

"Bloë, you might feel like you're the only one who's been put in a predicament, but you'd be dead wrong. It isn't just you. It's the entire demon race that's in danger."

Agner sounded exhausted as he spoke.

He always seemed so calm and grimly determined, so this was the first time I'd ever

seen him in that kinda state.

"We demons only have two options left. Defeat the humans and survive or lose and be destroyed. That's all it comes down to."

"It's not really that simple, is it?"

"No, I'm afraid it most certainly is."

Win or lose.

Survive or perish.

All or nothing.

I can't imagine our fate is anything so simple, but Agner insisted it was just that.

"The bigger the scale of a situation, the more complicated things get. But there are exceptions to every rule. This occasion is one such exception. Because the Demon Lord herself desires that simple outcome."

The Demon Lord.

Just thinking about that woman makes me scowl.

Everything went off the rails when she showed up.

"Mr. Agner. Why do you serve such a—?"

"Don't say another word."

I don't know why someone as powerful as Agner obeys the Demon Lord.

If he rebelled against her, maybe things would have been different.

Thinking about that, I started to say something bitter, but he cut me off.

"...We cannot win. Or rather, I could not win. I was unable to win against the Demon Lord. That's your answer."

Agner's simple response left me stunned.

He couldn't win.

I'd never heard Agner admit defeat before.

The implications of that are incredibly serious.

"I will not quietly accept our demise, of course. I have simply determined that this is the only course of action that remains open to us. We have no choice but to win."

Agner judged that he couldn't defeat the Demon Lord, so the only option left for the demon race's survival was to defeat the humans.

I don't want to accept it.

But I don't have much of a choice.

Not if Agner's the one saying so.

"We must win by any means necessary. Even if it is a gamble, it is one we will have to take. It's not just the Seventh Army at stake. If we lose, every last demon is likely to be doomed."

That's why he needs the Seventh Army to lead the charge.

I could tell that he was determined on this front and nothing I could say would change his chosen strategy.

We have to win.

It's not just the Seventh Army and me on the line.

The fate of the entire demon race rides on our victory.

The next morning—namely, this morning—I explained the gist of the strategy to the Seventh Army soldiers.

These men and women all participated in the would-be rebel army led by their previous commander, Warkis.

Since the rebellion was discovered, the Seventh Army has been treated poorly and resigned themselves to their current excruciating position.

Their supplies are given the lowest priority out of all the armies, they don't have adequate equipment, and some days there's not even enough food to go around.

And now, their orders are basically "go out there and die."

There's no way that doesn't bother them.

And yet...

"If you say so, Chief."

The soldiers readily accepted their suicide mission.

"We've all but died once already. Since we're living on borrowed time, we at least want to do something useful before we die."

"It's thanks to you that we've stayed alive this long, Chief. You saved our lives, so use them however you see fit."

"You guys..."

They're acting like I've done so much for them, but it ain't all that.

Most of these soldiers were incredibly faithful to Warkis.

Plenty of 'em were ready to grab their weapons and die trying to avenge him.

I calmed them down as best I could and punched their lights out when I had no other way to stop them.

Sometimes I went around begging for food, borrowing what I could so that my soldiers could eat, and even went hunting monsters myself when things got desperate.

But that's about all I could do for them.

Hardly enough to merit giving me their lives.

I'm sure they realize that, too.

They're fully aware they were allowed to live, but not forgiven.

All this means is that the time has finally come to pay the piper, so they're ready to die here.

And all I can do is send them off to their deaths.

So if I don't wanna let their final moments go to waste, I gotta make sure I don't lose, so I can pay them back for trusting a shitty commander like me!

I strike at the hero with everything I have.

The momentum of my horse, the strength of my body, and most of all, the intensity of our feelings are all behind this blow.

I have to win!

But in spite of my immense resolve, the hero blocks my blow.

“Tch!”

A part of me was hoping this attack might do it, but I knew it wasn't gonna be that easy!

But since he blocked my first attack the same way, I wasn't really expecting it to work.

I'm just getting started!

“Take this!”

I swing down with my sword from atop my horse.

The hero raises his own sword to parry the heavy strike coming from above.

Our blades clash, and both get knocked away.

Since I have a height advantage, the balance of power is tipped in my favor for the moment.

A downward swing has the help of gravity, while the hero has to use that much more strength to raise his sword.

And yet, we're still evenly matched.

That just goes to show that the hero's stats are higher than mine.

But I won't back down. I can't.

Not physically, and not emotionally.

If I back down here, we all lose.

The momentum of my sword threatens to drag my body backward, but I forcibly resist.

I hear a crack from the arm that's holding the sword in place, but I gnash my teeth and bear it, then swing down at the hero again.

The hero pulls his sword back, too, matching it against mine.

“Dammit!”

My blade clashes against the hero's again.

I'm not done yet!

From there, I launch right into a barrage of attacks.

It's just an artless onslaught of brute strength, technique be damned.

But in a proper sword fight, I'd probably be the one to lose.

I've gotta push through with sheer strength!

Our swords clash twice, then three times, but he isn't giving in.

“Nnngh!”

In fact, I’m the one who’s having trouble keeping up with the hero’s sword.

Each time our blades meet, slowly but surely, my sword gets a little slower.

If the duel keeps up like this, I’m in trouble.

Disaster is bearing down on me.

“Hiyah!”

Then, with a shout, the hero strikes hard enough to knock my sword aside.

I swing it back too late and without enough strength.

The hero doesn’t miss that chance.

He raises his sword and levels it at me while I’m still recovering.

I don’t have enough time to get my own blade back into position.

Am I screwed?!

Suddenly, my horse flips around, shifting me over.

Behind me, I hear a loud, dull sound.

“Huh?!”

Losing my balance, I pitch forward off my horse.

I manage to safely roll across the ground two or three times, then spring back up to my feet with the momentum and spin around.

In front of me is my beloved horse, missing a back leg, collapsed on the ground.

“No...”

I can guess right away what happened.

My dear companion protected me and willingly took the hero's blow.

A horse's legs are its lifeline. Losing even one of them is the same as accepting death.

Someone with high-level Healing Magic might be able to save my horse, but a glance at the vast amount of blood gushing from the wound tells me all too clearly that no healer would get here in time.

"...Sorry! And thank you!"

That's all I can say before I turn back to the hero.

I raised that horse from the very moment his mother gave birth to him.

He's my partner who's been with me longer than any of the soldiers in the Seventh Army, or even my old comrades in the Fourth.

And he gave his life to protect me.

So I have to make sure his last act of loyalty wasn't in vain.

Grieving will have to wait.

Right now, I need to focus on fighting the hero with everything I've got!

"Aaaaargh!"

Bellowing, I charge toward the hero.

My exchange with my horse lasted only a few seconds.

The hero's sword is still low after cutting down my horse.

I know that doesn't mean he's defenseless, though. After our fight so far, I'm well aware that he isn't that easy an opponent.

The kid specializes in magic, yet he outclasses me in close combat, too.

But I can't back down now!

The fate of the Seventh Army, of the demon race—it all rests on my shoulders!

For the Seventh Army soldiers who've already died in this battle and my beloved horse.

For the rebels who died before this fight, like Warkis, and the poor folks who tried to flee from the Demon Lord's tyrannical rule, and those who lost their lives before they could even try to do so.

For everyone who was forced to attempt the impossible because of that awful Demon Lord and died in despair.

And that's not all.

See, I know how hard guys like my brother and Agner were working before that Demon Lord appeared, wearing themselves down to the bone to try to help the demon race recover from its tattered state.

I grew up watching my older brother devote himself to civil service, barely even pausing to sleep.

And after all that effort, here we are.

I'm not gonna let my brother's efforts be for nothing!

My brother, Agner, and then there's...

In the back of my mind, I see White, always lurking behind that nasty Demon Lord.

I can't lose, dammit. I just can't!

“Huff... argh!”

I take a deep breath, then let it all out with another full-body attack.

The hero parries it easily, of course.

I'm not done yet!

Pulling back my sword, I change the angle and go in for another swing right away.

He blocks and blocks again. Must go on! Can't stop!

I won't let up until I've used every shred of strength in my body!

"!!"

Next thing I know, I'm holding my breath, and half my vision has gone cloudy.

I've lost sight of everything but the hero, following his sword with my eyes.

<Proficiency has reached the required level.

Skill [Thought Acceleration LV 4] has become [Thought Acceleration LV 5].>

Skills work in mysterious ways; for some reason, they go up in real battle like this far more easily than during training.

Some say that the tension of being on the verge of death promotes growth, and it's especially obvious when you're fighting someone who's stronger than you.

Sometimes, that growth can even turn the tides of the battle.

But thanks to my newly leveled-up Thought Acceleration skill, I can see the hero's movements all too clearly.

It's obvious he can tell how I'll attack before I even begin!

The growth I just experienced only makes the difference in our abilities even clearer.

I'm frantically swinging my sword with nothing else in my mind or vision, but the hero can see through my every move. He's just waiting for me to let my guard slip!

I can't reach him!

Even after all this!

But I can't lose!

How much do you think we sacrificed to get this far?!

And yet, and yet!

Though my insides have gone rigid with tension, my breath starts heaving again.

Gulps of the burned air of the battlefield come flooding in, scorching my lungs.

I feel my sword swings slowing, my movements dulling, my strength failing.

I've reached the limits of my exhaustion.

"Aaaaaagh!"

I push all that back down with sheer force of will and keep on attacking.

But...

"That still won't work."

"Huh?"

My sword gets knocked aside.

Unable to withstand the momentum, I stumble backward along with it.

Immediately, I'm met with a barrage of missiles made of light.

The hero's Light Magic, I realize—just as the powerful attack barrels into me.

"Guh! Urgh?!"

There was no time to dodge or block or even to think.

So this is how far apart the hero and I are in strength?!

I get blown backward, tumbling along the ground, and land on my hands and knees.

But this isn't the end. It can't be!

"Not yet..."

I use skills to heal my wounds.

But I can feel the strength draining from my body in the process.

My wounds are healed, but I barely have any stamina left to fight.

"You shouldn't push yourself any further. Surely, by now you see how much stronger I am."

Seems like the hero can tell what state I'm in, too.

"I haven't lost yet, dammit! If I crawl home like this, I won't be able to face my brother!"

Not just him.

I'd be failing the entire demon race!

"If you have siblings, isn't that all the more reason to survive? Withdraw your troops. We won't chase you down."

...This damn bastard!

If it was that easy, there wouldn't be a problem!

"We can't withdraw, dammit!"

I stand up and charge again.

The rational part of my brain is screaming that I can't win this battle.

I know that!

The hero is just too strong.

But still! I've gotta try and wear down at least a little of his magic and stamina!

Even if I can't win, I've gotta believe wearing him down might make enough of a difference for Agner to beat him!

My sword gets batted aside easily, and another shot of light flies toward me.

It's the same way I went down a minute ago.

But knowing that doesn't mean I can do anything about it.

I hit the ground again.

"Not... yet..."

I try to stand up again, but the hero drives his sword into the earth right before my eyes.

If it was just a little closer, it would've gone straight through my neck.

"Don't stand up again."

He's not letting me move.

The hero's words contained an obvious threat: If I try to get up, he's going to cut me down.

"You're not the only one with burdens to bear."

Despite his youth, his words carry serious weight.

This should be obvious, but just as we're fighting for the fate of the demon race, the hero is fighting for humanity.

He's here carrying the same feelings and determination that I have.

If we both have equally strong emotions, then this outcome is purely the result of the difference in our strengths.

My feelings aren't enough to change things if the enemy's resolve is just as strong.

"Damn... it all...!"

My fingers dig into the dirt.

I want to stand up, but I can't.

Why can't I be stronger?!

Strong enough to beat the hero!

To beat the Demon Lord!

"I don't know what's driving you to fight, of course. I'm sure you have reasons I can't begin to understand. But if you demons insist on disrupting the peace with humanity, then I will fight with the determination to protect my kind."

The hero's hand grips his sword tightly.

"Why?" An edge of anger creeps into his voice. "Why did you have to start a war?! Why do you keep forcing us to fight?!"

At that, my own anger boils over.

It's not like we're fighting because we want to, either!

"Because if we don't, we're all gonna get killed!"

"Huh?"

The hero looks surprised by my answer, gaping at me with an expression that doesn't belong on the battlefield.

Somehow, that just pisses me off even more. My rage takes over, and I start shouting.

"It's the Demon Lord! She says she's gonna wipe us all out if we don't fight the humans and win!"

"The Demon Lord?"

"Yeah, that's right, dammit! Everything's gone all wrong since she showed up! It's not like we wanna fight, either, y'know! But if we don't, we'll all be killed! The demons will be done for! Damn it all! Why?! Why's it gotta be like this?! To hell with it all!"

Forgetting about the sword at my throat, I pound my fist against the ground.

My vision blurs with tears.

It's humiliating, but I'm sure I'm gonna die here anyway.

A guy oughtta be able to bawl his eyes out as much as he damn pleases in his final moments.

"...So if the Demon Lord was defeated, this war would end?"

"Hunh?! Yeah, if that were even possible!"

When I recklessly blurt out an answer to the hero's question, he pulls his sword from the ground.

"Well, I guess I'll go bring down the Demon Lord, then."

I can't help but stare dumbly at the hero in response to that casual declaration.

"...Huh?"

"If the Demon Lord is the cause of the war, then all I have to do is defeat her. Besides..." He pauses for a moment. "It's the hero's duty to defeat the Demon Lord, isn't it?"

His tone is half-joking, but his eyes look serious.

The hero can say that so confidently only because he doesn't know how strong the Demon Lord is.

...But is that really the case, though?

Truth is, I don't really know how strong she is, either.

All I know is she's gotta be way, way stronger than I am.

But the hero here is way stronger than I am, too.

...Does that mean he might be able to beat her?

Really?

'Cause if so...

Suddenly, the ground shakes.

A chill runs down my spine.

There's something in the air, something more staggering than I've ever felt before, something strong enough that it might actually crush me.

"Wh-what the hell...?"

I can't stop my body from shaking.

This... this can't be real.

Even the hero widens his eyes and stares over my shoulder.

I don't dare turn around.

But I know I don't have any choice.

As I slowly look over my shoulder, I see the answer to my question.

It's an unbelievably giant monster.

Its eight legs bear deep into the ground, and eight eyes leer down at us from far above.

I know what this is.



I've never seen one in person before, but everyone's heard of this walking natural disaster. It's the stuff of fairy tales and nightmares.

And its name is the queen taratect.

In terms of the danger rankings humans give to monsters, it's a legendary-class monster, the sort of catastrophe that no amount of humans could ever hope to defeat.

How did something like that just appear out of nowhere?!

In spite of my confusion, the queen taratect is already moving.

It aims its mouth toward Fort Kusorion, and the world suddenly turns sideways.

At first, I can't tell what just happened.

Or maybe I simply don't want to.

Next thing I know, a whole chunk of Fort Kusorion is just... gone.

Along with all the Seventh Army soldiers who were attacking it.

"Wh... at..."

A murmur of disbelief escapes my mouth.

I'm too confused to think straight.

But things are only getting faster.

The queen taratect starts moving forward.

It's headed straight toward Fort Kusorion—or rather, what's left of it.

But there are still plenty of humans left there.

Most of them are standing atop the ruined fort, staring at the queen taratect in shock just like me.

"Run!"

Suddenly, a voice shouts from close by, echoing across the hushed battlefield.

"I'll buy some time! Run away!"

With that, the hero starts sprinting toward the queen taratect.

Is he stupid or something...?

It should be obvious at a glance that nobody's gonna be able to beat that thing!

But he's still fearlessly charging toward the giant monster, while all I can do is stare.

I'm so stunned that I haven't even managed to get up.

Except someone is standing at my side.

I notice the feet first, then look up to see White, the Tenth Army Commander.

I barely know anything about her, her strength, or her abilities—aside from the fact that she's deeply connected to the Demon Lord, of course.

But I do know one thing about her: she can use Space Magic.

The queen taratect's sudden appearance... White's Space Magic.

The two click together in my mind.

"Don't tell me *you* summoned that thing?"

Shouting despite myself, I jump to my feet and move toward her.

Looking startled by my attitude, she leans away.

Space Magic requires a huge amount of skill points to acquire—enough that you'd have to give up on learning anything else.

Most Space Magic users don't have any other high-level skills; they rarely have any other skills at all, for that matter.

In other words, Space Magic is probably White's only specialty.

It's not that I don't know her other abilities; she simply doesn't have any.

She's probably no stronger in battle than the average person.

I'm guessing she was made a commander because Space Magic is so useful and valuable, but there's no way she should be on such a dangerous battlefield.

Besides, White's Tenth Army itself plays more of a supporting role.

I don't know what they do or how they do it, but they're probably the Demon Lord's intelligence-gathering force.

White must use her Space Magic to send them to other areas to collect information.

The Tenth Army's assignments and where they've been deployed for this part of the war haven't been shared, which only further proves my theory: They only work behind the scenes.

So why is the commander of a noncombat unit here all alone?!

Oh, I'll tell ya why!

Because she was forced to teleport that queen taratect here!

On the Demon Lord's orders!

She's gotta be out of her mind to send a powerless noncombatant like White to bring that beast here!

"You idiot! What if you die out here, huh?!"

White tilts her head at me, as if she has no clue what I'm talking about.

Her unconcerned attitude just makes me even angrier.

In order to teleport something, the caster has to have a hand on it.

In other words, White must've been touching the queen taratect.

You're telling me she came so close to that thing?!

One wrong move and she would've been dead meat for sure.

A little lady this delicate could probably get blown into next week if that thing even moved a muscle!

"Why the hell didn't you refuse such a dangerous mission?!"

Looking even more confused, White puts her hand to her forehead in a thinking pose.

There's nothing to think about here!

You're really gonna put your life on the line so easily just 'cause it's for the Demon Lord?!

She's always like this, dammit.

I got no idea what the relationship is between the two of them, but everything this girl does is for the Demon Lord's sake.

That blasted Demon Lord...!

How the hell did White wind up working for the likes of her?!

And of her own free will!

I don't get it, but I'm sure she wouldn't say a word even if I complained about it.

"Dammit!"

I curse to vent my frustration before turning on my heel.

"You get outta here right now!"

Even that damn Demon Lord can't control a nightmare like the queen taratect. It's impossible.

She must've just used White to bring a wild queen taratect to the battlefield!

Which means it's gonna attack anything in its path.

Sure, it destroyed a big chunk of Fort Kusorion, but it also blasted a bunch of my

Seventh Army soldiers in the process.

This thing can't tell the damn difference between an ally and an enemy.

I gotta gather up the surviving Seventh Army guys and get them outta here, stat.

...If it's even possible, that is.

Am I really gonna be able to get away from that monster in one piece?

“Bloe.”

As I head to collect my soldiers, White calls out and stops me.

...I think that's the first time I've heard her say my name.

“What is it?”

“Retreat.”

White reaches out her hand toward me.

No way... Does she want me to teleport away with her?

“...I appreciate the thought, but ‘fraid I can’t do that.”

The woman I've got a thing for is offering me her hand.

But unfortunately, I can't accept it.

“A commander can't run away before his troops do, yeah?”

I've got a responsibility to lead my surviving soldiers.

“Go ahead without me. I'll be right behind ya.”

With that, I break into a run without waiting to hear her answer.

There aren't any enemies close by us, so I'm sure she can get away safely with Teleport.

I've gotta gather up my guys and get them outta here.

...I can't die like this, dammit.

Losing to the hero's one thing, but there's no way I'm gonna let myself get stomped to death by a damn queen taratect!

I'll make it back alive—I swear!

And then I'm gonna punch the Demon Lord's lights out.

No matter what happens, I refuse to do as she says anymore.

I'll show her what true resistance looks like.

Just like that hero who went barreling toward the queen taratect, knowing full well he can't win!

First things first, though! I gotta survive and get outta here!

Steadying my resolve, I step forward to run toward the ruins of Fort Kusorion.

BRRRRRING!

But then a strange sound from beside me stops me in my tracks.

What the...?



Please answer!

With a silent prayer, I hold the magic tool called a “smartphone” to my ear.

This small, slate-shaped magic tool is a communication device the Demon Lord gave to each commander.

It allows you to talk to someone with Telepathy from much farther away than any normal magic tool, or so I’m told.

And right now, I’m using it to try to call my younger brother, Bloe.

Yes, it’s partly because the Demon Lord ordered me to do so, but most of all, it’s out of concern for his safety.

Trying to keep my fraying emotions in check, I remember the conversation with the Demon Lord and Lady White from just moments ago.

All eyes were on the image displayed by one of the “monitors.”

It showed the battle at Fort Kusorion and Bloe’s imminent defeat.

“Well, that’s no good.”

The Demon Lord’s detached observation pierced my chest.

Bloe was fighting the hero, and it was clear at a glance that he was losing.

Anyone could tell that his defeat was simply a matter of time.

And that defeat would undoubtedly mean his death.

The thought made my heart hammer in my chest in alarm.

"Oh? Good timing, White."

I didn't notice right away due to my distress, but White had teleported back into the room.

"Kinda looks like Bloe's gonna die at this rate," the Demon Lord remarked to her lightly.

To me, the death of my younger brother would be a crippling blow.

But it was clear from the Demon Lord's tone that his death would mean little to her.

I wondered if there was any way to turn the tables, but watching the battlefield from afar, there was nothing I could do.

Nearby, Sir Agner was locked in battle with the hero's comrades, so it was doubtful that he would be able to rush to Bloe's aide.

"Hrmmm. I thought Agner would be able to hold his own against the hero, but maybe I was giving him too much credit?"

"Agner's fighting hard. The hero's party is just really strong."

For a moment, I couldn't tell who had spoken.

Only belatedly did I realize that Lady White had spoken on Sir Agner's behalf.

"Wha—?... Whoa, I thought I was hearing things. White, did you just speak up for Agner or what?"

The Demon Lord seemed just as startled as I was.

Lady White hardly ever opens her mouth, so of course it was a surprise.

On the rare occasion she does speak, it's usually to utter a single word, certainly never a sentence or two like the ones she just clearly stated.

I'd never even heard her speak for so long.

At the Demon Lord's inquiry, White fell silent again.

"Huh. So that's what you're into, huh? The fatherly type?"

The Demon Lord's expression looked conflicted.

White quickly shook her head, her hair whipping around violently.

Evidently, that was not what she'd meant.

"I know, I know. It was just a joke."

The Demon Lord grinned innocently.

In that moment, she looked like nothing more than a little girl teasing her friend.

You would never imagine that she's a demon lord intent on bringing about the destruction of the demon race.

But the smile quickly vanished, her eyes narrowing.

Following her gaze, I immediately noticed that Bloe has been brought to his knees by the hero, on the brink of his own demise.

"Bloe?!"

I cried out before I could stop myself.

But instead of taking Bloe's life right away, the hero was talking to him.

"Well, I guess I'll go bring down the Demon Lord, then."

"...Huh?"

"If the Demon Lord is the cause of the war, then all I have to do is defeat her. Besides... it's the hero's duty to defeat the Demon Lord, isn't it?"

The hero's voice rang out from the monitor.

"Wow. Say it to my face, why don'cha?"

On hearing this, the Demon Lord allowed a wicked smirk to spread across her face.

“Let’s move on to the next phase of the plan, then.”

There was no mercy in her eyes, just the look of a coolheaded destroyer.

As soon as the Demon Lord gave the order, Lady White disappeared via Teleport, and a queen taratect materialized right next to Fort Kusorion.

“Welcome back... Hmm? Where are Agner and Bloe?”

Lady White teleported back in, and the Demon Lord looked at her quizzically.

She had returned alone.

Even though their conversation beforehand had indicated that White was going to retrieve Sir Agner and Bloe.

White simply shook her head.

The monitor showed the hero fighting the queen taratect, so there was no way to tell where Bloe and Agner were or if they were safe.

Once again, my mind filled with dread.

“Huh? What, are they dead?”

In response to the Demon Lord’s question, Lady White shook her head again.

I wished they wouldn’t do things like that.

It was a relief to know he was safe, but that exchange was bad for my heart.

“Hrm? What’s up, then?”

“Agner’s still fighting.”

First, White reported on Sir Agner’s situation, although her “report” was only those

three words.

I didn't know the details, but I suppose that meant Sir Agner was still in the heat of battle, so she wasn't able to retrieve him.

"And Bloe?"

"Evacuating soldiers."

"Aaaah. I bet he told you he'd stay behind to make sure his troops get out safely, huh?"

A nod.

That is exactly the sort of thing Bloe would say, but as his older brother, I wished he had just escaped with Lady White.

"Uh... hoo boy, really? If those two get killed in this mess, what was the point of tagging in the queen taratect in the first place?"

The Demon Lord furrowed her brow in consternation.

...What exactly did she mean by that?

If I took those words at face value, it almost sounded like she had the queen taratect sent in for the sole purpose of rescuing Sir Agner and Bloe.

But would the Demon Lord really do such a thing?

Surely not.

"Hey, Balto."

My thoughts were interrupted by someone calling my name.

"Yes?"

I carefully maintained a calm expression as I responded.

"Would you mind giving Bloe a little call?"

Which brings us to the present.

With a legendary-class monster like the queen taratect on the loose, Bloe could be killed at any moment.

It's a race against time.

If he doesn't answer this call, then he might already be ...

Staving off the rest of that thought, I focus on praying that Bloe will pick up.

"Uh, is this thing on?"

"Bloe!"

My prayers are answered—I hear Bloe's voice.

"Big brother?!"

"Yes, it's me! Bloe, are you all right?!"

"Yeah, somehow."

He sounds better than I expected; I breathe a sigh of relief.

If he can talk like this, that means he's not in the middle of a fight and certainly hasn't already been caught in the crossfire and killed.

Then I need to tell him right away.

"Bloe, Lady White is coming back for you. Leave your soldiers and return with her."

"Hunh?!" Bloe snaps, sounding infuriated. *"You're really tellin' me to just ditch my people and get out of here?"*

"That's right."

In spite of his rage, I can't budge on this point.

My one and only little brother's life is at stake.

"Sorry, brother. I'm not gonna do that, even if it's on your order."

“...I thought you might say that.”

Bloe's always been this way.

He shows his compassion at the strangest times.

That's why his subordinates respect him so much, but there's a time and a place for such things.

“Bloe. The Seventh Army soldiers are former rebels. You shouldn't worry about them.”

“Former, yeah? But they're my soldiers now. That's a more than good enough reason to worry about them.”

Damn it! What about how *I* feel?!

“Even so!... Bloe, *please*. You're far more important to me than any of them...”

“Brother...”

My younger brother's life means much more to me than any soldiers whose faces and names I don't even know.

Perhaps giving my relatives preferential treatment makes me a failure as a leader, but those are my honest feelings.

“...I'm sorry.”

“...You really insist on staying there?”

We're not so distant that I can't figure out what Bloe is apologizing for.

I know exactly what he means, whether I want to or not.

In the end, Bloe can't abandon his soldiers.

"Yeah."

"I see. Then be careful not to get caught in the battle between the queen taratect and the hero. And make sure you come back alive."

No amount of persuasion on my part will change Bloe's mind.

All I can do now is pray for his safety.

"Got it, brother."

"The hero's going to be killed by the queen taratect, I'm sure. Don't do anything as embarrassing as stumbling into the middle of that mess and getting yourself killed, all right?"

I try to keep my tone jocular.

"...Listen, brother."

And yet, Bloe's voice sounds strangely serious.

"What is it?"

"You seem pretty damn sure that the hero's gonna lose to that thing, huh?"

"Hmm? Well, of course." I have no idea what Bloe is doubtful about. "The queen taratect is the strongest monster among Her Majesty's spawn. Surely, even the hero cannot defeat it."

"It's... what?"

Bloe exhales in disbelief.

"Bloe? What's wrong?"

"...Her spawn?"

"Ah... ah, I see. So you didn't know. Yes, the queen taratect was created by the Demon Lord."

I thought I had taught Bloe just how terrifying the Demon Lord is, but evidently, I never mentioned that she rules over the entire monster race of taratects.

That explains why Bloe seems so shocked.

“...Brother.”

“What is it?”

“...If it’s her spawn, does that mean the Demon Lord herself is even stronger than the queen taratect?”

“Of course,” I respond instantly.

With skills like Creature Training, it is possible to control a monster stronger than the user in certain cases.

But Kin Control is different.

In that case, the controller is always stronger than the spawn being controlled.

The moment the kin becomes stronger than the controller, the effects of Kin Control no longer apply, so it’s impossible that the Demon Lord’s kin could be stronger than her.

“...Ha! So that’s how it is!”

I can tell from the note of despair in Bloe’s voice that he finally understands just how terrifying the Demon Lord is.

“You finally understand?”

“Yeah, unfortunately. Damn it all!”

Bloe roars in frustration.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

I really do mean that.

If he finally sees how strong the Demon Lord is, then perhaps his attitude will improve a little.

"The hero said something about defeating the Demon Lord, but such a thing is impossible. Her Majesty's strength is far beyond comparison to even the queen taratect."

I doubt the hero will even be able to beat that giant monster.

Despite his bravado, he'll die before he ever even reaches the Demon Lord.

"...So there's no choice but to obey the Demon Lord, huh?"

"That is our only option. Which is why we're fighting now."

This is the only path left to the demon race.

Everything, including the fate of the demon race, rests on this battle.

But right now, I'm more worried about Bloe than the entire demon race combined.

"Bloe. Just make sure getting yourself back alive is your top priority. Understood?"

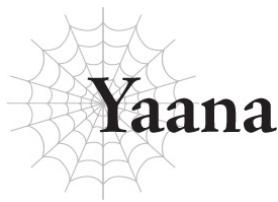
"Yeah. I'll give it my best shot."

Something about that response fills me with anxiety.

"All right, I better get going."

"Ah, wait! Bloe?! Bloe!"

I try calling out his name, but I don't hear even a hint of Bloe's voice in response.



There's a reason it's called *falling* in love.

"I see. So the Demon Lord is saying she has no more use for me, then..."

As I stare in shock at the queen taratect that suddenly appeared, I hear a quiet mutter come from Agner, the enemy commander we've been fighting.

Agner is extremely powerful.

He's skilled enough to cross blades with Jeskan while still keeping up a hail of magic aimed at Hawkin and me in the back.

That forces Hyrinco to protect us, which leaves Jeskan on his own.

Jeskan has managed to survive with help from my Healing Magic, but even if I can cure his wounds, I can't restore his stamina.

He's slowly getting worn down, so Hawkin has been using various tools to try to keep Agner on his toes, but even that hasn't been enough to tip things in our favor.

We don't have our main attacker, Julius, but it's still four-on-one. Yet, somehow, we're barely a match for him.

In fact, he's the one wearing us down.

I've never fought anyone so strong before.

I know some powerful people like Julius and his teacher, Elder Ronandt, but we've never been on opposing sides.

This is the first time I've ever been in a fight to the death with someone like that.

And it's terrifying.

Far worse than any fight with a monster.

In those situations, I never lost heart because Julius was there.

So if we held out long enough this time for Julius to come back, we could still win.

That was the only thought that kept me going all this time.

But now this...

The queen taratect's breath attack lands a direct hit on Fort Kusorion.

Nothing remains in its wake.

Nothing and no one...

Not the sturdy outer wall, the fort itself behind it, the people who were defending it, or even the people who were attacking it...

"This can't be real..."

My own voice sounds distant, as if it belongs to someone else.

I've never seen anything like this before.

Whether we're fighting monsters or people, we always fight to win.

No matter how hard the battle, we've always been able to see a path that leads to victory.

But this time, I can't even envision us defeating that thing.

If the enemy is that much more overwhelmingly powerful, it's not even a fight anymore.

It's a slaughter.

Certainly, I've seen many a slaughter before.

Namely, at the hands of Julius himself.

Monsters and people alike have been slaughtered by the hero.

They did everything they could to resist, of course.

But some things just aren't possible.

There are opponents who simply can't be defeated.

And it's all too painfully obvious that the queen taratect before my eyes is one such enemy who could never be defeated.

What we're doing is fighting, not wholesale destruction.

But in the face of such destructive power that can blow away an entire fort, no amount of humans could ever make a difference.

I can heal the injured, but I can't revive someone who's been obliterated without even leaving a trace.

Jeskan is talented with a multitude of weapons, but given their size, he wouldn't be able to leave anything more than a scratch on that giant creature.

No matter how much money Hawkin spent on any number of items, he definitely couldn't destroy a fort.

And Hyrince's shield would be annihilated along with Hyrince himself.

So this is a legendary-class monster.

So this is despair.

I'm amazed I'm still standing.

Suddenly, I notice the dull sound of metal clashing nearby.

"Don't just stand there spacing out!"

Hyrince scolds me, and I feel like my eyes have suddenly been opened.

I can't believe I got scolded by *him*!

"I am not spacing out!"

"Get to work, then!"

I snap at him automatically, but he yells back in a strained voice.

His tone tells me that things are even worse than I realized.

That instinctual thrum of danger immediately brings me back to my senses.

Then I realize that right nearby, Hyrince is locked shield to sword with Agner.

"Whaaa—?!"

They're still fighting in this situation?!

What? Ah, oh dear!

Jeskan is on the ground, covered in blood!

Agner must have hit him while I was still in shock.

"Boooss!"

"Idiot! Stay back!"

Hawkin starts to run toward Jeskan, but Agner's eyes swivel over to him, away from Hyrince.

If he jumps in now, he'll be killed!

"Hawkin, no!"

Hawkin doesn't heed our warnings and runs forward.

Immediately, Agner leaps away from Hyrince and closes in on Hawkin.

"Guh?!"

Hawkin has his knife ready, but if even Jeskan was barely able to keep up with Agner's swordsmanship, there's no way Hawkin will be able to block him.

Hyrince chases after Agner, but he's not going to catch up in time.

It's down to me!

I weave Light Magic and shoot it toward Agner right away!

But Agner apparently saw it coming, and he counters it with Dark Magic.

The moment our spells are expended, Agner slashes down at Hawkin.

“Gwah?!”

The sword cuts clean through the knife and bites deep into Hawkin.

The knife splits apart like a stick, and a wide gash opens up on Hawkin's body.

“Gotcha!”

“Hngh?!”

White smoke billows out of Hawkin's gaping wound, straight toward Agner.

Engulfed in the smoke, Agner closes his stinging eyes.

There must've been blinding ash in Hawkin's armor!

As Agner stumbles back, Hyrince catches up to him and strikes him hard with his shield.

Hyrince's shield has high defense abilities, and it's incredibly heavy, so it makes a good blunt weapon, too.

And across from Hyrince, Jeskan has dragged himself to his feet, despite his wounds, and run over with his ax.

This wasn't planned, but since the blinding ash is working, it's a perfectly timed pincer attack.

Surely, even Agner won't be able to dodge or defend against this!

“Gaaah!”

With a roar, Agner catches Hyrince's shield with his bare hand and Jeskan's with his sword.

He blocked them both?!

But...!

“Ngh?!”

My Light Magic lands a direct hit on his back.

His posture crumbles, and Hyrince and Jeskan both attack again without missing a beat.

This time for sure...!

As soon as I think that, though, there's a burst of darkness.

Huh?! How is this possible?!

Agner set off Dark Magic on the spot, sending himself as well as Hyrince and Jeskan flying.

“Aaargh!”

Hawkin was nearby, so he gets knocked back, too, rolling across the ground.

It looks like Hyrince managed to block with his shield just in time, but Jeskan was already gravely wounded, so he's crumpled on the ground after getting hit by the explosive force head-on.

If I don't heal him right away, his life will be in danger!

And yet, Agner is still standing.

He was in the very heart of the explosion, so he took the brunt of the impact, yet he

hasn't gone down.

Agner sustained a fair amount of injuries himself in our fierce battle before the queen taratect appeared, and that's on top of his self-destructive spell just now.

He must be terribly wounded, too. I can see from here that he is bleeding in several places.

And yet, his wide-open eyes, despite being bloodshot from the smoke, are just as full of the will to fight as ever.

Hyrince immediately moves between Agner and me, sword and shield at the ready.

I can't heal Jeskan unless we get through Agner somehow.

What should I do?!

Then I see Hawkin moving out of the corner of my eye.

He has a potion in his hand and is sneaking over to Jeskan so that Agner won't see him.

I don't know if a potion will be enough to heal Jeskan's wounds, but right now I have no choice but to trust Hawkin.

All I can do is keep Agner's attention over here.

"Why...?"

Without thinking, I speak in a quavering voice.

But it's not just an act; it's how I really feel.

I don't understand why we have to do this right now!

Doesn't he see the enormous thing behind us?!

"It is a hero's job to defeat the Demon Lord, I'm told."

Agner suddenly smiles.

“What?”

“That is what the little hero proclaimed, at least.”

I’m confused. Is he talking about Julius?

Does that mean that even while he was fighting the four of us, Agner was monitoring Julius, too?

What an incredibly powerful man.

And how humiliating, too.

That means that he considered this fight with us nothing more than the opening act before a showdown with the hero.

He fully intended to defeat us and then fight Julius—and he was so confident it would play out that way that he’s been keeping an eye on Julius this whole time.

During his battle with the four of us.

What could possibly be more mortifying?

“Well, there is your answer.”

Heedless of my feelings, Agner continues, nodding toward the queen taratect.

“It’s a statement from the Demon Lord. *Go ahead and try, if you think you can.* Heh...”

He sounds amused, and yet somehow, his smile is a little sad.

The queen taratect is a message from the Demon Lord, telling Julius to go ahead and try to win?

That almost makes it sound like the queen taratect *is* the Demon Lord...

“Are you saying *that’s* the Demon Lord?”

“Surely not,” Agner replies dismissively.

Of course it isn't.

A monster like that could never be the Demon Lord...

"It's just one of her spawn."

...Huh?

"Naturally, the Demon Lord herself is far stronger."

.....What?

"Now then, hero. If you cannot even defeat that creature, then you are a far cry from challenging the Demon Lord."

Agner chuckles, just as a loud roar goes up in the direction he's been looking.

"Julius?!"

That sound announced the start of the battle between the queen taratect and Julius.

"That idiot!"

Hyrince shouts in a panic.

I can't blame him. It's too reckless to try and take on a monster like that, even for Julius!

"So he intends to accept the challenge? I suppose that is the course of action befitting a hero. But I cannot say it is a wise decision."

Agner's observation is exactly right.

"But I must admit, I respect his determination."

For a moment, Agner wears a gentle smile unlike any expression I've seen on him thus far.

Seconds later, though, that expression disappears, replaced with one of sympathy.

"But he cannot defeat the Demon Lord. No one can."

His words almost sound like they're based on experience.

...I remember what he murmured earlier: "*So the Demon Lord is saying she is through with me, then...*"

Could it be?

"Have you challenged the Demon Lord before?"

"The Demon Lord is the strongest of all demons. That is all there is to it."

Though he didn't directly answer the question, his bitter smile seems like a confession that he was once defeated by the Demon Lord in the past.

"So what did you mean when you said she '*has no more use for you*'?"

I blurt out the question before I can stop myself.

"Exactly what it sounds like. That thing appeared while we were still in the midst of battle. In other words, the Demon Lord has decided to bury you and me all at once."

I didn't expect him to answer, but he readily explains his reasoning.

Agner has been abandoned by the Demon Lord.

"Then why are you still fighting?!"

If his leader is casting him aside, why would he bother to keep fighting us?

He no longer has any reason to do such a thing.

"For the sake of the demon race, of course."

"But hasn't the Demon Lord abandoned you?!"

"Your point being?"

"Huh?"

I don't understand Agner at all.

"I have dedicated my life to the Demon Lord because I determined that was the only way to help demonkind. To throw me aside or destroy me is the Demon Lord's prerogative. I cannot deny her that."

That way of thinking and that unshakable resolve make me shudder.

We're speaking the same language, but I still can't comprehend his words.

It's impossible for me to imagine being so defeated that you'd allow your ruler to kill you.

So that means Agner is willing to throw away his own life on this battlefield?

"I was ordered to conquer Fort Kusorion and to defeat the hero. So I must not stop fighting until I accomplish those goals."

Agner raises his sword again.

"Now, I believe I have let you buy more than enough time."

I gasp.

Looking behind him, I see that Hawkin has reached Jeskan and used the potion on him.

But Jeskan's still not in any state to fight.

"And I afforded myself enough time for my own wounds to heal, too."

That makes me realize that, just as we were trying to buy time, he was going along with it to earn himself a respite as well.

He must have an HP Auto-Recovery skill or something that healed his wounds.

It was a temporary truce on the basis that it was mutually beneficial for both parties.

Now that his wounds have healed, Agner's next move will be...

"Hyrince!"

"I know!" Hyrince breaks into a run at the same time as Agner starts moving.

He's going after Hawkin and Jeskan, who's still on the ground!

Agner runs toward the two of them, intending to take them out once and for all.

Hawkin and Jeskan are across from Hyrince and me, with Agner between us.

Which means that since Agner is running at them, his back is toward us.

But...

"I can't catch up!"

Hyrince isn't fast enough to catch Agner. He's not slow, of course, but his stats are geared toward defense.

Besides, Agner has the tactical advantage in terms of basic abilities anyway.

We can see his unprotected back, but we can't catch up.

In that case...!

I shoot a Light Magic spell at his back.

We can't catch up physically, but my magic can!

And yet—Agner dodges to one side without even a backward glance.

?!
How does he keep doing that?!

Does he have eyes in the back of his head?!

Usually, magic is near impossible to avoid.

Even a master of combat would have difficulty dodging something that moves faster than an arrow.

But Agner does so with ease.

It's not humanly possible, though I suppose he's not human.

But he won't be able to dodge this next blow, I'm sure!

Hyrince swings his arm with all his might and hurls his shield.

That shield is more than just plain defense: Sometimes it's a blunt weapon, and at times like these, it becomes a heavy projectile.

Of course, a shield bearer letting go of his shield is practically suicide, so Hyrince rarely resorts to it.

That's what makes it such an unexpected secret weapon.

Just as Agner catches up to Hawkin, the shield flies straight toward his head!

But right as it's about to hit, he leans to the side and deftly avoids it.

How?!

By this point, I'm beginning to suspect Agner might really have a skill that allows him to see behind him.

At the very least, it'd be best to assume that he has a skill that lets him keep track of everything going on around him.

In other words, surprise attacks from behind won't work.

“Rrrgh?!”

But even he wasn't quite able to react in time to a surprise attack from the front.

Hawkin's knife plunges into Agner's leg.

He dodged my magic and Hyrince's shield, but he couldn't also avoid Hawkin's knife on top of that.

“Hawkin?!”

But it comes at a price: Hawkin takes a direct hit from Agner's sword.

Blood flies everywhere.

It's not like last time, when he deliberately took a hit to release the blinding ash.

This time, the sword cuts deep into Hawkin's body.

"...Well played, sir."

Hawkin collapses.

"Dammit!"

Hyrince charges at Agner, but he's already raised his sword, ready to parry.

Without his shield, I doubt Hyrince can keep Agner occupied for long.

"Aaargh!"

But to my surprise, Hyrince bears down on him and makes Agner stumble back.

Still bleeding, Jeskan manages to drag himself to his feet and slash at the staggering Agner with his sword, too.

"Guh?!"

His movements clearly losing their polish, Agner suffers a hit from Jeskan's flaming magic sword.

But that seems to be the last of Jeskan's strength; he collapses back onto the ground.

"Heh! Not bad for a last-ditch effort, eh?"

Even as he falls, Jeskan manages one last grin.

Lying next to him on the ground, Hawkin wears a similar grin.

When I see the knife still gripped in Hawkin's hand, I realize why Agner's movements have suddenly failed him.

It's a magic blade Julius received from Elder Ronandt, imbued with Paralysis and

Lightning attributes.

That must be what's slowing Agner down.

"Finish it now!"

"You got it!"

Jeskan shouts, and Hyrince calls out in response.

His sword strikes Agner as the latter is still staggering from Jeskan's attack.

The blade pierces Agner's chest.

"Ngh! Don't think you've won yet!" Agner bellows.

He instantly mounts a counterattack.

"Huh?!"

Hyrince immediately blocks it with his gauntlet but lets go of his sword in the process.

Agner jumps forward, and Hyrince steps back.

Fortunately, Agner's attack is slowed by the paralysis and his wounds, so it doesn't look like there's much strength left behind it.

Hyrince seems unharmed.

"Gah!"

Agner coughs up blood, but he's still standing.

"How foolish... but I must... still fight..."

He starts to steady himself again.

What incredible persistence.

What is driving him to go so far...?

"For... the demon... race..."

Agner raises his sword.

Hyrince is unarmed, but he braces himself nonetheless.

".....?"

But several moments pass, and Agner still hasn't moved.

Hyrince walks up to him.

"...He's dead."

Agner ran out of strength and died while still standing on his feet.

...What a terrifying foe he was.

We've never faced such a strong opponent with an equally strong force of will.

Even in death, he's still holding his sword at the ready...

Wait, this is no time to be impressed!

"Hawkin! Jeskan! Are you okay?!"

I run over to the two of them on the ground and start using Healing Magic right away.

"*'Okay'* might be a stretch, but I'm alive."

"Same here."

Jeskan and Hawkin respond weakly.

But there are smiles on their faces.

"Well, boss, did I come in handy?"

"You sure did. We only won because of you."

Hawkin grins proudly at Jeskan's words.

It's true; if it weren't for him, we never would've beaten Agner.

The blinding ash and the paralyzing knife. Those were two major openings Hawkin created for us at the risk of his own life.

Those were the keys to our victory.

I'm sure if we had fought him head-on without Hawkin, we would have lost.

"But this is as far as we go."

Jeskan pulls himself up into a sitting position.

"Little Miss, Hyrince, don't worry about us. Just go."

Jeskan points toward the massive queen taratect.

Julius is still fighting over there.

"But what about your injuries?"

"They're a little better thanks to your Healing Magic. We've got potions, too, so we won't die. But we won't be back on the front lines anytime soon. Not me, and not Hawkin."

Of course not.

Their wounds are anything but minor.

In fact, if anything, those injuries are...

"We'll heal ourselves up with potions and get out of here so we don't slow you down. Hyrince... you've got to go get Julius and bring him back."

"Right. I got it. Let's go, Yaana."

"W-wait!"

“Just go already!”

“Yeah, don’t pay us any mind.”

Jeskan shoos us onward with a flap of his hand, and Hawkin smiles and waves weakly, still prone on the ground.

Hyrince grabs my hand and drags me away from them, interrupting my Healing Magic.

“Wait! Hyrince, wait!”

Ignoring my protests, Hyrince keeps moving.

“But Jeskan and Hawkin are...!”

“I know!!”

Hyrince shouts so forcefully that I start to tremble.

“...I know,” he repeats more quietly. “But I can’t just ignore their last wishes.”

Ah...

So Hyrince realizes it, too.

Jeskan and Hawkin are fatally wounded...

Those aren’t the kind of injuries you could heal with a potion.

In fact, they are so serious that even my best Healing Magic might not be able to save them.

As the saint, I’ve been focused on healing for so long that my health assessments on the battlefield are rarely wrong.

Which means that if I used all my strength, I might still be able to save them.

By sending Hyrince and me to Julius anyway, they’re telling us to save Julius instead of them.

Jeskan and Hawkin are both prepared to die for this.

“.....Mmmph!”

I can't stop the tears from falling.

Those two are our precious comrades, dependable guardians, and irreplaceable family.

Though we are all equals in the hero's party, they are the eldest, so they looked after us like father figures.

Since I was raised in a church, they were the closest thing to parents I've ever known.

And now part of my family is going to die.

My body trembles uncontrollably, although it isn't cold outside.

I can't keep my thoughts straight, and my vision grows hazy.

For a moment, I can't tell if this is a nightmare or reality.

But there's no point trying to avoid the truth.

This is really happening.

We've lost two of our beloved comrades.

As the saint, I've encountered death many times before.

I've had patients who died in spite of my healing.

I've taken the lives of our enemies while serving in the hero's party.

But though they were physically close by, those people were still strangers to me.

Somewhere deep down, a part of me believed that would never happen to us.

As long as we had Julius, everything would be fine.

I had entrusted my safety to that assumption.

There had been very few fights that posed a serious threat to the hero Julius's life, so I believed such a fight would never come.

Julius himself was confident that day would come someday, which is why I desperately prayed that it wouldn't.

There were a few close calls, like the battles with the greater wyrm or the earth spirit, but we had never encountered a fight that spelled certain doom before.

So I was sure this battle would be fine, too.

At least, that was what I wanted to believe.

But now, Jeskan and Hawkin...

And at this very moment, Julius is fighting the queen taratect.

It's a legendary-class monster, the same danger level as the phoenix that once gravely injured Hyrinice.

Even Julius can't defeat a monster like that.

He'll die.

The image of Julius lying lifeless on the ground flashes across my mind.

I'm scared.

No, no, no, no!

Julius can't die! I'm scared!

After losing Jeskan and Hawkin, I can't possibly bear to lose Julius, too!

I put more strength into my faltering footsteps and keep running as Hyrinice pulls my hand along.

This is no time to look away from reality.

I have to do something.

I have to save Julius.

That's the moment Julius comes into view.

“...Ah?!”

My breath catches in my throat.

Julius is covered in wounds, his armor in tatters.

But he's still holding his sword at the ready, squaring off against the queen taratect.

He's alive.

Part of me is relieved, but his dire state makes me worry that he won't be for long.

On the other hand, the queen taratect still looks completely healthy.

I can't spot a single serious scratch on it, and its massive form is just as terrifying as when it first appeared.

As I look on, the queen taratect raises one of its front legs and brings it down toward Julius.

“Julius?!”

My cry is so completely drowned out by the ensuing boom that it doesn't even reach my own ears.

Just a single step.

It pierces the very earth, sending up a cascade of dirt and dust.

Julius tumbles across the ground.

It wasn't a direct hit—Julius dodged the queen taratect's leg.

But the shock waves alone are enough to send a human flying.

A chill runs down my spine as Julius tumbles to a halt.

I can't help worrying that he might never get up again.

Luckily, Julius stands right away, so my fears were for nothing this time.

But if he keeps fighting that queen taratect, I can only assume that worry will become a reality sooner rather than later.

This isn't a fight—it's a slaughter.

Julius doesn't have even the slightest chance of winning. The outcome was clear from the start.

I have to find a way to change that.

"Julius! Get back!"

"?! Hyrince?! Yaana?!"

Hyrince steps in front of Julius and readies his shield.

Normally, taking shelter behind that shield is deeply reassuring, but against the queen taratect, it's hardly any better than a thin wooden plank.

I stand next to Julius and start healing him immediately.

"You can't be here! Both of you, get to safety right now!"

"Idiot! You're the one who needs to run! I'll buy some time! Yaana, grab that idiot and get out of here!"

"Ah!... All right!"

I hesitate for a moment, but in the end, I agree to Hyrince's command.

He said he'll buy time, but I don't see how Hyrince could possibly slow down the queen taratect.

But he's still willingly putting his life on the line to give us a chance.

I can't afford to waste valuable seconds wondering whether it's the right choice.

We're the hero's party.

Our top priority has to be the life of the hero, Julius.

Even beyond that official sense of duty, though, all of us want Julius to live.

Jeskan and Hawkin even sent us to save Julius at the cost of their own healing.

I can't let their sacrifice go to waste.

And I have to do it for Hyrinse, too, as he's putting himself at risk right now to buy time.

"Julius! Let's go!"

I grab Julius's hand, but he doesn't move.

"I can't run away now!"

With that, he turns to face the queen taratect again.

It's impossible. And insane.

Anyone can see that there's no way to defeat that thing.

It wouldn't even be a fight.

Why would you knowingly run toward your death?

That would be the same as dying in vain.

"Julius! You have to run!"

"No! I'm the hero! I can't run away!"

"It's *because* you're the hero that you have to run! You've got to survive!"

We don't have time to waste on this.

Even as that thought flashes across my mind, Hyrinice disappears from before my eyes.

Moments later, a gust of wind blasts toward us.

I cover my face automatically.

And when the wind dies down and I look forward again, the queen taratect is right in front of us.

“Ah...”

Where is Hyrinice...?

I don't know what happened.

But the queen taratect must have done something, probably swatted him away with its leg.

Which might mean that Hyrinice took the hit for us and got blown away.

Is Hyrinice all right?

I'm worried about him, but first I have to do something about the situation at hand.

Julius is still trying to press forward.

I use all my strength to pull on his hand, still gripped in mine.

When I first met Julius, my initial feelings were of sympathy.

Almost like I was recognizing someone of my own kind.

As a candidate for sainthood, I underwent training at the church from a young age.

Did I have promise from the beginning? It's hard to say.

I was somewhat talented, but there were plenty of other candidates who excelled more than I did.

But since I was the same age as Julius, I was chosen as the saint over far more qualified candidates.

I never thought I would be chosen, so at first I was thrilled by the unexpected boon.

But I would soon learn what it meant to become the saint over my more talented seniors.

That it meant standing above the other candidates who weren't chosen.

I had to live up to all their expectations.

Soon I realized how much pressure that entailed.

Like me, Julius is under the immense pressure that comes with being the hero, so I instinctively felt a kinship with him.

But during the fight against the human-trafficking organization, I learned just how different it is to be chosen as the hero by the gods, as opposed to being chosen as the saint by other humans.

Julius is a true hero.

He despises evil, seeks justice, and presses onward down his thorny path without hesitation.

And he's not fighting because he feels he has no other choice, like me. He's doing it because it's what he wants to do.

I became the saint because I followed the teachings I grew up with, while Julius became the hero because of who he already was. It may seem the same at a glance, but they could not be more different.

So the next emotion I felt toward him was intense admiration.

The admiration that a fake feels after laying eyes on the genuine article.

If I was with Julius long enough, maybe my artificial sense of justice would become the real thing.

That would make me happy.

Although in truth, the days went by too quickly for me to think about such things.

Spending every waking hour fighting at Julius's side was exhausting and fulfilling.

Because Julius always fights for what's right.

He's always pursuing what he believes in.

Although he might second-guess himself from time to time, Julius always does his absolute best to keep pushing forward with all his might.

I was so busy trying to keep up with him that my head constantly felt like it was spinning.

But staying by his side was also rewarding, because I knew I was doing it all for the people and for Julius.

And somewhere along the way, that admiration became love.

Even I'm not sure when exactly that happened.

There was no dramatic moment where everything changed. I just realized one day that I was in love with Julius.

I always wanted to be with him, to walk beside him.

So I do realize, you know, that Julius doesn't intend to marry anyone.

He knows how I feel, and he won't respond to my feelings.

Isn't that just awful?

Leading me on with no intention of ever returning my feelings is downright cruel.

But I can't hate him for it, because I know he thinks it's a kindness.

Julius is always lamenting his own weakness.

He thinks that if he was stronger, he might be able to save more people.

And because of his so-called weakness, he says he's bound to do something foolish and get himself killed someday.

If Julius was to get married, then he would leave that person heartbroken and alone when that fated time came.

That's why he said he'd never get married.

Which is typical of Julius, I think.

No ordinary person would behave that way.

After all, that way of thinking doesn't leave any room for Julius's own happiness.

If you ask me, Julius is a true hero to a fault.

The hero is humanity's last hope. An agent of good to guide people to happiness. A warrior who keeps fighting for that cause no matter how much it hurts him.

When does Julius himself get to be happy? Never.

He's self-sacrificial by nature.

So he thinks he's going to be the first of us to die.

But... oh, Julius.

Don't you know?

There are so many people who want you to live, who want you to be happy.

Just like you wish for other people's happiness, we're always wishing for yours.

Which is why I want you to live.

I yank on Julius's arm, pulling him behind me.

At that moment, Julius's face is full of shock.

I wonder what my expression looks like right now.

I know I'm no beauty, but I hope my face is glowing in my final moments, at least.

I hope I'm wearing my best smile.

The queen taratect's giant leg bears down on us from above.

Julius, please live.

Be happy.

Ah, but...

Despite myself, there's a part of me that hopes I'll leave a mark on Julius's heart forever.

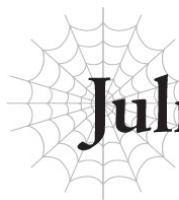
I'm a selfish woman, aren't I?

They call it falling in love because it brings your thoughts and wishes down to new lows.

I'm still falling, lower and lower.

But you know, I'll never regret falling in love with you.





Julius

For every meeting, there is a parting.

My first parting was losing my mother.

She was never especially healthy, but after she gave birth to Shun, her condition rapidly deteriorated until she passed away.

"Is it possible the true queen had a hand in it?"

There were rumors to that effect, but I don't believe my father's first wife would do anything so careless.

I can't exactly call her an ally, but I do have a certain faith in her.

For better or for worse, she is a key figure in our government. She only takes actions that she thinks will benefit the kingdom.

...And to be honest, I don't really need to know the truth about how my mother died.

I just didn't want to hate anyone for it.

I was terribly sad about the loss of my mother, and I didn't want that sadness to turn into hatred for someone else.

Not the true queen, despite the rumors.

And not Shun, who had in a sense been born at the cost of my mother's life.

I didn't want to hate either of them.

Especially Shun. Hating him seemed like it would be rejecting the final proof that my mother lived, and that frightened me.

A hero should never hate someone for personal reasons.

That sort of feeling wouldn't make my mother proud.

I kept on reminding myself of that, and so I was able to simply grieve my mother's death without resenting anyone for it.

If there was one person I was angry with, it was probably myself for not being strong enough.

If only I was stronger, maybe I could have saved my mother.

That feeling has stayed with me ever since.

When I saw the people who lost their families to the human-trafficking organization.

People whose parents were killed by monsters.

The coffin that contained Mr. Tiva's body.

"People live and someday die. We cannot change that. Nor can we choose how we will die. But what we can choose is how we live. It's not how he died that's important but how he carried himself in life. Thinking about what you can do for the dead, what you could've done for the dead, is nothing but a form of arrogance. All the living need do is grieve the dead and remember how they lived."

Those were the words of my teacher, Elder Ronandt.

I constantly find myself wishing that I was stronger, and every time, I remember his words.

Everyone will die someday.

That means there will inevitably be partings.

I'm sure my teacher has experienced far more partings than I have; there's no way to avoid them.

I think he was trying to tell me that I should accept them when they come, instead of dwelling on regrets, and keep on living life to the fullest.

But for me, living my life as best as I can means that I don't want to see someone die before my eyes.

If they're in reach, I want to save them.

In fact, if they're not in reach, I'll find a way to save them anyway.

Even if it means hurting myself in the process.

That's how I want to live my life.

I'm sure my teacher would be angry if he heard me say that.

But I just can't change the way I live.

I'm sorry, Master. I'm probably going to die young.

"Hrm. All right, this is an order from your master. You are forbidden to die before me. Understand? And when I die, you have to cling to my casket and cry even harder than you did today."

Master, I might not be able to obey that order after all.

So if that time comes, you'll have to scold my casket instead.

You stupid apprentice! you'll say.

Yes, I accepted my death long ago.

But... I didn't want to let anyone else die.

That's why I decided that I would be the first.

I swore I would be, and yet...

Before my eyes, Yaana disappears from sight under the queen taratect's leg.

I can't process what I'm seeing.

Yaana was at my side just a second ago.

I can still feel her warmth where she grabbed my arm.

But... but now...

Now I don't see Yaana anymore.

She's gone.

Even though she was right here.

She was here...

Instead, I only see the queen taratect's leg.

Which means Yaana must be under there...

"I have to save her."

My own murmur startles me back to life.

That's right.

Why am I just standing around in shock?

I've got to save Yaana.

It'll be fine. I can still rescue her.

She'll be okay. She has to be!

Falteringly, I try to stagger toward the queen taratect.

"What the hell are you doing?! Snap out of it!"

Then someone grabs my hand from behind.

My head is shoved downward, forcing me to the ground.

The queen taratect's leg passes just above my head.

Another sweeping attack.

Even with my high stats as the hero, a single hit might very well kill me.

Realizing I just narrowly escaped death, I finally start to regain my composure.

“Hyrince?”

“Hey! You finally snapped out of it?!”

It was Hyrince who pushed me down.

He's on the ground, too, having just barely avoided the queen taratect's attack.

His forehead is bleeding, and his breath is ragged.

Even his shield has been bent out of shape, crumpled from the enormous impact it took.

Looking closer, I notice that his left hand is twisted at an unnatural angle.

Hyrince stood in front of the queen taratect to let us get away and took an attack from it head-on.

It looks like he managed to protect himself with the shield, but even then, it did some serious damage.

“Hyrince?! Your arm!”

“No time to worry about that right now! We've gotta get out of here!”

Hyrince pulls himself up with his unbroken right hand and yanks me to my feet by the collar.

“Wait a minute! I have to save Yaana!”

“?!”

As I try to dig my feet in, Hyrince's face twists with despair.

And then he says it.

"Yaana's already dead!"

The undeniable words I can't bear to hear.

It's as if time has stopped.

I must have already known. I just didn't want to admit it.

Yaana... is dead.

The queen taratect... stomped on her... and crushed her to death.

"She gave her life to protect you, so you've got to survive!"

Hyrince grabs my shoulder and pulls hard.

Then he jumps back with me in tow, sending us to the ground again.

The queen taratect's leg whooshes by where we were standing just moments ago.

The same leg that crushed Yaana.

In that instant, something breaks inside me.

"Julius! Can you stand?!"

"Yeah."

I hear a cold voice come out of my mouth, though it doesn't sound like mine.

"Julius?"

"Hyrince, you go on ahead."

"What the hell are you...?"

“I’ve got to kill this thing.”

Hyrince catches his breath at my sudden intensity.

I stand up and raise my sword.

“Julius! This is crazy!”

Hyrince tries to stop me, but it doesn’t matter.

A hero isn’t supposed to hate anyone for personal reasons.

But from this moment on, I’m not fighting as the hero. I’m fighting as Julius Zagan Analeit!

I shove Hyrince back.

Then, just as the queen taratect’s leg comes sweeping sideways again, I duck down and avoid it.

The queen taratect is massive.

Because of that, its movements are clumsy.

It’s insanely fast for its size, but if I know an attack is coming, I can dodge it!

“Julius!”

Hyrince shouts my name from behind me, but I keep pressing forward.

Using Dimensional Maneuvering, I sprint into the sky until I’m right next to the queen taratect’s main body.

I’m aiming for the base of its leg, where its joint is attached.

Its exoskeleton is probably too tough for me to even leave a scratch.

But if I attack the joint...!

CLAAAANG!

But my sword is deflected without mercy.

Forget the exoskeleton—I can't even dent the joint, where it should be weaker.

Why?!

Why am I so powerless?!

I despair at how feeble I am.

But there's no time for that: The queen taratect's massive abdomen is hurtling toward me.

It's trying to crush me with its body!

Given its enormous size, that would be all too easy.

And because of that size, its attack radius is so large that I can't dodge it!

Unable to avoid the queen taratect's body slam, I am pushed down to the ground.

But right before impact, I use Earth Magic to make a cavern just large enough for me to safely escape.

I slide into the opening to avoid getting crushed.

The queen taratect, probably assuming it finally finished me off, stands up again.

I crawl out of the ground and run.

It's strong.

Legendary-class monsters really are horrifying, though I already knew this.

Like the Nightmare of the Labyrinth and the phoenix.

All the legendary-class monsters I've encountered have been gigantic, and this one is no exception.

Our fight so far has made the queen taratect's strength painfully clear.

Most of its power comes purely from its high stats.

Its attacks with its giant legs are simple, but that's more than enough to be a lethal weapon.

And its defense is so high that none of my attacks can touch it.

Simple as the issue is, it limits my options severely.

Essentially, I need an attack that will pierce its defense.

And since my attacks couldn't touch it, in spite of my status as the hero, it's painfully clear how impossible a task that will be.

But I can't back down now.

I won't!

Yes, I know that Yaana's death was my fault.

Because I insisted that I wouldn't run away, Yaana died protecting me.

My stubbornness, my sense of duty as the hero—that's what killed her!

Because I was weak, because I wasn't strong enough!

I know that running away is the best chance to ensure that her sacrifice isn't in vain.

But if I did that, I would never forgive myself.

Yes, I do hate someone.

I hate myself for being helpless.

And I hate this queen taratect for killing Yaana!

"Do you want to use it?"

Just then, there's a voice directly in my head.

Instinctively, my eyes flit to the other sword at my waist.

The voice belongs to the Light Dragon Byaku, who lives within that sword.

The Sword of the Hero.

It's a weapon that only the hero can use, which can apparently defeat any opponent but can be used only once.

Byaku is asking if I want to use that sword now.

"...No."

To be honest, I can't say it isn't a tempting offer.

The queen taratect is a terrifying monster.

It'd be incredibly difficult to fight it on my own and win, but if I use the Sword of the Hero, I might be able to defeat it instantly.

When I acquired the Sword of the Hero, I vowed to Byaku that I wouldn't use it.

At the time, I thought that using this sword to defeat one creature or one person, accomplishing that with a power that wasn't my own, would never be the path to true peace.

That hasn't changed.

I still believe that the only way to create true peace is through persistent effort from the people living in that age.

But right now, I'm not going to use it for a different reason.

"If I use it now, I can't use it on the Demon Lord."

The queen taratect was sent here by the Demon Lord.

According to that demon general who called himself Bloe, the demons are being forced into battle because of the Demon Lord.

He said they would be wiped out otherwise.

I get it now.

If she's strong enough to control a queen taratect, it's no wonder they would have to obey her.

In other words, the Demon Lord is the cause of all this!

I can't even imagine using the Sword of the Hero on anyone else.

"I know I was high-and-mighty about it before, but I will be using the Sword of the Hero after all. On the Demon Lord."

It seems there *is* hatred in me.

For my powerless self.

For the queen taratect who killed Yaana.

And most of all, for the Demon Lord who sent the queen taratect here!

The Sword of the Hero loses its power after a single use.

If the Demon Lord can command the queen taratect, I'm sure I can't beat her.

I'll need the power of the Sword of the Hero.

...I'm so weak.

Too weak to accomplish anything on my own.

I couldn't even protect the girl I loved...

It's pathetic, but that's why I have to use any help I can get.

"When that time comes, please lend me your strength!"

"...Very well, if that is what you wish."

“Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. But what do you plan to do about this, then?”

The queen taratect looms before me.

“I plan to win.”

Honestly, I have no idea how I’m going to make that happen.

But even so, I have to win.

“If I lose, I’ll apologize on my hands and knees to Yaana on the other side.”

Maybe that would be all right, too.

Win or lose, I won’t have any regrets.

With that decided, my mind clears up a bit.

But I still have no intention of losing.

I’ll avenge Yaana. Whether that’s what she would have wanted or not.

I’m fighting because that’s what *I* want to do!

Not as the hero but as Julius Zagan Analeit.

“Here we go!”

I start forming magic!

A few cheap tricks aren’t going to do the job.

I need to use all the power I have!

Holy Light Magic: Holy Light Beam.

The Holy Light Beam hits the queen taratect head-on.

Its massive body might be a giant weapon, but it's also a giant target.

But its defense is too high for that to be a serious problem.

Even a direct hit from my Holy Light Beam doesn't leave a mark.

I knew that's how it would turn out, though.

You won't see me getting discouraged that easily!

The queen taratect's eight eyes swivel toward me.

Then one of its legs vanishes.

It didn't really disappear—it just moved so fast that it was near impossible to follow.

"Ugh!"

I dive to the side just in time to avoid a direct hit.

Even then, a shock wave erupts like a huge explosion went off right next to me, slamming into my body.

But I have no time to worry about that.

Another leg just vanished.

Despite its massive size, it's unbelievably fast.

Trusting my instincts, I move to one side.

A gust of wind barrels past me.

It must be because the queen taratect has swung its leg again.

I move my own legs and keep running around, knowing I could be crushed if I move a second too late.

But I have no way of winning if I just keep dodging.

As I run, I start casting a new spell.

Then I unleash another Holy Light Beam.

I'm aiming for its giant eyes!

The eyes are a weak point for any living being.

Even with the queen taratect's unbelievable defense power, its eyes must still be vulnerable.

Sure enough, the queen taratect dodges for the first time, even though it's ignored all my other attacks thus far.

It deftly avoided the Holy Light Beam that would've hit it right in the eyes.

That must mean that if I can hit its eyes, I can damage the queen taratect.

The time between the initial casting of Holy Light Beam and when it lands is incredibly short, so it usually doesn't miss.

That said, it takes a while to construct, so it can be easy to anticipate when I'm preparing it.

Just now, though, the queen taratect dodged my Holy Light Beam after it was fired.

Which means the queen taratect is as fast as the Holy Light Beam or even faster.

It's not that it wasn't able to avoid my attacks up until now. It simply didn't dodge them because it had no reason to bother.

The only way I can damage the queen taratect is to stop its movements somehow and hit its eyes with all my might.

...Stop this massive thing from moving?

Is that even possible?

No, I can't get intimidated now!

I knew going in that my chances of winning were slim!

The queen taratect is a living creature, too.

It's not invincible, nor is it immortal.

That means I can beat it.

I can, and I will!

The queen taratect's eight eyes fix on me.

For the first time, I can see an emotion in those eyes.

Irritation.

Thus far, it's been fighting me almost automatically, without showing any interest at all.

It looks like the real fight's about to begin.

Just as I start to brace myself, I'm suddenly sent flying.

“Guh?!”

Blood sprays from my mouth.

I can't even tell what just happened.

All its attacks thus far have been frightening, too, but none was so fast that I failed to process what was happening.

Does that mean it's been holding back all this time?

But why?

As my thoughts churn wildly, the queen taratect slowly starts walking.

Deliberately slowly, as if to show off its enormous form.

“Nnngh!”

I jump to my feet.

In response, the queen taratect slowly raises its leg high in the air.

As if it wants to show me what true despair looks like.

To be honest, it really does feel like this is as far as I can go.

I even glance at the Sword of the Hero at my hip, wondering if I’ll have to use it after all.

As that leg comes down, I’m almost certain that I’m about to die.

But I don’t.

A huge barrage of spells strike the queen taratect in the side.

“Huh?”

Who in the world did that?!

Looking in the direction the magic came from, I see a large group of soldiers charging this way on horseback.

The soldiers who were at Fort Kusorion.

“Why?”

I thought I told them to run...

“Protect Sir Hero!”

“We’re here to help!”

“Just use whatever you’ve got!”

Galloping around on horses, the soldiers keep casting spells.

Magic like that won’t hurt the queen taratect.

But, perhaps annoyed by it, the gigantic monster lowers the leg it was about to bring down toward me.

“What kinda soldiers would we be if we made the hero do everything?!”

“Sir Hero saved my child! This is my one chance to pay him back!”

“We’ll show ‘em what humans can do when our backs are up against the wall!”

The soldiers shout as they charge forward, as if they are letting out all their fear.

“They all came running to help you.”

“Hyrince?!”

Somehow, Hyrince is standing at my side.

“But I thought you ran away?”

“Moron! As if I’d ever leave you behind!”

Hyrince raps me on the head with his broken left hand.

“Same goes for everyone else. They couldn’t just run away and leave you here. Everyone is hoping and praying for you to live—don’t you get it? That includes Yaana.”

“.....”

How am I supposed to respond to something like that?

After all, I’m being selfish right now.

I’m fighting as an individual, not the hero.

“I can’t make everyone go along with my selfishness...”

“Sure you can. You always put yourself last, y’know? No one’s gonna mind if you wanna be selfish for once in your life.”

Hyrince assures me that it’s all right, even though it means dragging so many people

into a desperate life-and-death battle.

“You’re gonna win, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“Then get it done like a real hero!”

“Right!”

The queen taratect starts moving again, as if it were waiting for our exchange to end.

But it turns toward the charging soldiers.

“Oh no!”

The giant beast’s mouth opens.

It’s going to use a breath attack.

The same attack that destroyed Fort Kusorion!

I jump between the queen taratect and the soldiers.

“Julius?!”

Quickly, I form a spell.

“Listen up, Julius. If all you want to do is use magic, skills are plenty for that. But if you truly want to master magic, that isn’t good enough. How do you normally create and unleash spells? Be aware of that, and ask yourself how you can do it stronger, faster, and more accurately.”

That’s what my master taught me.

So I try my best to be mindful.

How am I using magic, and what do I want it to do?

Right now, what I want is a sturdy shield that will protect everyone!

"Instead of trying to bear the brunt of its power, I simply changed its direction."

I remember something Mr. Tiva once said.

"If your opponent is too strong, you won't accomplish much by trying to block their attacks head-on. At times, you must create an opening by redirecting their strength."

This must be what he meant!

I tilt the shield of light I've created at an angle.

When the queen taratect's breath attack comes roaring out, I deflect it with my shield.

“Nnnngh...!”

The impact is intense.

It's too strong for me to fully deflect it.

At this rate, it'll break through!

"If you can't do it on your own, we'll just have to do it together, right? Even if you're not strong enough alone, we'll be strong enough as a team. Take what just happened. You might not've stood a chance if you were alone, but we were with you. That's why we all made it back alive. You've got friends who want to fight at your side, see? So try to depend on us more."

“Hyrince!”

I call out the name of the dear friend who said those words.

“On it!”

Right away, Hyrince runs over to support me.

He must be in pain, since his hand is broken, but he still pushes with all his might.

“Aaaaah!”

With Hyrince's help, I push back the breath until it changes direction and bounces off

harmlessly into the sky.

The queen taratect recoils, looking taken aback for the first time.

“NOOOOW!”

The soldiers seize that opportunity to charge forward on horseback.

With the queen taratect’s high defense, that probably wouldn’t cause it any pain.

But as the dozens of knights charge at once during the monster’s brief moment of hesitation, even if it doesn’t cause any damage, it’s more than enough to knock those legs off-balance.

The queen taratect stumbles a couple of steps.

It’s a small opening but a clear one.

“Go!”

“I’m on it!”

Hyrince pushes me forward, and I use that momentum to leap up high.

Using Dimensional Maneuvering, I whirl through the air, filling my sword with holy light.

The queen taratect glares at me.

I choose one of its eyes and stab my sword into it with all my might!

“!!!!!!”

The queen taratect’s screech of pain rattles the very air.

I finally managed to do some damage to it!

All I did was crush one eye, but that’s more than enough!

“Magic items are made to be used, y’know? Ain’t no point dyin’ to conserve ‘em.”

"Weapons are part of your strength, too. What's wrong with using them to win?"

Hawkin's and Jeskan's words play back in my mind.

Right, this is the perfect time to use that!

I reach down and draw it from its scabbard.

No, not the Sword of the Hero.

It's a short sword.

A magic sword known as an "exploding sword."

The last of the ten magic swords that my master gave me!

Like the Sword of the Hero, they can be used only once.

I thrust this one deep into the queen taratect's wounded eye.

"Haaaah!"

Then I cast a Holy Light Beam to drive it in even deeper!

There's an explosion.

And then a moment of silence.

"It's coming down?!"

The queen taratect's massive body slowly leans to the side.

I hurriedly move away from it.

Seconds later, the enormous monster crashes to the ground, creating huge tremors in the earth.

"...Did we... win?"

Hyrince murmurs in disbelief.

I slowly raise my sword to the sky.

“Y... YAAAAAAAHH!”

One of the soldiers raises a cry of triumph.

I keep holding my sword aloft, acknowledging the cheers.

Don't cry yet!

As long as people are watching, I have to keep being the hero.

Later, when I'm alone, that's when I'll cry my eyes out.

But I think I can at least be allowed a scream.

“AAAAAAAHH!”

I did it, Yaana.

While everyone celebrates the defeat of the queen taratect, Hyrince quickly walks away.

Noticing him, I silently follow.

Then Hyrince stops.

Just as I move to join him...

“Don't come any closer!”

...he shouts to stop me in my tracks.

“Hyrince... is she... there?”

“Yeah...”

“Then I—”

“Don’t! Julius, don’t you dare come over here!”

She’s right here.

But Hyrinice won’t let me see her.

“Please. I’m begging you—don’t come over. Don’t look. I’m sure Yaana wouldn’t want you to see her like this, either...”

Hyrinice’s voice is choked with barely suppressed sobs.

Yaana is hidden behind him, his broad back blocking my view.

But Hyrinice is begging me not to look.

That alone is enough for me to imagine what sort of awful state she must be in.

And I can’t bring myself to ignore Hyrinice’s words and go see for myself.

I’m not... brave enough... to look.

...What kind of hero am I?

How can I call myself a hero if I couldn’t even protect the girl I loved?!

Tears start to well up in my eyes, but I force them down.

Not yet.

I can’t cry just yet.

“?! Julius!”

Thanks to Hyrinice’s warning cry, I just barely manage to block the blade that’s coming toward me.

“Tsk!”

I hear someone click their tongue nearby and immediately swing my sword in that direction.

There's the shrill clash of metal on metal as our weapons collide.

It's none other than Bloe, the demon general I was fighting before.

He jumps back, his surprise attack ending in failure.

"You seriously still want to fight?!"

The queen taratect is dead.

That must have been the demons' big secret weapon.

Since we defeated it, surely their morale is broken by now.

So why does he still want to fight?

Looking behind him, I realize the demons have gathered in this spot.

And by the looks of it, they're still raring for a fight.

Hearing the commotion, the human soldiers come over to gather behind me, too.

"Take your soldiers and leave. I don't want to fight anymore."

I tell Bloe to withdraw.

He must have realized in our last fight that he couldn't beat me.

Since his surprise attack failed, he has no way of winning.

And the last thing I want right now is more battle.

"Please. Don't make me keep fighting on a grudge."

If we fight right now, I'll take out my hatred on these demons.

They might be victims of the Demon Lord, too.

Which is why I don't want to fight them.

“We’ve gotta fight now!”

Ignoring my earnest feelings, Bloe readies his sword.

“Hero! You’re crazy strong; I’ll admit that! But it’s still no use! If you had such a hard time against one of her spawn, you’ll never beat the Demon Lord!”

Bloe starts ranting in the language of demons, as if he can’t keep forming sentences in human language anymore.

“You can’t win, dammit!”

His voice is full of bitterness.

“I’ve gotta kill you here and now for the sake of all demons!”

Then he charges toward me.

I’m sure he has his own reasons for not giving up.

But I do, too, you know!

I can’t let myself get killed now after Yaana died to protect me!

I knock Bloe’s sword aside and use the backswing to slash into his body.

Bloe collapses in a spray of blood.

“Damn... it... all... Why...?”

His halting last words come out in demon language, but I can guess at their meaning.

I can sense the anguished feelings behind them.

But I can’t show mercy to an enemy who’s attacking me.

Looking away from Bloe’s body, I turn toward the remaining demons.

“I’ll say it one more time. Leave now!”

I give them a final warning.

If they still insist on coming at me after that, then I'll have no choice...!

But then a single girl steps out from among the demons.

A girl who's so pale white that it sends a shiver down my spine.

"Listen closely, Julius. Humans are weak. Incredibly weak. Most humans are even weaker than I am, which is why they look at me and say that I'm strong. But I'm only human, too. I'm strong by human standards, but that's all."

Out of nowhere, I recall something my master once said to me.

"To those with true strength, the power of mere humans is nothing."

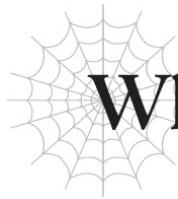
I've experienced that for myself before.

Long ago, when I witnessed with my own eyes the feared monster known as the Nightmare of the Labyrinth.

For some reason, I feel that same fear now.

Then the girl opens her eyes...

A scarf flutters to the ground, its owner gone.



White 2

“.....”

In the command center room, the atmosphere is downright oppressive.

The Demon Lord's expression is grim.

Balto isn't here.

He's already been informed of Bloe's death.

After saying he wanted to be alone for the time being, Balto left the room.

All who's left are the Demon Lord, Güli-güli—aka Black—and me.

Yes, that's right. The mysterious Ninth Army Commander, code-named Black, is actually Güli-güli!

Okay, now isn't the time for joking around like that, I know.

The dark mood filling the room is mostly coming from Black here.

“...I have no right to complain.”

Finally, slowly, Black speaks.

“If you'll excuse me, I believe I need a moment.”

With that, Black leaves, too.

Well, I can't blame him.

I'm sure he has some thoughts about how things went down.

The Demon Lord watches Black leave, then lets out a heavy sigh.

“...Nothing ever goes to plan, y’know?”

“...Uh-huh.”

Frankly, this battle was a total failure.

We had several important goals, and we accomplished almost none of them.

“So the commanders we lost are Huey, Bloe, and Agner...”

The Demon Lord murmurs the names of the commanders who were killed in action.

Of the three, I’m not too broken up about Shota aka Huey, but the loss of Agner is tough to swallow. He was a very capable man in many ways.

And then there’s Bloe.

He was annoying and all, but I didn’t hate him.

“...So, White. Why didn’t you bring back Agner and Bloe?”

The Demon Lord’s doubts are understandable.

If I really wanted to, I could have forcibly extracted those two and brought them back.

Depending on your point of view, it might look like I let them die.

“Principle.”

“Mwuh?”

“On principle. Agner and Bloe were fighting with their lives on the line. Ready to die. It didn’t seem right to stop them.”

Agner and Bloe both knew they would almost certainly die, but they still saw the battle through to the end.

I couldn’t bring myself to tarnish that conviction.

Their intense determination reminded me of Araba's final moments. I didn't want to interfere.

"Gotcha."

The Demon Lord doesn't press the matter any further.

Huey's death was a minor accident, but we didn't plan to let Agner and Bloe die, and we could have prevented it.

But we didn't.

Their deaths were a serious miscalculation.

But there was an even bigger one.

"I never imagined the hero would manage to beat the queen."

"...Yeah."

The biggest unexpected disaster was the hero defeating the queen taratect.

No, the fact that he won isn't a problem in itself.

In fact, we sent it so the hero would defeat it... only after using the Sword of the Hero.

"I still can't believe he won without using the damn thing. Considering the differences in their stats and strength, was that a miracle or what?"

"Mm-hmm."

I can't blame her for complaining.

There was no way the hero should've possibly been able to beat the queen, no matter how hard he tried.

He would have to use the Sword of the Hero for any chance of surviving the battle, or so we thought.

That sword is extremely dangerous.

It's a divine sword that our old pal D left in this world that can kill even a god.

It's one use only, but it wouldn't be safe to leave a dangerous weapon like that just lying around.

So when I learned that it had fallen into the hands of the current hero, I decided to force him to waste it.

That was the purpose of the queen, since it'd be no problem if he defeated that one.

The main goal was just to harvest the energy released by the Sword of the Hero.

But somehow, he managed not to use it.

Talk about a serious miscalculation.

"Well, we didn't lose anything major, so I guess it's fine," I say aloud. "We can always make another queen. It was just a fake queen anyway."

That thing wasn't a real queen taratect.

It was one of my clones.

Thanks to my years of training, my mini-mes have evolved all the way into maximum-mes!

Heh-heh-heh!

They're not quite as strong as a real queen but certainly close enough to take the hero down easily.

Or so I thought...

Sure, I held back so the hero would get a chance to use the Sword of the Hero, but who would've thought he would actually win without it?

Unreal.

"So. Our attempt to meddle with the system failed, too?"

Urk!

That particular failure is kinda my mistake, or at least my lack of ability.

Earlier, when I killed the hero, I was trying to alter the system at the same time and erase the very existence of heroes forever.

In other words, to remove the Hero title.

The Hero title has a special effect against the Demon Lord title.

It's set up so that the Demon Lord can never defeat the hero, no matter what.

I tried to interfere with the system to get rid of that nasty title, but it ended in failure.

There is a good reason for that, but I can't make that excuse to the Demon Lord...

So I think I'll just keep it to myself and call this a mistake on my part.

"Which means a new hero has been born somewhere, hmm?"

The Demon Lord heaves an even bigger sigh.

The Hero title is an inherited one.

When one hero dies, someone else in the world becomes the hero.

That means there's not much point in killing the hero, since whoever it is, the main danger is the fact that they can defeat the Demon Lord.

But still, I don't think we have to worry too much.

"There's no way the next hero is gonna be like that one. For sure."

At my firm statement, the Demon Lord just goes "uh-huuuuh..."

What's with that iffy look she's giving me?

"White, you really admired that hero, huh? You weak to a pretty face or what?"

“No. It’s not like that, okay?”

Why do I feel like we just had a conversation like this recently?

“I’m kidding. But yeah. I kinda get what you’re saying. That was a good hero.”

“...Mm-hmm.”

I watched that hero through my clones for a long time.

He had a pretty tough life, but he never stopped living nobly.

I can’t imagine a hero that impressive is gonna come along again anytime soon.

The Demon Lord fiddles with the scarf that the hero was wearing.

“White, take a look at this. Apparently, it’s made of spider thread.”

She must have used Appraisal or something to inspect the scarf’s materials.

“I heard it traded at a high price among humans, but can you believe the hero was wearing it?” She snickers sarcastically. “Unreal.”

Wow, seriously?

Talk about a coincidence.

So the hero facing off against a spider demon lord was wearing a scarf made out of spider thread all along.

“So what should we do with this?”

I don’t think we need to do much of anything with it, but you do you.

Then a wicked smile spreads across the Demon Lord’s face.

“Wasn’t the hero’s younger brother a reincarnation? Let’s give this back to him, then.”

With that, the Demon Lord starts imbuing the scarf in her hand with magic.

I guess she's putting some kind of effect on it.

"Yep, yep. A little present for the hero's little brother, full of the Demon Lord's divine protection. Pretty slick, don't you think?"

Uh, no, that seems in pretty poor taste to me actually.

"Ahh, I'd love to see the look on Yamada's face when he gets this..."

The Demon Lord grins with excitement, but I gotta say, that's a pretty nasty move.

Poor Yamada...

It wasn't until later that I would learn that Yamada himself was chosen as the new hero.



Observations by Future Historians: Epilogue

The Great Human-Demon War is said to have ended in victory for the demons.

Many forts fell into the demons' clutches, and the hero, the humans' last hope at the time, was defeated.

The hero of that time, Julius Zagan Analeit, is widely considered to be the most noble hero in history, thanks in no small part to the many records left by his younger brother Schlain, which extoled his countless achievements and virtues; there are many other extant documents that describe his accomplishments as well.

The previously quoted excerpt from a soldier's diary is said to have been written after the soldier witnessed Julius the hero's death firsthand.

In this Great War, humanity lost their greatest hope.

But those who are familiar with the events that followed are likely well aware:

Even this momentous battle was nothing more than a preliminary skirmish.

Truly turbulent times.

No, such hackneyed words cannot fully describe what would become a critical turning point in history.

And that time was fast approaching.

AFTERWORD

It's twelve o'clock. Noon.

No, wait, it's Volume 12. That's right.

Good afternoon, I'm Okina Baba.

Or good evening, for those of you joining us at twelve o'clock at night.

For some reason, the number twelve sort of evokes the sense of an ending.

There are twelve hours on a clock and twelve months in a year.

But have no fear!

This series isn't over yet by any means!

I don't know... I just felt like I should probably make that clear.

Especially since several stories came to an end in this volume.

I won't say too much so I don't spoil the story, but I wonder how you readers felt about how they lived their lives?

How will those who survived carry on their will?

That's the kind of volume this is.

Although I guess it's not really a spoiler, since the outcome was already mentioned in much earlier volumes!

In that way, I think this volume is the kind of story where you warmly watch over their final moments even while knowing how it's going to end.

Sniffle...

I hear there are some authors who cry while they're writing, and I think I sort of understand that feeling now.

I didn't cry, though.

Huh? *Come on, you should've cried?*

Well, I can't help it. I'm a heartless brute.

Would an author with a heart subject their protagonist to such a difficult dungeon?

Ha-ha-ha.

Although I did almost cry about something else.

Yep. I almost cried because I was too busy.

Why was I so busy, you ask?

Well, I'll tell you right now!

Ta-daaa!

The *So I'm a Spider, So What?* anime will be airing in 2020!

Yaaaay! Clap-clap-clap-clap!

It's been a long wait, I know.

But the anime's finally been scheduled to air in 2020.

I've been hard at work on that, which is why I've been so busy.

But thanks to all that, we've come this far at last!

Woooo!

So the anime will start airing in 2020!

The release has been delayed quite a bit, but it's finally happening.

Anyone who's been waiting in the nude all this time has probably reached enlightenment by now.

That's how long I made you all wait.

But! Since you waited so patiently, we're doing our best to make sure it lives up to your expectations.

Wow...

The anime adaptation was first announced in 2018.

And theeen...

2019 ended, and now we're in 2020.

But now, finally! Finally!

The time has come at last.

So feel free to keep your hopes up as you wait for more information about the anime broadcast!

And! To go along with the anime release, we're planning to publish a collection of reference materials in *So I'm a Spider, So What? EX!*

Like any reference book, it'll contain character profiles, as well as an explanation of the Great Elroe Labyrinth and lots of other fun goodies.

It'll also include some of the store-exclusive short stories from previous releases and a few brand-new ones!

Please feel free to use it to brush up before you watch the anime.

Phew, that was a lot of announcements.

2020 will definitely be the year of the spider!

Finally, let me say my usual thank-yous.

To Tsukasa Kiryu for the wonderful illustrations as always.

Really, thank you for all that you do!

And sorry for making so many characters!

I hardly ever describe the characters' appearances in the text, so that job always falls to Kiryu.

Even for the anime character designs, my contribution was basically just saying, "*If Kiryu likes them, then it's fine with me.*"

I really am sorry!

But! This heartless brute of an author plans to keep taking advantage of your kindness for as long as I can!

Thank you as well to Asahiro Kakashi, who creates the manga adaptation.

The manga wound up being used as a reference for the anime, too!

Seeing that get incorporated really convinced me all over again that Kakashi truly is amazing.

I'll be depending on you lots more from now on, too!

Then there's Gratinbird, who makes the spin-off manga.

This bizarre story is already surreal enough with a spider protagonist, and now this artist is stuck with the work of turning four copies of the protagonist into an even more surreal gag manga.

Whoever thought of this plan is seriously a genius.

And Gratinbird is equally a genius for pulling it off.

The manga is so funny, I can't help laughing out loud, so please give it a read.

Thank you to everyone who's involved in the anime adaptation, too.

2020! It's finally airing!

To my editor Ms. W and everyone else who helped put this book out into the world.

And to all of you who have picked up this book.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

EVERYONE'S
FAVORITE
SPIDER
GIRL
RUNSWILD
IN HER
VERY OWN
MANGA!



I'm
So a Spider, So What?

Art:
Asahiro Kakashi

Original Story:
Okina Baba

Character Design:
Tsukasa Kiryu

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So I'm a
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