

Spider So I'm a So Phat?

5

OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU



SO I'M A SPIDER, SO WHAT?

– Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka? –

- VOLUME 5 -

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[Yen Press]

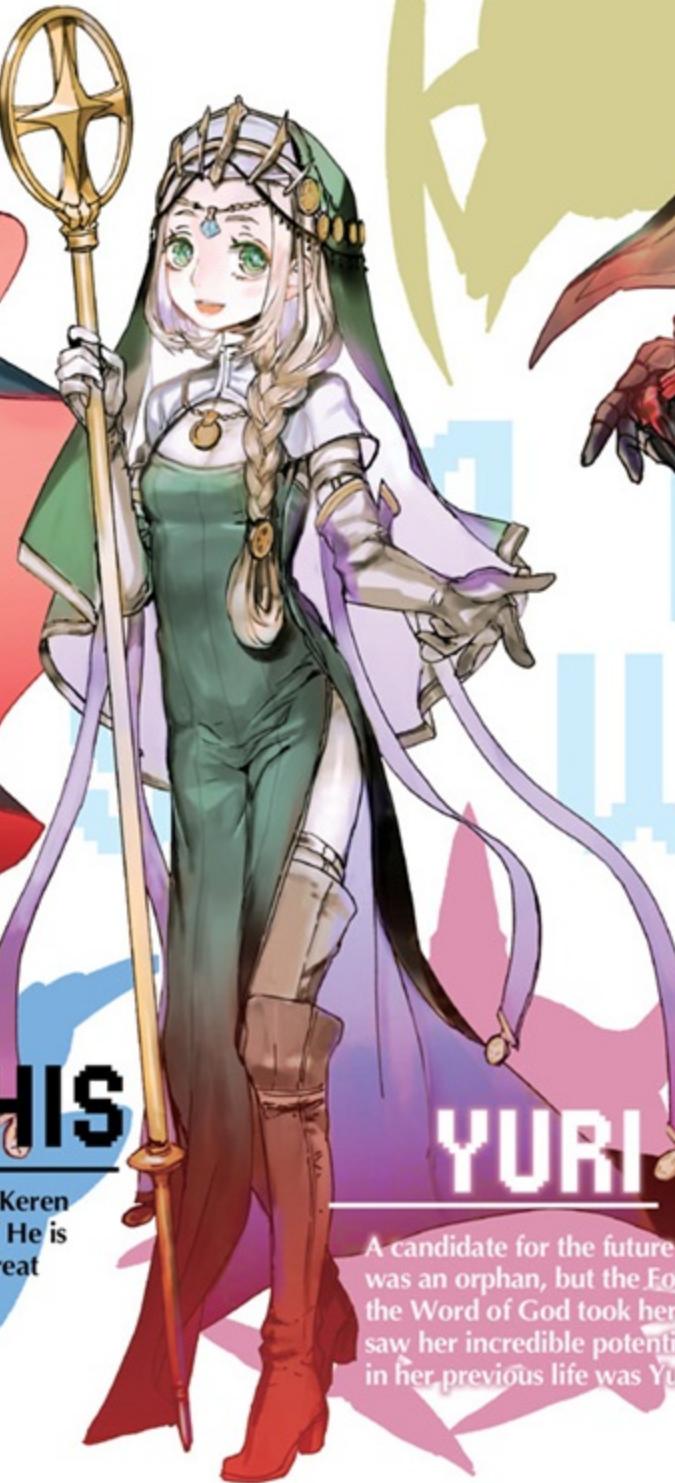
POTIMAS HARRIFENAS

The powerful chief of the elves. Ever since having a daughter, named Filimōs, his meddling with humans has increased.



MERAZOPHIS

A pale-faced man. A servant of the Keren family who calls Sophia "Mistress." He is one of the demon generals in the great human-demon war.



YURI

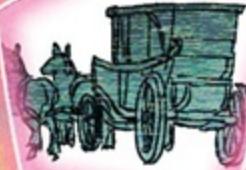
A candidate for the future saint. She was an orphan, but the Followers of the Word of God took her in when they saw her incredible potential. Her name in her previous life was Yuika Hasebe.



Ee

Kumoko peeking
into town with the
Clairvoyance skill.

The vampire kid's family must
be loaded! Are they nobles?



A noble family suddenly
having a vampire baby
sounds pretty rough.



Spider So What?

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YEN
ON
New York

Copyright

So I'm a Spider, So What?, Vol. 5
Okina Baba

Translation by Jenny McKeon
Cover art by Tsukasa Kiryu

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Homeroom Teacher: Kanami Okazaki

Boys

- ★ Ren Aikawa
- ★ Kanata Ooshima
(Katia)
- ★ Kenichi Ogiwara
- ? Shinobu Kusama
- Naofumi Kogure
- Issei Sakurazaki
- ? Kyouya Sasajima
- ★ Kunihiro Tagawa
- ★ Dai Tsushima
- Kengo Natsume
(Hugo)
- Kouta Hayashi
- ★ Maki Shouwato
- Shunsuke Yamada
(Me)

Girls

- ★ Aiko Iijima
- Mirei Shinohara
(Fei)
- ★ Asaka Kushitani
- ★ Sachi Kudo
- Shuuiko Segawa
- Saki Temarikawa
- Himiko Tonooka
- ★ Chie Nanase
- Shouko Negishi
[*Shouko Negishi*]
(Sophia)
- Yuika Hasebe
(Yuri)
- ★ Mio Furuta
- Hiiko Wakaba

★ Reunited in the elf village



THE SPIDER AND THE VAMPIRE

I remember a high school classroom that was almost remarkably unremarkable.

Then I recall the faces of each of the students there.

Shouko Negishi...

Hmm. Hmm...
Hm. Hm...

Yeaah, I don't remember her.

I mean, I can remember all my classmates' faces, more or less.

But her face and name don't seem to match, or rather, her name doesn't sound familiar in the first place.

To be fair, I was never someone who held a lot of interest for the people around me.

I can't put a name to most of my classmates' faces.

Not that I ever had to, since I hardly spoke to any of them.

Sometimes they would try to talk to me, but when I froze up out of sheer surprise, they'd turn bright red, get mad at me, and leave.

It's wrong to just suddenly start talking to outcasts like that.

We'll freeze up because we have no idea how to respond.

To be fair, even if the interaction wasn't sudden, I'd probably end up doing the same thing —but still!

Ahh, I do remember the name of that kid who was always bothering me, but that's

about it.

I certainly don't know any Shouko Negishis.

If there were a way to check what her original face was like, it'd come back to me, but she obviously looks different now.

At the moment, all I can see is a lady holding a baby.

Around them, their guards are watching, rigid from fear.

How did this happen again?

I was on the run from this demon lord freak with obscenely high stats and spotted a carriage being attacked by robbers, right?

Pretending I never saw it would've made me feel hella guilty later, so I swooped in dramatically and wiped out the bandits.

While I was at it, I used Healing Magic to cure a guard who'd been struck down by a robber.

Then this lady jumped out of the carriage.

And when I Appraised the baby in her arms, I got some seriously weird results.

So here we are.

Guess I'll look at the baby's Appraisal results again...

<Human Vampire	LV1	Name: Sophia Keren/Shouko Negishi
Status:	HP: 11/11 (green) (details) SP: 12/12 (yellow) (details) Average Offensive Ability: 9 (details) Average Magical Ability: 32 (details)	MP: 35/35 (blue) (details) : 12/12 (red) (details) Average Defensive Ability: 8 (details) Average Resistance Ability: 33 (details)

	Average Speed Ability: 8 (details)		
Skills:			
[Vampire LV1]	[Undying Body LV1]	[HP Auto-Recovery LV1]	[Magic Power Perception LV3]
[Magic Power Operation LV3]	[Night Vision LV1]	[Five Senses Enhancement LV1]	[n% I = W]
Skill Points: 75,000			
Titles:			
[Vampire]	[Progenitor]		>

Hmm. Yep, it still shows two names whenever I look at it!

And the second one couldn't be more Japanese-sounding!

I don't recognize it specifically, but this baby must be one of my former classmates.

She even has the "n% I = W" skill, so there's no doubt about it.

According to what the self-proclaimed evil god D told me, all the students who were in the classroom with me were reincarnated into this world.

It's been a pretty long time since I was reborn as a spider, but this is the first time I've encountered another reincarnation.

Well, not much to do but accept it.

I mean, this is a strange situation, but I guess it's kinda like running into a fellow Japanese person while traveling abroad.

I wasn't close with anyone in my class, so that's about the level of emotion I feel after encountering one of them.

What more do you want? I was an outcast.

Let's put aside for now the fact that she's a fellow reincarnation.

Besides, there's already plenty of weird stuff to unpack here.

First of all, what's up with that race situation?

How can you be a human and a vampire?

Does this mean that she used to be a human but had her blood sucked and became a vampire or whatever?

Although I have no idea whether vampire lore works the same way in this world as it usually did on Earth.

For now, I guess I'll get some info on that with Appraisal.

<Vampire: A ruler of the night who lives by sucking the blood of others. Members of this race are very strong but also suffer many weaknesses. Many vampires originally belonged to another race and take on the characteristics of their primary race. Purebreds who were born as vampires are known as Progenitors.>

Well then.

I guess vampires here are pretty much identical to what I know.

Wait a second, though.

It said that purebreds who are born vampires are called Progenitors?

'Cause she's totally got the Progenitor title right there, sooo...

What's going on?

This child was born a vampire?

Does that mean her parents are vampires or what?

But according to Appraisal, the woman who's holding this baby is human.

The lady's name is Seras Keren.

Same last name as the baby bloodsucker.

If you put two and two together, that means this lady is definitely the kid's mother.

Her mother is human.

Is her father a vampire, then?

Maybe she has two races because she's half-human and half-vampire?

Well, her father doesn't seem to be tagging along, so I don't have any way of knowing for sure.

Everyone else here seems to be human, too.

Which means this mystery isn't entirely solved, but I can't find out just by thinking about it, so let's put that aside for now, too.

Next on the list of weird stuff: Why does she have so many skills?

She's just a baby, meaning she should barely even be able to move on her own, never mind acquire a bunch of skills. What's up with that?

She's got more of them than some weak monsters that live in the labyrinth!

All I had when I was first born was Poison Fang, Spider Thread, Poison Resistance, Night Vision, Skanda, and "n% I = W"!

...Now that I think about it, I actually had quite a few skills when I was born, too.

Still, though. I had six to start out with, while this baby bloodsucker has eight.

A difference of two skills.

Two whole skills!

That's a huge gap, you know!

This isn't fair!

Oh, wait a second, though.

Did some of these skills come bundled with a title?

A title always seems to come with two skills.

Title Appraisal, go!

<Vampire: Acquires skills [HP Auto-Recovery LV1] [Night Vision LV1]. Acquisition conditions: Acquires skill [Vampire]. Effect: Adds Vampire to the holder's species. Explanation: A title awarded to one who has become a vampire.>

<Progenitor: Acquires skills [Immortality LV1] [Five Senses Enhancement LV1]. Acquisition conditions: Be a vampire from birth. Effect: Cancels out the negative effects of being a vampire. Explanation: A title awarded to a progenitor of vampires.>

Mm-hmm. Turns out she has four of those skills because of her titles.

But I'm guessing she had both the Vampire and Progenitor titles from the moment she was born, so I guess it doesn't make much of a difference.

Those are both pretty amazing titles, though.

Vampire comes with the HP Auto-Recovery skill, which is super-handy. It's saved my butt plenty of times.

Having it from birth would've been awesome. I'm so jealous it makes me wanna curse this baby!

But the Progenitor title is even crazier.

I mean, should you really be allowed to cancel out the negatives of being a vampire?

Vampires in stories always have lots of weaknesses so that humans can still beat them. If you take those away, wouldn't that just leave a totally unbeatable bad guy?

But I guess strength in this world is mostly determined by stats, so even without those weaknesses, I don't think anyone could be completely unstoppable.

That being said, a vampire without weaknesses sounds terrifying.

For one thing, that skill most likely means that she doesn't need to drink blood to survive.

Or maybe breast milk counts as a substitute for blood?

It's sorta made from the mother's blood in the first place, right?

Well, not having to drink blood is big, but what's even scarier is that sunlight doesn't hurt her.

At this very moment, the baby bloodsucker is totally basking in the sunlight without a care in the world.

The ability to negate all your natural weaknesses is no joke.

And on top of that already impressive title effect, you get two crazy skills, too.

<Undying Body: Increases resistance to all attributes except for Fire, Light, and Rot. Additionally, once per day, the holder can survive any attack with 1 HP.>

So on top of increasing almost all your resistances, it gives you a free once-a-day survival pass.

Okay, I absolutely want this skill.

Unfortunately, it's not on the list of skills I can acquire.

My guess is that it's a special skill that only certain races can get or something like that.

There's no way I would've overlooked such a useful skill.

Five Senses Enhancement is also quite useful, so all in all, the Progenitor title is insane.

Wh-whatever!

I've got the Immortality skill anyway!

I can survive any skill however many times I want, not just one stupid chance a day!

I've got nothing to be jealous of!

Whew. I nearly fell victim to the green monster of jealousy there.

...Hmm. Now that I look at it, though, I guess most of these skills are vampire-related.

I mean, half of them came from vampire titles in the first place.

Being born a vampire is a pretty sweet deal.

Huh? Wait a sec.

What's this kid's special reincarnation skill?

I got Skanda as a bonus for being a reincarnation, so Dracula Jr. here should have one, too, right?

Out of the eight, it can't be any of the four that came from a title.

And "n% I = W" is a skill that all reincarnations have, so that's not it, either.

Which leaves Vampire, Magic Power Perception, and Magic Power Operation, but those last two would make a pretty lame bonus skill.

They're both important, but they're pretty easy to acquire down the line and not nearly as big an advantage as my Skanda skill.

I seriously doubt D would have picked out something so plain.

So by the process of elimination, her reincarnation bonus skill is... Vampire?

Hmm? Hmmمم?

Which means that the reason this kid is a vampire is because that's what she got for being a reincarnation?

The description for the Vampire title did say that it gets added to your species when you get the skill.

Wait. What's that supposed to mean, then?

So it's entirely possible that this kid's father is a normal human, too?

Man, that would seriously suck.

Judging by this lady's clothes and their fancy carriage, she's gotta be the wife of some big shot.

And their daughter is a vampire.

Yikes, that's definitely not gonna end well.

But knowing that schadenfreude-loving D, I wouldn't be surprised if it was all set up that way on purpose.

I mean, I guess I can't say for sure, but don't come crying to me later if I'm right.

It's got nothing to do with me anyway.

I'm actually most concerned about weird detail number three: those skill points!

What do you mean, 75,000?

When I was born, I got only 100 lousy skill points.

That's 750 times more! 750!

Having a few extra skills is one thing.

Sure, I'm a little jealous she came right out the gate with HP Auto-Recovery, Undying Body, and everything else, but I did get to start with handy skills like Spider Thread and Skanda.

But those skill points? That's seriously not cool.

With 75,000 skill points, you could pick up anything and everything that catches your eye!

If I had that many skill points when I was born, I would've had a waaay easier time!

This is so unfair.

It's unreasonable.

There is no god in this world!

Oh wait, yes there is. A really mean-spirited, self-proclaimed evil one.

Damn you, D! So this is just another one of your traps!

This time I'm definitely protesting against this unfair treatment!

On the one hand, you've got me, born as a wimpy spider monster in the world's biggest and most dangerous labyrinth.

On the other hand, you've got this vampire baby who was born into a high-class family.

That alone is a huge freaking difference.

But whatever!

I might've been born a monster, but I'm super-strong now!

Who needs to grow up in the lap of luxury?!

Not me, that's for sure!

Well, I've gotten rather preoccupied griping about the injustice of the world. But to everyone else, I just look like a scary spider monster who's staring at a baby.

That's bound to lead to some misunderstandings.

Now, since I'm using Thought Acceleration, this whole inner monologue took me only a few seconds.

Still, those seconds must have felt long to these humans.

I was staring at the baby the whole time, and the baby stared right back.

This Seras lady is desperately trying to tell me something, but unfortunately for her, I don't understand a single word of this world's language.

If you'd like to talk, learn Japanese first, then get back to me, please.

That being said, I literally can't talk, so I'd only be listening regardless!

And even if I could speak, my social skills are so crappy that we still wouldn't get anywhere!

I'm an outcast, all right?

And we outcasts don't like being the center of attention.

Between the baby, her mom, and their guards all staring at me, I'm actually extremely uncomfortable right now.

A baby in a staring contest with a spider, a lady trying to communicate with said spider, and a bunch of guards standing around watching.

What kind of weird setup for a joke is this?

I wish I knew the punch line.

This is just too weird.

In fact, I can't take it anymore. I'm just gonna bolt.

Yep. I'm taking off now.

Miss Seras shouts something after me, but I'm just gonna ignore her.

I hope that baby bloodsucker who turned out to be my fellow reincarnation will have a safe and happy life, I guess.

And that D doesn't mess with her too much.

Yeah, it'll be fine.

Definitely seems easier than being reborn as a spider.

When I was born, the first thing I laid eyes on was a cannibalistic bloodbath of my brothers and sisters, remember?

I worked real hard to survive and eventually wound up being targeted by a genuine

demon lord.

Ha-ha! My spider life has been crazy from day one!

...Yeah. She'll have an easier time than I did, I'm sure.



TWO DAYS BEFORE THE BATTLE

We've been in the elf village for three days now.

On the first day, we were so tired from the journey that we went to sleep as soon as we were given rooms.

And on the second day, we were reunited with the reincarnations who live in the elf village.

So what are we going to do on day three?

I would've liked to spend more time bonding with my fellow reincarnations like the day before, but with Hugo's imperial army closing in fast, I don't think this is the time for that.

We could ask them for information, but since the elves have basically forced all the reincarnations to live here isolated from the outside world, I doubt they would know anything that could help in this situation.

There's a lot I want to ask them about the elves, their thoughts on Ms. Oka, and so on.

But that can wait until after we've done something about the closing army.

For now, I have to focus on the battle ahead.

Charging into battle alongside our teacher and the elves when I'm not entirely sure if I can trust them isn't the most comforting feeling.

But surely the elves won't stab us in the back.

I don't think they will, at least.

The scary thing is, thinking back on the words and behavior of Potimas and the elves who've been assigned to us as stewards, I can't say it's impossible.

Two stewards have been assigned to everyone in our visiting party, and they generally follow us everywhere.

Despite their job title, they have yet to do a single thing to help us.

It's obvious they're here to keep watch on us under the superficial guise of serving as our stewards.

And their attitudes have clearly indicated they have no interest in being friendly with us.

When we first met and I asked their names, their terse response consisted of only, "You don't need to know."

On top of that, they didn't make any effort to learn our names, either.

Their total indifference toward us was extremely clear.

I've tried to talk to them anyway in the hopes of getting through somehow, but if I don't specifically need anything, they simply ignore me.

When ignoring my attempts at conversation doesn't seem to get their point across, they'll go as far as to say, "Please do not speak to us unless it is a matter of importance."

Do they really have no intention of working together at all?

I'm starting to think that even though he kept our conversation as short as possible, that was Potimas's idea of being friendly after all.

But we haven't seen him since the day we arrived, likely because he's busy preparing for the encroaching battle.

Ms. Oka is going to join him today, too, so we might not meet either of them for a while.

After basically being all but tossed aside by our hosts, it's up to me to figure out what to do today.

"Shun, maybe we should also prepare for battle by going to see this barrier thing? If a

fight breaks out, the area beyond the barrier will probably be the battlefield," Hyrince suggests.

Since I couldn't think of anything useful to do, it's the perfect suggestion.

Out of all of us, there's no doubt Hyrince has seen the most battles.

His stats are lower than mine, but stats don't measure the strength that comes from having experience.

It never would have occurred to me to scout out a potential battlefield in advance.

Which makes me realize all over again how inexperienced I really am.

Soon after, we all head toward the outer perimeter of the elf village to examine the barrier.

On the way, we meet with some unexpected faces.

"Yo."

"Good morning."

As we leave the house we've been assigned, we run into two of the reincarnations we'd been reunited with yesterday: Tagawa and Kushitani.

"We're the only reincarnations here who can fight, so they said we should start working with you guys."

Tagawa points at the elves standing like guards behind them.

It feels like we're carrying out a prisoner exchange.

Tagawa and Kushitani seem to feel the same way, judging by their expressions.

"Hello. Shun and the others explained the situation to me. The name's Hyrince. Nice to meet you."

Trying to shake off the dark mood hanging over the group, Hyrince holds out his hand and introduces himself.

"The pleasure's all mine. I'm Kunihiko Tagawa. It's an honor to meet a famous member of the hero's party, sir." Tagawa shakes Hyrince's hand.

"Kunihiko? Not the same Kunihiko whose name has been spreading among adventurers everywhere?"

"It's not exactly a common name here, so yes, I believe so."

Tagawa grins playfully at the surprised Hyrince.

I guess he must actually be pretty famous.

"Does that make her Asaka, then?"

"The very same. It's nice to meet you."

Kushitani gives a little bow.

I guess if Tagawa is famous, his partner, Asaka, would be, too.

Before they came to the elf village, Tagawa and Kushitani traveled around as adventurers.

I didn't have time to ask more about it yesterday, but now I'm getting the impression they got up to more than I first suspected.

"Well, it's heartening to know that a pair said to be on the fast track to rank S will be on our side."

Hyrince's tone is serious. He isn't just flattering them.

Sounds like Tagawa and Kushitani are bona fide adventurers.

I feel a bit immature in comparison.

And I admit some jealousy flared up when Hyrince acknowledged their strength.

Compared to them, I haven't made a name for myself in the world at all.

"Shall we continue our conversation on the way?"

At Katia's urging, we begin walking under the guidance of the elves.

There are two elves for each one of us, numbering fourteen in total.

Watching them walk in totally silent lines is a little unnerving.

"What kind of work did you two do?"

It would be uncomfortable to walk all the way there without talking, so I strike up a conversation with Tagawa.

"Heh-heh. You wanna know all about Asaka's and my brave deeds, do you?"

As soon as he replies, I immediately regret my decision.

It does seem like he also wants to relieve the awkward tension of the situation, so maybe he's playing it up on purpose, but I suspect that he's also enjoying a chance to brag.

"Actually, forget I said anything."

"C'mon, don't be like that. First of all, take a look at this. What do you think?"

Tagawa produces a sword from his belt.

"A katana!"

"A pseudo-katana anyway. I had it made to look like one," Tagawa says proudly.

Katanas don't exist in this world.

So even if Tagawa's is just an imitation, that still makes it the only one in the world.

And on top of that, this katana is a magic sword, too.

If parts of a powerful monster are used as ingredients to craft a weapon, it'll sometimes be imbued with a unique effect.

Weapons with such effects are called magic swords.

"A katana that's also a magic sword? Wow. That's awesome."

That is all I can manage to say.

I mean, who doesn't want a powerful magic weapon?

"Right? This baby was made from the claw of a thunder dragon that Asaka and I brought down, so it's got thunder magic inside. And Asaka's staff there was made from the bone of a wind dragon that we beat another time. That one can make Wind Magic stronger."

Wow, so you can make equipment this good if you defeat a dragon?

And on closer inspection, the pair's armor looks like it was made from other dragon parts, too.

"Just to be clear, we didn't defeat them all by ourselves, okay? All we did was join forces with a larger group of adventurers."

I was very impressed with Tagawa's boasting, until Kushitani added a few words in a cold voice to knock him down a peg.

She always seemed serious and coolheaded, which clearly hasn't changed in this world.

Back then, she was close with the similarly minded class representative, Kudo, but tended to butt heads with Fei.

Even now, it seems like she's trying to keep her distance from Fei, whose aversion to serious people hasn't changed, either.

"Modesty is a virtue, but judging by all the materials you acquired, surely you played a large role in the battle, no? I'm looking forward to seeing that dragon-slaying strength for myself."

With a graceful smile, Katia pats Tagawa's shoulder.

Tagawa, however, looks a bit perturbed.

"Listen. No offense, but are you really Ooshima? 'Cause you kinda act and talk like a

totally different person..."

Deflecting the suspicion thrown on his character, Tagawa voices some doubts of his own.

I can see why, though. Fei and I have gotten used to it by now, but for people who knew her as a man in our previous lives, hearing Katia's ladylike speech can definitely have a jarring effect.

That would explain why Tagawa's been acting strange around her, but he clearly couldn't hold back any longer.

Still, it's a bit much to say that she's like a totally different person.

Katia hasn't changed a bit.

"Well, of course I do. I was reborn as a woman, and the daughter of a noble family no less. How could I not change, growing up under such circumstances?"

However, Katia's reply directly refutes my personal belief that she hasn't changed as a person.

I turn to her in surprise, and our eyes meet.

Katia smiles at me meaningfully. Seeing this, Tagawa and Kushitani exchange glances with expressions I can't quite read.

"This is the barrier."

The elves stop in front of what looks like a thin, transparent film.

It stretches to the left and right as far as I can see and upward, too.

If I stare up long enough, I can see the curve of a faint dome covering us.

It's so transparent that I didn't realize it was there until now, but the barrier has been above us all along.

"Does this extend underground, too?" Tagawa asks.

"Yes, in the same way as it does in the sky," one of the elves responds.

Which means no one can invade the village by tunneling underneath.

"Is it all right if I touch it?"

"Go ahead."

It doesn't appear to be the type of barrier that electrocutes you or anything, so I cautiously reach out and touch it.

The surface feels very strange, sort of like touching glass that doesn't have a temperature.

Contrary to its thin appearance, it actually feels quite hard.

"Mind if I test how sturdy it is?"

The elf nods at Tagawa's request.

As I watch on curiously, Tagawa pulls out his katana, and the blade sparks with purple lightning.

A crackling sound fills the air, and powerful energy converges on his sword.

A little alarmed, I warn everyone to step away from Tagawa.

Once we're at a safe distance, Tagawa swings his katana.

The lightning built up on the blade flies off and smashes into the barrier.

A searing flash of light blazes through the area with a loud *boom*, and the heated air whips up into a gale.

I guess I should have expected as much from a magic sword made of dragon parts and the swordsman who helped slay the dragon.

Even simply watching from close by, I can tell just how powerful Tagawa is.

And yet...

"Well, damn."

Tagawa whistles in admiration.

His all-out attack didn't even scratch the barrier.

"There's no way they can break this, right? It's way too tough," he remarks, sheathing his katana.

He must have felt as soon as he attacked that it was impregnable.

"Do you want to try, too, Fei?"

"Nah, I can't be bothered. If that little move didn't work, I'm not gonna be able to break it, either"

Fei has the highest offensive power of any of us, and she's decided that it's unbreakable without even trying.

In a way, that only confirms how amazing this barrier is.

Tagawa nods. "No way Natsume can break through that—"

"But they don't need to break it, do they?" Katia interrupts unexpectedly.

"What d'you mean?"

"It's simple. They just need to either deactivate the barrier from inside or perhaps enter the same way we did."

My eyes widen at Katia's calm tone.

She's right. If they could do that, they wouldn't need to break anything.

But in order to deactivate it from the inside or use a teleport point to enter, they would need a guide on the inside.

Obviously, you can't deactivate the barrier unless you're inside it.

And you can't use a teleport point like the one we used to get in without the help of

someone who knows where it is.

The location of the teleport point is so top secret that Ms. Oka made us swear not to tell anyone.

The elves must be the only ones who know where it is.

“Are you implying there could be a traitor among us?” one of the elves asks Katia sharply.

The other elves are scowling, too. They don’t seem too happy about the implication.

“It’s strictly hypothetical. As I’m sure you know, Hugo has the ability to brainwash others. Can you be absolutely certain that not a single one of you has been brainwashed?”

“Impossible. We would never succumb to such a thing.”

The elf’s response is entirely dismissive.

If you ask me, though, they’re underestimating Hugo’s power.

It’s not the kind of thing you can resist simply because your stats are high.

Since Katia has been brainwashed herself once, she knows all too well how terrifying that power is.

I can’t help but be irritated by the way the elves are sneering at her in spite of that.

“I see,” Katia replies evenly. “Nonetheless, I would propose temporarily shutting down the teleport points. Even if no one is brainwashed, it’s not impossible that somebody could leak one of their locations.”

She’s right. No matter how careful the elves might be, they can’t guarantee that the information hasn’t slipped out.

Between the far-reaching influence of the empire and the widespread Word of God religion, the enemy is bound to have an impeccable intelligence force.

They might have monitored the movement of elves outside the village to uncover the location of a teleport point.

“No need.”

The curt response shocks us all.

“No matter what tricks they employ, no mere humans could ever outsmart us.”

The elf’s tone couldn’t have been more arrogant.

And he’s making it clear that he looks down on us, too, not just the imperial army.

The tension gripping us is even worse than before.

Fei seems to be the angriest of all.

The way she’s crossing her arms and glaring at the elves reminds me of what she was like right before she would take out her anger on Wakaba back in our old world.

At this rate, she might actually thrash a bunch of them.

Likely sensing this as well, Hyrince puts a hand on Fei’s shoulder and silently shakes his head.

Fei reluctantly reins herself in.

I breathe a sigh of relief. Thank goodness we have someone as mature as Hyrince around.

My eyes also shift toward Anna, who’s been hanging her head in silence this entire time.

As a half elf who’s been persecuted by elves in the past, she’s probably having a hard time with this spat.

“At any rate, now we know the barrier can’t be broken. Let’s go back and discuss how the imperial army might make its move.”

Hyrince addresses this to the whole group.

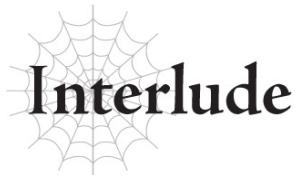
Everyone agrees, and we head back the way we came.

“Are these guys really worth defending?”

I pretend not to hear Fei's muttering along the way.

Ms. Oka's mysterious actions and the attitude of these elves...

If I think about all that for too long, I'll be tempted to agree with her grumbles.



THE HALF ELF'S HALF-LIFE

“Anna. Will you lend me your strength to help make our kingdom stronger?”

I still remember that person’s face, his hand as it reached out to me.

Master Schlain seems quite worried about me, but in actuality, I do not have many unpleasant memories of this village.

At least, not that I can remember.

My memories of my time here are vague, incomplete.

I imagine that my subconscious is trying its best to reject such painful memories.

And yet, strangely enough, I can still clearly recall the ideology of the race called elves.

The elves have a thoroughly warped outlook on the world.

To them, other races are vulgar and inferior.

This belief, which could essentially be called elf supremacy, is indoctrinated from a very young age.

Personally, I think it developed to cover up an inferiority complex.

The elves observe a strict monarchy, with Lord Potimas at the top as their chief.

From birth, elves are destined to devote their entire lives to serving Lord Potimas, working until the day they die.

Though it may be harsh to phrase it this way, they are essentially Lord Potimas’s slaves.

I believe that is why they look down on other races: to inflate their personal sense of social status.

I never realized this until after I left the elf village.

Elves are the supreme race. Serving Lord Potimas is the natural order of things. And half elves are meant to be oppressed.

While I lived here, I believed all these things without a shadow of a doubt.

It was simply common sense, as obvious as the law of gravity.

To the elves, it's only natural to despise the other races, so having a child with someone of an inferior race is inconceivable.

Any child born of such a union is bound to be the target of hatred and disgust.

I was often subjected to nasty insults, and there were times when it came to physical violence, too.

Most likely, the only reason I wasn't killed is that anything related to the elves, even a half elf like myself, is the property of Lord Potimas.

The other elves could not simply destroy their master's property without his permission.

So while I was subjected to terrible abuse, I was allowed to live.

That was my life in the elf village, as far as I can tell from pieced-together fragments of my time here.

My parents are nowhere to be found in those memories.

As I have never met them, I had no way of knowing what circumstances led to the birth of a half elf like me.

Eventually, I was driven out of the elf village.

This was most likely Lord Potimas's decision.

Every elf is the property of Lord Potimas, and their lives are at the mercy of his whims.

I was cast out, forced to wander aimlessly from place to place.

Until my exile, I was no different from a doll.

If the elves are slaves to their master, Lord Potimas, then I was even lower than that.

A living sandbag.

After I was driven out of the elf village, even I do not understand why I chose to continue living.

Why would a doll who had never felt happiness, who could not even recognize despair as anything but ordinary, try to live on her own?

It would almost have been more natural to simply do nothing and let myself starve to death.

But I did not die.

Instead, I found a reason to live.

The first person to grant me this was King Analeit of a few generations ago.

He heard of my magical prowess that I became known for during my wanderings, and he said he wanted to take me in.

This was the first time I had ever been wanted by anybody.

That may have been when my heart was truly born.

And so, I traveled to the Analeit Kingdom, where I have served devotedly ever since.

Sadly, the king who first summoned me passed away far too young. But on his deathbed, he entrusted me with the care of his son.

I will forever be thankful to the king who trusted an outsider like me. Never will I forget the pride I felt when I realized my service had earned such trust.

At that moment, I felt truly glad to have been able to serve him.

I made up my mind to remain loyal to the kingdom from then on.

Once I made that decision, I began to feel sorry for the race of elves.

From the moment they are born, it's already been decided where their loyalties must lie.

They never have a chance to choose for themselves or to even question authority.

Yes, it's exactly how I felt when I lived in the elf village.

Fortunately, I encountered someone who I could serve of my own free will.

Of that I was deeply proud.

However, my pride was later to be crushed.

When I was manipulated by Prince Hugo of the empire.

Master Schlain insists I am not to blame.

However, to cling to those kind words would only be running away from my guilt.

I must prove my worth to Master Schlain to atone for how I have troubled him.

And yet, I do nothing but hold him back.

Even my magical strength, which once was a source of confidence, pales in comparison to the strength of Master Schlain and his friends now that they have grown.

Instead of atoning, I am only inconveniencing him further.

Though I feel that things cannot be allowed to continue this way, there seems to be nothing I can do.

I cannot be of help in battle, and now even in everyday life, it is Master Schlain who looks out for me.

He knows that I was persecuted in the elf village because I am a half elf, making him even more concerned ever since we arrived here.

Even though he has much more important problems to concern himself with than the likes of me.

I have become a burden to Master Schlain.

This reality weighs heavily on me.

Perhaps I should have simply stayed in the kingdom?

I have thought this countless times, yet I still came along.

I cannot continue to hold back Master Schlain any longer.

I swear to be useful in the next battle, no matter what.



THE TOWN

I munch on one of the robber corpses I absconded with.

I didn't actually intend to take them with me, but one of my Parallel Minds picked them up.

Just stuffed 'em into my Spatial Storage with Spatial Magic.

I guess I don't really mind, but I'm a little surprised that my Parallel Minds did something I wasn't planning on doing at all.

Parallel Minds is a skill that essentially makes copies of my consciousness, sort of like an intentionally induced multiple personality disorder.

But the copies have the same thought processes as I do, so there's more of me.

All of them are the real me, with no particular distinction between one or the other.

Together, these split-up copies form my mind, my consciousness.

At least, that's what I thought. But after they were away fighting Mother for so long, my Parallel Minds' behavior has been surprising me.

Grabbing these corpses is one example.

I fully intended to leave the corpses there, yet the Parallel Minds collected them like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And when I asked why they did that, the response was: *[Why in the world wouldn't we do that?]*

The other Parallel Minds agreed, so I was the only dissenter.

I'm having a difference of opinion with my Parallel Minds, which are supposed to be me.

That's never happened before. It's not like I had any reason to think it was possible before this.

I mean, it doesn't make sense to disagree with myself, right?

But somehow, that's exactly what happened.

I should be happy that my Parallel Minds defeated Mother and came back, but I can't help feeling a little uneasy about the change.

Which is mostly why I haven't given them control of the body since they got back.

My role used to be the "information brain": analyzing the enemy with Appraisal and such.

Body brain was in charge of moving my body, the magic brains were in charge of magic, and so on and so forth.

But now, I'm moving my own body.

Since I used to do everything with only one consciousness, it's not like I forgot how.

It's just much more efficient to divide up work among Parallel Minds.

Now I'm sacrificing that efficiency to do everything myself, just like I used to before I had my Parallel Minds.

They can still use magic on their own, but everything else can be done only by the "real" me.

My Parallel Minds haven't complained about this.

I'm guessing they've pretty much figured out what I'm thinking.

Maybe they can tell that they've changed, too.

But I haven't taken any serious steps to separate myself from them or anything yet.

It's not really that surprising that they were able to pick up that corpse.

My main guiding principles are to never leave anything behind and always eat the monsters I kill.

There are some exceptions, of course, like when circumstances clearly won't allow it.

For me, this was one of those cases.

I did intend to collect the thieves' bodies at first, but when I encountered a fellow reincarnation, those plans flew out the window.

My original intention was to make it look like I was a monster who just happened to be passing by, killed the robbers, and made off with their corpses.

But one of the guards who I thought had been killed by the robbers was actually hanging on to life by a thread, so I ended up saving him on impulse.

My whole "passerby monster" scenario was already screwed at that point.

I defeated the robbers and then healed an injured human, which probably made it obvious that I was deliberately saving them.

That alone was more than enough to cause some gossip, but then I had to go and lock eyes with that stupid baby on top of it.

I drew way too much attention to myself.

And the more I stand out, the more likely it is that people will start talking about me.

If rumors spread, word might even reach the Demon Lord's ears.

Which was exactly why I decided to abandon the corpses and book it outta there before I did anything to make myself stand out even more.

Though by then it was too little, too late.

I'd already drawn attention to myself in so many other ways. Guess another strange phenomenon like the corpses mysteriously disappearing won't make much of a difference.

All things considered, it's not like the Parallel Minds did something terrible or anything.

The only reason I feel bad now is that the bodies of the robbers I'm currently eating are smelly and gross.

That's all.

While I reluctantly eat the corpses of Stinky, Smelly, and Nasty, I stare at a large town.

You see, I figured that if I followed a road big enough for horse-drawn carriages, I would stumble upon a town sooner or later.

It's a bit bigger than I expected.

A little surprising it's this close to where I rescued that carriage, too.

Why were you morons causing trouble so close to a town?

You were basically begging to have the guards called on you.

If I were you, I'd commit my crimes slightly farther away from civilization.

Oh, I guess it doesn't matter, since you've already been killed and I'm eating you right now.

Anyway, the town is surrounded on all sides by some sturdy-looking walls.

When you live in a world that's full of dangerous monsters, I suppose there's no way to live in peace without shelter like that.

As proof, there isn't a single building outside the walls.

A lot of the time, when there's a town this big, more buildings will start cropping up outside the walls as the city expands outward.

But all the buildings here are snug within the walls.

Maybe they figure monsters might attack before they even finish building anything on the unguarded land.

Besides, I imagine it helps keep out ruffians like the ones I'm chewing on right now, too.

There's a watchtower at the four corners, and soldiers are patrolling along the walls as well.

It's super-dark right now, too. I'm impressed!

I mean, I've got a maxed-out Night Vision skill, so I can see perfectly, but still. These average Joes aren't even nocturnal, so it's quite brave of them to keep watch at night with hardly any light sources.

Yes, it's nighttime right now. The dead of night, in fact.

A time when all good little children should be tucked into bed.

Since there aren't any streetlights or anything in this world, towns get awfully dark at night.

It looks like most people go to bed pretty early, too. As soon as the sun sets, they turn out the lights and hit the hay.

Well, I guess that makes sense. Unlike modern Japan, they have to use fire as their light source, which can't be cheap.

It's probably safer and more economic to turn out the lights and go to bed early.

So even though there're plenty of people living in this town, it gets super-dark and quiet as soon as night falls.

It really drives home the differences between here and Japan.

It's always bright in Japan, even at night.

If you look at satellite photos of Earth's side where it's the middle of the night, the islands of Japan are always lit up very clearly.

Since that's what I'm used to, I can't help thinking, *Damn, I didn't know night was this dark.*

Still not as dark as the inside of the labyrinth, though!

After all, there was no moonlight or starlight in there.

Oh, by the way, turns out this place has more than one moon.

When I first saw that, I couldn't help being a bit moved by the otherworldly feeling.

What does that mean for tides and stuff here, I wonder?

Anyway, any guesses as to why I'm sizing up the town this late at night?

The answer is currently skulking through the town.

A group of people covered from head to toe in black clothing creep toward the big mansion at the heart of the city.

They might as well be screaming, *We're up to no good!*

The black-clad crew slips into the mansion without a sound.

It's not that the mansion's security is bad.

There are guards patrolling around the grounds keeping watch, and all the doors and windows are locked.

The homes of common people in this world don't seem to have locks at all, so to have them on every door and window is pretty high security.

The guards also have the Night Vision skill, plus others like Five Senses Enhancement and Presence Perception, so they're perfect to act as a manned alert system.

However, the group in black has no problems getting past them because their skills are simply superior.

They're armed to the teeth with skills that hide their presence, like Stealth, Concealment, Silence, and Odorless.

On top of that, I don't know how to explain this, but they move like real pros.

They slip past the guards' line of sight with effortlessly acrobatic movements, pick the locks with ease, and slip inside.

It's easy to see that they've done this kind of thing many times before.

They're expert hired hands whose skills put any ordinary thief to shame.

And in the garage (or carriage room, I guess) of the mansion they're currently targeting is a carriage that's very familiar indeed.

Yep. It's the same one I saw the baby bloodsucker in this afternoon.

You know what that means, don't you?

This giant mansion must be where the baby vampire lives!

Damn, this kid's family is loaded.

Actually, aren't they nobles?

From what I saw earlier and all, I'm guessing the baby bloodsucker's father is in charge of this town.

His name is John Keren.

Race: Human. *Human*. I say it twice because it's important.

Good for you, Baby Drac! You're a vampire who was born to human parents via some freak mutation!

Ah-ha-ha-ha!

Okay, it's not actually something to laugh about.

I don't know how vampires are usually treated in this world, but if an important noble suddenly has a vampire baby, that smells like it'll be trouble in the future.

Well, they'll have to deal with that themselves.

I can't hang around and look after 'em forever.

But right now, if I let something bad happen to them right before my eyes, it's gonna leave a bad taste in my mouth later.

Which is why it's time to bust out my new technique!

Panoptic Vision plus Jinx Evil Eye!

When I had only Clairvoyance, I could see stuff that was far away, but I couldn't Appraise it or use Evil Eyes on it or anything.

But guess what! Now that Clairvoyance has evolved into Panoptic Vision, I can totally combine those things!

See, I'm still in the forest near the town right now.

Even though I'm that far away from the mansion, if I combine Panoptic Vision with Evil Eye, I can attack the enemy with zero chance of retaliation! With perfect accuracy, no less!

Think about it. Evil Eye affects anything in my field of vision, so it's not like it can miss.

That means that as long as I can see the enemy, I can attack them without fail!

It's the ultimate long-distance attack. Sounds pretty badass, doesn't it? Hey, I'm just saying.

Anyway, Jinx Evil Eye absorbs the victim's HP, MP, and SP and continuously lowers their stats to boot.

And since it's insanely far, they won't be able to fight back.

Pretty brutal, if I do say so myself.

Actually, with my super-high Magic Attack stats, it can kill humans pretty much instantly.

So without further ado, I use this nasty little number on the intruders.

They collapse on the spot as if they've been struck down by a sudden attack.

I mean, that is pretty much what happened.

I sucked out all their HP, MP, and SP in an instant.

Boy, it's sure gonna seem mysterious that they all dropped dead despite having no visible wounds.

I'm just gonna leave those mysterious corpses in the mansion.

That's sure to cause a big ol' panic in the house tomorrow morning.

But I'm not trying to prank them by leaving the bodies there or anything.

I'm leaving that suspicious-looking bunch of dead guys there as a message, to let them know they're being targeted.

Yes, that's right. Someone is targeting this mansion.

I learned about the whole thing not long after arriving in town.

As I was gazing at the first human settlement I'd ever seen in this world, the carriage with the baby bloodsucker pulled in. It had been attacked just outside of town, after all.

A sketchy-looking crew was staring at their carriage.

There was something dangerous about the look in their eyes.

That's when it hit me!

Maybe these guys were the ones who sent those robbers after the carriage in the first place?

Sudden misfortune befalls the feudal lord's wife and daughter.

Thereafter, the lord drowns in despair and ruin.

And hidden in the shadows, some bad guys reap the rewards.

It all clearly unfolded in my mind like the plot of a pulp novel.

Decent guess, though, isn't it? I decided to keep an eye on these shady characters for a bit.

Luckily, the Demon Lord is currently in the Bottom Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth, for whatever reason.

This town is pretty far away from the labyrinth, and it'd take a while just to get back to the surface from the Bottom Stratum.

It'll be at least a few days before the Demon Lord can possibly catch up with me.

There shouldn't be any issues if I kick around here for a bit.

I don't think it'd be my fault if something happens to them while I'm not around to keep an eye out, but I'm not gonna just ignore a ticking time bomb if I see it right there.

I mean, if they get killed after I went to all the trouble of rescuing them from those robbers, that'd be a wasted effort, right?

That's why I decided to keep an eye on those extremely suspicious characters.

First, they started having some kind of strategy meeting in what looked like a secret hideout.

Once in a while it almost seemed like one of them was glancing at me, but I must've imagined that. Right?

And as I continued to watch them, the strangest thing happened.

They tried to break into the mansion in the middle of the night!

Honestly, I was surprised they were aggressive enough to gun for it the very same day.

They've got guts; I'll give 'em that.

But they're dead now, so a fat lot of good that did them.

Anyway, I wiped out those would-be intruders, but I still haven't dealt with the source of the problem.

There are still several people in the hideout.

And one of them seems to have Clairvoyance, too.

The moment the intruders dropped dead, he went and reported it to a boss-looking fellow.

I don't understand the language here, so of course I don't know what he said, but I'm sure he was reporting that the crew of intruders kicked the bucket.

Then the boss guy in the important-looking robe used Telepathy to get in touch with someone or other.

I kind of intercepted the message with Professor Wisdom or something, but it's not like I understood it anyway.

The person he was talking to was a really stuck-up-sounding guy. Maybe he was the robe guy's boss?

That would mean that the organization that's targeting the lord has more branches outside this town.

If I take out all the schemers here, they might just send reinforcements from another branch.

So it makes no sense for me to kill the ones in this town.

It's not my job to go up against some fancy anti-lord organization, okay?

That's why I left the corpses there to let the lord know that someone's after his family.

If he knows he's being targeted, he can probably figure out the culprit by ID'ing the intruders or whatever.

After that, it's up to him to defend his family somehow.

That's about the best I can do for ya, kid.

Even if we do technically know each other from our previous lives, I'd say it's pretty darn nice of me to save your life twice.

So that's all well and good.

If a person's about to be killed by a monster or thieves or whatever right before my eyes, sure, I'll save them.

I certainly have the power to do so, so to look the other way would just make me feel guilty.

It's sorta like when you see trash lying on the ground, and the trash can is right there, so you just throw it out.

You get a little bit of self-satisfaction for doing your good deed of the day.

But I'm not gonna go so far as to stick my nose into places I can't see.

If someone dies when I'm not looking, well, that's not my fault.

I mean, what do you do if you see trash on the ground, but there's no trash can anywhere nearby?

You most likely leave it as is 'cause it's too much of a pain.

So even if the baby bloodsucker's family is being targeted, I'm not about to go crush the whole enemy organization.

That's way too much work.

So I'll help as long as it's somewhere I can see, but I think I'll let them handle the rest down the line.

I'm not so softhearted that I'm willing to devote a bunch of my time and energy to someone else for free.

Going all out just to help some rando isn't worth the effort.

I'm willing to work my hardest only when it directly benefits me.

At least, that was the plan.

But as soon as the guy in the robe takes off his hood, everything changes.

[An elf...] [An elf...] [An elf...] [An elf...] [An elf...] [An elf...]

The man's ears are long and pointed.

Aw yeah, now that's a classic fantasy race!

But I'm the only one who gets excited.

The other Parallel Minds all just mutter *[An elf]* in perfect unison.

This isn't just disinterest; it's... anger? Hostility? Hatred?

What in the world?

I don't understand why my Parallel Minds are so tense.

Why would their feelings suddenly shift like that?

Do they hate elves that much?

I have no idea why that would be the case.

But the Parallel Minds aren't questioning those feelings. Their attitude toward the elf is practically murderous.

[If the elves are involved, we can't just ignore it.]

[Agreed!] [No complaints here.] [Let's do it!]

And now it seems like they're ignoring my confusion and making a decision without even consulting me.

I just don't get it.

But it sorta seems like they're all gonna turn on me if I object.

The Demon Lord is far away in the Bottom Stratum, meaning we do have a little while before she chases us down.

Besides, now that I've expanded my horizons and found more places I can escape to, I can just teleport away as soon as the Demon Lord starts to get close.

As long as I don't let my guard down, I'm pretty sure the Demon Lord's not gonna catch me.

So it's not really a problem if I stay here for a bit.

But still, it's scary that I don't know what my own Parallel Minds are thinking.

It's almost like a part of me is turning into someone else entirely...

I'm pretty freaked out by the whole thing, honestly.

Still, I don't think I'm going to oppose them.

Because I have a bad feeling about what might happen if I do.

And so, for whatever reason, I decide to stay near this town for a while.



Special Chapter

THE CONSPIRATORS: CHIEF OF THE ELVES

“A failure?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Even through Telepathy, his voice is trembling.

He must be afraid I will blame him for this loss. Why does he think I would waste my time on such worthless things?

There is nothing to be gained from complaining every time a disposable thing is wasted.

The only distinction between those lesser elves is whether they are mass-produced, low-cost inferior items or high-cost, slightly useful custom-made items.

The failure of the former is already factored into my plans.

Even for the custom-made items, I do not have overly high expectations.

No matter which might fail, I will not be surprised, let alone become angry enough to dole out punishment.

Although I suppose there is one irregularity among my custom-made items that was rather unexpected.

“Was it Oka...?”

“I am sorry we were unable to meet Lady Oka’s expectations.”

The mass-produced object babbles something, misinterpreting my aside.

Oka: the custom-made item that was created as my child.

I was certainly surprised she turned out to be a reincarnation of a human from another world.

But I am grateful to Oka.

Because of her, I was able to find out very quickly about the existence of the irregulars known as reincarnations.

That is why I have bestowed upon her the privilege of being my daughter.

As she requested, I am prioritizing the protection of the reincarnations.

Depending on her future achievements, I may even consider granting her a position close to mine in both name and status, though she will never be my equal, of course.

She has proven herself most indispensable.

Simply by being a reincarnation and having the accompanying knowledge, she has proven more valuable than any other custom-made item at my disposal.

And furthermore, she has that skill.

The skill called Student Roster.

It is as though she were sent to me by a god, no?

And I do mean a genuine god, not some foolish being like an administrator.

To think that the day would come that I would be grateful to a god.

But this is truly the ultimate gift.

It would be impolite not to exploit it as much as possible.

As she is but a sapling, Oka can only deal in information, but I intend to put her to work as soon as she is ripe of age.

No doubt she'll be more than willing if I say it is for the sake of her precious students.

If I protect the reincarnations as she wishes and continue to soak up the nectar of her

knowledge, she will surely carry on even if she has slight suspicions.

Just imagining such a comical sight improves my mood greatly.

Yes, Oka is a very devoted daughter indeed.

And I shall have her dance for me.

“Heh-heh-heh.”

“Y-you seem to be in a good mood, my lord...”

Yes, I suppose I am.

Impressive that a worthless throwaway can perceive my emotions.

For that much I will credit him.

However, he did fail to kidnap Keren’s daughter, and that is unacceptable.

“Let us return to the matter at hand. So you say that you attempted two separate strategies, and both of them failed?”

“Yes, my lord. The first time, as I reported, we were hindered by a spider monster.”

I think back on the contents of his earlier report.

He carried out a plan to kidnap Keren’s daughter, a reincarnation, but failed.

Twice, no less.

The first time, they had robbers attack the carriage carrying the mother and child.

The second time, they attempted to break in to the mansion in a direct attempt to steal the child.

However, a spider monster foiled the first attempt, and during the second, the parties involved met with an abrupt and mysterious death.

The throwaway reports that they believe these deaths may be related to the spider

monster from the first attempt, and I am inclined to agree.

It cannot simply be a coincidence.

I must assume that our interloper was aware of our plans and arranged to interfere with them in advance.

Damn you, Ariel, how did you sniff us out?

If a spider monster was involved, it can be only her doing.

One would think that utilizing the various slave-trade and human-trafficking channels to mask which children were our real targets should have thrown her off the trail.

Although that was originally intended as a countermeasure against a different man, not her.

I never expected that Ariel would interfere, since she wasn't already keeping a lookout for such things.

But if word of our movements has leaked to Ariel, I must assume that man knows, too.

At worst, I may even need to take on Ariel and that man at the same time.

Ariel is a powerful individual, but that man—Dustin, the pontiff of the Word of God sect—has the might of a massive organization behind him.

It is difficult to say which is worse, but it would be unwise to make an enemy of either.

I do not know whether Dustin is aware of the reincarnations yet, but he is very inconveniently located.

Keren County in Sariella is exactly where he has been setting up his little schemes.

Whether he is aware of them or not, if we take any more noticeable actions, we are sure to catch his eye.

If we must do battle with Ariel and Dustin at the same time, I will require a warrior with both the power to keep Ariel in check and the adaptability to outwit Dustin's plans on the spot.

I do not have such a thing, even among my custom-made items.

In which case, I am left with only one option.

"How do you wish me to proceed next, my lord?"

"I will take care of it personally."

The throwaway is silent, evidently stunned by my response.

"Be sure to keep close watch on that spider. If there is any development, report to me at once," I order, then pause for a moment.

"Are you listening? Whoever you are, I shall deal with you directly. If you plan to attack me, you had best be prepared."

This last part is a message for anyone who might be listening in.

The mass-produced throwaway will surely not understand any of that, so I cut off our telepathic connection.

He may be taken out before my arrival, but the loss of any number of mass-produced objects is of no consequence to me.

Now it is time to take action of my own.

My goal is to capture the Keren girl, the reincarnation.

Disposing of Ariel's offspring is my secondary objective, or if Ariel herself should appear, I shall dispose of her, too, if I am able.

This will be a perfect opportunity to test out the new Gloria type-A model.



THE DAY BEFORE THE BATTLE

The day after going to see the barrier, we all gather to discuss countermeasures against the approaching imperial army.

"First of all, if we assume they can't destroy the barrier, then they'll most likely target the teleport points, like the little lady said yesterday. Given our own experience teleporting here, I'd like to think the security is pretty solid, but we can't be sure."

Hyrince takes the lead, voicing his concerns.

Just as Katia told the elves before, if the imperial army has no means to break the barrier, they must intend to invade using a teleport point.

According to Ms. Oka, due to the special properties of this village's barrier, it's impossible to get inside without using a teleport point.

As long as the imperial army can't destroy the barrier, all we need to do is protect the teleport points to ensure that we avoid any needless battle with them.

The easiest way to do this would be to temporarily disable the teleport points, but the elves' attitudes yesterday made it clear they would do no such thing.

"Why would they be so stubborn about taking our advice?"

"It's probably their stupid elf pride. Although they might have just been hiding the fact that they can't disable the teleport points."

Hyrince looks disinterested, but that sounds like a pretty important theory to me.

"They can't disable them?"

"Chances are they can't. At the very least, normal teleport points can't be disabled from

only one side. You need someone operating on both ends to deactivate them. And once you do that, it takes some time and effort to reactivate them. On top of that, the teleport points here are special, since they have to cross that powerful barrier we all saw yesterday. Maybe they were so snippy about it because it's too difficult to stop and restart them?"

I see. That makes sense.

"Do you know anything about this, Anna?"

"Regretfully, I do not. There is no hope of a half elf such as myself being privy to that sort of information. My apologies."

Anna looks terribly morose, and I realize it was foolish of me to ask her.

If I had thought about it for a moment, I would have realized that someone who was persecuted like Anna was wouldn't have access to such confidential information.

I stupidly reopened old wounds, and on top of that, she told me she was sorry about it? I'm the one who should apologize.

"No, I'm sorry for asking you such a stupid question."

"Not at all, Master Schlain. You need not apologize for anything. It is I who disappointed you with my incompetence."

"No, no..." We're starting to get into an endless loop of apologies, so Hyrince raises a hand to stop us.

"Let's move on. By my reckoning, we can't stop the teleport points. Therefore, I believe our best course of action would be to help defend them here. What do you all think?"

"But in that case, what do we do if it turns out that any of the elves have been brainwashed?" I ask.

There could be an elf in the village who's been brainwashed by Hugo.

If so, they would most likely try to deal with it internally.

"Shun, there's nothing we can do about that," Hyrince responds bluntly.

"It's just as Mr. Hyrince says. Surely we cannot Appraise every elf in this entire village, correct? After all that boasting yesterday, they'll likely try to keep a situation like that among themselves. If they think they can resist being brainwashed, I'd love to see them try."

Katia smiles mirthlessly.

She must be still angry about the elves claiming to be immune to brainwashing, since she's been brainwashed herself.

Her sarcastic tone makes her irritation crystal clear.

"I mean, I know we have no way of finding brainwashed elves if there are any, but should we really just forget about it entirely 'cause of that? If there are, couldn't they wreak havoc in here or assassinate key people or something?"

"Kunihiko's right. Besides, we don't really know for sure that the barrier can't be broken, do we? In the worst-case scenario, an army of intruders could come in through the teleport points, while brainwashed elves raise a commotion in the village at the same time. What if the barrier does get broken on top of all that?"

Kushitani takes her partner's hypothetical scenario to its logical conclusion.

"That certainly would be the worst...," I murmur.

The atmosphere in the room grows heavy.

"I hate to say it, but... that's not really the worst-case scenario yet, is it?"

Fei opens her mouth and brings the mood down even further.

"You remember, don't you? There's someone even worse out there than stupid Natsume."

At Fei's words, it all comes back to me.

No, that's not the right expression.

Those memories haven't left my mind once.

The person who canceled out my magic with a wave of her hand, who defeated Ms.

Oka as easily as if she was twisting the arm of a baby, who Fei took one look at and deemed a “monstrosity.”

“Shouko Negishi.” Fei’s voice is grave.

The reincarnation Shouko Negishi.

Her name in this world is Sophia Keren.

She’s overwhelmingly powerful and seems to be working with Hugo.

And according to Ms. Oka, she’s also one of the reincarnations who’s sided with the “administrators.”

“Negishi? You mean *that* Negishi?” Tagawa asks uncertainly.

In our previous lives, Shouko Negishi definitely stood out.

So Tagawa and Kushitani seem to remember her, too.

“Oh, it’s her; all right,” Fei confirms, then looks to me.

At her prompting, I explain the incident with Hugo in the capital and what our encounter with Sophia was like.

“Is she really that strong?”

“I took one look at her and knew I couldn’t win that fight—I’ll tell you that much.”

Fei is the strongest of all of us, so her words carry serious weight.

That means no one in this group has any hope of beating Sophia alone.

Incidentally, I got Tagawa’s and Kushitani’s permission to Appraise them earlier.

Both have stats just below mine, higher than Katia’s.

That means they’ll be strong allies, but that also means they’re still weaker than Fei.

If Fei can’t beat Sophia, they won’t stand a chance.

"A power that can cancel out magic, hmm...?"

Tagawa furrows his brow.

"Would that ability work on the barrier?"

Hearing that, I can't help but gasp.

Clearly, Sophia has some kind of skill that can cancel out magic.

What if she can cancel out the barrier, too?

"I don't know," I respond honestly.

I don't know how strong Sophia's magic-canceling ability is or what its limits are, and I don't know how thoroughly the barrier will be able to resist it, either.

But if the barrier can't stand up to Sophia's ability, then we can no longer assume it's impenetrable.

"Uh-oh. So now what? We keep an eye out for the barrier breaking, keep an eye out for intruders from the teleport points, keep an eye out for brainwashed elves running wild, and keep an eye out for some monstrosity who none of us can beat? Give me a break already."

At Tagawa's words, the somber mood sinks even further.

"Not to mention, we can't be sure that Negishi is the only reincarnation with them," Katia adds, as if to strike the finishing blow.

Is now really the time to say that...?

No, I suppose we have to confront all the possible problems.

Still, I can't deny that I've been avoiding that particular topic.

"We know there are at least three reincarnations against us: Natsume, Negishi, and Hasebe, who's brainwashed. And according to the information I've gathered, there are still two reincarnations whose whereabouts are unknown: Shinobu Kusama and Kyousuke Sasajima."

As soon as those two names come up, especially Kyouya's, my heart sinks even further.

In our old world, Katia, Kyouya, and I were best friends.

And now, it's possible that Kyouya has become our enemy.

Just thinking about it puts a pit in my stomach.

"Shinobu and Kyouya, huh? What do you think the odds are that they'll be with Hugo's army, Kanata?"

"I'm all but certain that at least one of them will be. It could very well be both, but I can't say for sure."

Katia's words strike home a grim reality.

Judging by what Ms. Oka has said so far, there are almost certainly other reincarnations who have taken the side of the administrators.

Which means that out of the two who are unaccounted for, at least one of them is most likely our enemy now.

And considering that Ms. Oka has stopped searching for the reincarnations, I'm assuming that means she knows where all of them are.

If she knows where they are but can't bring them back and won't tell us about it, that hints they're not on our side.

Like Katia said, we can't know for sure, but it's entirely possible that both of them have allied with the enemy.

At the same time, something feels off about it.

Would Kyouya really join up with those mysterious administrators?

Kyouya had a gentle, kind personality.

He was a quiet person who avoided standing out or conflicting with others, but deep down I think he held a strong sense of justice.

When Katia—Kanata—took a joke too far, Kyouya was always there with a firm scolding.

Could that same Kyouya really forgive all the awful things Hugo has done?

“Hey, Katia. Do you really think Kyouya is our enemy now?”

I decide to voice my honest concerns to Katia.

The Kyouya I remember would have never accepted Hugo’s actions.

He was always deeply disgusted by evil deeds.

So actions like forcing a brainwashed Sue to kill her own father or brainwashing Katia into fighting me would go against everything he stood for.

“I couldn’t say. If you only consider the old Kyouya, it would be unnatural for him to support Hugo.”

“Then why...?”

“Because we can’t base our assumptions on our old lives, Shun. Just as we’ve been living different lives in this world, Kyouya has been walking his own path for equally as long. It’s possible he’s become a completely different person in that time.”

She’s right, of course.

We’ve been here plenty long enough for someone to change.

Katia herself has asserted that she’s essentially a different person.

Yuri became obsessed with religion in a way that would’ve been unthinkable for her old self.

And even Hugo didn’t do such insane things back then.

Everyone has changed.

From other people’s perspectives, I might have changed, too, even if I haven’t noticed it myself.

My stubborn belief that Kyouya hasn't changed is probably just me selfishly clinging to memories of our old lives.

"Yeah... you're right, huh? I guess it's possible Kyouya's changed..."

"Is anyone going to talk about Kusama or what?"

Just as I start to sink into despair, Kushitani cuts in with some perfectly timed dry humor.

"Sorry, Kusama. I guess we all forgot about you."

Tagawa follows suit, clasping his hands in mock apology to our absent classmate.

Everyone laughs a little, releasing some of the tension in the room.

Kushitani must have said that to lighten the mood for everyone.

Honestly, I don't know how someone so quiet and thoughtful can spend all her time with the likes of Tagawa.

"Kusama, hmm? I have to admit, I can't picture that dork joining up with the side of evil, either."

If Natsume was the leader of the class, Kusama was the class clown.

"I dunno," Fei drawls. "I bet Shino would hop on board to do odd jobs without any idea what they're plotting behind the scenes."

None of us reincarnations can argue with that.

Kusama was definitely the kind of person who would happily run errands for anybody.

Fei would know, since she was always getting him to do stuff for her back then.

"So it is possible that both of them are with the enemy now..."

I don't want to believe it, but we have to be prepared for the worst.

"So on top of Negishi, who's stronger than anyone here, we might have to deal with

two more reincarnations of unknown strength, too. Like we didn't have enough problems? Gimme a break already."

Tagawa's complaints hit the nail on the head.

We can't deal with all this alone.

"Yeah, it'll be tough. But we still have to do it."

Otherwise, the risks we took to get this far would all be for nothing.

After my resolute declaration, Hyrince steps in.

"Right. Sorry to interrupt while you're getting all worked up here, but remember, this is ultimately a battle between the empire and the elves, got it? We're only here to provide backup."

He pauses for a moment to let that sink in.

"All of us are extras in this battle. It's not a fight we have to win no matter what. Don't forget that."

"But if we lose, the elves—"

"That's war in a nutshell. Besides, I hate to say it, but I have no obligation to defend the elves. If we can defeat Prince Hugo in this battle, I'll certainly be thrilled, but honestly, the rest doesn't really matter to me."

Hearing this from Hyrince stuns me into silence.

"Listen. Don't get your priorities mixed up, okay? All you have to do in this battle is protect the reincarnations who live here. And that includes yourselves. After that, your secondary goal is to defeat Prince Hugo. There's no point worrying about who wins between the elves and the empire. That's for the elves to handle, not us."

I can't help but wonder if he's saying this because he's bitter about how rude the elves were yesterday.

But Hyrince is a mature adult, and he's not done speaking.

"Of course, since we are here to aid the elves, I fully intend to do everything in my power to help them win. But the last thing I want is for any one of you to die for that cause. So if it gets to that point, remember that you can always retreat. Got it? Good."

Hyrince's tone doesn't leave room for anyone to object.

But I can't bring myself to agree, either.

The rational part of me knows that he's right, but the rest of me doesn't want to accept it.

"Shun. I know your history with Prince Hugo. And I know how much this battle means to you. But still, please make sure you put your survival first. I can't watch another person I care about die right in front of me. Please."

That's not fair.

If you put it like that, you know there's no way I can object.

Hyrince lost Julius and the rest of his friends right before his own eyes.

I can't refuse a request like that.

"All right. I understand."

Hyrince breathes a sigh of relief at my answer.

"Personally, I'd prefer that you form a group with all the other reincarnations and stay on the defensive, but you wouldn't be satisfied with that, right?"

Hyrince looks at me searchingly.

It's true that based on everything he's said, it would be safer and more in line with our goals for me to stay with the reincarnations who can't fight and be prepared to run away if necessary.

But I want to settle things with Hugo, too.

No, that's not quite right.

To be more accurate, I want to make sure Hugo doesn't hurt anyone else.

The more he plunges the human world into chaos, the easier it is for demons to take advantage and attack.

My brother Julius gave his life to defend the human race, and now Hugo is threatening to destroy them anyway.

That's more unforgivable to me than any personal grudge I have against Hugo.

I aim to stop him with this battle.

And when I say I don't want Hugo to hurt anyone else, that includes the elves.

They haven't exactly been friendly toward us, but that doesn't mean I want to see anything terrible happen to them.

I don't think I have it in me to stand idly by and watch as an entire race gets dragged into war.

So I can't just stay in a safe place with the other reincarnations and wait.

I have to do whatever I can to protect everyone.

Otherwise, there was no point coming to the village in the first place.

A single glance at my troubled expression told Hyrinse all he needed to know.

"Yeah, I figured. So forget that plan. Let's do as much as we can to help the elves win, then. That way we might get a chance to approach Prince Hugo."

I'm grateful that he's so worried about us, but we can't just leave everything to the hands of others.

"Thank you. And I'm sorry, everyone. I know it's selfish of me, but I really need to settle things with Hugo. I don't want to drag all of you into it, though."

"Oh, don't apologize. I have a score to settle with Hugo myself, after all."

"Yeah, hiding out in a safe place sounds lame anyway. I'll go with you."

Katia and Tagawa have my back immediately.

While looking at the latter, Kushitani's expression says that she can't help but go along with him.

Anna doesn't say anything, but it looks like she's quietly steeling her resolve.

Fei, for once, is silent.

I can't tell what she's thinking.

"Fei?"

"Mm. Huh? What is it?"

"Well, you seem worried about something..."

"Oh, sorry. Don't worry about it; it's no big deal."

"Is that so...?"

Her tone isn't very convincing, but since she says not to worry, I have no choice but to trust her.

"So, like we were saying earlier, I think our best bet is to help guard the teleport points. Assuming the barrier can't be destroyed, that'll be the most likely target. Even if the barrier is destroyed or if brainwashed elves start working from the inside, all we can do is deal with that when it happens. So it makes the most sense to protect something that we know for sure needs to be protected. If the enemy does ignore the teleport points and starts causing trouble elsewhere, we'll just have to run over to them then. If that does happen, we'll probably need your help, Miss Fei. Is that all right?"

"Yes, that's fine," Fei answers lightly.

"So basically, we'll have to play it by ear. Let's just do what we can, as best we can."

Hearing those words, a light goes on in my mind.

I recall the words of Basgath, our old labyrinth guide.

"Everyone has things they can do and things they can't. Trying to do the impossible anyway won't change a thing. Just stick to what yeh can do."

He was exactly right.

Maybe I've just been too greedy all this time.

I saw the situation as impossible because I was assuming we would deal with everything ourselves.

But all we can do is try our best.

Thinking of it that way, the burden on my shoulders feels a little lighter.

It's simple. I'll do what I can do with all my might.

And then I will do my best to fulfill my duties as the hero.

That's right. I lost sight of what really matters.

Settling things with Hugo is important, but there's something bigger than that at stake.

Protection. That's what comes first.

Julius's main goal as the hero was to protect everyone's peace.

If I really have to, I can wait to settle things with Hugo in order to put that first.

Because as long as the barrier stays unbroken and we manage to protect the teleport points and any brainwashed elves are dealt with, Hugo won't be able to lay a hand on the village.

Which means that we won't be able to lay a hand on Hugo, either.

But that's all right.

What matters most isn't settling the score with Hugo.

It's protecting people from senseless violence.

Doing everything I can to create a better future.

That's what's most important.

Right, Julius?

"Yes, I agree with Hyrince's plan."

Our goals have been decided. All that's left to do now is wait.



THE WYRM AND THE HALF ELF

The strategy meeting's over.

Ugh, my shoulders are stiff.

I flap the wings on my back a few times and stretch.

Man, I'm sleepy, too.

Whether it's class or a meeting, I guess that kind of thing still makes me sleepy.

I mean, I know that was a really important conversation, all right?

Doesn't mean I'm not gonna get sleepy, though. I'm just saying.

Sure, it was technically a strategy meeting, but nothing particularly important got decided.

We're just going to be on standby near the teleport points, really.

I mean, we did get to tell Kuni and Kushitani about Negishi and all, so I guess it wasn't a total waste of time, but still.

Negishi... Hmm.

Does Shun seriously think he can beat her or what?

I guess it wouldn't be the first time he's pushed himself too far.

Hyrince knows that, too, which is probably why he was trying to stop him, but I don't know if that did any good.

Hopefully, Katia can hold him back, but she doesn't understand how scary Negishi is,

so she might end up wanting to believe that Shun can beat her, too.

Love is blind, after all.

She has a ridiculous amount of faith in Shun, meaning I probably can't count on her very much.

Ugh...

I'm actually pretty unlucky, aren't I?

Same for Hyrince, too.

I returned to my assigned room after the meeting, but now my stomach hurts too much to sleep, for some reason.

Maybe I'll go out for a little walk.

As soon as I open the door and step outside, two elf men are there, as if they were waiting for me.

I barely manage to suppress a scowl.

Instead, I ignore them and keep walking, and the two men silently follow me.

Leave me alone, will ya?

Sooo annoying.

What's up with these guys anyway?

We're not criminals, you know.

I don't get why they have to watch us at all times.

As I wander around irritably, I find a crowd gathering nearby.

It sounds like they're laughing, too.

That's odd.

In the time we've spent here in the elf village, I've never once seen an elf laugh.

They don't even smile; they just grimace all the time.

But everyone in the group in front of me is laughing aloud.

Is there something funny going on?

I take a casual little peek, not expecting much.

There I see Anna cowering, her cheek swollen and red.

Huh?

Wait, what? What's going on here?

Is that mark on Anna's cheek from a punch?

Did somebody hit her?

And these guys are laughing at that?

"Hey, you! What do you all think you're doing?!"

Right away, I start shouting at them.

The elves stop laughing immediately and turn to stare blankly at me.

Their mechanical expressions make me even angrier.

"This is an issue among us elves. Strangers shouldn't stick their noses where they don't belong," one of the elves says curtly.

He seems to be the leader of this little group.

"Well, let me make something clear, then. Anna is our friend. That means I'm not a stranger, so I'm free to stick my nose in, correct?"

I step up to him and grab him by the collar.

“Or should I stick my fist in instead?”

I ball my free hand into a fist and draw it back.

I would love to pummel the smug elf’s face right now, but I force myself to hold back.

The two guards who were following me have drawn their weapons behind me.

Oh, come on!

I’m trying to stay calm here, so why do you have to go and start things?

“You sure you want to be pointing your weapons at me? I am a member of the real hero’s party, you know. Do you really want to make an enemy of the hero?”

I address all the elves present, not just the two behind me.

The elf whose shirt I’m holding shakes loose from my grip.

“Let’s go.”

The elves all turn their backs and start to walk away.

“Wait right there.”

I grab the ringleader’s shoulder and stop him.

“Apologize.”

“No need.”

“Maybe not for you, but we don’t see it that way. Apologize. Now.”

The elf leader tries to shake me off again.

I dig my fingers into his shoulder just strongly enough to keep him in place.

The elf’s face contorts with pain.

“Do you really think your actions will go unpunished, girl?”

"You're the one who laid a hand on Anna first, aren't you? I'll let you go as soon as you apologize. Go on."

He still doesn't give in.

I shrug and start putting more pressure on his shoulder.

Before long, it reaches the point where I might start breaking things if I press any harder.

"All right, all right! Sorry!"

Finally, he apologizes.

When I let go, he glares at me wrathfully but leaves without saying anything else.

Soon, the only people who remain are Anna, the four elves guarding us, and me.

The two who are guarding Anna must have been there when the violence started.

If they just stood there and watched without helping her, what are they even guarding us for in the first place?

"Thank you. I apologize for the trouble."

"Don't worry about it. Only a useless moron would stand by without doing anything to help," I respond, looking pointedly at the guards.

Their eyebrows twitch slightly, suggesting that my barb got through to them.

"Still, what about you, Anna? You're normally a terror when you're training us. Why wouldn't you just give those clowns a beatdown?"

I'm verrry familiar with Anna's intensity.

She's the one who helped me level up when I was younger, after all.

I'll never forget the hellish training she put me through back then.

That's all well and good, but she also believed the superstition that consuming the flesh of a strong monster would make you that much stronger, so she always used to

force me to choke the nasty stuff down.

As the memories bubble to the surface, I let out a pained chuckle.

“If I could do such a thing, I would not have struggled so.”

Anna glances at the four remaining elves.

Ahh.

Even if she wanted to complain, she can’t because these guys are here.

“I can’t believe they’d gang up on one girl, though! For having such long lives, elves sure do behave like children. Even human kids these days wouldn’t do something so immature.”

Since Anna can’t voice her concerns, I decide to complain for her.

...Not that I’m really one to talk, since I was a bully myself in my previous life.

“Are elves aaalways like that? I guess they still haven’t grown up, then. Why else would they do something that even a child knows is wrong? I’m sure that particular group of elves must just be extremely stupid.”

Oof, that one hit home!

I’m sorry, okay?! I get it! I was extremely stupid and childish myself in my past life!

“But I’m sure it’ll be fine from now on! These guys will totally protect you if it happens again, after all. They must’ve just been so shocked that their fellow elves would do something so vulgar that they couldn’t move, right, guys?”

I turn a bright smile toward the two elves who were guarding Anna, and their faces twitch.

They’re picking up on the heavy sarcasm I’m laying down here, then.

But they know that if they argue back, they’ll just be acknowledging that all elves are actually that vulgar.

That's the setup I was aiming for, anyway.

See, I want to believe that the elves aren't actually that stupid.

That they know what they're doing is socially unacceptable.

But it turns out elves are ludicrously prideful.

No matter how much I make fun of them, they're never going to admit that, yes, they are that stupid.

So all they can really do here is agree, if you ask me.

"Very well. We shall inform the other elves not to sully the dignity of our race."

I can practically see the veins popping in their foreheads, but they still gave in.

Hey, I did it!

Even if I had to stab myself in the heart a few times in the process.

In my previous life, I bullied a certain girl a lot.

Although I guess I don't know if you could quite call it bullying.

Her name was Hiiro Wakaba.

That vixen who bewitched the guy I liked with her ridiculously good looks.

Just remembering it makes me mad.

I worked up all my courage to confess to that upperclassman. Imagine how I felt when he said, "Sorry, I like Wakaba"!

I know it's not really her fault, but at the time, I couldn't help it.

When I went to her in tears to complain, she did nothing but stare me down with those cold eyes.

I think something inside me snapped at that moment.

Ever since then, I began to view Hiiro Wakaba as my mortal enemy, and I would pick on her whenever I got the chance.

I regularly insulted her to her face.

I hid or destroyed her stuff.

I put a razor blade in her desk.

You know, all the clichés.

But no matter what I did, she just ignored it with a cool expression.

That just pissed me off even more, and it might have escalated if my friends hadn't stopped me.

"Wakaba's scary, you know. You better not push her much further."

Ai and Himi both told me this very seriously, and my other friends said the same.

I knew something was up with her, too, but I just couldn't stop myself.

Whenever Wakaba looked at me with those eyes that seemed to stare right through me, I couldn't help getting angry.

Those eyes said I wasn't even a blip on her radar.

At some point, it stopped being about the guy I liked. I just couldn't stomach the look in her eyes.

It's not like I was going out with that guy anyway, and Wakaba didn't seem to like him back, either, so she never really took him from me in the first place.

Maybe I'm being punished for doing stuff like that.

I thought about that for a while inside my egg.

To be honest, I don't remember much about being in the egg.

It sort of feels like a dream now, y'know?

But I do remember being trapped somewhere dark and cramped.

And when I finally broke out of that awful place, I was a wyrm.

First I think I died without even realizing it, and then I was reborn as someone's pet dragon thing.

That's got to be divine punishment, right?

When I learned that all my other classmates were in this world, too, I made up my mind to apologize to Hiiro Wakaba when I saw her again.

To say sorry for doing all that stupid stuff.

But then I learned that Hiiro Wakaba was already dead.

Which means I'll be stuck feeling guilty like this for the rest of my life.

Maybe that's my real punishment.

"Anna, you knew something like this would happen, right? Why would you come all the way here with Shun knowing they were gonna give you a hard time?"

I finally ask something that I've been wondering for a while.

I always knew that Anna was pushing herself too far by coming with us.

But I couldn't figure out why she would stubbornly insist on coming anyway.

Especially now.

She knew that elves hated half elves, and she must have known that she would suffer if she came here.

"I have sworn my fealty to the Analeit royal family. If I were to stay behind for my own sake, it would betray that oath."

I can't tell how much of her answer is how she really feels and how much is merely formality.

Personally, I think she has special feelings toward Shun that have nothing to do with that oath.

I don't think it's romantic or anything, though.

Maybe it's more like a maternal instinct?

Yeah, that almost makes too much sense.

Anna sees Shun as her child, I think.

It's natural for a mother to want to protect her child.

She's trying to protect Shun from any suffering, no matter how hard it is on her.

It's not simple loyalty. She probably wants to help Shun no matter what because she has maternal feelings toward him, right?

Thinking about it that way, I feel much better.

Anna is like a foster parent to Shun.

Lucky you, Katia.

I guess this person isn't your rival after all.

In a sense, though, this bond might be even more powerful.

Motherly love is pretty strong.

It might even manifest more intensely than romantic love.

Shun tends to push himself already, but if he ends up in danger, Anna will probably protect him even if it comes at the cost of her life.

They're not related by blood, but they're still basically family.

That means one more person who might throw themselves headfirst into danger.

Man, I'd really like to just let Hyrince handle all this...

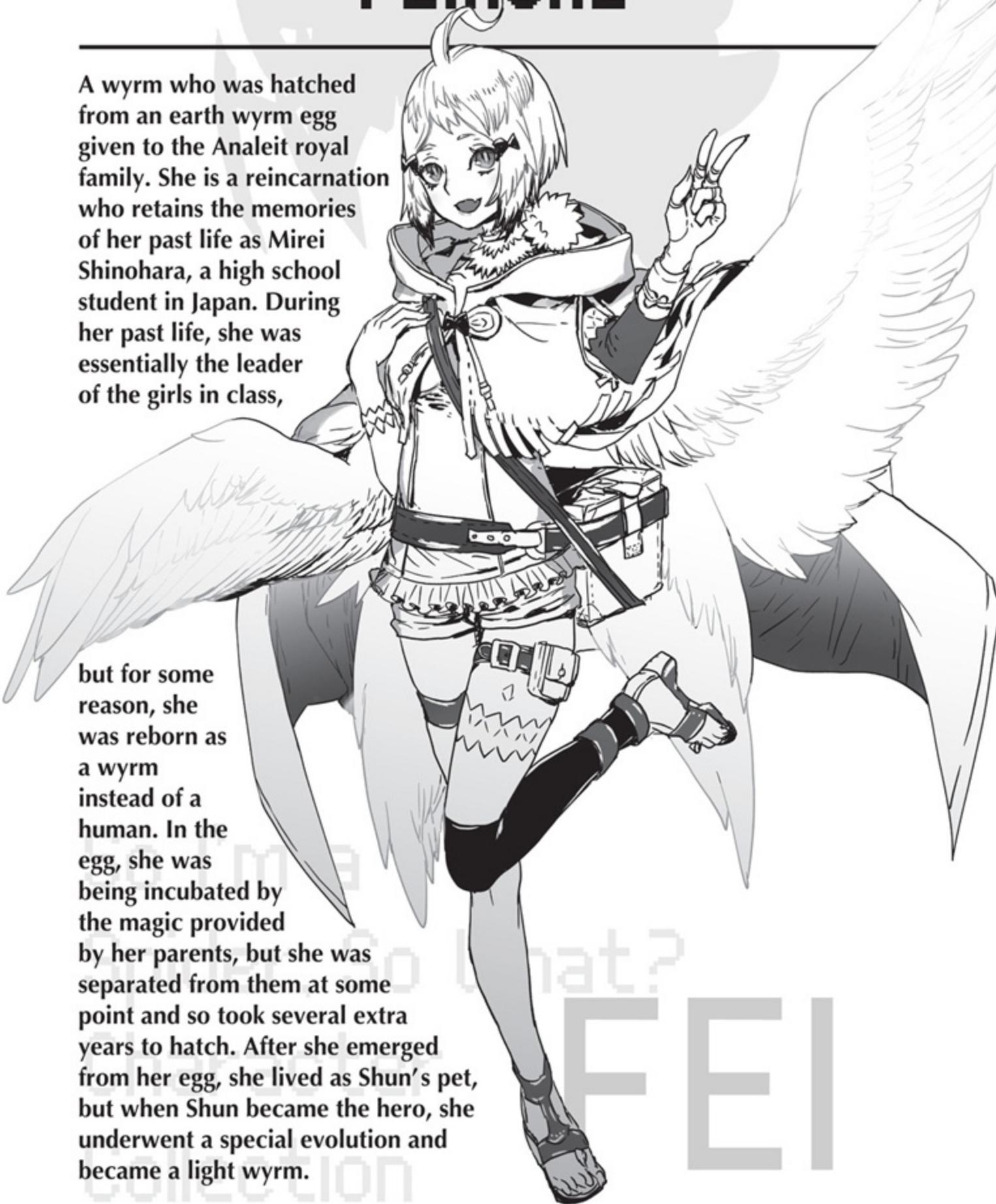
I guess I'll step in if I have to, though.

If that's what it takes to make sure everyone survives.

FEIRUNE

A wyrm who was hatched from an earth wyrm egg given to the Analeit royal family. She is a reincarnation who retains the memories of her past life as Mirei Shinohara, a high school student in Japan. During her past life, she was essentially the leader of the girls in class,

but for some reason, she was reborn as a wyrm instead of a human. In the egg, she was being incubated by the magic provided by her parents, but she was separated from them at some point and so took several extra years to hatch. After she emerged from her egg, she lived as Shun's pet, but when Shun became the hero, she underwent a special evolution and became a light wyrm.





THE BATTLE OF THE ELF VILLAGE BEGINS

Right now, we're waiting by the tree that houses the teleport points.

According to the elves, the imperial army has already arrived at the outer perimeter of the barrier.

Whether they try to break the barrier, attempt to use the teleport points to invade, or cause some kind of chaos with brainwashed elves, I'm definitely expecting them to act today.

It looks like I'm not the only one who feels that way, since the rest of our group is sporting equally tense expressions.

And then it happens.

Suddenly, there's a loud clamor from the direction of the teleport points.

Something's going on in there.

And, as we predicted, it's something bad.

"Let's go!"

I shout to everyone and run inside the tree to the teleport points.

All the teleport points connected to the elf village lead into this tree.

Like most of the buildings in the elf village, it's a room hollowed out from one of the giant trees that grow in the forest, not a man-made building.

As we enter the tree's dome-shaped interior, we find a young man surrounded by elf guards.

"Hey!" he yells. "Nobody told me I'd be surrounded as soon as I teleported here!"

The elf security all thrust their spears at the boy at once, but he suddenly disappears before they pierce him.

What just happened?

"Hey, careful! I could've died, y'know! Are you trying to kill me or what?! Oh, I guess you are, huh?"

The boy's hyperactive voice bounces off the walls, seeming very out of place.

Something about it gives me *déjà vu*.

I've never seen this boy before, but somehow I feel like I know him.

Which can mean only one thing.

"Kusama?"

At my doubtful call, the boy turns to face me.

"Oh, hey! If it isn't Shun, Kanata, and Kuniyan! Long time no see! And Shinohara and Kushitani, too. S'up?"

The young man greets us cheerfully, as if oblivious to the angry elves who just tried to kill him.

He's a reincarnation: Shinobu Kusama.

Kusama was always a hyperactive guy in our old world, and clearly that hasn't changed in this one.

In fact, he's so unchanged that it's a little creepy.

"Kusama, if you know who we are, does that mean you're fine with being enemies?"

Katia speaks to Kusama in Japanese.

That's right.

Kusama recognized us.

If he was able to tell who we are without being introduced, that means he already knew about us beforehand.

And he used the teleport point to infiltrate the village.

That means he's knowingly become our enemy.

"R-riight. Yeah, I guess you could say we're enemies, huh?"

His tone is reluctant, but still, his answer is clear.

"All right, then! We'll do our best not to kill ya!"

"Yeeek! No way I can take on all of you at once!"

Kusama shrieks, obviously flustered.

When I Appraise his status, I know he's not bluffing.

Yes, Kusama's stats are high.

But they're about on the same level as Tagawa's.

He's not overpowered like Sophia.

My one concern is the Ninja skill, which I've never seen before.

It definitely looks like a unique reincarnation skill.

But doesn't giving him the unique skill Ninja because he has the ninja-esque name Shinobu seem a little too on the nose?

Elf spears strike out toward Kusama again.

They jab right through Kusama's body—or so it seems, except Kusama is no longer there.

It's happened again.

Just like the first time, it looked like Kusama was hit, but the space is actually empty.

This must be the effect of the Ninja skill.

I push past the elves who are trying to kill Kusama and stand directly in front of him.

The elves definitely aren't going to be able to handle this.

I lunge forward, making it look as if I'm about to swing my sword down at him, then instead take another step as I go for a body slam.

"Huh?!"

My body passes right through Kusama without touching him.

Then I see the real Kusama in front of me.

So his mysterious power of evasion is actually the power of illusion.

It's no ordinary illusion, though.

It's almost like he's making copies of himself that disappear when they're attacked.

It's duplication jutsu, one of the effects of the Ninja skill.

The Kusama in front of me now is the real Kusama.

I try to hit him with the butt of my sword.

Kusama dodges it by hopping backward.

However, Katia and Fei are already behind him.

Katia's rapier and Fei's fist close in on him from either side.

"!"

"Whaaa...?"

Their attacks pierce nothing but air.

He must have used duplication jutsu to dodge again.

The annoying thing about this technique is that he can switch places with the duplicates he creates.

It basically gives him the ability to mimic Short-Range Teleport, making him very hard to capture.

“You trying to kill me?!”

Kusama reappears a short distance from Katia and Fei.

Then Kushitani’s Wind Magic chases him down.

“Gwuh?!”

Looks like it hit him this time.

The mass of compressed air smacks him square in the stomach, and Kusama tumbles to the floor with a strange exclamation.

Tagawa and I close in to catch him.

But then Kusama’s fallen figure disappears.

He’s swapped places with a duplicate again.

What an annoying ability.

I quickly look around, searching for Kusama.

There!

He’s standing on one of the teleport points.

Beneath him, the circle starts to glow.

He’s trying to use the teleport point to escape!

“You’re not getting away!”

Tagawa charges after Kusama.

"Dammit! Wasn't this supposed to be an easy job where I just sneak in here for a minute?! Stupid geezer!"

Kusama curses.

He brandishes the sword in his hand.

As soon as I see the sword, my instincts scream that there's danger.

I rush over to stop Tagawa from charging toward him, then Appraise the sword.

"All right, I'm outta here. You guys better run, too."

Kusama throws the sword.

It flies through the air, much higher than necessary.

"Everyone, get outside now!"

Right as I cry out, the teleport point glows, and Kusama disappears.

After it's been used once, it takes a short while before a teleport point can be activated again.

If we want to chase Kusama, we'll have to wait until the teleport point is usable again. By then, he'll have already gotten far away.

But I can't worry about that right now.

Starting with Katia, the rest of my group runs outside, perhaps sensing the desperation in my voice.

The elves, on the other hand, react more slowly.

I open my mouth to warn them again, but before I can speak, my body is forcibly pulled back.

"Mr. Hyrincl!"

Hyrince sprints toward the door, carrying me along with him.

"It's no use. Forget them."

His clipped words effectively summarize the current situation.

The sword that Kusama threw pierces the ground.

Then it explodes with an intense flash of light.

Hyrince turns to face it, bracing against the coming impact with his shield.

He and I are blown away by the shock wave, and we tumble out of the teleport-point tree.

The explosion inside the tree tears it up by its roots.

"The teleport points...," someone whispers.

Standing up and looking around, I see that everyone in our group is safe.

But the elves who were inside the tree when it exploded are not.

The sword that Kusama threw was a magic sword with a self-destruct effect.

Magic swords contain a lot of power.

If you unleash all that power at once, it results in unbelievable destructive force.

The price is that the magic sword itself is destroyed in the explosion.

"Dammit!" Tagawa shouts furiously. "They must've sent in Kusama to destroy the teleport points and trap us inside the barrier!"

That explosion must have destroyed all the teleport points.

Those were the only way to get in or out of the elf village.

In other words, everyone in the village, including us, is now trapped here unless the barrier is deactivated.

The barrier that's meant to protect the village now imprisons it.

Glancing at my companions' faces, I see their expressions can be sorted into two groups.

About half of them are frustrated like Tagawa, while the other half, especially Katia, are lost in thought.

Finally, my eyes meet with Hyrince's.

Right, I didn't thank him yet.

"Mr. Hyrince, thank you."

"Don't mention it."

If Hyrince hadn't rescued me earlier, I would've been caught in that explosion, too.

After making the snap judgment that there was no way to save the remaining elves, he left them, grabbed me, and ran.

Hyrince probably figured that if he didn't drag me out by force, I would have tried to do something to save the elves, even though it was impossible.

And he was probably right.

I know all this.

There was nothing I could have done.

I couldn't stop the sword from exploding, or protect the elves from the explosion, or anything.

If I had stayed behind, all I would have accomplished was adding one more death to the list.

Still, I can't help feeling like I should have been able to do something.

No, wait. There's still something I can do.

"Shun. Don't use it."

Hyrince shuts me down as if he'd figured out my decision moments before I did.

He knows exactly what I'm planning now.

"Why not?"

"It's a miracle that most people wouldn't believe. You mustn't show it off to complete strangers. It'll only cause trouble in the future."

What I want to do is use the Mercy skill to bring back the dead.

But Hyrinice stops me.

The reason he's not referring to it by name is because we don't know who might be listening.

Even I can imagine that if people found out I can revive the dead, it would cause a whole lot of problems.

But if there was ever a time and place to use it, wouldn't that be now?

"Besides, doesn't it have certain limits, as far as we know? Can you even use it if there's nothing left but ash?"

I have no response for that.

Mercy's ability to revive the dead isn't all-encompassing.

If the body is severely damaged, it won't work.

The bodies of the elves inside the still-blazing tree are most likely far beyond the help of my Mercy skill.

"Shun. Hang on to that power for now. The real battle hasn't even begun."

"What do you—?"

Suddenly, an overwhelming chill runs through me.

It's a torrent of fear like nothing I've ever felt before.

The power I'm sensing is far, far away.

That's the only reason I'm still standing.

If I felt that kind of power up close, I would probably pass out on the spot.

"What the hell is that?!"

Tagawa says what we're all thinking.

Everyone looks pale and panicky.

And as if that wasn't enough, the strangeness doesn't stop there.

The barrier covering the elf village disappears as easily as a soap bubble that's been popped.

"The barrier!"

I don't know whose voice that is.

But all of us are staring up in horror.

There's nothing else we can do but watch.

As my thoughts slowly return to me, I understand the meaning of Hyrinse's words.

I knew something was off.

Even if we were trapped in the elf village, they grow their own food already, so it wouldn't be that big of a problem.

There would be no reason to turn off the barrier in a panic.

If that was Hugo's goal, he's not as smart as I thought.

The imperial army would be the ones suffering if they stood around waiting outside for the barrier to be taken down.

There are dangerous monsters roaming out there, so they wouldn't be able to scavenge

for food safely.

I wasn't sure initially what the imperial army stood to gain by destroying the teleport points.

From their perspective, they were just losing their only way into the elf village.

That's probably why Katia and the others looked like they were thinking hard about something.

But if the barrier is broken, that all goes out the window.

We were operating under false assumptions.

Kusama didn't break the teleport points to trap the elves inside the barrier.

It's just the opposite.

We were afraid that the imperial army would use the teleport points to invade the village, but they were worried the elves would use them to run away.

They broke the teleport points to prevent us from escaping.

"You guys better run, too."

I remember Kusama's words.

Damn it. They were never going to let us run away in the first place!

I shout immediately. "Fei!"

"I know! But look the other way, all right?"

Knowing exactly why I'm calling for her, Fei begins transforming into her wyrm form.

As she does so, we turn our backs to her.

"All right, I'm ready!"

With Fei's transformation complete, we hurriedly climb onto her back and take off into

the sky.

Our goal is the outer perimeter where the barrier used to be.

Because that should be where the imperial army is invading.



TO CATCH A THIEF

Any bad boys and girls out heeere?

If I find you, you're in biiig trouble!

It's been a few days since that suspicious bunch broke into the baby bloodsucker's family's mansion.

During that time, the Demon Lord's been holed up in the Bottom Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

What's she doing down there?

I'm curious, but if she's not gonna move, I'm certainly not complaining if it means I don't have to constantly worry about her catching up to me.

So, since I'm able to relax a little for once, I've been spending my free time dealing with robbers.

If you couldn't tell by the way the baby bloodsucker's carriage was attacked, there are lots of robbers in this world.

Living outside the city, they terrorize passersby to steal their food and money.

These thieves are very belligerent and surprisingly cunning.

They prey on the weak but they're smart enough to keep their distance from the strong.

Since they live outside of town, their group must be strong enough to defeat the monsters in the area without a problem, making them generally more dangerous than the local monsters.

That's an excerpt from the Spider Press publication *An Illustrated Guide to Dangerous Creatures*.

It's true, though. The robbers really are worse than the monsters here.

Because they're choosing to maliciously attack people.

I mean, at least the monsters that attack other living things indiscriminately are just following their instincts.

On top of that, the thieves in this neighborhood seem to be directly connected to the elf organization who's after the baby bloodsucker.

One of those elves has been sneaking around outside town, meeting with them and stuff.

As I suspected, those robbers who attacked the carriage were connected to the elves' plan.

But why are these elves acting like the mafia?

I thought elves were supposed to be peaceful, nature-loving tree huggers.

But these elves aren't hugging trees at all!

In the end, I decide that if these robbers are working with the sinister elf organization, might as well throw 'em in the garbage.

It does benefit me, too, you know.

Humans give tons of experience points.

'Cause their own EXP tends to go more toward skills than stats.

Humans generally have lower stats than monsters, but in exchange they have a lot more skills.

Which means the EXP they give is pretty high, considering how weak they are.

Especially for the thieves who've built up their skills like crazy to survive outside of

town.

Humans who kill other humans give extra points, too.

They've built up lots of EXP from killing other high-EXP-granting humans, after all.

But now it's their turn to provide EXP for me!

If I kill thieves, the residents of the town are happy, and Baby Drac's family is happy, too, since that means less enemies for them.

And I'm happy because I get lots of experience in the process.

Forget killing two birds with one stone. This is at least three or four.

I'd be a fool not to!

So I use Panoptic Vision to search around the area for robbers.

And boy, do I ever find them.

We're talking triple digits here, in all shapes and sizes.

Why are there so many?

Like, that's definitely overkill.

Are they supposed to be a bad rodent infestation or what?

Seriously, talk about an unsafe area.

Or is this the normal way of things in this fantasy world?

If so, this place is pretty scary.

These enemies are stronger than monsters, and they're swarming around in droves.

What kind of impossible game is that?

Actually, what I really wanna know is why all these guys are thieves in the first place.

But I guess I don't really need to know their backstories.

To prepare for my quest to exterminate these robbers, I picked up a few new skills.

Since I gained the ability to use Evil Eyes even on super-distant targets when Clairvoyance evolved into Panoptic Vision, I figured I might as well pick up a new Evil Eye or two.

I went for Sealing Evil Eye for three hundred skill points, Antimagic Evil Eye also for three hundred skill points, and even Warped Evil Eye for a whopping five hundred skill points.

If you add these three to the four I already had, plus Future Sight, that makes exactly eight eyes.

Now my eyes are all fully loaded.

I've finally completed the combination I've been aiming for since I first found out about Evil Eyes!

So these are the three I just picked up:

<Sealing Evil Eye: Deals Seal-attribute damage to anything in the user's field of vision.>

<Antimagic Evil Eye: Deals Antimagic-attribute damage to anything in the user's field of vision.>

<Warped Evil Eye: Deals Space-attribute damage to anything in the user's field of vision.>

Yeah, I know. The explanations don't really explain anything.

First of all, it turns out "seal" is a status condition that can prevent the target from using skills.

That definitely sounds promising, but judging from my experience so far, I'm guessing it's going to be pretty difficult to use in reality.

But I picked it up anyway in the hopes that I might be able to seal the Status Condition

Nullification skill down the road.

If I can do that, then I'll really get a chance to unleash the fury of the other Evil Eyes.

Seal is itself a status condition, so it seems entirely likely that it won't work in the first place, but I think it's worth a try.

Next there's Antimagic Evil Eye, which, as the name suggests, prevents the target from invoking magic.

It's not unlike those dragon-scale skills that have given me so much trouble in the past.

I do have a lesser version of those skills that I absorbed from Mother called Dragon Barrier.

But the nice thing about Antimagic Evil Eye is you can start inhibiting the opponent's use of magic as soon as you see them.

Put another way, skills like Dragon Scales and Dragon Barrier dampen the power of magic that's been invoked, but Antimagic Evil Eye makes it harder to start up the magic in the first place.

All in all, I can use Antimagic Evil Eye to hinder someone's use of magic, then block the incomplete spell with Dragon Barrier.

Combined with my high base magic defense power, does this mean I basically won't take damage from magic anymore?

Anyway, last but not least is Warped Evil Eye.

This nasty thing can warp space in any place you can see.

I tried it out a little bit, and it's super-hard to control.

But since I'm pretty familiar with controlling Spatial Magic, I was able to warp things pretty freely once I got the hang of it.

Warped Evil Eye is also considered a Space-attribute attack spell, so if there's anything in the space you're warping, it'll get twisted around, too.

Snap! Just like that.

I tried it on a tree, and it hollowed out the trunk.

Snap! Just like that.

That's pretty cruel.

Well, I can use this from a long distance thanks to Panoptic Vision.

And unlike most Evil Eyes, this one targets space instead of living things, so I can warp whatever I want.

Doesn't that mean I could hollow out the inside of someone's head if I wanted to, too?

Snap! Just like that.

Although, since its target is space, that means it can actually be avoided, unlike my other Evil Eyes.

Gotta take the bad with the good, I guess.

If you're wondering why I picked up this Space-attribute Evil Eye even though I have Spatial Magic, it's because Spatial Magic attacks are insanely hard to use.

Sure, there are attack spells in Spatial Magic.

Ones that cut through space and stuff like that.

But to use Spatial Magic, unlike any other magic, you have to set up a designated target area.

It's basically defining where the magic will be activated, but it's also a huge hassle.

Since you have to do that on top of the rest of the magic process, it's slower than any other magic I have.

That's all well and good, since in exchange it comes with the way-too-useful Teleport spell.

But in battle, where a moment's delay can mean life or death, it's usually safer to use a different magic attack besides Spatial Magic.

It was almost like I didn't have a Space-attribute attack at all.

That's why I picked up an Evil Eye with the Space attribute, even though I technically have the magic already.

Now I finally have a Space-attribute attack I can use instantly.

Taking my new Evil Eyes out for a test drive, I wiped out a big bunch of robbers.

And now it's time for some initial reviews!

First is Sealing Evil Eye.

It's stupid and hard to use!

It takes a super-long time, and when it's done, it can seal only one skill.

One!

I know it's probably because its skill level is low, but that's pretty awful.

To the point where I'm kinda regretting picking it up in the first place.

Next, Antimagic Evil Eye.

Sooo, about that. Since I was using Panoptic Vision to attack from a distance, I didn't really get a chance to try it.

I mean, my targets can't even see me, y'know?

So of course they didn't use magic, and of course I didn't get to test out Antimagic Evil Eye.

Yep. Evaluation pending!

Finally, Warped Evil Eye.

This one's kinda hard to pin down.

Unlike other Evil Eye attacks, this one targets the space in my field of vision, not the enemy's.

So it doesn't get a guaranteed hit like the other Evil Eyes.

If the enemy moves out of the space I'm targeting with the attack, it'll miss.

On top of that, if there's an object in the space I'm targeting, it makes it more difficult to twist it based on how solid the object is.

Sometimes that delay meant my target moved before the spell activated.

That said, being able to directly attack the opponent's body is pretty sweet.

You can just target places that won't be hard, like, say, brain tissue.

Just give it a little twist.

It'll literally blow your mind!

Yep, pretty nasty.

As of now, Jinx Evil Eye is still way more powerful and convenient, but who knows? Maybe when this one's skill level gets higher, it'll have uses of its own.

So that's the analysis of my new Evil Eyes.

I'm not quite sure how to feel, really.

But since I defeated a ton of robbers in the process, I gained a huge amount of experience and even managed to level up.

That's a victory in my book.

I wonder if more robbers will show up soon?



Special Chapter

THE CONSPIRATORS: THE PONTIFF OF THE WORD OF GOD

"I see... My team of Word of God intelligence agents who were hiding disguised as robbers have all been wiped out?"

My subordinate nods meekly.

"Yes, sir. However, the spies who have been long disguised as residents of Keren County, merchants, and so on are unharmed. And since other robbers besides our disguised agents were killed as well, it would appear the thieves were the target, not our agents."

I cannot help but sigh at this report.

This all started when the disguised intelligence team we'd sent into Sariella was destroyed.

And those who were disguised as robbers suddenly dropped all communication.

We hurried to investigate, but we were not prepared for what we discovered.

"Dear me. We have an unexpected interloper on our hands."

You must forgive me for the idle complaint.

After all, a major part of the network we were setting up in Sariella has suddenly been crushed by the appearance of a powerful outsider.

I review the report once more.

It contains information on the mysterious monster that suddenly appeared in the labyrinth and exhibited inexplicable behavior: the Nightmare.

These documents include all the tracks that we know to be connected with the Nightmare.

A postscript on the final page describes the aboveground appearance of a queen taratect at the same time as the Nightmare's discovery, complete with an eyewitness account from the oldest Divine Beast.

If the Nightmare is a spider-type monster, it must be the offspring of Lady Ariel.

One can only wonder why Lady Ariel would do such a thing when she has hitherto never intervened with worldly goings-on, but it is impossible to divine meaning behind her movements and the Nightmare's alike.

It looked as if Lady Ariel was searching for something, but in my later investigations, I have been unable to determine what she might have been attempting to find.

The Nightmare's behavior is yet more mysterious.

I do not understand what thoughts motivate its actions.

At times it helps people, and at other times it attacks them.

If all this is in accordance with orders from Lady Ariel, the intent is completely lost on me.

"Well? Are there any signs that the Nightmare might know about the other spies?"

"Not at the moment."

What is Lady Ariel trying to do?

Surely she did not simply set out to dispose of some robbers.

Am I to take this as a warning to us?

Perhaps she means to tell us not to lay a hand on the land of Sariella.

However, I cannot agree to such a request.

In which case, our only option is to observe with utmost vigilance.

And Lady Ariel is not the only one to watch.

"Do we know whose employ the other thieves were under?"

"It seems they were members of a human trafficking organization operating not just in Sariella but all over the world. And the masterminds behind this organization are the elves."

I already half expected my subordinate's reply.

The elves. Potimas Harrifenas.

What in the world has moved him to create a human trafficking organization?

I cannot say, but surely any actions taken by that man will cause more harm to the world than good.

I must expose and stop him at once.

But right now, we must deal with the Goddess followers first.

Until we clean up this problem, we will never be able to stop a worldwide human trafficking organization.

Our forces are so concentrated on the Goddess at this stage that we simply do not have the resources to spare.

We have already made up our minds to destroy the Goddess's religion.

Ariel's unknown machinations concern me, but we cannot change our plans now.

We have prepared too much.

The deaths of some intelligence agents disguised as thieves will have no great bearing on our plan.

That damn lord of Keren County has made great efforts to avoid war with Ohts, but the center of Sariella is beginning to lean toward open conflict.

Little do they know that we have been slowly guiding them toward it all along.

If a spark emerges with Ohts, it is sure to spread into a wildfire all on its own.

Sariella's Goddess religion despises the Word of God, and we Followers of the Word of God view them as heathens in turn.

With the coals of hatred already thus ignited, one simply needs to prod those embers until they burst into the flame of war.

Quite laughable, when one considers that the Goddess and the Word of God are in fact one and the same.

"Shall I continue the report?"

Oh dear. I must be more mindful.

I let my thoughts wander in the middle of listening to the briefing.

It is a bad habit of mine.

"The robbers have all been wiped out, but there are still elves remaining in Keren County, sneaking about on business unknown. Shall we eliminate them?"

The elves are still lurking about after their forces have been destroyed?

To what end?

According to the reports, the elves have taken aim at Lord Keren and his family not once but twice.

Is Lord Keren their target?

However, I cannot imagine why Potimas would have any need to target Lord Keren.

There is no connection between them to my knowledge.

For that matter, I do not understand his motivation behind carrying out human trafficking in various places, either.

Kidnapping. What does he aim to accomplish by stealing away a great deal of children?

No, wait.

Is it the opposite?

Could it be that he needs not a great deal of children but a select few, and he has made this large-scale operation to mask that fact?

But why would he go to such extreme lengths?

What kind of child could possibly be worth that much trouble?

I do not have enough information to determine that.

Any further contemplation would be mere speculation—nay, delusions.

However, it does seem quite possible that he is targeting specific children.

If so, could the elves' target in Keren County be not Lord Keren but his child?

That is certainly worth considering.

Once the problem of the Goddess worshippers is dealt with, it may be the hint that helps me expose Potimas.

"Let them be. However, be sure to monitor them closely."

"Yes, sir."

Hrm.

Come to think of it, the elves have yet to target the Nightmare, even though it has now protected Lord Keren and his family from them not once but twice.

Could it be that they, too, have decided to let it swim free in order to lie in wait for an even bigger fish?

In that case, the angler in question is surely none other than Potimas Harrifenas.

The Nightmare of the Labyrinth, eh?

That creature has a strong connection with the land of Ohts.

As Lady Ariel's offspring, it is doubtless potentially dangerous to meddle with, but it may yet serve our cause, as well.

The best-case scenario would be if Lady Ariel and Potimas go head-to-head themselves, but it would be difficult to ensure such a thing.

This situation is likely to require a careful hand and a watchful eye.

Such a complex game we play.

Who will emerge victorious?

Will it be Lady Ariel, Potimas, or myself?

In any case, whoever controls the events in Keren County is sure to take the lead.

"We must be more thorough in our intelligence operations in Keren County. Send along every piece of information you can find, no matter how trivial. We had best assume the battle has already begun."

This is a true matching of wits, in which each of us tries to predict and outwit the others.

Perhaps we should throw in a move of our own?

"The adventurers who encountered the Nightmare in the Great Elroe Labyrinth are in Ohts now, are they not? Send them a request, one that will not provoke their suspicion. A request that will set them up to encounter the Nightmare once again."

Now, how will our Nightmare react?

Whether it helped those adventurers by chance or for some larger purpose, I should hope that it will send some kind of response.

How will it warp the stone I have thrown in?



THE BATTLE OF THE ELF VILLAGE: BECAUSE I'M THEIR TEACHER

I am a weak person.

The barrier covering the sky disappears in an instant.

This is the barrier that has protected the elf village for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years.

All the elves except for me stare up at the sky, dumbfounded.

They must be in complete shock that the barrier they thought was impenetrable is suddenly gone.

This is why I tried to warn them that the barrier might vanish.

“Everyone. Please prepare yourselves for battle. They’re coming.”

I use Wind Magic to help my voice reach the frozen elves.

Hearing me, they all seem to gasp collectively as the tension of the current situation dawns upon them.

They must realize now that if the barrier is gone, the imperial army is going to attack.

“The barrier is broken. However, the device itself that generates the barrier is still intact. All we have to do is hold out until the barrier can be restored.”

As the daughter of the chief, my voice is strongly respected by the elves.

Even now, they seem to be calming down little by little as they listen.

"Besides, this is our forest, essentially the garden of the elves. No human troops can win against us, especially here. Let us show them how foolish they are to challenge the elves in the middle of a forest."

I make up some encouraging words to stir their fighting spirit.

To tell the truth, this situation is not so simple.

We do have the advantage of being on home ground, but the numbers are overwhelmingly in the enemy's favor.

Besides, our opponents are demons and the experienced army of the militant Renxandt Empire.

I know this will be a difficult battle.

The elves must have some understanding of that, too, but morale is very important.

As the elves regain their composure and mentally prepare themselves for battle, I'm relieved that, for the time being, they seem to have overcome the shock of the barrier breaking.

Although, to be honest, I have no idea whether the barrier will actually be restored.

I do have concerns that the barrier might be irreparably broken.

And I know all too well that there is a high likelihood that I am right.

Because of my unique skill.

Student Roster.

I am most likely the only person in the world with this skill.

It records a general summary of my former students' presents, pasts, and futures in their reincarnated lives.

When I close my eyes, the roster rises from deep within my mind.

If I open the roster, I can see my students' names listed in order of their seat number,

and when I focus on one name, I can read more information about that person.

However, the information this skill provides is exceedingly simple.

The “past” is a record of the moment they were born.

It tells me where they came into this world.

However, that’s as far as the record goes.

The “present” summarizes the person’s current condition in one word.

Healthy, Sick, Fatigued, and so on.

It doesn’t reveal their current location.

And then there’s the “future.”

This part gives a rough estimation of when and how the student will die.

It uses a standard year of 365 days, with the day of my birth as the starting point.

When I open the Student Roster to Kengo Natsume’s name, it states that he will be killed in action in the elf forest.

Killed in action. In other words, in battle with someone.

Thanks to the scouts I’ve had watching him in secret, I know that he is with the imperial army right now.

In other words, he was outside the barrier.

The fact that Hugo is fated to die in battle in the elf forest was a hint that their forces would find a way past the barrier.

This was why I suspected all along that the barrier might be destroyed.

And that Hugo is likely to die here.

My body trembles.

When I remember the names of the four students who have disappeared from the Student Roster, I tremble even more.

When a student dies, their name disappears from the roster.

Hugo's name, Kengo Natsume, will most likely disappear soon, too.

And unlike the previous four students, his blood will be on my hands.

I thought I was prepared for that, but I still can't stop shaking.

It takes everything I have just to hide this from the elves.

If they think I'm trembling in fear, the morale I raised will quickly plummet.

Then we won't be able to take on the imperial army.

How did it come to this?

I only wanted to save all my students.

In my previous life, I was a teacher.

Being a teacher was my dream from a very young age.

I always wanted to be the kind of teacher who could share a laugh with her students.

And I spared no effort to make that happen.

That meant learning about anything that children of the current generation would be interested in.

Games, manga, novels, the Internet...

I tried to develop an interest in anything I thought I might be able to talk to them about.

I might have actually gotten addicted to those things...

Ultimately, I changed my manner of speech, invented a new persona, and became the

kind of strange, slightly pathetic teacher I thought would be easiest to befriend.

I may have gotten carried away with the “pathetic” part, but that’s all right.

Still, I couldn’t help but wonder.

Was this really enough?

Was it really my dream to laugh with my students as a fake me?

But I was too afraid to show them my true self and shatter the image I had worked so hard to build up.

In the end, I spent my days contenting myself with the situation I’d created.

Then I was reincarnated into another world.

My last memories are of teaching my class.

Then my recollections of that life cut off abruptly, and the next thing I knew, I was a baby.

The time until I understood what was happening was very difficult.

Since I was a baby who had just been born, I could scarcely move my body, and my eyes and ears weren’t fully functioning.

I must confess I flew into a panic then, crying and shrieking.

When my eyes could finally see and I realized that I’d become a baby, I was even more shocked than before.

For one thing, the ears of the people around me were long and pointy.

Thanks to the nerdy knowledge I’d spent so long accumulating, I knew right away that they were elves.

And I understood my own situation, too.

Reincarnation in another world. It’s very trendy in stories online right now, and I’d

been sucked into such a story.

But I am weak.

I couldn't be strong and build a brand-new life for myself like the protagonists of those novels.

I couldn't give up my old identity.

As I was overwhelmed with confusion, I latched on to one specific part of that identity.

I am a teacher.

Meaning I have to prioritize my students above all else.

That's the ideal teacher I always wanted to become.

Fortunately for me, I was born with a very convenient skill for this task.

The Student Roster skill.

However, the information I learned from that skill only threw me into despair.

Most of my students would die within less than twenty years.

Unable to accept the facts, I hid trembling from reality for several days.

However, reality did not change, and I couldn't stop time only by ignoring it.

Then I noticed something.

The name of the student whose time of death was the earliest, who was written to die while still a baby, had disappeared.

My roster had an empty space.

When I saw this, I knew I had to do something.

Of the remaining students, ten were set to die within two or three years.

I used the abilities we know as “skills” to try to do something about it.

If a mysterious power like the Student Roster skill existed in this world, surely there must be a skill like Telepathy, too.

Thus, I paid skill points to acquire the Telepathy skill.

Fortunately for me, my father is Potimas, the chief of the elves.

The average person would likely question their sanity if their infant daughter started suddenly talking about reincarnation and such, but Potimas accepted my story easily.

As it turned out, Potimas already thought of me as a special case from the beginning.

At any rate, though it was risky, I took the bet and was able to convince Potimas to promise to protect the reincarnations.

The rest was simple.

I could tell from the “past” descriptions in my Student Roster where my students were born.

We simply needed to search in those areas.

Unfortunately, there were a few students we couldn’t reach in time, but we were able to secure most of them safely.

Sometimes we accomplished this with money, other times with... Well, there’s no point in mincing words—with kidnapping.

This was, of course, a crime.

But the elves did not hesitate to carry it out.

The elves have their own motivations, you see.

Their goal is a world with as few skills as possible, in order to best combat the administrators.

And as it happens, reincarnations are born with a great deal of skill points, along with

a single extra-strong skill.

If such a reincarnation was to acquire and strengthen a lot of skills, then according to the elves, they might catch the eyes of the administrators and be exploited for their purposes.

I have good reason to believe this story.

One of the causes of death listed in my Student Roster is “divested of skills.”

Even now, it’s still listed as the cause for Shun and Katia, among others.

Initially, most of my students were fated to die for this reason.

I suspect this would indicate death brought about by an administrator.

Now that many of my students are in the elf village in an environment where they can’t improve their skills, the number of skill-related deaths on my list has decreased.

The “future” information changes fairly frequently.

However, no matter what I do, there are students whose predetermined causes of death still have not changed from “divested of skills.”

Worse, all these deaths are meant to happen at the same time.

This year.

And I have no information about the future past that point.

Aside from the students who are meant to die this year, the others’ “future” information is all blank.

Just thinking about what that might mean frightens me.

My own name is not listed on my roster, you see.

That’s only natural. After all, I am a teacher not a student.

I don’t have any information about my own fate.

But it's easy to draw conclusions.

The students who are still fated to die by being divested of their skills are those with a great deal of skills.

And I have a great deal of skills as well.

Most likely, I am going to die along with them.

I assume I don't have any information past that point because I'll be dead by then.

I'm scared. I don't want to die.

I thought about using Skill Elimination.

But I need to keep the power of my skills at least until I've dealt with Hugo.

Besides, if I did use Skill Elimination to erase my skills, I don't know what the elves would do.

Skill Elimination essentially surrenders your power to the administrators.

If I give their opponent my power, the elves may start to view me as an enemy.

I have no doubt that Potimas would be willing to purge me without even the slightest change in his expression.

Even more importantly, that might endanger my students who are in the elves' care.

The elves are not protecting them out of goodwill, after all.

That leaves only one option.

I must turn the tables on the enemy who comes to rob us of our skills, most likely an administrator.

I don't know if I can even do such a thing, but I have no other choice.

But before that, I have to deal with Hugo.

As his teacher, the blame lies with me for letting him end up like this.

I must take responsibility for that.

...And Hugo isn't the only case for which I need to take responsibility.

I recall Kudo's cold eyes glaring at me.

Am I doing a good job of protecting my students?

I don't really know.

Perhaps if I told them everything, they wouldn't hate me so much, but there is one curse associated with the Student Roster.

Namely, students are forbidden from reading it.

In other words, I cannot tell my students anything I have learned from the Student Roster.

I don't know what the penalty is for breaking that rule, but I can't afford to take any unnecessary risks.

No matter how I attempt to explain it to the students, there would be no avoiding mention of the Student Roster.

And so, I have no choice but to keep silent.

As of now, the only problem it's caused is a bit of resentment for me.

My students' dissatisfaction hasn't yet reached an explosive breaking point.

In that case, being hated by one's students is simply part of a teacher's job.

I ought to just resign myself to their enmity. This sort of thing is no big deal.

...That's a lie. It breaks my heart. I'm not strong enough.

I'm frightened. I don't want to die, and I don't want any of them to die, either.

Am I doing the right thing?

Have I made a mistake?

Am I doing a good job as their teacher?

Someone, please tell me.

“Ms. Oooookaaaa! Aw yeah, this is perfect! So nice of you to come out to meet me!”

Hugo appears, along with the imperial army.

He's their general, yet he's charging ahead at the front.

“I'm happy to see you, too.”

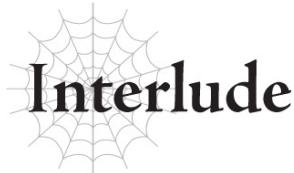
I'm not really happy, of course.

But I have to scold a student who's chosen the wrong path.

I don't know if that's really the right thing to do.

But I have no choice but to do it.

Because I'm their teacher.



A LORD PERPLEXED

What in the world is going on?

These incidents of late wear on my body and mind alike.

What with the huge outbreak of bandits, the successive kidnapping incidents that have followed, and so on, the order within my territory has sharply declined all at once.

The abnormal increase in the number of bandits already smells of some kind of international incident, and as we were investigating, the carriage containing my wife and daughter was attacked.

Fortunately, my wife and child are safe, but it seems my trusted retainer Merazophis was briefly in grave peril.

And yet, when I received this information, when I laid eyes on him, he bore nary a scratch.

And Merazophis himself is the one who relayed this report to me, no less.

He explained that, of all things, a spider monster saved them from the evil clutches of the robbers.

My wife insists that the creature must have been the Divine Beast.

Indeed, in the texts of the Goddess whom our country of Sariella worships, there is a Divine Beast that serves the Goddess herself.

My wife seems to believe that this spider monster is that very same Divine Beast.

At any rate, just as I was breathing a sigh of relief that they were safe, we discovered the bodies of some unidentified but suspicious-looking humans in our home the very next day.

Based on that timing, I can only assume they must have been in league with the robbers who attacked my wife and daughter's carriage the previous day. I have ordered Merazophis to investigate, but we have yet to learn just what we are dealing with.

But not long after that day, all the robbers in the county suddenly vanished, so perhaps there is no longer any point in investigating.

The culprit behind that was found immediately.

The spider monster who seems to have saved my wife and daughter has been sighted lurking in the woods near our town.

At that point, I simply had to laugh.

To think that a monster able to quickly and quietly dispose of bandits would exist so close to our town.

My wife exclaims that the Divine Beast has saved our town, but I cannot say I share her delight.

Regardless, we must proceed with caution lest we incur the wrath of the spider monster.

Yet despite my intentions, those adventurers who arrived from Ohts have made contact with the monster.

And since they have been spreading word of the spider monster in the town, now the masses are all aware of its existence.

Why has it been one major event after another as of late?

To make matters worse, my wife has been spreading her Divine Beast theory all through town.

My dear wife, is the Divine Beast truly more important to you than your own husband?

Thanks to her, the people of the town are beginning to seriously believe that the spider monster is the Divine Beast.

Even though this is certainly not the case!

We have already discovered the creature's true identity through our investigation.

It is a dangerous monster commonly known as the "Nightmare," which escaped from the Great Elroe Labyrinth in Ohts.

A monster that has attacked people in the past.

We have no way of knowing when it might decide to attack us on a whim.

So it is beyond dangerous to worship such a creature as the Divine Beast.

However, now that my wife has taken the initiative to announce such a thing, I cannot simply come out and deny that it is the Divine Beast.

If I take one wrong step, I may even be impeached.

"Ha... ha-ha. Whatever should I do, Merazophis?"

"Master, please stay calm. Remember, I am here."

Thank goodness. What everyone really needs is a trusted, understanding confidant.

"Master, you are surely correct that the Nightmare is likely not the Divine Beast, but is it not possible that the thing possesses intelligence?"

I can't help but let out a groan at Merazophis's suggestion.

"Yes, that thought has crossed my mind. In fact, let me state my conclusion: The Nightmare most likely has very high intelligence indeed."

"Then is it possible that it would understand speech, as well? We may be able to negotiate, if so."

"Merazophis. It is not that simple. That thing is still a monster. Even if it does possess the same level of intelligence as a human, we may not be able to communicate. After all, do you believe that you could hold a conversation with a Word of God fanatic?"

Merazophis is silent at that.

It's difficult enough to reach an understanding between humans, never mind with a

monster.

At any rate, we must monitor the Nightmare closely lest it turn its fangs on us next.

This is a powerful monster that was able to easily dispose of thieves whom we had been utterly incapable of dealing with.

It even destroyed a fortress in Ohts.

I doubt there is anything we humans could do to stop it.

In that case, the best I can think to do is pray to the Goddess that it will not ravage our lands.

“Master, are you perhaps worrying a tad too much?”

“What? Merazophis, surely you, too, do not believe that creature is the Divine Beast that will save our land?”

I suppose the monster did heal Merazophis’s injuries when he was on the verge of death.

No doubt he is hesitant to speak poorly of a creature that saved his life.

He has always been an almost excessively diligent man.

Honest if slightly awkward, he repays any favor to the best of his ability.

“I am grateful to it for saving you, too, you know,” I admit.

I am as relieved that it saved Merazophis as I am that it protected my wife and daughter.

“However, that is only my personal opinion. As a statesman, I must respond to emergency situations such as a dangerous monster lurking near town with the worst-case scenario in mind.”

Perhaps the Nightmare really is the Divine Beast.

Perhaps it really will save our land.

But it is equally possible that it will be the ruin of our town.

We have no way of knowing just yet.

As a leader, I must proceed by assuming the worst.

I cannot put my people at risk by acting in accordance with idealistic wishes.

“Merazophis, what do you think of the Nightmare? Please tell me your honest impressions.”

I inquire, moved by a sudden curiosity.

“I... am not sure, myself.”

Merazophis’s response is uncharacteristically hesitant.

Generally, he has a black-and-white personality and prefers to respond to things with a simple yes or no.

It’s highly unusual for him to give such an unclear answer.

“It is difficult to pin down. Perhaps one might say it was wicked yet honorable... No, perhaps not. I cannot put it into words, I am afraid.”

Wicked yet honorable?

That certainly is difficult to understand.

Honorable, though...?

Wickedness would be easy enough to understand, but does that Nightmare have a sense of honor, too?

“Excuse me! Pardon my intrusion, but I have urgent news! The Nightmare has saved a deathly ill patient!”

When my subordinate bursts in with this report, I feel like I can grasp the honor Merazophis mentioned.

What in the world is that spider?!



LET US FIGHT

My Wind Magic flies directly toward Hugo.

However, it vanishes into nothing right before it reaches him.

The girl who is now standing in front of Hugo has dispersed it.

“Miss Negishi.”

“I keep telling you not to call me by that name.”

Negishi’s smile barely masks her irritation as she blocks my way.

She has a skill that can negate magic.

As long as she stands on the front lines, the magic-using elves are bound to be at a disadvantage.

“Sophia. Don’t interfere.”

Yet Hugo is willfully throwing that away.

“Oh? Are you quite sure?”

“Yeah. I have to get revenge on Oka with my own hands.”

Hugo fearlessly takes a step forward.

“I see. I’ll just watch and learn, then, I suppose.”

Negishi steps back along with the boy and girl at her side, then leans against a tree with her arms folded.

It seems she really does intend to sit back and watch.

I don't know how long she plans to stick to her word, but for my sake, I hope it stays that way.

"Elves are the enemies of God! Their only fate is death!"

Unfortunately, the others don't seem so willing to step down.

Yuri, the other reincarnated girl at Hugo's side, assaults me with a merciless magic attack.

"Hey! I told you: Don't interfere!"

"I cannot simply watch on when the enemy of God stands before me! Why have you sided with the elves, teacher? Elves are heretics who do not listen to the words of God. Those who would defy God will meet with certain death! That's why we have to slaughter every elf, all of them, so we can send them to hell where they can reflect on their sins. Yes, let them repent in hell! Surely you would not work with such sinners, would you, Ms. Oka? If you do, I'll have to punish you as a heretic, you know? You must repent. Repent! Teacher or no, all heretics must die! Do you understand? So please tell me you're not a heretic. It's not too late. I'm sure God would forgive you. Will you devote yourself to God now?"

Yuri rants as if she's gone mad.

There's no way she's in her right state of mind.

I have to defeat Hugo and free her from his brainwashing right away.

"Please wait a little longer, Miss Yuri. I promise I'll bring you back to your senses."

"Ms. Oka, you're the one who needs to come to your senses, all right? You must not believe the elves' filthy lies! I know you are an elf, too, but if you admit they deceived you, I'm sure God will forgive you! Just confess, all right?"

Clearly it will do me no good to keep trying to reason with her.

She'll only keep talking around in circles.

In that case, it'll be faster to simply defeat Hugo, the source of all this evil.

I narrow my eyes and focus on him, and his lips twist into a smirk.

“Come on, then! Hurry it up, or I’ll just have to come after you first!”

Hugo beckons, trying to provoke me. At the same time, the army behind him begins to move forward.

“Intercept them!” I call an order to the elves and at the same time fire another Wind Magic attack at Hugo.

Unlike the diversion spell that Negishi dispersed a little while ago, this one is at maximum firepower.

The level-four spell of Tempest Magic, Dragon Wind.

Putting it bluntly, this spell creates a tornado.

The storm swallows people up like blades of grass.

Having lost all his skills and stats at one point, Hugo has no way to defend against it.

It’s been some time since that happened, but it would be all but impossible for him to work his way back up to his former strength from square one in that time.

I know that he has a Seven Deadly Sins skill.

However, the skill he has is most likely Lust.

According to the elves’ records, the Lust skill grants a brainwashing ability.

It seems to be terrifyingly strong brainwashing, but still, it is not a directly battle-related skill.

The title may have increased his stats somewhat, but nothing more.

He won’t be able to stand up to my magic.

The tornado swallows the soldiers who step out in front of Hugo, sucking their lives away in an instant.

Then it closes in on Hugo...

“Graaah!”

...and is scattered by his sword.

What?!

How could he destroy that spell?!

“That crap’s not gonna work on me!”

A swing of his sword sends a black fog of darkness gushing toward me.

I parry it with Wind Magic.

At the same time, I realize how Hugo stopped my Dragon Wind.

His equipment.

That sword must be made from dragon materials.

Weapons and armor made from monster materials sometimes retain the special properties of that monster.

If it canceled out magic, it’s safe to assume that his sword contains dragon parts.

And since it can unleash a Dark-attribute attack in addition to its magic-inhibiting abilities, it must be made from parts of a particularly rare kind of dragon: a dark dragon.

No doubt about it: This is a rare and powerful sword.

I look over Hugo’s appearance again, reassessing.

Instead of armor, he’s wearing somewhat Chinese-style clothes.

However, the monster bones wrapped around the shoulders indicate that these clothes, too, have been tailored from monster parts.

In short, he’s using high-performance equipment to make up for the fact that his stats

have been weakened.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Those half-assed spells are never gonna touch me! Did you really think I was just gonna stay helpless forever after you stole all my power?!"

I deploy multiple Wind Magic spells at once, but his sword blocks every last one of them.

I don't think relying on your equipment is anything to brag about!

Judging that magic alone won't be effective, I pull out my bow.

Then I cast Wind Magic on the bow to loose an arrow.

Accelerated by the power of the wind, the arrow flies forward like a bullet.

With this spell, the arrow is powerful enough to bore a hole through something if it lands a direct hit.

Since his stats have been lowered, Hugo shouldn't be able to react to that speed in time to dodge or defend against it completely.

He may not die from it, since he's protected by high-quality equipment, but the damage is sure to be severe.

But despite my expectations, Hugo dodges the oncoming arrow.

"What?!"

An exclamation of surprise escapes my lips.

The arrow flies past Hugo and into the imperial army behind him, piercing right through multiple soldiers.

Despite having lost several allies to the attack, Hugo simply looks back at me and grins.

Something about that smile sends a shiver down my spine, but I nock another arrow and try again.

Just like the first one, it flies toward Hugo at high speed thanks to my Wind Magic, but

he manages to evade it again.

This doesn't make any sense.

Hugo should still be weakened, since I took away his stats and skills once before.

Even if he's trained since then, there's no way he should have been able to get fast enough to dodge my arrows.



“Pretty weird, right? You wanna know how I got this strong? I bet you’re dying to know!”

Hugo casually kicks forward.

The distance between us closes with a single step.

So fast?!

I was wrong. This can’t be the power of equipment alone!

As I retreat, I grab another arrow and shoot.

Hugo ducks to the side, dodging the arrow.

The time it takes to dodge slows him down a little, putting more distance between us.

“Hey, don’t run away! C’mon, I thought we were friends!”

I loose another arrow.

At the same time, the elves around us launch an attack on him all at once.

“Yeah, right!”

Magic and arrows rain down on Hugo, but he brushes them off easily.

This is all a bit unexpected.

I use Telepathy to order the nearby elves to evacuate.

It looks like I won’t be able to take on Hugo by holding back.

However, as the elves retreat, Yuri’s magic chases them down.

“Elves are heretics! Death to the elves!”

Her magic blows away all the elves surrounding me, leaving me isolated.

Then Hugo steps in again to slash at me with his sword.

I retreat once more, trying to put some distance between us.

"C'mon, we weren't done talking! I'm actually pretty grateful to ya, y'know? I wouldn't be the man I am today if I hadn't suffered so much I almost went insane!"

Almost? No, he definitely is insane!

But I have no right to make that comment.

Because I'm the one who made him insane.

"And that's how I got all this power! You know about one of 'em, right? The Lust skill. It's an awesome skill that lets you make people do whatever you want!"

I loose more arrows. He dodges again.

"And there's one more thing! Now I can be the strongest guy ever. 'Cause I got the skill Greed, too! With this, I get to steal some of the strength of anyone I kill! Why d'you think I'm on the front lines, huh? It's all so I can kill lots of enemies and make their power my own!"

Stunned, I stop moving for a fraction of a second.

The effects of that skill flash through my mind from the elves' records.

The Greed skill.

It's another one of the Seven Deadly Sins skills. When the user kills someone, they gain some of the victim's power.

But only a small amount of their skills, stats, skill points, and so on.

Essentially, though, Hugo has used this skill to make himself even stronger than he was before.

How many lives has he taken?

How many sins has he amassed to gain all this power?

I stop moving for only a moment.

But in that moment, Hugo closes the gap between us and raises his sword.

“Up here!”

“Eh?!”

The sword makes a shallow cut through the arm of the wind armor that I normally wear.

I quickly create a windblast between us, using the recoil to push us apart.

This hurts me, too, but I’m at a major disadvantage in close combat.

“Huh. Well, look at you.”

Hugo appears to be completely unharmed.

Still, I keep firing arrows.

Hugo dodges them easily.

As I start to nock my next arrow, a blast hits my body.

“Nngh?!”

“Ms. Oka. It seems like I can’t get through to you at the moment, so please go to sleep for a little while. Don’t worry. I’ll pray to God to cleanse the poison that’s tainted your thoughts. You’ll be pure again in no time!”

It’s Yuri’s magic.

As soon as I realize this, I automatically loose an arrow toward her.

The arrow hits a surprised Yuri in the shoulder.

And it’s a highly destructive Wind Magic–imbued arrow.

It blows right through her shoulder, sending blood flying everywhere.

...Oh no. How could I do this?

Reflex or no, I accidentally hit Yuri with a potentially fatal attack when she's only being manipulated!

"Uh-oh. What kinda teacher would do that to her own student?"

"H-how dare you say such a thing!"

Hugo is the last person to have any right to say that to me!

Pretending to fly into a half-crazed frenzy, I shoot another arrow.

It doesn't hit, of course, flying off course so that Hugo dodges it easily.

However, now my preparations are complete.

I haven't been firing my arrows for nothing.

If Hugo was sane, he would've noticed that I've been running away in a big circle.

The arrows sticking out of the ground are a starting point to generate a barrier.

It won't be as strong as the one that protected the village, of course, but it's still the kind of barrier that can't be reproduced with skills that imitate the ancient techniques.

I activate the barrier.

Leaving Hugo in the middle.

He isn't simply trapped in there, either.

The air inside the barrier is rapidly escaping.

Manipulating the wind means that I can move the air.

And while this world does seem to be different from Earth in various ways, oxygen certainly still exists here.

The basic rules of this world are no different from those on Earth. They just seem different because of the addition of the new rules known as skills and magic.

Just like on Earth, humans cannot live without air.

The shape of the barrier doesn't change, but with the air gone, the pressure inside changes rapidly.

The human body can't stand up to this pressure. Even if it could, the lack of oxygen would cause it to die soon enough.

This is an original spell that I developed myself.

Hugo desperately tries to destroy the barrier, but it's no use.

It may not be perfect, but it's still a reproduction of a barrier from the age of the gods.

I can't activate it without a great deal of difficulty, but once it's been produced, the barrier can't be destroyed.

I've won. Or so I thought.

For one fatal instant, I forgot there are reincarnations here more dangerous than Hugo.

“Aagh?!”

In that moment, I have no idea what happened.

But I know that a powerful force struck my body, sending my vision spinning.

“Ha-ha-ha! Damn, that was close! I almost ate it in there! Nice one, Sophia!”

As I roll to the ground uncomprehendingly, Hugo's loud laughter reaches my ears.

It's only then that I realize what must have happened.

Negishi must have destroyed my barrier.

And I was blown away by the aftershock, or something like that.

I was too careless.

Just like with Yuri a little while ago, I've been so focused on Hugo that I forgot to stay

vigilant of the other dangers around me.

I have no right to make fun of Hugo for such a thing anymore.

“How pathetic. After all that ‘don’t interfere’ grandstanding you did.”

“C’mom, don’t be like that. How was I supposed to know Oka had such a crazy move up her sleeve? It’s over now, though.”

Raising my head, I see Hugo standing above me.

“Nngh?!”

His sword swings down, tearing deep into my abdomen.

No! Stop! It hurts!

“You sure gave me a run for my money there. Looks like I won, though. Heh-heh-heh. I’m not gonna kill you; don’t worry. I wanna make sure you get a good look at the total ruin of all the elves! What should I do with the rest of the class, hmm? If they’re willing to cooperate, maybe I’ll let ‘em work for me. But if not, guess I’ll torture them in front of you, huh? You’ll make a good face for me then, won’t you? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Should be fun, right?!”

Please, don’t!

I have to stop him.

But the pain won’t let me move my body properly.

“Well, isn’t this nice. It’s the total opposite of last time. Well? How do you like being crushed into the ground, huh? You’re probably goin’ crazy wondering what’s gonna happen to you now, right? Totally hopeless, I bet. Well, I’m not gonna brainwash you. I’ll make you watch as I send you to the nethermost depths of despair until your spirit’s totally broken!”

Hugo aims a kick at my small body.

It’s enough to send me flying through the air, slamming into the trunk of a tree.

The impact sends shock waves through my body, and blood gushes from the cut in my stomach.

“You know she’ll die if you keep this up, right?”

“Oh right. Can’t have that, can we?”

Tears well up in my eyes from the pain, blurring my vision.

The image of Hugo approaching me wavers, until suddenly my vision is filled with light.

Unable to look at it directly, I close my eyes, wiping the tears away with a trembling arm.

“Sorry we’re late, Ms. Oka.”

Then, as I open my eyes again, I see Shun and his friends, standing firmly between Hugo and me.



WORSHIP MEEE!

How did this happen?

A bunch of people are prostrating themselves in front of the forest.

The offerings are piling up, too.

And all of this is for... me.

I'm being worshipped for some reason.

Sort of like I'm a local god or something.

Seriously, how did this happen?

I guess the only explanation is that a whole bunch of different factors created a chemical reaction that resulted in this bizarre situation.

First of all, I shouldn't have wiped out all those robbers.

If whole hordes of robbers suddenly disappear, of course people are going to be suspicious.

Once the lord of the county started investigating the cause, it was only a matter of time before they found out about me.

If it had ended there, that wouldn't have been so bad.

Mr. Lord, who also happens to be the baby bloodsucker's father, seems to regard me as dangerous, so he's been proceeding with extreme caution.

I wasn't planning on doing anything unless they really provoked me, so I didn't mind

them keeping an eye on me if they kept being polite about it.

But then I had to go and get discovered by a group of adventurers.

It would've been one thing if they came from the town, but I wasn't expecting them to come up behind me.

Turns out, they came from a neighboring country on a mission to figure out the source of an unusual outbreak of monsters.

Or I guess it would be more accurate to say the source of an unusual migration of monsters.

Yep. That's my fault.

My Intimidation scared a bunch of monsters so badly, they fled all the way into the next country.

If anything, it's only natural the adventurers investigating that phenomenon would end up here, since the source is none other than yours truly.

I should've used Teleport to temporarily hide from them. In fact, I was away in the Great Elroe Labyrinth on some business when they arrived in the forest, so when I teleported back, I ran right into them.

Felt like I'd gotten into a traffic accident.

That's how the adventurers found me, but what really surprised me was that the newbies who I rescued before in the Great Elroe Labyrinth were among them.

You know, the ones who I found being corned by a snake in the Upper Stratum that one time?

I've evolved since then, so I look a little different, but they still clearly recognized me right away as their spider savior.

So they stopped their adventurer buddies from trying to attack me. Then, for some reason, they offered me fruit.

I figured I might as well take it, 'cause why not? But in retrospect, maybe I should've

thought it through a little more.

Because now they all seem to think that I'll play nice if they give me fruit or something.

From there, well, one thing led to another, and next thing you know, here we are.

You don't get it?

Yeah, I'm not really clear on the details myself.

Some adventurers walk into a town.

They tell everyone there's a spider monster in the forest, aka me.

Somehow, rumors spread that this same monster is the one who dealt with all those robbers.

And now they think I'm the second coming of some Goddess's Divine Beast or something?

Leading to me being worshipped at the moment.

Yep. Still doesn't really make a lot of sense.

From what I gather, the Goddess religion that folks in this town practice has something about spiders being holy creatures, and this so-called Goddess once had a servant called a Divine Beast.

...I seem to remember a certain demon lord having the title Ancient Divine Beast, but I'm sure I'm just imagining it.

Yeah, I must be! Let's go with that.

But forget about our friend the spider demon lord for now.

The reason they started worshipping me in the first place is they figured out I'm the one who killed the robbers.

I can gather why, though.

It must've been the lord's wife, the baby bloodsucker's mother.

Yep. She totally ignored her husband's request to keep things quiet and went all around town telling anyone who'd listen about that attack.

Like, "The Divine Beast saved me from bandits!"

And she must've found out from her husband that I killed all those skulking robbers, 'cause she told everyone about that, too.

If the most powerful lady in town started referring to me as the Divine Beast, well, you can see how things went from there.

On top of that, those adventurers I rescued have been telling everyone in town about their own little encounter with me, too.

You wouldn't believe how fast everyone started believing I'm the Divine Beast after that.

Maybe it's just because they were all Goddess zealots to begin with, but I gotta say, I'm a little worried they were all so willing to trust a monster just like that.

I feel bad for the poor lord who has to wrap his head around this situation.

He's the one who's right for wanting to be cautious of a monster, if you ask me.

Man, the power of religion is scary.

Still, when this whole situation first began, they were merely worshipping me from a distance.

Praying in front of the forest, occasionally putting out fruit as an offering, that's about it.

There weren't too many people, either. Just particularly devout followers of the Goddess, adventurers praying for safety, and stuff like that.

How in the world did that turn into a huge crowd of people milling around the forest? Well, no good deed goes unpunished.

The adventurers must have spread the word that I can use Healing Magic, and next thing you know, a mother's bringing her sick child to me.

Crying, holding the kid up, the whole shebang.

I ignored her for a while, but she kept crying out some word that definitely had a pleading tone, so eventually I had to give in.

I Appraised the kid and found that she was suffering from a pretty serious illness.

The kind of thing that wouldn't go away from normal healing.

I doubt there's any technology to cure cancer in this fantasy world.

Yeah. The kid had liver cancer.

How does a child get liver cancer, you ask?

That's what I wondered at first, but I kinda figured it out by looking at her status.

She had the Foul Feeder title, just like me.

I guess they must be a poor family.

They've probably eaten a lot of crummy food due to poverty, including poisonous stuff.

I'm assuming the effects of the title protected her digestive organs, but her liver couldn't hold up to all the toxins.

The same goes for her mother, whose organs were in a similarly sorry state.

It's not like I had any real obligation to help them, but I didn't have anything better to do, so I decided to heal both of 'em.

Simply using Healing Magic like normal wouldn't have done the trick, so I had to use some pretty high-handed methods.

Basically, I put them to sleep, hollowed out their organs, and used Healing Magic to make them generate new ones.

If a doctor from Earth saw that, they'd probably pass out.

But I guess that's a fantasy world for you.

Still, that move ended up biting me in the butt a little bit.

'Cause starting the next day, a ton of sick and injured people started coming to me for healing.

At this point, I figured there wasn't much else I could do, so I went ahead and healed every single one of 'em.

And that's why I'm being worshipped now.

Hrmm.

When I put it that way, this is half my own fault, half the fault of the Goddess religion's teachings.

But it's not doing any harm at the moment, so I guess it's no big deal.

The Demon Lord, who might very well be the real Divine Beast, is still in the Bottom Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth for some reason.

Are you becoming a shut-in? Feel free to just stay there forever, 'kay?

All things considered, it seems like I can relax for a little while at least.

Otherwise, I would've hightailed it outta here the second all this craziness started going down.

In fact, as long as the threat of the Demon Lord isn't hanging over me, this whole being worshipped thing actually isn't half-bad.

I get a lot of food as offerings, for one thing.

I've barely had anything good to eat till now, so to be honest, I'm pretty moved by all this offering business.

Most of it is fruit, but there's enough variety that I don't get tired of it.

When I lived in the labyrinth, I never could've imagined getting to eat such sweet stuff every day.

This rules!

If possible, I wouldn't mind eating other dishes besides just fruit, but you won't catch me looking a gift horse in the mouth.

So the new richness of my diet is definitely the biggest plus, but there've been other benefits, too.

Since I've been healing all the sick and wounded people who have been throwing themselves at me nonstop, I've gotten some titles.

Five, to be exact.

[Rescuer], [Medicine Alchemist], [Saint], [Savior], and [Guardian].

<Rescuer: Acquires skills [Healing Magic LV1] [Light Magic LV1]. Acquisition conditions: Acquires a certain number of purification points. Effect: Strengthens effectiveness of healing. Explanation: A title awarded to those who save others.>

<Medicine Alchemist: Acquires skills [Medicine Synthesis LV1] [Healing Magic LV1]. Acquisition conditions: Use a certain quantity of medicine. Effect: Strengthens effectiveness of medicine. Explanation: A title awarded to those who use medicine.>

<Saint: Acquires skills [Miracle Magic LV1] [Holy Light Magic LV1]. Acquisition conditions: Acquires a certain number of purification points. Effect: Drastically strengthens effectiveness of healing. Explanation: A title awarded to those who save many others.>

<Savior: Acquires skills [Charity] [Hero LV1]. Acquisition conditions: Acquires a certain number of purification points. Effect: Drastically strengthens capacity for Light attribute. Explanation: A title awarded to those who save countless others.>

<Guardian: Acquires skills [Iron Defense LV1] [Shieldsmanship LV1]. Acquisition conditions: Protect a certain number of people. Effect: Greatly increases defense and resistance abilities. Explanation: A title awarded to those

who protect others.>

I got Medicine Alchemist by using Medicine Synthesis in conjunction with Healing Magic.

Although by the time I got it, my Medicine Synthesis and Healing Magic skills were both maxed out already, so I didn't exactly gain much.

I don't really understand why I got Guardian, to be honest.

Maybe it's because I protected the town from the robbers, or I protected the people from illness, or something like that.

Iron Defense increases my defense ability, so that's pretty handy.

And Shieldsmanship increases the strength of my shield and my ability to use it, when I have a shield equipped.

But, uh... y'know?

Me, equip a shield?

Is it even possible for me to equip weapons and armor?

Okay, this skill is useless. Cool.

Anyway, so Rescuer, Saint, and Savior are all acquired by getting something called purification points.

Basically, you build them up by doing good deeds or whatever.

I've been doing a whole lot of healing for super-sick and injured people, mostly by using my crazy-high magic stats to brute-force everything. That explains how I got all these points.

Each of these titles also increases the effectiveness of my healing, making me even better at it, so that's nice.

Heal people, get a title, improve my healing, and heal some more.

I basically got caught up in a nice endless healing cycle.

The new skills I got from these titles are Light Magic, Miracle Magic, Holy Light Magic, Hero, and Charity.

As the name suggests, Light Magic manipulates light.

Holy Light Magic is an advanced form of Light Magic.

Miracle Magic is a fancier version of Recovery Magic, so I don't know why I didn't get it when I maxed out Healing Magic.

It lives up to its name with crazy-powerful healing that lets me heal pretty much anything that isn't dead.

Then there's the Hero skill.

It seems to form a pair with the Demon Lord skill. Just like that skill, it multiplies all my stats by one hundred times its skill level, as well as increasing my resistances.

Um, am I really allowed to have the Hero skill when I already have the Demon Lord skill?

They're not going to repel each other and make me explode from the inside or anything, are they?

Or is it the kind of thing where the hero and demon lord are strongest when they combine their strength or whatever?

In that case, might as well go for it.

But nothing has happened so far, so it's probably fine.

Light Magic, Holy Light Magic, Miracle Magic, and Hero.

That's a lot of goody-goody-sounding skills for a spider.

Pretty surreal, huh?

And the Charity skill is the straw that breaks the spider's back.

It's another super-broken skill like Perseverance.

Why would a title give me such a crazy-broken skill?

Doesn't that seem weird to you?

And naturally, I acquired the Ruler of Charity title, too.

That makes six ruler titles altogether.

At this point, I kinda just have to laugh.

<Charity: n% of the power to reach godhood. Extends the equivalent effect of HP Ultra-Fast Recovery to the user and anyone recognized as the user's allies. In addition, the user will gain the ability to surpass the W system and interfere with the MA field.>

<Ruler of Charity: Acquires skills [Miracle Magic LV10] [Offer]. Acquisition conditions: Obtain [Charity] skill. Effect: Increases MP, magic, and resistance stats + correction to support skill proficiencies. Grants ruling class privileges. Description: A title granted to one who has conquered charity.>

Are you serious?!

Miracle Magic got maxed out in one go.

And the effect of Charity is pretty wild, too.

It doesn't do me much good, since I'm a total loner, but if the general of an army got this or something, presto! You'd have an invulnerable army on your hands.

Unfortunately, since I'm an outcast, it's pretty much wasted on me.

Although I guess I might be able to use it if those eggs I laid in the Great Elroe Labyrinth the other day hatch successfully.

My newfound life as an object of worship continues, but it's becoming a bit of a problem.

Making contact with people is scary.

I did mention I was a loner, remember?

I was an outcast in my previous life, and all the more so in this one so far!

That's just how I am!

Seriously, though, I've never been very good at communicating with others.

I spent most of my time alone, and when people did try to talk to me, I ended up not responding because I didn't know what to say.

I got bullied, too, probably for that same reason.

One particular girl who always stood out in class would hide my stuff and say mean things to me and so on.

It was rather mild bullying, so it didn't really bother me that much anyway.

Most of the time, it consisted of her coming up to me, saying something mean, and walking away.

Can you even really call that bullying?

I'm not sure, but I know I was pretty alienated in class.

I hardly ever held a conversation with anyone else.

So I don't know how to deal with these hordes of people aggressively coming at me all of a sudden.

I have more or less learned the language here now, though.

While I've been staying near this town, I set up some invisible thread that I've basically been using like a tin-can telephone to eavesdrop on people.

I've had my Parallel Minds working hard on deciphering it to figure out the language.

Thanks to that, I'm getting to the point where I can more or less understand basic

conversations.

That's how I know about the lord's wife spreading her rumors and stuff.

I understand the language now.

That's the first step to being able to hold a conversation.

Now all I have to do is get Telepathy, and I can use it to send my thoughts and statements to people.

Then I can hopefully gain some recognition as an intelligent creature, not just a monster to be fought.

If we can hold a conversation, I might be able to find new ways of getting along with people.

Aside from the major problem that is the Demon Lord, I might even be able to live side by side with human society.

Yet I can't quite take the plunge, because I'm too afraid of interacting with others.

How do you hold a conversation, anyway?!

Do you just start with talking about the weather?!

What comes next?!

I can easily imagine myself saying, "Nice weather we're having, huh?" and then drowning in a pool of my own sweat because I can't think of anything else to say, y'know?!

What are people gonna think if a spider starts talking to them about the weather and then freezes up?!

I'm pretty sure that would scare anybody!

I know I wouldn't wanna be near someone like that!

Even now, when I don't have to say anything, it still scares me if people come anywhere

near me!

Outcasts get scared when there are lots of people around, you know!

As it is, with people coming up to plead for healing and stuff, I probably would've left this place immediately if the lord guy hadn't forbidden people from entering the forest!

He probably wanted to forbid people from coming anywhere near me, but since the whole town's crazy about their "local god" right now, he must've given up on that.

Still, I gotta thank you, Mr. Mayor.

At least I can flee into the woods if I need to get away from people.

They don't know how crazy it is that they're able to make someone like me run away.

But that does leave me with a problem. Am I gonna have to start socializing with humans even more than this?

Nope, not happening, thank you very much!

No, for now I'll just keep things the way things are.

It's hard to get people to understand each other, after all.



FATEFUL CONFRONTATION

By the time Fei drops us off at the border where the barrier used to be, the elves and the imperial army are already clashing.

The elf army is making full use of the forest, using the trees as shields and footholds while they shoot at the enemy from a distance with magic and arrows.

The imperial army, on the other hand, is being slowed down by the countless roots protruding from the ground, along with their own heavy armor.

At a glance, it looks like the elves have the upper hand.

Still, that won't stop the imperial army.

Not unless I defeat the person standing in front of me right now.

"Well, well, well. You're here, too, huh?"

Hugo smirks unpleasantly.

"Yeah. To defeat you."

"Ha! That's hilarious! You, defeat me? Like that's ever gonna happen!!"

Waves of pressure roll off Hugo, as if he's trying to dominate the entire area.

"Is Yuri all right?"

Daring to ignore him for a moment, I look over Hugo's shoulder instead.

Yuri is lying on the ground, losing a frightening amount of blood.

As I speak, I sense Ms. Oka trembling behind me.

Judging by this situation, she must be the one who brought down Yuri.

"We're healing her right now, so she won't die, at least," Sophia replies smoothly.

A boy I've never seen before is treating Yuri.

"Wald, be a dear and carry her somewhere safe when you're done healing her, will you?"

"...All right."

The boy called Wald looks disgruntled but appears to give in and nods.

"Do you really think we'll just let you take her away?" I demand.

"Oh? Would you rather just leave an unconscious girl here on the battlefield, then? It's all the same to me, really."

I don't have a good answer for that.

If we leave Yuri lying on the battlefield, she's bound to get hurt.

"Hey, don't ignore me!"

Hugo cuts in between Sophia and me.

"Hey, Natsume. Been a while, huh?"

Tagawa calls out casually, ignoring Hugo's fury.

"Huh? Who're you?"

"C'mon, it's me. Kunihiko Tagawa."

Hugo looks oddly perplexed.

"Kunihiko Tagawa... Kunihiko Tagawa. Tagawa?"

What's going on? Hugo's acting strange, even for him.

Does he really not remember Tagawa?

"Well, whatever. The only guy I've got business with here is Shun. Shut up and stay out of it."

Looking furious at being dismissed so easily, Tagawa tries to take a step forward, but I hold out a hand to stop him.

I have to face Hugo myself.

"Hugo. Let me ask you one thing. You don't intend to surrender, do you?"

"Why would I? I'm gonna beat you to a pulp right here and now, then rub Oka's nose in it till she knows what hell on earth feels like."

"I see. All right, then."

Clearly, reasoning with him isn't an option.

"P-please, stop," Ms. Oka calls out weakly. "I have to take care of Hugo with my own hands. You mustn't get involved."

I shake my head. "Sorry, but I have no choice."

Ms. Oka is already injured.

It doesn't look to be fatal, but she obviously can't fight anymore.

"Anna, please heal Ms. Oka."

"Of course."

I leave Anna in charge of our teacher and take a step toward Hugo.

"Wait!"

"I can't. Ms. Oka, Hugo's not just your problem. I have to settle things with him myself, too."

I hear Ms. Oka struggling behind me, but Katia holds her back.

She must be truly determined to fight Hugo.

If I step in and fight him instead, it might be an insult to that determination.

Still, I can't back down.

I have even more reasons than Ms. Oka to fight Hugo.

"Mr. Hyrince, please protect Anna and Ms. Oka."

"You got it."

Normally, I'm sure he would try to stop me from taking on the enemy general alone.

But this is one time that I can't let anyone else take care of it.

I think Hyrince understands that, too.

"Sophia. Don't interfere."

"This again? I'm not helping you even if you're about to die this time, all right?"

"Yeah. That's fine."

I wasn't expecting Hugo to tell Sophia not to get involved.

Honestly, I'm relieved.

Sophia is strong.

If she won't interfere, then I can focus entirely on Hugo.

"Guys, you should stay out of this, too," I tell my allies.

As the sounds of the furious battle between the elves and the imperial army echo all around us, Hugo and I face off in silence.

Readyng my sword, I Appraise Hugo.

<Human	LV61	Name: Hugo Baint Renxandt
Status:	HP: 3,169/4,831	MP: 1,542/1,711

	(green) (details) SP: 2,577/2,577 (yellow) (details) Average Offensive Ability: 3,889 (details) +400 Average Magical Ability: 998 (details) +200 Average Speed Ability: 2,939 (details) +400	(blue) (details) : 2,663/3,255 (red) +0 (details) Average Defensive Ability: 1,255 (details) +200 Average Resistance Ability: 2,384 +200 (details)	
Skills:			
[HP Auto-Recovery LV6]	[MP Recovery Speed LV2]	[MP Lessened Consumption LV2]	[SP Recovery Speed LV7]
[SP Lessened Consumption LV7]	[Magic Power Perception LV3]	[Magic Power Operation LV2]	[Magic Divinity LV2]
[Magic Power Conferment LV2]	[Magic Power Attack LV1]	[Destruction Enhancement LV4]	[Cutting Enhancement LV4]
[Impact Enhancement LV2]	[Piercing Enhancement LV1]	[Shock Enhancement LV1]	[Heretic Attack LV4]
[Battle Divinity LV2]	[Energy Conferment LV2]	[Energy Attack LV5]	[Sword Mastery LV4]
[Throw LV2]	[Spatial Maneuvering LV2]	[Cooperation LV2]	[Leadership LV4]
[Concentration LV10]	[Thought Acceleration LV3]	[Prediction LV1]	[Arithmetic Processing LV1]
[Memory LV1]	[Hit LV8]	[Evasion LV8]	[Stealth LV3]
[Silence LV1]	[Odorless LV1]	[Appraisal LV10]	[Conquest]
[Stupefaction]	[Water Magic LV1]	[Lightning Magic LV1]	[Jinx Magic LV1]
[Heretic Magic LV2]	[Demon Lord LV1]	[Dignity LV2]	[Rage LV4]
[Overeating LV3]	[Greed]	[Lust]	[Destruction Resistance LV1]

[Impact Resistance LV2]	[Cutting Resistance LV2]	[Status Condition Resistance LV3]	[Heresy Resistance LV4]
[Pain Resistance LV7]	[Vision Enhancement LV3]	[Auditory Enhancement LV2]	[Olfactory Enhancement LV2]
[Taste Enhancement LV2]	[Tactile Enhancement LV2]	[Divinity Expansion LV3]	[Ultimate Life LV10]
[Magic Hoard LV2]	[Instantaneous LV5]	[Endurance LV5]	[Herculean Strength LV8]
[Sturdy LV4]	[Technique User LV2]	[Protection LV2]	[Running LV9]
[Taboo LV9]	[n% I = W]		

Skill Points: 217

Titles:

[Monster Slayer]	[Ruler of Greed]	[Ally Slayer]	[Human Slayer]
[Ruler of Lust]	[Human Slaughterer]	[Merciless]	[Monster Slaughterer]
[Master of Madness]	[Champion]	[Commander]	[Lord]
			>

His stats are all over the place.

They're low overall, but he has tons of skills.

His skill points are a strangely uneven number.

This is the strength that Hugo has built up using Greed.

He must have gained the more powerful skills due to titles.

The Ruler of Lust and Greed titles must have granted him powerful skills, as well as Master of Madness, which I've never even heard of.

What really concerns me is the Demon Lord skill.

The Demon Lord and Hero skills can be gained only by either using a huge amount of skill points or building up enough proficiency.

Since Hugo calls himself the real hero, I don't think he would go out of his way to acquire the Demon Lord skill.

Which means he must have gained it by building up proficiency.

Now, I don't know how you earn proficiency for the Demon Lord skill.

But for the Hero skill, it's said that you can gain it by behaving in a way befitting of a hero.

Hyrince, for example, gained the Hero skill through proficiency.

So it's safe to assume that the Demon Lord skill has similar acquisition requirements.

And Hugo met those requirements.

Just what sort of evil deeds has he committed?

I invoke Mental Warfare and Battle Divinity and look Hugo right in the eyes.

His smile is that of a man gone mad.

Like someone who can't turn back even if he wanted to.

Quietly, I raise my sword toward my former classmate.

"Here we go."

"Hurry it up!"

Hugo beckons me, so I charge forward.

I swing my sword down toward him, but Hugo blocks it with his own blade.

"Hah!"

We lock swords for a moment, then Hugo forces me back and swings a counterattack at me.

I use that momentum to dodge backward, but a black cloud spews forth from Hugo's sword, chasing me down.

Surprised, I nonetheless sweep it away with my sword.

So Hugo's weapon is a magic sword.

It seems to have a Dark-attribute effect on it, too.

However, its power is nothing so impressive.

Tagawa's magic sword is probably much stronger.

I bathe my own sword in light to counter his.

This is an enhancement done with my own magic, not a function of the sword itself.

My light-coated sword clashes with the darkness of Hugo's.

The light slashes through the darkness and knocks Hugo's sword back.

"Huh?!"

Hugo stumbles backward, and I strike his chest with the butt of my sword.

The impact knocks him off his balance, and he hits the ground with a *thud*.

"Do you give up?"

I point the tip of my sword at his neck and offer Hugo another chance to surrender.

"Hmph! Don't get full of yourself just 'cause you got in one lucky hit!"

Hugo pushes my sword away, leaps to his feet, and quickly regains his stance.

Then, with the agility of a beast, he charges at me recklessly.

I calmly assess the movements of his flailing sword and dodge the attack.

Then I sweep his sword away again and knock him to the ground, just like before.

"Do you give up?" I repeat.

He stares at me in disbelief, but then a grin supersedes his expression.

However, the smile quickly fades, too.

“It’s no use. Your magic won’t work on me.”

I could tell he was trying to use some kind of magic on me.

My guess is that he tried to use Jinx Magic.

I don’t know what effect that magic has, but it doesn’t matter.

Hugo’s magic attack power is too low, and my magic defense is too high.

On top of that, I have the Dragon Power skill I gained when I defeated the earth dragon in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

As long as I’m using it to weaken the power of magic, Hugo’s spells can’t touch me.

“Surrender.”

“Hell no!”

Hugo stands up again, waving his sword around wildly.

There’s no trace of logic to his movements anymore; he’s just flailing around with his weapon at random.

It’s like a child throwing a tantrum.

His sword comes toward me, and I dodge it by a hairbreadth.

I firmly strike the hand holding Hugo’s sword, knocking it out of his grasp.

Then I form a fist with my left hand and punch the now-defenseless Hugo in the chest.

“Oogh!”

Hugo grunts painfully and crumples to the ground.

Seeing him clutching his side and groaning, I can't help feeling a little gratified.

"This can't be happening. This world exists just for me, doesn't it? Why can't I win?"

Still crouching on the ground, Hugo mutters to himself madly.

Does he really still believe that?

"This world isn't yours. It belongs to everyone who lives in it, not any one person. Especially not you."

Hugo glares up at me furiously.

But evidently he still isn't able to stand because of the blow I dealt to his stomach.

"Oh? Well, isn't that a lovely sentiment. But since you don't know the truth, you just sound ridiculous."

The speaker steps forward with a rather scornful smile.

Sophia Keren.

A reincarnation just like us.

And, according to Ms. Oka, an enemy who has sided with the beings called administrators.

As Sophia steps forward, Katia, Tagawa, and Kushitani step forward beside me.

Armed and ready.

They're prepared to battle at any moment.

However, Sophia simply stands there calmly, along with the boy and girl on either side of her.

"Sophia!" Hugo snarls, still on the ground. "Kill them!"

"Hmm. Whatever shall I do?"

Sophia looks amused.

Her eyes are those of someone glaring down at an insect in disgust.

But I thought these two were allies?

“Now’s not the time to screw around!”

“Yes, but don’t you remember what you told me? I thought I wasn’t supposed to interfere.”

“Ngh!”

Hugo twitches.

“Besides, we have no further use for you,” Sophia continues casually.

She says it so easily that none of us understands her meaning at first.

As if she’s just commenting on some idle gossip.

“Wh-what?”

Hugo himself is the first one to respond to her chilling words.

“Merazophis, what’s the situation?”

Sophia ignores Hugo and addresses someone else.

At first I thought she was speaking to one of the two people flanking her, but I was wrong.

“We have already begun the invasion.”

“Is that right? A little soon, don’t you think?”

The man appears as suddenly as if he just sprang out of Sophia’s shadow.

There’s no other way to describe his abrupt appearance.

He has an overly serious expression and the pallor of a man who could die at any

moment.

“Huh?! What’re you doing here?!”

Tagawa lets out a startled yell.

“You know that man?”

“He’s an executive in the demon army.”

My breath catches in my throat.

An executive in the demon army?

What would a man like that be doing here?

Did the demons already know that Hugo was out of control and choose this moment to attack?

No, that wouldn’t make any strategic sense.

Then I suddenly realize what Sophia’s words mean.

“*No further use.*” That can mean only one thing.

They were working behind the scenes, manipulating Hugo to control the imperial army.

“You’re part of the demon army?!”

“Very insightful. It’s a little late for that epiphany now, though. The invasion’s already begun, after all.”

I knew the sounds of the battle around me seemed more intense than normal.

If Sophia is telling the truth, the demon army has begun their assault.

The imperial army was nothing but a decoy.

While the elves were busy fighting them, the demon army launched a surprise attack.

“Sophia, you used me, you scumbag!!”

Sophia ignores Hugo's shouting.

As if to say that she has no need to waste time on him.

No, as if his existence itself is pointless.

“Shun, what do we do?” Katia asks me quietly.

I don't know what to do here, either.

But I know we can't just let Sophia do as she pleases.

She's the strongest person I've ever encountered.

I can't just let her run wild.

“We defeat Sophia.”

“My, that's quite a declaration.”

Sophia chuckles mockingly.

Her smile says she's more than confident that we're powerless to do such a thing.

“You certainly beat down our little puppet here, but if you think I'm on his level, you're going to regret it.”

Her tone is light and joking, but there isn't a hint of mirth in her eyes.

At that moment, the boy named Wald picks up Yuri and retreats with her.

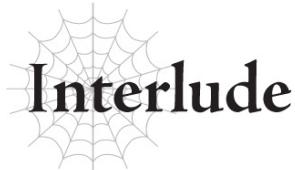
Watching them go, the man called Merazophis draws his sword.

The other girl simply remains behind Sophia, unmoving.

“Well, if you insist, I'll play with you.”

Sophia spreads her arms wide, calmly inviting us to attack.

Taking her up on her offer, I charge forward.



THE LORD'S ANGUISH

“Protests, you say?”

“That’s correct.”

Merazophis frowns uncertainly, and I heave a tired sigh.

Unable to bring myself to speak any further on the matter, I instead hand him the papers.

As Merazophis reads them, his eyebrows draw closer and closer together.

“These accusations seem very... excessive.”

“Indeed.”

For once, Merazophis’s emotions are plain on his face.

For someone who normally seems so cool and composed, at the moment he almost looks heated.

But I suppose that’s not important at the moment.

The real problem is the contents of the letter Merazophis is now holding.

To summarize its lengthy demands: “Give us the spider demon your people are worshipping.”

The letter is from Ohts.

According to them, since the monster lived in the dungeon contained in the land of Ohts, it belongs to them.

If we continue to unjustly keep it to ourselves, the letter says, they are willing to resort

to military force.

This is a new level of foolishness.

How can anyone claim ownership over a wild monster?

We have no such illusions of possessing it.

It has chosen to be here of its own accord, and we are by no means the creature's keepers.

If they think that man can control such a thing, then the people of Ohts have knotholes for eyes.

"So how are we to reply?"

"Do not ask the obvious. I will simply explain that we do not claim ownership of the creature, in polite tones that even a complete idiot will understand."

You must forgive me if my tone is a tad sardonic.

No matter how I respond, Ohts is sure to find fault with it anyway.

They are our neighbors, but I cannot say that we have a friendly relationship.

After all, their religion, the Word of God, blatantly claims that we followers of the Goddess are heretics.

Thus, it is inevitable that we would have a poor relationship with any land that worships the Word of God, including Ohts.

And since they live right on our borders, they meddle in our affairs all too often.

This is another such incident.

However, all that aside, there is another reason that Ohts has decided to approach in the form of a protest letter.

You see, the spider monster in question, also known as the Nightmare of the Labyrinth, has caused no small amount of damage to their land.

The Nightmare is a monster that emerged from the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

At the exit of that labyrinth was a fortress erected by Ohts to prevent monsters from escaping.

And the Nightmare of the Labyrinth destroyed that fortress.

Ohts seems to have attempted to keep this under wraps, but there was no hiding such a major incident.

The rumors have spread so far that even our commoners know all about it.

With this in mind, Ohts has chosen to take a defiant stance.

In the letter, they claim they “must punish the monster that has caused harm to our noble land.”

Which is why they demand we hand the creature over to them.

Though one doubts whether that is the whole truth of the matter.

No doubt the people of Ohts have heard rumors that the Nightmare of the Labyrinth has been healing people.

In fact, it's been causing such miracles as healing those who were on the verge of death by incurable illness and even restoring lost limbs.

The Nightmare has done all this while receiving only the paltriest offerings in return.

A miraculous creature that can cure any illness or wound.

If they hear of such a thing, of course people are bound to come clamoring for healing.

And there will be those who seek to profit from it, too.

No doubt Ohts wishes to take the Nightmare back to their land and use that healing power for their own benefit.

That is why they have sent such ridiculous accusations.

No matter how we reply, I am certain they will refuse to back down.

I am inclined to doubt they seriously intend to use force, but continuing to harass us through “diplomatic” means does seem quite likely.

Even if we tell them that “handing it over” is simply impossible.

They must understand that already, making this even more ridiculous.

I have a bad feeling about the whole situation.

Something tells me it’s only going to go from bad to worse.

My bad premonitions are, unfortunately, always correct.

Right now, in this very mansion, I have all manner of visitors of varying degrees of office.

Most of them are nobles from other countries.

And all of them are here for the Nightmare of the Labyrinth.

It seems they are all scheming to lure it to their own homeland if possible.

However, that doesn’t seem to be going well for them.

The Nightmare can easily be lured out with food.

However, it emerges only enough to show itself. If any further contact is attempted, it quickly retreats into the forest.

A few people attempted to communicate using Telepathy, but the Nightmare quickly withdrew as if running away.

Only when there were people who needed to be healed would the Nightmare make an appearance. Besides that, it stayed in the forest.

I have ordered everyone not to enter the forest in an effort to avoid angering the creature.

The townspeople have accepted this, not wishing to disturb the Divine Beast.

However, our greedy visitors make no attempt to abide by these rules.

Some have ventured into the forest, and a few even attempted to forcibly approach it.

“Dammit! That stupid bug! Horrible insect!”

The man currently shouting and stomping about in the mansion is one such individual.

I must say, it is most unseemly to witness a grown man throwing a childish tantrum.

Quite honestly, I would rather not have him in my mansion at all, but certain circumstances forced my hand.

This man is an official emissary from the land of Ohts.

I have no choice but to provide any such emissary with a warm reception, even if he comes from a country with whom our relationship is fraught.

And no matter how damnable a creature he might be, at that.

I can tell by the way he displays his idiocy with reckless abandon in my home that this is not a man of merit.

Indeed, he constantly causes trouble, and we, his hosts, are the ones who must pay the price.

Since he first started staying here, not a day has gone by that he has not complained to my staff.

If these were legitimate complaints, then surely we would amend them to make his stay more pleasant, but all of them are unbearably foolish beyond repair.

“The food is terrible.” Of course the vegetarian diet of Goddess worshippers would not appeal to a man who dislikes most vegetables.

“The maid keeps nagging me.” Yes, because you were smoking tobacco near my infant child, Sophia.

"This room smells awful." Again, you are the one who was smoking in it.

And so on and so forth.

On some occasions, his demands are so absurd that I cannot help thinking he must be doing it on purpose.

Yet if his demands are not met, he immediately throws a tantrum.

All in all, every one of us wants him to leave the mansion as soon as possible.

In fact, I would like to chase him out right now if I could.

However, if I do such a thing without good reason, Ohts is sure to rail against me.

In fact, perhaps that is their aim.

Why else would they send such a ridiculous man as their official emissary?

They must be aiming to provoke us Sariellans into harming one of their own.

Then they can hold that above our heads in whatever they plan to negotiate next.

However, I do not know what their intended next move might be.

Between the two countries, Sariella is far stronger than Ohts.

Ohts is in an alliance with the Renxandt Empire and has connections to the Holy Kingdom of Alleius because of its belief in the Word of God, but even with their backing, I cannot understand why they would set out to provoke us so.

Even though it's entirely possible that this emissary will cause such problems here that we will gain a bargaining chip instead.

In fact, given the supreme stupidity of the man, that seems the likelier possibility.

I cannot guess what Ohts is thinking.

One must assume it is related to the Nightmare of the Labyrinth, but I did not think them this foolish.

Surely they realize this is not a matter that can be decided through negotiating with us.

Yet the emissary sets out to bother the Nightmare every day without fail.

"That awful insect! How dare it make a fool of me!"

Amazingly, the man is still shouting.

He has been going to see the Nightmare of the Labyrinth each day, claiming it his duty as an emissary.

There, he trespasses into the forest and approaches the creature, demanding that it go over to Ohts.

In a way, perhaps the man deserves some respect for being so bold as to give orders to the mighty Nightmare.

Not that I will be offering him any.

The Nightmare of the Labyrinth has no regard for his orders, of course, and dismisses him in one way or another each day.

Which is why he's shrieking and stomping about now.

Whenever the man shows up in the forest, he says that the Nightmare goes up into a tree.

Then it stares down at him, unmoving.

No matter what the man says to it, that's all it does.

However, the emissary seems to take this as being looked down upon, and he gets angrier each time he sees the Nightmare of the Labyrinth.

Even though he is the one who keeps entering the forest, which is closed to trespassers, and haughtily shouting orders at the Nightmare that we can hear from town.

That alone is enough to incur the anger of the common people who worship the Nightmare of the Labyrinth as the Divine Beast.

This man seems to have a gift for making himself disagreeable to anyone and everyone.

We are managing for now, but if this situation continues, someone on one side or the other is bound to reach their limit.

Thankfully, the emissary's stay is temporary.

I can only hope that no problems occur before he finally leaves.

My hopes fell on deaf ears.

The emissary has died.

In this very mansion, no less.

His cause of death is unknown.

There is not a single scratch on his body; according to his servant who witnessed the death, he simply fell to the floor as suddenly as if he were a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Which was why I was woken up quite rudely in the middle of the night.

Now the man's servants sit in front of me, their faces pale.

"Well? Do you have any ideas as to what might have caused his death?"

The servants nod silently to my question.

However, I can see from the shifting of their eyes that they have no idea.

I heave a pointedly audible sigh.

The servants all tremble in response.

I have a very good idea of the cause of the man's death.

It is the work of the Nightmare of the Labyrinth.

In fact, this is not the first sudden, mysterious death to occur in this town.

It has happened before in this same mansion, in fact.

A group of suspicious-looking men were found dead here, with no visible wounds whatsoever.

We still do not know who these men were or why they were invading our mansion.

Based on recent events, I suspect they may have been agents of Ohts, but I have no proof of this.

Did they come to assassinate me? To steal confidential documents?

Because the cause of their deaths was so unusual, it seems likely that the culprit was some aberrant outside force.

And when one considers the timing, it seems quite likely that the Nightmare of the Labyrinth is responsible.

However, I do not know why the Nightmare of the Labyrinth would take such an interest in protecting this town.

Surely the creature is not actually the Divine Beast from the legends of the Goddess?

Since it seems to have intelligence to easily match that of a human, there must be some reason behind its actions.

Although it's possible I think that only because I'm a human myself.

Even if it has the same level of intelligence as a human, that doesn't mean that a monster like the Nightmare of the Labyrinth would follow the same patterns of thought.

It might have motivations completely different from that of a human.

Which would make it all the stranger that it has chosen to support our town.

But I suppose it doesn't matter much either way.

Whether it thinks the same way as a human or not, I can't come up with a single reason for a monster to protect our human town.

Not knowing that is quite frightening indeed.

Especially since the creature in question is an immensely powerful monster.

However, this time I think I understand what the Nightmare of the Labyrinth was after. Revenge.

“So? Why were all of you awake at such an hour?”

The time is well past midnight.

It is still pitch-dark outside, with some time before the sky begins to turn blue.

Unless the man was on night watch, he ought to have been sleeping.

It is highly suspicious that he was awake.

All the more so since he normally drank enough to fill a small tub before going to bed.

“W-well, you see...”

One servant is obviously very flustered.

His reaction is so over-the-top that I'm tempted to wonder if he's acting, but judging by his pallor, it's clearly the truth.

If he can invoke such a pale face by acting, the man deserves to be in leading roles onstage.

The servants look at one another uncertainly, clearly wondering whether to admit the truth or make some excuse. Unfortunately for them, however, I'm already in the know.

A watchman informed me that a group of people had attacked the Nightmare of the Labyrinth.

I have little doubt they were assassins sent by these servants' now-dead master.

The circumstantial evidence alone is more than sufficient.

He must have been planning to make the Nightmare of the Labyrinth obey him by force.

Or was he hoping to get rid of it in revenge for ignoring his demands?

Either way, there's no denying it was an extremely foolish act.

The offenders, incidentally, were quickly dispatched by their would-be victim, the Nightmare.

It is difficult to pity them when they could not perceive the clear difference between their strength and their opponent's.

Or did they have some reason for not being able to refuse their superior?

If their superior was the emissary, then it would make some sense.

I do feel sorry for those under the employ of an incompetent superior.

Now, how to deal with these remaining servants of the deceased incompetent in question?

One must hope that the subordinates are equally incompetent.

I must attempt to guide them such that Ohts will not raise objections against Sariella for this matter, or at least to keep their anger to a minimum.

When an emissary dies in another country, it is inevitable that the host will receive some degree of blame.

If I cannot create a convincing reason, we will end up owing them a needless debt.

And so, I must have the late man's servants confess that he attempted to lay a hand on the Nightmare of the Labyrinth and was killed by said monster in retribution.

We cannot change the fact that the emissary died in Sariella, but if he brought it upon himself by making an attempt on a dangerous monster, it will at least lighten the blame placed on us.

And in light of the man's general behavior, I imagine those who knew him will be quite willing to accept our side of the story.

...At least, I certainly hope so.

I am well aware that all of this is rather wishful thinking.

If Ohts sent that emissary fully knowing this would come to pass, then the situation is dire.

And I am quite disturbed that I do not know what Ohts is attempting to do.

The attack on my wife and child.

The sudden increase in the robber population, clearly influenced by some other country.

The mysterious intruders.

All these signs point to something very bad indeed on the horizon.

And as if to confirm these fears, my spies have informed me that Ohts has been making movements in secret.

There are signs that they are preparing for war.

I did not want to believe this.

The difference in strength between Sariella and Ohts is quite clear.

If a war breaks out, it is bound to end in a Sariella victory.

And Ohts should be just as aware of this as I am.

So does this mean they have some secret means to victory?

Could it be that the Renxandt Empire or the Holy Kingdom of Alleius intends to interfere?

I do not know.

Is Ohts really going to wage war on us?

I do not know this, either.

However, I must do whatever I am able to prevent it.

At the moment, that means getting the servants in front of me to confess.

Though that may not matter much if Ohts really does intend to start a war.

At any rate, it is too early to say whether war will break out.

Perhaps we can still resolve things through negotiation.

Again, wishful thinking, but I must do everything in my power.

I suppose only the Goddess knows what will happen after that.



HERO PARTY VS VAMPIRE PRINCESS

I don't know much about Sophia.

Not in this world or in our previous one, for that matter.

I know her name there was Shouko Negishi, but if you asked me what kind of person she was, I don't think I'd be able to say a single thing with certainty.

That's how little we interacted.

I don't believe we ever had a real conversation.

In fact, the exchange we just had is probably more conversation than we ever managed in our previous lives.

I don't know anything about her.

Not then and not now.

I don't know what she was thinking when she chose to play a part in all this.

But what she's done is show complete contempt for human life.

She's helped bring catastrophe down on the people who Julius desperately fought to protect.

I cannot forgive her for that.

So I have to stop her here and now.

I draw my sword and charge with fervor, but she easily deflects my strike with her broadsword.

“Ngh!”

She didn’t have this broadsword until a second ago, when it appeared from her shadow.

I thought it might be Shadow Magic, but that’s not quite right.

It’s probably the effect of some unknown skill of hers.

It seems that she was keeping a broadsword in her shadow somehow, too, just like the man called Merazophis who appeared from it not long ago.

The huge two-handed sword doesn’t seem to suit Sophia’s small frame.

But she’s wielding it with one hand.

My body gets blown back as if I weigh nothing at all.

I quickly twist around in midair to land on my feet, so I don’t take any damage at all.

However, I can feel the difference in our power so keenly it’s almost painful.

I charged with all my might, and she parried and brushed me off easily.

It’s safe to assume that Sophia has a skill that can cancel out magic.

In which case, the only way to defeat her will be in a physical fight.

And yet, that brief exchange of blows made one thing clear.

I can’t beat her.

Although I can’t Appraise her, I know that the difference between our stats must be huge.

But I was prepared for that reality.

It’s been obvious that Sophia is way stronger than I am since we first met in the capital.

But even if her stats are higher, I’ll find a way to win.

“Shun! Don’t charge in alone like that!”

Katia steps up by my side.

"Asaka and I will hold off Merazophis. The rest is up to you guys."

Tagawa and Kushitani face off against Merazophis, who readies himself in turn.

"Shun, I can fight, too."

Ms. Oka stands up, preparing her bow.

Anna has finished her treatment, which leaves her free to rejoin the front lines, too.

As well as Mr. Hyrince, who was protecting the pair of them.

That's right.

I'm not alone.

Maybe I can't do this by myself, but if we all come together, I know we can win.

"Looks like it's five against two. Hope you don't mind."

Hyrince steps forward, his shield braced before him.

"Oh, that's fine with me. In fact, let's make it five against one."

Sophia shoots a look toward the girl behind her.

The girl makes a face but quickly withdraws.

"You don't seem too worried."

"I'm not worried in the least," Sophia responds smoothly.

Hoping to take advantage of her relaxed state, Ms. Oka looses an arrow at Sophia.

A perfect surprise attack in the middle of a conversation.

For a moment, it seems cowardly to me, but I have to remind myself that Ms. Oka is as desperate as the rest of us.

Besides, a surprise attack can't be dirty if it doesn't work.

Sophia reaches out with her free hand and catches the arrow.

Her reflexes are terrifying.

There was no need for her to catch the arrow instead of dodging it.

Dodging it would have been quicker and easier, I'm sure.

But she probably decided to catch it in order to make her overwhelming power that much clearer.

However, no matter how clear our disadvantage, there are some fights you can't back down from.

Hyrince charges, pushing his shield forward.

Sophia tosses the arrow aside and grasps her broadsword with both hands.

Immediately, a metallic *clang* echoes in the air.

Sophia has caught Hyrince's rush attack with her broadsword.

Her slim body doesn't falter an inch, despite Hyrince's heavy equipment.

But then Katia and I follow up from either side of Hyrince.

My sword and Katia's rapier plunge toward her at the same time.

Then, for a moment, I don't understand what's happened to me.

My vision whirls, and I slam into the ground, unable to quite control my fall.

Confused, I nevertheless leap back to my feet.

There's a dull pain in my hand, as if it's going numb.

When I see Katia and Hyrince have been knocked to the ground like I was and Sophia finishing a swing of her sword, I realize what happened.

Sophia used her broadsword to knock all three of us back.

And all in one swing.

It must have hit Hyrinace first, then followed through to hit Katia and me seconds later.

Katia hasn't managed to get up yet, and her rapier lies in pieces on the ground.

Sophia must have been aiming at our weapons.

My sword managed to withstand the blow somehow, but the aftershock caused serious damage to my wrist.

To be honest, it's practically a miracle that I haven't let go of my sword.

But what if Sophia had been aiming not at our weapons but directly at us?

The image of Katia and me being sliced in half flashes across my mind.

I shudder for a moment.

She probably could have done it.

Sophia must have deliberately aimed for our weapons to avoid killing us.

Ms. Oka shoots more arrows and Anna casts magic at her, but she dodges the arrow with a slight duck of her head, and the magic gets canceled out before it even reaches her.

"Oh, right. A half elf, is it? How very unusual."

Sophia's gaze turns toward Anna.

Hyrinace stands up with his shield prepared as if to block her vision, but Sophia still seems to be deep in thought, ignoring him completely.

While she's distracted, I charge at her with my sword.

But I already know that she's not really distracted; she just doesn't care.

Once again, she easily dodges the surprise attack.

I was expecting that much, though.

I immediately alter the trajectory of my sword, cutting back toward Sophia.

Since her broadsword is so large and heavy, it's not built to make tight turns.

Judging by what I've seen of her power so far, she can still move pretty quickly with it, but there must be a limit.

If we can't beat her with sheer strength, we'll try besting her with speed!

I move my sword as precisely as I can, carefully controlling my strength.

Using as many sword thrusts as possible, I try to keep the movement of her broadsword in check.

Sure enough, the long broadsword isn't suited to rapid-fire attacks, and Sophia begins to use the side of her sword to defend herself.

Then Ms. Oka adds in more arrows, pressing her even further.

This time, Sophia has to dodge the arrows, since she can't afford to catch them.

I pile on even more sword attacks, trying to chase her down.

This could work!

But just as that thought crosses my mind, I see Sophia's foot move out of the corner of my eye.

In the next second, a powerful impact hits my stomach.

"Oof!"

A grunt escapes my mouth, pushed out along with the air in my lungs.

My body is sent flying, but the crash to my back never comes.

Looking up, I see Hyrince's face.

He must have caught me when I got blown backward.

"You all right?!"

"Yes, thank you."

I'm not really fine, but I keep that to myself.

My stomach is still throbbing with pain as I quickly remove myself from Hyrince's arms.

It's obvious what happened this time.

She kicked me.

I never expected her to be able to throw a kick in that situation.

"Your aim's not bad, but your swordsmanship is far too prim and proper. You realize that leaves you open to dirty tricks like this, right?"

Sophia's voice is careless, even bordering on friendly.

Silently, I brandish my sword once more.

She's right, of course.

I have lots of experience from training and fighting monsters but much less in the way of battling other humans.

That means I'm weak to unexpected attacks and probably easy to read, too.

Now I'm truly, painfully aware that there's a bigger difference between Sophia and me than I thought.

It's more than just stats.

She's seen a lot more bloodshed than I have and fought in far more real battles.

That much is clear, despite how brief our exchange has been so far.

Close by, I can hear the sounds of Tagawa and Kushitani fighting Merazophis.

However, I can't afford to turn away.

I can't take my eyes off Sophia for a moment.

If I let my guard down for even one second, I have a terrible feeling that it will all be over.

And yet, I can't help noticing Katia's gaze.

Still crouching on the ground, she seems to be trying to tell me something with her eyes.

Recognizing her intentions, I focus all my thoughts on that moment.

"Hmm. Whatever shall I do? I know I'm supposed to kill all the elves except Ms. Oka, but where do half elves factor into that equation?"

Sophia hasn't noticed.

We're in the middle of a battle, but her thoughts are clearly elsewhere, without a care in the world.

That's when Katia completes her magic.

At that moment, I break into a run.

Katia was invoking an Earth Magic spell.

Instead of attacking Sophia directly, it makes the ground below us rumble.

Sophia's magic nullification ability doesn't seem to work on magic that moves the ground instead of attacking her directly, so the spell works.

The ground shakes violently, breaking Sophia's posture ever so slightly.

I aim for that brief opening.

This is the only chance we have left of winning!

Sophia welcomes my determined attack with a smile.

As if she's mocking us for our pathetic attempts.

But then her smile darkens.

Flying past me, Ms. Oka's arrow zooms toward Sophia.

She couldn't have seen it coming, since it was hidden in my shadow.

We didn't plan this, but Ms. Oka must have picked up on the opening Katia was creating.

Still off her balance, Sophia is unable to dodge the arrow.

She has no choice but to block it with her sword, then try to parry me.

This time, Sophia's smile disappears entirely.

Because Hyrince's shield has crashed against her sword.

A shield throw.

Hyrince's shield isn't just armor. It's also an excellent weapon.

The weight of the shield alone makes it a superb blunt weapon, and when it's thrown, it's like a cannon.

Hyrince's shield strikes just as Sophia is trying to regain her stance after blocking Ms. Oka's arrow.

Even she can't handle the impact, and the broadsword in her hand goes flying backward.

Now that she's completely off balance, I swing my sword down toward Sophia's body.

"You really should have gone for the neck just now, don't you think?"

The bland remark stuns me into silence.

My sword has definitely struck Sophia's body.

But she doesn't seem hurt in the slightest.

It's being blocked by something hard under my blade.

When I look at Sophia's neck from incredibly up close, I realize what she means.

The back of her neck is covered by something shiny and metallic.

Just like the hard scales of a wyrm or a dragon.

"That wasn't half-bad, I'll admit. It didn't work, though."

Sophia aims another kick at me.

I can't fully defend myself against it, and it knocks me back just like before, until Hyrince catches me once again.

But this time, I can't pull away from Hyrince and stand up quite yet.

I put all my power into that strike.

Yes, I avoided her vitals so I wouldn't kill her, but I wasn't holding anything back.

Yet that attack didn't cause her a single bit of pain.

She has the upper hand in stats and abilities, and yet we somehow managed to create a brief, perfect opportunity.

But now it's been rendered meaningless.

If we'd merely failed, we might still be able to create another chance like that.

But it won't work again.

Magic doesn't affect Sophia.

So Anna, whose only means of fighting is magic, hasn't been able to lay a hand on her.

If magic doesn't work, our only shot is physical attacks.

But an attack with my full strength didn't work on Sophia.

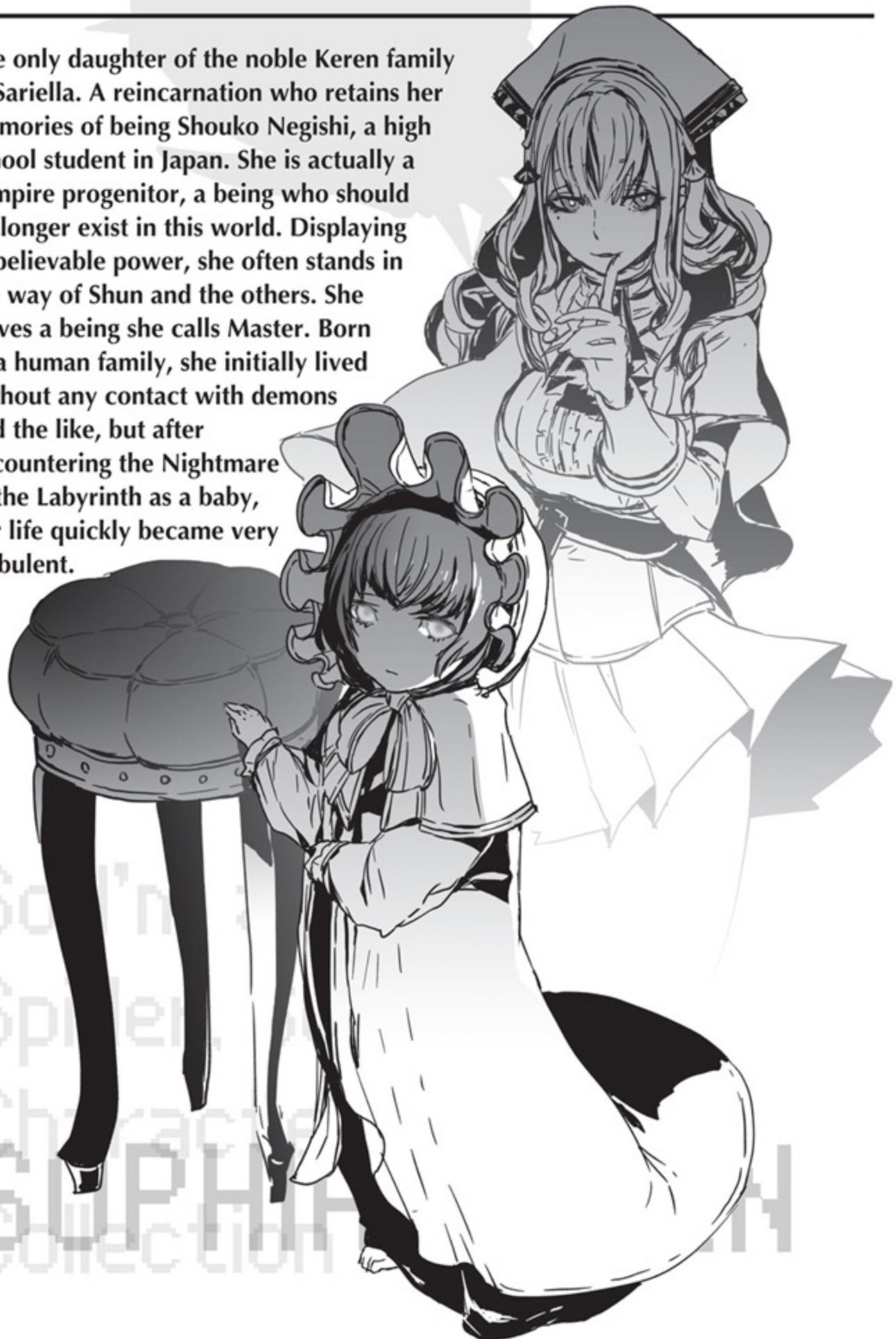
That means neither magical nor physical attacks can touch her.

If neither of them will work, if her defenses are that invincible, how are we supposed to fight her?

For the first time, I feel the horror of being truly helpless.

SOPHIA KEREN

The only daughter of the noble Keren family in Sariella. A reincarnation who retains her memories of being Shouko Negishi, a high school student in Japan. She is actually a vampire progenitor, a being who should no longer exist in this world. Displaying unbelievable power, she often stands in the way of Shun and the others. She serves a being she calls Master. Born to a human family, she initially lived without any contact with demons and the like, but after encountering the Nightmare of the Labyrinth as a baby, her life quickly became very turbulent.





MACHINATIONS IN MOTION

This annoying guy kept bugging the crap out of me, so I maybe kinda sorta killed him.

Oopsie!

I mean, if he was just being annoying, that'd be one thing, but what do you expect if you're gonna try and attack me?

Sure, it was enough of a pain when he kept showing up every day, blathering on at me, then getting pissed off before going home for whatever reason.

I still don't fully understand the language here, so there were some parts that went over my head, but mostly he was just being snooty and saying stuff like, "You are my pet now! Obey me!"

Like, did you really think that was gonna work?

Was this guy right in the head?

And then while I'm just staring at him blankly, the guy starts throwing a fit.

What was there to get mad about anyway?

It's just like with the girl who used to pester me in my old life. Why does me staring at people in confused silence always piss them off?

I don't get it.

Then, just as I was getting really sick of this stupid old guy sticking his nose in my business every day, he ordered some of his subordinates to attack me.

He probably intended to kidnap me by force or whatever, but I honestly feel kinda bad

for the poor thugs he sent to do the deed.

They never stood a chance of kidnapping me.

Did they know that and set out with a sense of resignation to see their duty through to the end, or were they just stupid?

Well, either way, I wiped 'em all out.

While I was at it, I wrapped things up by using my Evil Eyes to dispose of the old guy who sent them.

Next thing you know, the town's in an uproar.

It turns out this guy was some kind of big shot from another country or something.

Since he died in this town under suspicious circumstances, it could end up being a whole international incident for the country this town is in, I guess.

The lord and his right-hand man looked pretty stressed out while they were talking about it.

I'm sorry, okay?

I guess this is kinda my fault.

But look, I don't regret it one bit!

If someone tries to get me, I'll get 'em right back!

That's just how I roll!

Besides, I'm sure one stupid old guy kicking the bucket isn't gonna be that big of a deal.

Well, boy, was I wrong about that.

It's been a few days since that guy died.

Things have taken a bit of an unexpected turn.

More specifically, the people are preparing for battle now.

Like, what the hell?!

Why?!

A bunch of soldiers and stuff have been gathering in town.

There's been lots of logistical talk, too. Seems like everyone's rarin' for a fight.

They're totally gearing up to go to war.

The only person who seems bothered by this is the lord of the town.

It seems like he was hoping to avoid war if at all possible, but instead now he's stuck on the front lines.

Everyone else's morale is super-high.

How did things even end up like this?

Well, nothing to do with me, that's for sure.

Yep. I've definitely got nothing to do with it.

I haven't heard anyone talking about beating down those bastards who tried to steal their Divine Beast or anything like that.

Nope, definitely not.

Ugh. Unreal.

It seems like the reason for the war is 'cause I offed that annoying old guy.

His country, which I guess is called Ohts or whatever, has always had a bad relationship with this one, which is called Sariella.

It seems to be about a difference in religious beliefs or something, but I don't really know the details.

So Mr. Cool Guy from Ohts is dead.

The cause: me.

If he'd just been attacked and killed by some ordinary monster, they might've been able to work things out, but right now Sariella sees me as some kind of Divine Beast, so it's playing out sort of like this:

Your Divine Beast whacked one of our guys; what are ya gonna do about it?

Don't play dumb; your goon tried to lay a hand on our Divine Beast first.

What's that, wise guy? You wanna go?

Bring it on, asshole!

That's the gist of the exchange, as far as I can tell.

They probably weren't talking like old-timey mobsters, but seriously, you get the idea.

Ha... ha... ha.

How stupid can these people get?

Don't go to war over something like that. No waaay.

What a half-assed reason!

I'm getting culture shock over how easily these people decide to kill one another!

I mean, we're not talking about a little brawl here.

This is war, all right?

Should you really be starting a war so casually?

I mean, I guess it's not my place to say that as an outsider, and it's not like I can really say it to them anyway.

But I'm not really a total outsider here, either.

In fact, I'm in the weird position of being both an outsider and kind of involved at the same time.

Hmm. Hmm.

What should I do now?

I mean, if they wanna go to war, normally I'd say they can go right ahead, but I feel kind of weird about it when it's happening because of me.

Right, right.

I know, okay?

Yes, I'm technically the cause, but that was really just an excuse.

If you think about it, there's no way they'd send such an annoying little man to do an important job like bringing me to their country.

The only explanation is that he was a pawn sent here to cause trouble between the two countries.

Once that plan went south, they'd use it as a justification to attack Sariella.

I guess they got what they wanted.

As proof, the lord who's been working so hard to avoid a war has finally given up.

From what I hear, troops are already gathering in Ohts.

Not only that, but their allies are sending reinforcements, too.

They're practically champing at the bit.

If someone intends from the beginning to start a war, there's not really anything you can say or do to prevent it.

And they basically used me as a scapegoat to start their little war.

Ugh!

I'm not one to go around telling people when they can or can't have a war, but if I'm being used in the process, that kinda makes me mad.

Hmm. How am I gonna vent this anger?

Oh, wait. Why don't I just participate in the war? That'd be pretty simple.

Ohts is the country that used me as a scapegoat, after all.

And that's who Sariella is about to go to war against.

As their beloved Divine Beast, I can take part in the war to protect Sariella.

Yep, that all checks out.

Besides, if I go to war, that means I'm gonna end up killing lots of people.

Humans give a lot more experience points than monsters.

Mm, I can't say no to that.

If you look at it that way, war starts to seem like a great way to grind EXP.

I'm nowhere near strong enough to fight the Demon Lord yet.

If I want to get a little closer, well, earning tons of experience isn't a bad way to do it.

On top of that, if I fight in the war, my fame in Sariella will skyrocket.

The more I think about it, the better it sounds.

If I leave the area of the town, the elves might try to pull something, but I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

As long as I wipe out all the elves who're in this town before I leave, I'm sure it'll be fine.

This plan is perfect.

Too perfect!

Kinda makes me want to pull a nasty face and go, "Just as planned!"

Heh-heh-heh.

My mind is made up. No turning back now.

Time to go to war.

So here we are, reporting live from the battlefield!

Humans, humans, humans, as far as the eye can see!

If I had to put it into words, I'd say it reminds me of a certain Comi-what's-it event that happens in Japan every summer and winter!

As a side note, I've never once set foot on that particular battlefield!

This may surprise some viewers, but do you really think I'd be able to handle such a huge crowd of people?!

I would definitely get overwhelmed and pass out!

In fact, I feel like I could pass out right now!

That's my report for today!

...Can I pass out now?

I mean, seriously.

The soldiers started moving, so I snuck along to check things out, and *bam!* Tons and tons of people everywhere.

They're all clanking around in full armor and equipment, too.

At a glance, it's hard to say exactly how many people there are, but both sides seem to number in the tens of thousands.

Doesn't that seem like a lot?

I activate Professor Wisdom's Detection and get a more precise number.

On the Sariella side, forty-two thousand.

On the side of the Ohts Alliance, fifty-three thousand.

Okay, gotcha.

About half the size of the battle of Sekigahara, then.

Ha-ha... ha.

Waaay too many!

Is this real?!

This is the war you used me as a catalyst for?

'Cause it kind of feels like an all-or-nothing showdown to me.

Oof, this is kinda giving me a stomachache.

Assuming spiders can get stomachaches, anyway.

Yeesh.

This battle is a whole lot bigger than I imagined.

I was kinda expecting more of a teeny little skirmish, but look at what I got instead.

So much for just popping onto the battlefield and swashbuckling around. If I do that here, it's gonna make things real weird, real fast.

What am I gonna do?

Not to mention, with this many people around, I might seriously pass out.

Maybe I can still go home?

But right as I start seriously considering that, both armies begin advancing.

Even from far away, the echoing battle cries send a shudder through my body.

Y-yikes.

I fought all kinds of monsters in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, but I've never seen such a huge war between humans before.

Based on stats alone, these people are all vastly inferior to me, but with their huge numbers, their strength would be nothing to sneeze at.

The armies collide.

If I stand around doing nothing while trying to make up my mind, Sariella is going to lose.

The difference in numbers is too great.

I don't know what the troops' stats all look like, but based solely on the size of the armies, Sariella is clearly at a disadvantage.

And the place where they're fighting is a wide-open plain.

The armies don't have any fancy formations. They're just charging right into one another.

From what I can tell, Sariella doesn't have any way to make up for what they lack in numbers.

Their magic attacks from the rear are definitely lighting up the battlefield, but the scale doesn't seem like enough to faze the Ohts Alliance too much.

At this rate, Sariella is going to be defeated.

Hrmm.

If Sariella loses here, I feel like that's gonna be a big pain for me.

The country of Ohts definitely isn't going to leave me alone.

They blamed the whole war on my existence, after all, so it wouldn't look good for

them if they did nothing about it afterward.

I don't know how they'd approach me exactly, but I doubt I'll be getting worshipped like I have been so far.

Yeah, that's gonna be a problem.

And the easiest way to avoid that problem is to make sure Sariella wins this war.

All right. No time to dillydally.

Let's do this! Woo!

A woman's gotta have guts! No point worrying about what other people think!

I literally leap into action, putting myself in the air above where the armies are clashing.

Some of them notice me and are looking up, but I just gotta ignore them. Ignore them!

Seriously, if I pay too much attention to that, it's all over!

Mostly because I would probably faint!

I launch magic toward the Ohts Alliance forces.

My wide-range Dark Magic attack smashes into their army, decimating their forces in one fell swoop.

Ooh.

How many did that just kill? About three thousand?

Just like that, there's a huge gap in the Ohts forces where people used to be.

Whoosh. The battlefield falls still.

Everyone starts looking at me.

...Did I mess up?

Maybe I went a little too far?

An awkward silence settles painfully over the area.

The battlefield is dead silent, not including a sound that only I can hear: the sound of me leveling up over and over.

Humans really do grant tons of experience.

That one attack seems to have leveled me up quite a bit.

As I sweat it out internally, wondering what to do next, a noise finally breaks the terrible silence.

One of the Ohts Alliance soldiers starts running away.

As soon as one starts fleeing, others quickly follow suit.

The soldiers all scramble to get away as fast as possible.

The Sariella soldiers come back to their senses at that.

In a panic, they start chasing after the fleeing Ohts soldiers.

Chaos ensues.

Some of them hold out, since they seem to have a good commander. Nevertheless, the tides of the battle have now turned completely in Sariella's favor.

.....Just as planned!

Yep, let's go with that.

My single devastating attack destroyed the Ohts Alliance's fighting spirit, leading Sariella to victory.

That's exactly how I pictured this going!

So on that note, I think I'll get out of here now.

Being the center of attention like this for even a moment longer won't be good for my mental health.

Considering how much the situation has changed, I doubt Ohts is going to pull a comeback out of a hat.

I'll just head back early and await the triumphant return of the Sariella soldiers.

With that in mind, I start to activate Teleport.

But then, just as I'm about to use it, I sense something teleporting in front of me first.

Something's coming.

Now I'm really sweating, in a different way from before.

This particular feeling is all too familiar.

It's the person I met in the Middle Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth, right after I beat that fire dragon.

That dark man in black.

Why would he be coming at a time like this?

But my premonition turns out to be wrong.

In the worst way possible.

"Sorry to interrupt your fun."

The girl who appears before me speaks in a casual tone.

"I'm going to have to ask you to die now, okay?"

With a big smile, she sentences me to death.

The alarms in my head sound off at max volume.

Of course they do.

Because the person in front of me is the one who's been chasing me around all this time.

The Demon Lord, Ariel.



THE DEMON LORD AND THE ADMINISTRATOR

I've lived a very long life and come close to death plenty of times.

But I have never fought such a strange opponent before.

I first learned of its existence when I received an emergency request for aid from one of my subordinates, a queen taratect.

According to the report she sent me via Kin Control, she was in danger of being eaten by one of her own children.

I didn't know what to make of that, but from the queen's panicked state, I knew this was no small matter.

This came at an important time for me, since I'd just started working as the demon lord, but I can't turn down a request from my precious kin.

I immediately went to the Great Elroe Labyrinth to get more details from the queen herself.

This left me even more bewildered.

Just as I'd been told before, the culprit was one of the queen's many offspring.

It left the queen's side, evolved on its own, and ended up freeing itself of her control.

This is the first time anything so unusual has happened.

However, it's not necessarily impossible.

There are certainly less system bugs these days, but some of them are still hanging around from when the whole thing started.

I concluded that this must be another such bug and figured the situation would be remedied if I just eliminated the anomaly.

But I was naive.

I haughtily assumed that even if it had evolved a few times, it couldn't be that big of a deal.

It wasn't long before I realized my mistake.

I didn't entirely understand right away why the queen had asked for my help.

"Found it."

When I found the individual, I soon realized that it was far more dangerous than I thought.

<Appraisal Blocked>

My Appraisal results drove this reality home.

Only Rulers can interfere with Appraisal.

Rulers have ruler skills, and on top of that, they're connected to the system.

Even the queen hasn't reached that position, but this individual had done it.

"Hi there. I'm your grandma."

I jokingly introduced myself, approaching in a friendly manner.

"Sorry to ask this right off the bat, but could you stop attacking the queen now, please?"

Hearing that, the creature tilted its head, then waved a leg from side to side.

It refused.

It must have tilted its head to imply that it didn't know why I would ask such a thing.

"I see. I suppose I have no choice, then."

It's not that it didn't occur to me to try to bring the Ruler onto my team.

However, I judged that it was too dangerous to leave this thing to its own devices.

If it wasn't going to listen to me, I'd just have to crush it on the spot.

"Well, that was a short-lived relationship. Good-bye."

With a swing of my arm, I crushed the individual.

Ruler or not, it hadn't been alive for that long.

Unable to withstand my attack, it died just about instantly.

Or so I'd thought.

But the attack on the queen continued.

An attack that eroded the soul directly, which no skill should have been able to do.

I killed the source, yet the attack persisted.

I don't know what kind of tricks it used, but that meant it wasn't dead.

Since then, I've been chasing it all over.

I've been doing so despite the fact that I'm at a huge disadvantage, since the individual is a master of Teleport magic.

On top of that, there have been signs that it can track my movements.

Even with Kin Control, I can grasp only a vague idea of where the queen might be, never mind this creature.

There's nothing more pointless than chasing something you can never catch up with.

And doing something that I know is pointless is incredibly tiring.

In the meantime, we lost not only the queen's subordinates but even my own puppet taratects.

It would be dangerous to keep warring against that thing.

Yet the all-important queen kept getting attacked, with no way of escaping.

Then the queen died.

I had known for a while that it was the most likely outcome, but when I actually lost one of my queens, it tore open a hole in my heart.

One of my own kin who'd fought alongside me for so many years, gone.

This was a huge loss.

I went to the Bottom Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth, where the queen died.

But I couldn't even find her body anywhere.

My soul trembled.

A powerful rage that I hadn't felt in ages burned in my heart.

Never.

I'd never forgive it for this.

I'm going to destroy that thing, and not just because it turned its soul-eroding fangs on me.

Luckily, this attack is much weaker than the one on the queen.

Even my soul, already on the verge of death, can bear it for now.

"You seem to be having quite a bit of trouble."

In the Bottom Stratum, an earth dragon spoke to me with Telepathy.

It was the guardian of this area, the leader of the earth dragons, earth dragon Gakia.

Behind him were some of the strongest of the already powerful earth dragons.

And I sensed fierce hostility rolling off them toward me.

“And what if I am? You know if you interfere with me you’ll be violating the pact, right?”

“That was an agreement between you and our lord. We will obey the lord’s orders, of course, but unfortunately we have not been ordered not to oppose you.”

I thought back to the lord of the earth dragons, Gülie.

Clearly, he hadn’t disciplined his subordinates properly.

“How very shrewd. So? What makes you want to fight me so badly that you’d even go against your lord’s orders?”

“*Do you not agree that it is time for the old to be culled?*”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“A new wind is blowing. You are the oldest Divine Beast. Should we elders not withdraw from this world to make way for the new?”

Was the “new wind” he was blathering about that individual I’d been fighting?

“You’re joking. So what, then—we leave everything up to the newbies? That’s how we got into this situation in the first place. Why else would someone as ancient as me have to start getting involved?”

If so, then this wasn’t a joke at all.

Did he know why that strange individual was born?

There was no way something like that just came about naturally.

I had to assume there was a reason behind it.

Did these guys know what it was?

“Eldest Divine Beast. We cannot understand why you are after that being. However, we

infer that you are being cornered. Is that being the one who has cornered you? Or are we gravely mistaken?"

I knew it.

These guys knew about that thing.

They knew, and they had expectations of it.

What in the world was that individual?

"That being's strength is so great that it has managed to defeat our brethren. You cannot simply expect to arrive late on the scene and easily harm it."

"See, this is the problem with dragons..."

Dragons, especially earth dragons, value strength way too highly. They respect anyone strong, no matter who it is.

Even if the strength in question was being used to kill their own kin.

"Such strength must be treated with reverence. That being, especially, has grown to be able to defeat our brethren in such a short time."

Reverence?

For that thing?

"No waaay."

These words spilled out of my mouth unbidden.

It caught even me off guard.

What did I just say?

Something felt strange, as if someone else's thoughts had crept into my own.

I was being encroached on.

That individual's attack on my soul was slowly but surely eating me from the inside.

Me, who rules over Gluttony, being consumed.

Noticing the irony, I couldn't help but scratch my head irritably.

"So? Are you guys going to back off or what?"

That irritation leaked into my attitude toward the dragons.

"We shall not. We, too, are old creatures, ripe to be destroyed. I cannot think of a more beautifully fitting stage for our end than buying time against the eldest Divine Beast."

"Speak for yourself. I still intend to devour everything."

My word was as good as a promise.

I took a step forward to devour the earth dragons.

That was some time ago now.

It's all but impossible to sense the passage of time in the darkness of the labyrinth, so I have no idea how long it's been since our battle first began.

"*Magnificent.*"

Earth dragon Gakia collapses.

"I could say the same for you."

They really were magnificent.

Despite the huge difference in strength between us, Gakia and his earth dragons gave me a run for my money.

Aside from the unique opponent I'm dealing with right now, it has been quite a long time since I struggled this much in a direct confrontation.

"*I am... satisfied.*"

The light fades from Gakia's eyes.

His long life has finally come to an end.

I gaze at Gakia's fallen remains.

I didn't have any particular attachment to him.

However, knowing that one of the ancient dragons has perished, I feel a sentiment that's hard to describe.

Another one of the elders is gone.

It's all the more painful because it was by my own hand.

I shake free of the pointless emotion.

There is still something that I must do.

I must consume Gakia's remains, as well as the remains of the other earth dragons.

Because the battle took us all over the Bottom Stratum, the remains of those dragons who fell along the way are scattered in various places.

Troublesome though it might be, I must go retrieve and eat them.

It goes against my principles to leave leftovers behind.

Wait.

That's strange.

Have I always had such a principle?

Hmm...?

Well, it's fine.

No.

This is not fine.

This is not fine at all.

My thoughts are diverging more and more from my original self.

I feel that something is mixed in with my soul.

It's the individual eating away at my soul, the same thing I felt before this battle began.

It seems to have advanced significantly during the battle.

And yet, something feels different.

Before I started fighting the earth dragons, it felt as if I was being attacked, but now it feels more like we're melding together.

We're becoming one.

I cannot tell if that is a good thing or not.

But in the process, memories of what the unique individual is have merged into my consciousness.

A reincarnation, another world, and its life thus far in this one.

It's only bits and pieces, but now I understand how and why the individual attacked the queen.

Although that does not mean I have any intention of forgiving it.

I do not really understand my own condition at the moment.

I am me, and yet a part of me is not, making me question whether I am really myself at all.

It is not a good feeling.

However, I am still functioning as myself without any issue.

At this point, I cannot tell whether I am succeeding in preserving my own self or not.

And yet, I do not feel too uneasy.

The only thought I can summon is a lighthearted “Well, it’ll work out, I bet.”

Perhaps even my personality has been changed by the spiritual assault now.

I may simply feel like myself still, when in reality I have already been all but devoured.

To be honest, the part of me that believes everything will be fine... frightens me.

But obsessing over it will do me no good.

Clearly, not eating the earth dragons is not an option for me now.

I am indeed hungry anyway, and considering the effects of Gluttony, it would no doubt be best to eat them regardless.

Then there is no reason to hesitate.

“Time to eat.”

“It certainly is not.”

Someone responds to my soliloquy.

Turning around, I see GÜlie there, looking troubled.

The dark man some call “Black,” the administrator GÜliedistodiez.

One of the gods who control this world’s system.

“Which one are you right now?” he asks shortly.

I think for a moment before I respond. “Which one do I seem like to you?”

I’m answering a question with a question, but I have no choice.

Because I myself don’t know the answer to what he asked me.

“Both and neither at once. You have blended together such that I can no longer say whether you are one or the other. Though your consciousness appears to be closer to Ariel.”

“Aw, man, you think so?”

I scratch my head with a grin.

I had figured as much, but when someone else points it out, I can’t help thinking, *Oh wow, yeah.*

“Your tone more closely resembles the other, however.”

“Yep. While I’m at it, I think my thoughts are leaning that way, too.”

Otherwise I doubt I could be so optimistic.

The old me was cautious, even cowardly.

The fact that I am experiencing the process of no longer being myself and still simply enduring it is good proof of that.

“What do you intend to do now, then?”

“I don’t know.”

I really don’t.

Now that our souls have become so intermingled, it would likely be too late even if I destroyed the other’s real body now.

And the biggest issue is that I still have no idea how to defeat that body anyway.

It somehow revives itself even if I kill it, and since it has Teleport, it wouldn’t be terribly easy to catch it in the first place.

The only reason I was able to catch it before is that I was lucky, and that the main body is a fool.

I can’t catch it by chasing it around, and even if I did, I can’t truly kill it.

Even if I could, I do not think I could return to my old self.

I don't even know if the corrosion would stop.

I'm beset on all sides.

"Honestly, I've pretty much lost already. It's a fifty-fifty chance whether I'll retain my sense of self at all, but I don't know if I can even say that if I'm already not myself anymore. In a sense, the being known as Ariel has already been altered. She may already be gone."

I would not say that Ariel is dead.

I still retain my feelings and memories as Ariel.

However, my thought process is very different from how it once was.

Given these circumstances, can I really say that I am still me?

It's a question with no right answer.

"Gülie, what is a reincarnation?"

Putting aside this difficult thought exercise, I instead ask Gülie a question he should know the answer to.

"I suppose the best way to describe them is as guests who have been invited into this world by Administrator D."

"Invited, eh?"

Something in me resists that knowledge.

All I know of Administrator D is what I have heard from Gülie.

According to him, D is a god with far more power than Gülie.

And now, at a time like this, that god has deliberately welcomed new souls from another world.

Perhaps D was trying to call a new wind into this world, like earth dragon Gakia said.

To change this world's fate as it careens toward destruction.

"Well, I don't know what D was thinking, and I don't care. I'm going to get payback, that's all."

I will fight against that individual once more.

That's all.

"How likely do you think it is that I'll remain, Gülie?"

"Fifty-fifty, indeed. At this point, even I can no longer separate your souls. Either way, I believe your existence will live on in some form, but I cannot imagine what that form might be."

"I see."

"It seems as though even the one grappling with your soul can no longer stop the fusion of its own will. I cannot tell whose thoughts will emerge victorious. You may even be reduced to a different person entirely when the melding is complete."

I hope that doesn't happen.

I want to retain as much of myself as possible and resist as much as I can.

"Hmm. Well, allow me to make up for my subordinates causing you trouble. I will send you to that creature's location."

At that offer, my jaw hits the floor for a moment.

"Are you sure that's all right? Even when it clearly has an administrator's favor?"

"No, it is not all right. D has specifically instructed me not to interfere with the reincarnations. Indirectly or no, D may decide to punish me for putting a reincarnation in a difficult spot."

It seems that lending me a hand is even more dangerous for Gülie than I realized.

“Then why—?”

Gülie cuts me off. “Nevertheless, I would like to help my old friend’s daughter if I can.”

“Aren’t you acting cool. Can’t you ever show that side to Lady Sariel?”

“Say what you will.”

Gülie begins to form the Teleport spell.

“But come back alive.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Whether I win or lose, I do not know if I will remain myself.

But I must win if I wish to proceed.

Gülie’s Teleport magic activates, sending me to a different place.

When I arrive, I’m at some kind of battlefield.

The strange individual is right before my eyes, wreaking havoc on some humans.

“Sorry to interrupt your fun.”

I apologize frankly for disturbing whatever is going on here.

“I’m going to have to ask you to die now, okay?”

And then I declare war.

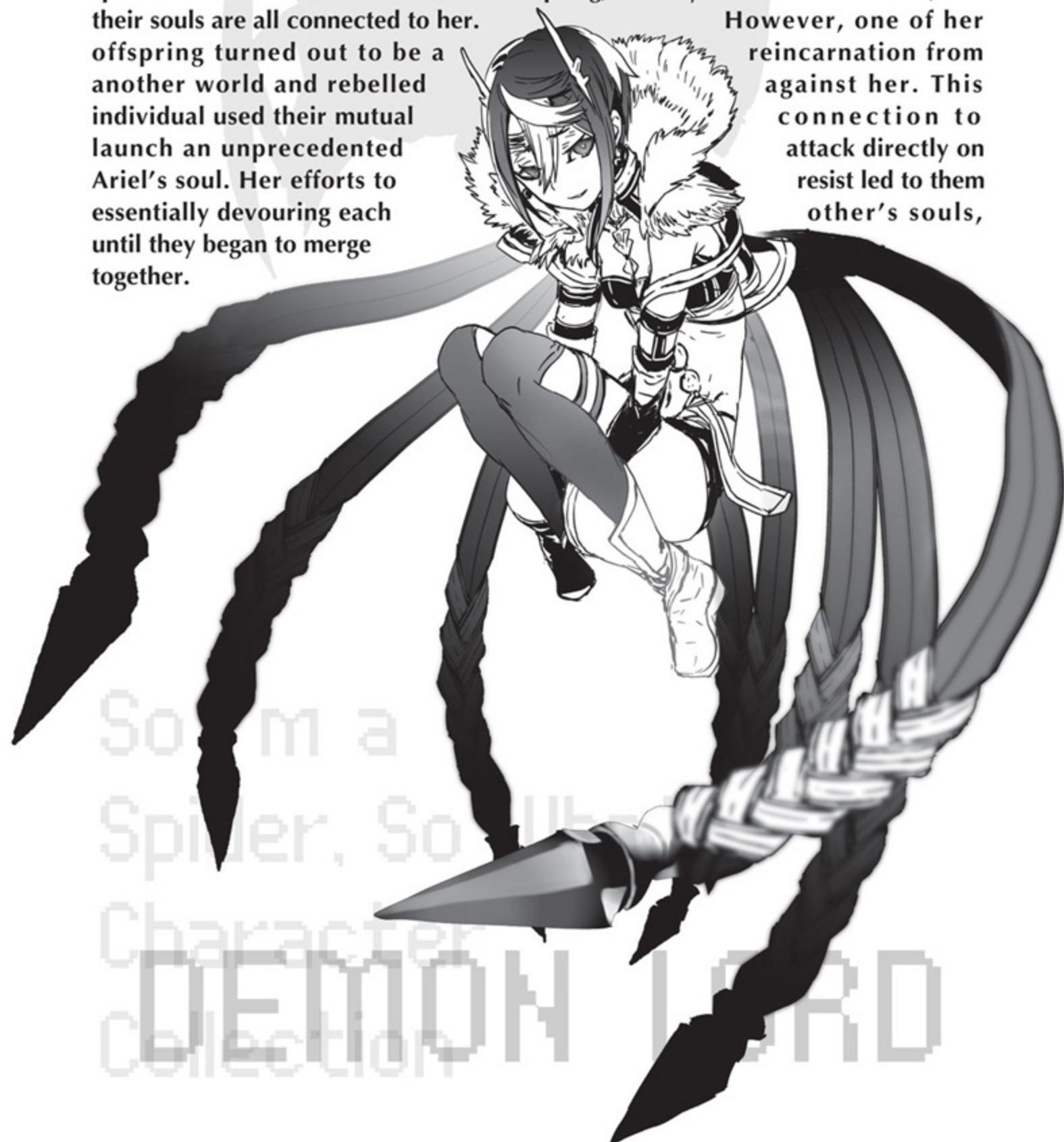
Oh, I just realized. I forgot to eat the earth dragons.

ARIEL THE ORIGIN TARATECT

The oldest Divine Beast, the Demon Lord, and the Ruler of Gluttony. She is actually the Origin Taratect, the progenitor of the entire taratect spider-monster species. All taratects are her kin and offspring, directly descended from her, and their souls are all connected to her.

offspring turned out to be a another world and rebelled individual used their mutual launch an unprecedented Ariel's soul. Her efforts to essentially devouring each until they began to merge together.

However, one of her reincarnation from against her. This connection to attack directly on resist led to them other's souls,





SPIDER VS DEMON LORD VS HERO

Noooooo!

How did this happen?!

In front of me is my mortal enemy, the Demon Lord.

She's currently attacking me, in the midst of the swirl of shrieking and destruction that is the battlefield.

There's no longer any distinction between Sariella and the Ohts Alliance troops. My battle with the Demon Lord has thrown it all into chaos.

Battle?

Yeah, you could call it a battle.

It's a defensive one for me, but I'm still holding my own.

The first time, I got blown to bits by a single attack, but my stats have gone up ridiculously high since I absorbed Mother's power.

I'm not going to get utterly annihilated like last time!

Although I still have to be on the defensive!

I release a single Light Magic shot toward the Demon Lord.

She already has Divine Dragon Barrier invoked over the area, so I can't put together any complicated magic.

That means I can't teleport, and I'd be hard-pressed to use more powerful attack magic than this, too.

All I can really do are simple one-shot attacks.

And since the Demon Lord's high resistances can nullify most attributes, those aren't going to work.

My only hope is the Light series of magic that I acquired when I was doing all that healing near town.

But even if my Light Magic shots hit, they do only one damage, which gets recovered pretty much instantly!

The Demon Lord keeps charging at me, paying no mind to the Light Magic shots hitting her, so I create a wall with Earth Magic to stall her.

Since this magic works on the ground and not an opponent, even Divine Dragon Barrier has a hard time blocking it.

A wall of earth rises up, blocking the Demon Lord's charge.

But then the wall disappears with a crunching sound.

The Demon Lord keeps moving, visibly chewing something as she goes.

Then she gulps it down, and her SP recovers.

Enough of this already!

No matter what I do or don't do, it just ends up restoring the Demon Lord's SP!

The reason for this is the totally broken effect of one of the Demon Lord's skills, Gluttony.

<Gluttony: n% of the power to reach godhood. Allows the user to eat anything and stock it away as pure energy. In addition, the user will gain the ability to surpass the W system and interfere with the MA field.>

<Ruler of Gluttony: Acquires skills [Fortune LV1] [Sublimation]. Acquisition conditions: Obtain [Gluttony] skill. Effect: Increases HP, MP, and SP + correction to strength skill proficiencies. Grants ruling class privileges. Description: A title granted to one who has conquered gluttony.>

So basically, the Demon Lord can eat literally anything.

That means earth or anything else that has substance.

No, she can even eat invisible things like magic!

I activate Dragon Barrier to counter the Demon Lord's Divine Dragon Barrier.

I was hoping this would neutralize the Divine Dragon Barrier somehow so I can use magic properly, but it doesn't work.

One, my barrier's not as powerful as the Demon Lord's, and two, the Demon Lord can *eat* mine.

She can consume even things that have no physical form and absorb them as her own strength.

Considering that she already has cheat code-tier stats, the addition of this overpowered skill makes her pretty much unbeatable.

I know I can't figure out any way to do it!

Dammit!

How am I supposed to fight this beast?!

The Demon Lord swings her arm, slamming it into my body.

Guh?!

Some kinda liquid is coming out of my mouth!

That's blood, you idiot!

I get blown away so fast it's almost funny and roll along the ground, tangling up with soldiers along the way.

The soldiers caught in my path get shredded into mincemeat.

If my defense was lower, the same thing probably would've happened to me, too.

Stats are the best.

But I have no more time to appreciate my own high stats.

Chasing me down as I roll away, the Demon Lord descends from the sky.

I hurriedly avoid her feet as she lands, but the explosion when she hits the ground sends me flying again.

Yeah. She drop-kicked the ground so hard it exploded.

Look, I don't really get it, either.

Excuse me, Miss Demon Lord, are you sure you're not in the wrong story?

'Cause to me, it seems like a character from some power creep–ridden *shonen* manga has made her way into a fantasy story by mistake.

I tumble away from the crater the Demon Lord has made.

The soldiers from both sides are fleeing all over the place, their war basically abandoned.

Seriously, how did this happen?!

Actually, the only reason I've survived all the damage I've taken is the people around us.

I seem to be gaining experience points for the ones who get killed in the aftershocks.

Thanks to that, I get to level up and fully recover.

I'm sorry, soldiers whose names I don't even know!

Your deaths are the reason I get to live!

Thank you!

Unfortunately, the molting and recovery from my level-up aren't perfect.

Since my stats are so high now, it doesn't fully heal me anymore, and every time my

skin molts off, it trips me up for a few seconds.

Besides, there are fewer and fewer people around now, for obvious reasons.

At this rate, my level-up recovery won't be able to keep up with the damage, and I'll lose for sure.

I have to find a way to escape before that happens!

"I am your opponent, monster!"

A courageous but very young male voice reaches my ears.

Honestly, I don't have time to deal with this, but I can't help glancing over to see who's speaking.

Then I look again.

Uh, what is a little kid doing here?

It's an actual child, wearing kinda fancy clothes and looking completely out of place.

He trembles as he stands in front of me, sword in hand.

Huh? What's going on exactly?

Somebody, please explain!

"Hero?"

Oddly enough, the one who answers my unspoken question is the Demon Lord.

She's looking directly at the young boy.

Dumbfounded, I Appraise the child.

Sure enough, much to my surprise, the boy really is a hero.

<Human	LV14	Name: Julius Zagan Analeit	
Status:	HP: 476/476 (green) SP: 455/455 (yellow) Average Offensive Ability: 469 (details) Average Magical Ability: 488 (details) Average Speed Ability: 435 (details)		MP: 497/497 (blue) : 401/455 (red) Average Defensive Ability: 465 (details) Average Resistance Ability: 476 (details)
Skills:			
[Magic Power Perception LV10]	[Precise Magic Power Operation LV1]	[Magic Warfare LV9]	[Magic Power Conferment LV8]
[Magic Power Super-Attack LV1]	[MP Rapid Recovery LV1]	[MP Minimized Consumption LV1]	[Swordsmanship LV7]
[Destruction Enhancement LV6]	[Cutting Enhancement LV2]	[Impact Enhancement LV1]	[Mental Warfare LV4]
[Energy Conferment LV2]	[Concentration LV9]	[Hit LV5]	[Evasion LV5]
[Light Magic LV10]	[Holy Light Magic LV1]	[Vision Enhancement LV9]	[Auditory Enhancement LV8]
[Olfactory Enhancement LV6]	[Taste Enhancement LV2]	[Tactile Enhancement LV5]	[Life LV9]
[Magic Hoard LV2]	[Instantaneous LV8]	[Endurance LV8]	[Strength LV9]
[Solidity LV9]	[Monk LV2]	[Talisman LV1]	[Running LV7]
[Hero LV3]			
			>

First a demon lord, now a hero?!

Wait, but is it just me, or are his stats pretty weak?

I guess they're probably pretty good for a child, but still.

In fact, his stats are way better than most of the soldiers around here.

That's about it, though.

I guess he doesn't have many skills yet because he's still a kid?

Okay, now's not the time to stand around analyzing this!

What's the Demon Lord doing?

Huh? She seems kinda wary of the kid hero?

Why?

An awkward three-way standoff ensues, with the kid hero, the Demon Lord, and me all frozen in place.

I don't know why the Demon Lord's so nervous about this kid.

Discreetly booting up Professor Wisdom, I do a search for "hero."

<Hero: As a hidden effect of the title, temporarily grants the ability to defeat a demon lord.>

Ahaaa!

Now, that's the kinda system loophole I like to see!

The Demon Lord is too wary of this hidden effect to lay a hand on the kid hero!

I don't think "ability to defeat" necessarily means it's a guaranteed win, but now I've got one card to play against the Demon Lord!

The kid hero's stats are pathetic even compared to mine, never mind the Demon

Lord's.

However, the Demon Lord is definitely afraid of this weird hidden hero effect.

Can I use that to improve this situation somehow?

As I contemplate how to do that, the standoff continues.

What finally ends it isn't because of me, the Demon Lord, or even the kid hero.

No, it's a huge ball of fire falling from the sky.

I don't know which army caused it, but are they trying to get rid of all three of us at once?!

Of course, that spell's not gonna make it through the Demon Lord's Divine Dragon Barrier.

But the kid hero doesn't know that, so he stares up at the flames in horror.

The Demon Lord takes that opportunity to move.

Specifically, she starts aiming a spell at me.

Crap!

That spell is bad news!

The spell she's invoking is Abyss Magic.

Magic that destroys even the soul itself.

Abyss Magic is no ordinary attack magic.

It has a hidden effect, too: disintegrating the soul.

It's the ultimate execution magic, smashing the soul to bits until it can't be reincarnated again.

If that hits me, even Immortality won't save me from dying when my soul is destroyed.

But I don't have enough time to get away.

Steeling myself, I make a life-or-death gamble.

The Demon Lord's Abyss Magic activates, and something that looks like all the darkness in existence condensed into one spot swoops toward me.

Unable to avoid it, my body is swallowed up inside the darkness and disintegrates without the slightest resistance.



A TERRIBLE REUNION

What do I do?

How can I win against Sophia?

In fact, how can I even damage Sophia?

Is it even possible for me to defeat her?

Still being held up by Hyrince, I rack my brain until Fei's large wings suddenly block my view of Sophia.

"What's this? Finally done observing?"

At Sophia's words, I realize that Fei hasn't participated at all in the fight so far.

I thought for a moment that she figured her giant dragon form would get in our way, but I guess I was wrong.

"I suppose."

Speaking through Telepathy, Fei's voice sounds somehow different than usual.

"Anyway, I'd like to surrender. Think you could spare our lives?"

I stare at Fei's back in disbelief.

It can't be.

This isn't like her at all.

Even in our old lives, Fei has always been stubborn and a sore loser.

I can't believe that she would admit defeat before even fighting.

But at the same time, contradictory as it might be, part of me thinks it's exactly what Fei would do.

Fei actually cares about us a lot.

Maybe when she saw that I couldn't lay a hand on Sophia, she determined that we can't win this fight, and that's why she's raising the white flag.

To protect us.

"Hmm."

Sophia taps her chin thoughtfully at Fei's declaration.

There's a faint smile on her face, as if she finds the whole thing funny.

"So you can tell what will happen if you try to fight me, hmm?"

"More or less," Fei responds.

Which means she knew even before the battle began that we could never beat Sophia.

"Well, it can't have been Appraisal. A dragon's intuition, perhaps?"

"Something like that. It's sort of a gut feeling, not the kind of thing I can explain, you know?"

Fei knows just how strong Sophia is.

The second she first laid eyes on her back at the capital, she immediately chose to flee without a fight.

She must have known ever since that moment that we can't win against Sophia.

"Why didn't you stop your friends, if you knew they didn't stand a chance of winning?" Sophia inquires.

"Even if I told them, Shun wouldn't have listened to me."

Her answer hits me right in the gut like no other answer could.

It's my fault?

It's true that even if Fei tried to tell me we couldn't win, I probably would have said something about having to fight anyway and kept leading us down the path to battle.

And this is where that led us.

Fei predicted all of this and has just been waiting for the right time to surrender, I guess.

I'm so ashamed.

I dragged my friends into a battle we had no chance of winning, and now one of them has to protect me and beg for our lives.

I'm so ashamed, I could die.

"What? That's ridiculous," Sophia says dubiously.

Her expression says that she really, truly doesn't understand this logic.

I guess only my friends who understand me would get it.

"It's his pride as a man, basically."

"Pride, eh...?"

Sophia's reaction to Fei's explanation is surprisingly serious.

I was expecting her to be more mocking about it.

"Life and pride. There are times when you have to fight for your pride rather than your life, I suppose. Not that I've ever done it myself," Sophia murmurs contemplatively. "Very well, then. I shall defer to that pride and spare your lives. Then again, I never intended to take any reincarnations' lives here in the first place."

She giggles, not unlike a child who's pulled off a funny prank.

With her already lovely features, it makes for an unexpectedly pretty expression, but

all that does is make me feel even worse.

"Well, thanks for that. Not that we asked you."

As Tagawa's voice rings out, Merazophis lands unceremoniously at Sophia's feet.

His body is in tatters.

However, it's not blood that leaks from his wounds but something like a black mist.

"Oh? They got you, did they?"

"I'm terribly sorry."

Still on the ground, Merazophis bows his head humbly.

"Your real body might be one thing, but did you really think you could stop us with a double?"

Tagawa glares irritably at Merazophis.

Or rather, evidently, a copy of him made with some sort of skill.

Unlike Kusama's duplicates from earlier, evidently this skill makes copies strong enough to hold their own in battle.

Tagawa and Kushitani aren't unharmed, either.

Tagawa's armor is bloodied in a few places, purple lightning still crackling along his blade.

Although I can't see any injuries on Kushitani as she holds her wind-clad staff, she's definitely breathing hard, her shoulders heaving.

Between them, I can tell they had a hard battle against Merazophis's double.

And that was only a double.

How strong must the real thing be?

"Please forgive my worthlessness in being unable to protect you." Merazophis is still expressionless, but his voice is pained.

"You're always protecting me, Merazophis. Don't say you're worthless," Sophia responds with a gentle expression I've never seen on her before.

I don't know much about these two, but from that exchange, it's clear they share a trusting master-servant bond of some kind.

"All right. We're just about done here. You focus on commanding the army."

"Yes, madam."

Merazophis's body disappears, melting away into the ground.

"The real Merazophis is going to lead the invading army now. If you want to fight him, why not head over there?"

"Yeah. We'll do that later. But first we're going to defeat you."

Tagawa and Kushitani face down Sophia.

Are they really planning to fight her?

Both of them certainly are strong.

But their stats aren't much different from mine. They're lower, in fact.

They can't beat Sophia.

And there's no way they don't realize that.

Still, their eyes are blazing, ready for battle.

"I'm sorry, Fei. I don't think I can give up after all."

Inspired by the two of them, I extract myself from Hyrince's arms and stand.

That's right.

I knew from the beginning that I couldn't win.

I've known it since we ran away in the capital.

But ever since then, I haven't been able to let it go.

I can't help feeling that I have to surpass her somehow.

I don't see how I can win.

Even so, I have to face her.

That's just how it is.

I'm sure my brother Julius wouldn't be running away at a time like this.

Which means I can't run away, either.

"Oh, all right, then."

Sensing my determination, Fei assumes a battle posture, too.

Seeing that our group is ready to fight again, Sophia smiles sweetly.

"If you insist. I suppose I'll play with you a bit lon—"

"There's no time for that."

For a moment, I don't understand what's happened.

Tagawa starts bleeding and collapses, and Kushitani hits the ground at the same time.

Standing before their now-prostrate figures is a man who wasn't there moments earlier.

Just figuring out what's going on takes me several seconds.

And it takes even longer for my brain to fully process the situation.

The man came down from above and cut Tagawa.

Tagawa reacted quickly and blocked him but was cut down along with his dragon-made magic sword.

Near Tagawa's fallen form, the magic sword lies in two pieces.

After cutting down Tagawa, the man grabbed Kushitani with his other hand and slammed her into the ground.

Just like that, both of them are out of commission.

Two strong allies, down in an instant.

"Hmm? My, you're early."

"No, I'm not. You're just late."

The man addresses Sophia in a calm tone, as if he hadn't just knocked Tagawa and Kushitani out cold.

But the pair lying on the ground and the overwhelming bloodlust rolling off the man who did it tell me that it was no illusion.

There's a terrifying distance between his quiet tone and his powerful presence, frightening even to look at.

If Sophia's presence is that of subtle strength, this man's is like an unsheathed sword.

"You didn't kill them, did you?"

"Nah, they're not dead. But it'd be a bad idea to let them take up any more time, so I decided to shut them up for a little while."

However, these reasons aren't why I'm so startled by the man's abrupt appearance.

It's not the fact that he was strong enough to beat Tagawa and Kushitani in an instant or the overwhelming sharpness of his presence.

No, it's that this particular person is here at all.

"Hey, it's been a while. Or have you forgotten me after all these years?"

The man looks back at me and speaks in a familiar tone.

There's no way I could ever forget.

Many of my memories of our old world have faded, but I still remember his face very clearly.

I've been searching for him for so long.

And after what Ms. Oka told us, I had been bracing myself a little.

I thought this might happen.

And now here he is, right before my eyes.

“Kyouya.”

Katia's and my closest friend from our previous lives, Kyouya Sasajima.

That's the man who's standing before us now.

On the administrators' side, along with Sophia.



RESURRECTION

Gwaaaaah!

Screaming pointlessly in my mind, I break through the shell in front of me.

My body's movements are clumsy and weak.

Even breaking through the thin shell takes time.

Finally I succeed in cracking it open and crawling out.

Looking around, I'm surrounded by what look like eggs.

The same kind that I just emerged from.

This scene is certainly similar to when I first got reincarnated into this world, but the eggs around me haven't hatched yet.

They're rattling around a bit, though, so they'll probably hatch soon.

Where am I right now? Well, it's somewhere between the Middle and Upper Strata of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

In other words, the place where my old home used to be.

Mother knew about this location, which means it wouldn't be too surprising if the Demon Lord knows about it, too, but it was the first place that came to mind as an emergency escape spot.

My memories of this place run pretty deep, after all.

If you're wondering how I escaped the Demon Lord's Abyss Magic, the short of it is that I abandoned my body and got reborn.

That's not a good explanation?

Yeah, I know. But that's what happened.

To elaborate, I used the Egg-Laying skill I got from Mother a while back.

As the name implies, it obviously allows me to lay eggs. And when the eggs hatch, I can put the babies to work as my kin.

I tested it out right away, but, y'know. They were still eggs.

They take a while to hatch.

I left my mass-produced eggs in this hopefully safe area, my old base of operations in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

The thing about this skill is, as you may have guessed from the fact that I can produce the eggs by myself, it's actually more like making little mes than bearing children.

It's basically a skill that creates inferior copies of yourself with minds of their own.

Although considering that Mother's babies were all small lesser taratects, I think they're a little too inferior.

My thought process was, if this skill can make inferior copies of me, doesn't that mean I could transplant my Parallel Minds into them?

That's probably not how this skill was intended to be used, but when it comes to Parallel Minds, I tend to operate waaay outside the intended framework.

I figured it was worth a try, just for kicks.

To be honest, my current Parallel Minds have started to have a difference of opinion with the original (me), probably as an effect of eating Mother's soul.

I mean, up until then, it was basically just like there were a whole bunch of mes in my head.

That might be hard to imagine for an ordinary person, but I don't know how else to explain it.

But now, the Parallel Minds are different.

It's like there are other people inside me, which isn't a great feeling.

If possible, I wouldn't mind getting rid of them.

I might be able to deal with it by turning off the Parallel Minds skill, but that would basically be like killing my Parallel Minds, which I'd feel a bit guilty about.

Besides, it's possible that if I turned it off, I'd give in to that outside influence myself.

I definitely don't want that.

So I decided to transplant my Parallel Minds into some of the babies in these eggs.

See, as soon as they hatch, our souls are connected thanks to Kin Control.

I figured it seemed like a decent possibility.

But before I got to try it, that whole war went down.

The war itself was one thing, but why'd the Demon Lord have to show up at that exact moment?

Unreal.

So when it was looking like the Demon Lord might kill me, a light bulb went off in my head.

If I can transplant my Parallel Minds, can't I transplant myself along with them?

There's not much difference between transplanting a part or transplanting the whole thing, right?

In which case, if I transplant my whole consciousness, doesn't that mean I can escape?

So I tried it out, and presto, I'm reborn.

No doubt the Demon Lord's Abyss Magic has vaporized my original body.

But guess what! My consciousness lives on in a whole different body!

Heh-heh-heh.

Between the Immortality skill and this egg revival technique, my body and soul are both indestructible!

Bwa-ha-ha-ha! It's impossible to kill me now!

Well, unless I get caught off guard with some Abyss Magic or something. So I better not get too cocky.

Hoo, boy.

I'm lucky that worked when I hadn't even tested it out. Otherwise, I really would've died that time.

Yikes, I don't even wanna think about it.

So what do I do now?

First, I better see what's up with my current body.

Right now I'm a newborn baby spider, fresh out of the box.

As a result, this body's a whole lot smaller than my old one.

I'm talking the size of a tarantula back on Earth, small enough to fit in a human's palm.

I guess that's because my old body couldn't lay giant eggs like Mother.

Physically speaking, it'd be impossible to lay eggs almost as big as yourself.

Even in a world that has magic and stuff, physics doesn't simply cease to exist.

Consequently, the eggs I laid aren't much bigger than a chicken's.

Smaller than ostrich eggs, maybe?

So it makes sense that my body would be around the same size, since it hatched from

one of those eggs.

So how are my stats looking, then?

Buh?!

I can't help sputtering when I look at my stats with Appraisal.

All my stats are at 3.

3.

No ifs, ands, or buts. Just the number 3.

Thankfully, my original stats are still listed as the maximum values, with a note next to my status saying that they're currently lowered.

Does that mean my stats went down temporarily because I switched bodies?

My skills are still the same, but I definitely can't do any fighting in this state.

Well, that ain't good.

How am I even going to obtain food like this?

I do have some supplies in my Spatial Storage via Spatial Magic, but I don't even have enough MP to activate that.

If I could at least get my max MP back, I could use magic again, but I'm kinda worried that I'll starve to death before then.

Worst-case scenario, do I eat what's inside these eggs?

Mother did the same thing, so I guess I could theoretically sacrifice some of my children for my own survival.

We'll save that for a last resort, though.

And then there's my other option.

Yes, I do have one.

But I'm pretty sure that would be a serious gamble.

See, the level displayed in my Appraisal results is 50.

And next to that is the indicator that I can evolve.

My next evolutionary step is the one I've wanted for so long: arachne.

I really, really wanna evolve.

But when I evolve, it uses up a huge amount of SP.

And know what my current SP is?

You guessed it: 3.

I could easily starve to death in the process of evolving.

Once the evolution is complete, my stats might come back, which would let me use magic to get my supplies out of Spatial Storage, but I don't know whether this fragile little body can survive evolution in the first place.

So yeah, it's a gamble.

Hmm. What should I do?

If the evolution succeeds, my stats will probably recover, and all my problems will be solved.

The problem is, I don't know whether it'll succeed.

Man, I dunno what to do here.

As I'm waffling back and forth, I sense a fluctuation in the air.

Someone is trying to teleport here!

My blood runs cold.

Did the Demon Lord follow me?

If so, I'd be totally screwed.

I can't resurrect into another egg if all the eggs here get destroyed.

Then I'd die for real this time.

I'd be killed.

But against all expectations, the person who arrives isn't the Demon Lord.

Instead, a man emerges from thin air.

A slim body that seems to be fused with its armor.

All covered from head to toe in black.

I've met this dark man only once before.

In the Middle Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth after I beat the fire dragon.

The administrator Güließtostodiez.

One of the gods who control this world.

"Th** is * surprise. I *** not expect y** to survi**."

I still can't pick it all up completely, but I've learned a good amount of this world's language.

I can fill in the spotty parts with my imagination.

He's saying that he's surprised I survived, right?

Ah! That's right!

The Demon Lord doesn't have Spatial Magic!

Does that mean she was able to teleport to me because of this guy?!

Which would mean he's my enemy, too!

"N* need to ** so guarded. I h*ve no **tent**n of h*rming you now."

Administrator Güliedistodie— Ugh, too long, let's just call him Güli-güli.

I don't sense any hostility from Güli-güli.

As long as he doesn't intend to kill me, I guess we're okay for now, right?

"Can you understand me like this?"

Suddenly, I hear a muted voice that seems to beam directly into my head.

It's kinda like the Divine Voice (temp.).

And like our friend the DV, it comes through to me in Japanese.

Silently, I nod.

"I have altered a skill D made to add a translation function. This way, my telepathy will sound like your language to you, and your words should also come through to me in mine."

Huh.

You can do that?

Is there a way to just have translation on all the time?

"Incidentally, I am implementing this function through force. It is not a function of the skill originally, so it would likely be very difficult for you to implement it yourself."

Oh really?

That's too bad.

Well, guess I might as well start asking questions.

Or I would, but I'm so bad at conversation that the words just won't come out!

"You must find it strange. That I sent Ariel to you and yet I have come to you to have a conversation now. Allow me to begin by explaining."

Sweet, thanks.

Mr. Güli-güli's the best, guessing what I want to know before I even say it.

"Ariel and I are old friends, with a deep connection. I decided I would help her, just once. D has ordered me not to interfere with the reincarnations, but I did not do so directly in this case."

Hrmm.

Isn't that what people call a technicality?

But I do kinda get where you're coming from, Güli-güli.

If someone you know is in trouble, of course you'd wanna help them.

But this time, it almost ended in me dying!

I'm not just gonna be like, "Okay, that's fine, then!"

"Your anger is understandable. Thus, although it does not excuse my actions, I wish to offer you this."

Güli-güli reaches into another space and pulls something out.

Something huge!

It's the giant corpse of a dragon. No, several of them, in fact.

"These dragons fought for your sake. I am certain they would be honored to offer their flesh and blood for you as well."

There's a touch of sorrow in Güli-güli's eyes.

I don't really know what you're talking about, but that means I can eat these, right?

"This is the last time I shall lend a hand to Ariel. From here on out, I swear never again

to interfere with any reincarnations."

Oh yeah?

Glad to hear it.

That means the Demon Lord's not going to randomly teleport to me again.

As long as I keep an eye on her whereabouts with Professor Wisdom's marking feature, she won't catch me by surprise again, I hope.

"This is a gesture of good faith from me personally, in regards to the issues I have caused you as well."

Hmm. Honestly, considering what I lost, I'm not really sure this makes up for it, but that's all right.

I'm not gonna push my luck by asking for anything more.

"In addition, I have a selfish request."

Hmm?

"Is there any way I could convince you to stop meddling with Ariel?"

Hrmمم?

Meddling with the Demon Lord?

I haven't been doing that, have I?

If anything, she's the one who keeps meddling with me.

As far as I'm concerned, now that Mother is dead, our connection is severed, and we don't need to bother each other any further.

"I understand that I am being unreasonably demanding. If you wish to reject my request, I will press the matter no further."

I, uh, what?

Meddling with the Demon Lord, meddling, meddling...

Ah!

Maybe *she*'s behind this?!

My Parallel Mind who used to be my body brain!

That's right! She went over to the Demon Lord!

I completely forgot about that!

The Demon Lord suddenly appeared while I was taking down Mother.

In order to deal with her, one of my Parallel Minds went over to start attacking the Demon Lord's soul directly.

That was former body brain.

But when Mother died, the connection between Mother and me disappeared.

As a result, the connection I had to the Demon Lord through Mother was also severed, meaning that the Parallel Mind who was dispatched to the Demon Lord can no longer return to me.

I can't even contact former body brain. She's totally isolated.

I had no idea what happened to former body brain after that, but if what Güli-güli's saying is true, she's been fighting valiantly against the Demon Lord on her own all this time.

Unbelievable.

I'd just assumed the Demon Lord was chasing me to get revenge for me killing Mother, but she must have been trying to kill me because my former body brain has been attacking her this whole time!

Which means this is all your fault, former body brain!

Oops, rein it in.

I shouldn't get too angry at former body brain.

She's been fighting tooth and nail even though she lost her way back.

Anyway, how should I respond to Güli-güli?

It's probably best to be honest about it, so that's what I do.

"I can't."

It's true. I really can't.

I can't even get in touch with former body brain, never mind bring her back.

So I can't stop her meddling from here even if I wanted to.

I try to convey this to Güli-güli, rather incoherently.

Sorry that it took me so long to explain.

I'm just really bad at talking to people.

"I see. Then I have asked the impossible of you, ignorant of the circumstances. I apologize."

Nah, it's all good.

You gave me some valuable information in the process, so let's call it even.

Now I have the wonderful little nugget of hope that if I keep running away, former body brain might eventually beat the Demon Lord for me.

"There is one more thing I would ask of you."

Hrm? What now?

"I would have you cease your involvement with humans from this point onward. If possible, please live somewhere quietly in secret from now on."

Pardon?

"D has given me a summary of your situation. I wish to apologize that you have gotten involved in this world's predicament. I am sorry. I also ask you to not interfere with this world any further. I am well aware that this is an impolite request. But right now, you are already one of the most powerful creatures in this world. For each action you take, there is a wave of consequences too large to ignore. It threatens to plunge this world into chaos. Again, I know this is a large request to make of you. But would you by chance at least consider it?"

I can tell that Güli-güli is being very sincere.

"Might I hear your reply?"

Hmm.

Since he's being so up-front, I should respond with equal sincerity. *"Sorry, but no."*

I hate to be rude to Güli-güli, but I can't agree to that.

I mean, he's basically asking me to let the inhabitants of this world handle everything and just go hole up in a cave somewhere.

But the people of this world are too pathetic to get anything done, which is why it's on the verge of destruction.

Clearly, they can't be trusted to handle things from here.

I might be busy dealing with the Demon Lord right now, but I have my own plan of action, too.

And so, it's unthinkable that I would just give up and go into hiding.

"You will not reconsider?"

Looking ponderous, Güli-güli seems to be making one last confirmation.

I shake my head silently.

"I see."

Güli-güli looks up toward the sky.

"From the perspective of one from another world, does what I am doing seem laughable to you?"

His brow wrinkles as he telepathically asks the question.

His expression is that of an exhausted and anguished man, who has nevertheless resolved to keep moving forward.

I can't really answer his question.

That's his business, after all.

But I can say this much.

"You should do whatever you feel is best."

In the end, that's just how it is.

You have to push onward down the path you believe in.

That's all I can really say to a question with no correct answer.

"I see. You are right, I suppose."

Güli-güli looks a little surprised, then nods.

"Then I shall do what I feel is best, indeed. Still, D has a stake in your actions, as well. For the time being, I shall not harm you. But you would do well to remember this. If your actions lead to results that run counter to mine, then you shall likely find me standing in your way."

Makes sense.

But I hope that doesn't end up being the case.

"Our business is done for today, then. Farewell."

Just like that, Güli-güli teleports away.



THE OGRE BARES HIS FANGS

When Katia and I were reunited, we were both deeply relieved.

Being reborn in a parallel world for unknown reasons and forced to start life over from babyhood was a lonely and distressing experience.

Meeting your best friend from your previous life in the middle of all that was a big deal.

Katia and I were able to support each other, finding reassurance from the fact that we weren't alone.

She was living proof that my memories of Earth were real, not just my imagination.

And at the same time, our reunion gave me the courage to commit to living my second life to the fullest.

After that, I met others, like Fei, Ms. Oka, Yuri, and Hugo, and got to experience those bonds from Earth again.

My former classmates were here in this world.

In that case, Kyouya must have been here somewhere, too.

Surely we would get to meet again someday.

I often dreamed of the day we'd be reunited with Kyouya. We would reflect on our memories from back on Earth and talk about how our lives in this world had been so far.

But the scene in front of me says that that's not going to happen.

"Cool, so you do remember me. I thought you might not recognize me, since I look a little different now."

Kyouya's tone is perfectly friendly.

However, Tagawa and Kushitani are lying at his feet.

If what Kyouya said is true, then they're not dead, but that doesn't change what he did and what it means.

Kyouya is our enemy.

"Kyouya... is that really you?" I ask, despite knowing the answer.

"Yep. Kyouya Sasajima, in the flesh. It's been a while, Shun, Kanata."

I don't want it to be true, but it is.

Even if he hadn't answered, I would have known.

My gut instinct already told me that this can't be anyone but Kyouya.

His gentle tone and even his face haven't changed from our old lives.

All of it brings memories flooding back.

He's not a fake or an illusion.

His face looks exactly like it did back on Earth.

And the reason is right there on his forehead.

Two horns.

Two devil-like horns growing from his forehead.

Most likely, he's not a human or a demon but a monster that looks humanoid.

If Fei's example is any indication, when a reincarnation who's a monster turns into human form, they seem to take on the same face they had in their past lives.

Of course, he doesn't look exactly the same.

Back in our old world, Kyouya was short, but now he's considerably taller, with tight muscles like hardened steel.

He's slender, but somehow he reminds me of a blade.

A blade that never breaks and cuts in two anything that touches it.

"Why?"

Again, another pointless question escapes my lips.

"Hrm? I thought that was obvious. To destroy the elves."

"What?!"

Kyouya's answer catches me off guard.

I don't know what I was expecting him to say to my vague question.

But I can't help being surprised, even though I should have known.

"If anything, I'm the one who's stumped as to why you guys are helping the elves in the first place. I guess they must've suckered you into it."

"What do you mean?"

I ask another question despite myself.

It's not as if I never had my doubts.

Katia has always voiced her distrust of Ms. Oka, and Sophia has made similar hints, too.

But I still can't forgive Hugo for what he's done, and since Sophia and her comrades have been manipulating him behind the scenes, that means I can't trust them, either.

But the person in front of me now was my best friend in our old lives.

Should I listen to what he has to say?

“You know the elves cause nothing but harm to this world, right? You must be crazy to protect them. It’s not too late to—”

“Don’t let him fool you!”

Ms. Oka sharply interrupts Kyouya.

“I don’t know what the administrators are planning, but it can’t be anything good! Shun, you mustn’t forget what they did to your kingdom!”

She has a good point.

They’re the ones who used Hugo to overthrow my kingdom.

What gives them the right to say the elves are the ones causing harm, after what they did?

“That was—”

“Besides!”

Kyouya starts to speak, but Ms. Oka isn’t finished.

“It was the demon army who killed Julius the Hero! Isn’t that right?! Eighth Army Commander Wrath!”

Ms. Oka points right at Kyouya.

He’s one of the leaders of the demon army?

And his name is Wrath...?

The information hits me like a blow to the stomach.

I shouldn’t be that surprised, since Sophia is part of the demon army, too, but it’s different when it’s about Kyouya.

The demon army killed my brother Julius.

My best friend is a part of that.

I'm so dizzy I can barely stand.

"Doesn't look like I'm gonna get through to you," Kyouya says unhappily.

"It's just like Master said. Our little teacher here has them totally fooled, so they won't listen to us."

A fresh wave of suspicion toward the elves starts to rise in my mind.

As Sophia speaks, Ms. Oka's eyes widen, too.

I sense some slight hesitation from her.

Does Ms. Oka not completely trust the elves, either?

Next to her, Anna seems at a loss, while Katia and Hyrince are keeping a careful eye on Kyouya, Sophia, and even Ms. Oka.

Fei's back is turned toward me, so I can't see her expression.

What should we do?

What's the right move here?

But before I can make a decision, the situation progresses on its own.

Light Magic shoots down from the sky, swallowing up Kyouya and the others.

"What was that?!"

I look up to search for the source.

There, I see some elves floating in the sky.

"Sir Hero! Return to the village at once!" one of them shouts.

"Hey, you! What do you think you're doing?!" Katia yells back up at them.

Tagawa and Kushitani were lying right near Kyouya.

Katia was relatively close to them, too, so she nearly got caught up in the elves' attack herself.

There's no way the elves didn't realize that before they attacked.

"Sir Hero, the Demon Lord is approaching the village! Since you have the Hero title, you're the only one who can oppose the Demon Lord!"

The elves ignore Katia's accusations and continue to address me directly.

The Demon Lord is heading toward the elf village?

The reincarnations who are still in the village come to mind immediately.

"Leave this area to us, and hurry there at once!"

I don't know whether to obey the elves or not.

All kinds of thoughts whirl around my mind, making it hard to figure out what to do.

"Hero, come with me. I can use teleportation."

A single elf approaches me, holding out his hand, as I hesitate.

"That's not gonna happen."

Suddenly, there's a blade protruding from the elf's chest.

He collapses dead before my eyes.

Behind him I see Kyouya, who threw the sword.

Tagawa and Kushitani are still lying at his feet, but I'm relieved to see them stirring a little.

However, I'm in shock that Kyouya killed an elf without hesitation.

"All units, attack!"

Behind Ms. Oka and Anna, a group of elves arrives in perfect formation.

They send magic and arrows flying toward Kyouya and Sophia.

“Don’t interrupt us.”

Sophia swings her arm.

The elves’ attacks are all blown away at once, and a red liquid spews from her arm, scattering through the air.

The liquid moves as if it has a mind of its own, shooting toward the elves.

By the time I even move to stop it, it’s too late. All the elves the liquid has touched begin to dissolve, emitting a horrible sound and stench.

“Geh?!”

Turning around, I see Hyrince, who’s blocked some of the liquid with his shield.

The red liquid seems to be trying to coil around his shield, attempting to cover it completely.

Behind him are Anna and Ms. Oka.

The elves in the sky attempt to attack Kyouya with magic and arrows of their own.

“Back off.”

His attack reaches them before they can even fire.

Swords.

An immense amount of swords appear out of nowhere, piercing the elves like skewers.

Looking closely, I can see that the swords are manifesting around Kyouya, then shooting upward at a high speed to attack the elves.

He must be bringing them out of another dimension with Spatial Magic.

And my guess is he's using the Expel skill to send them flying so quickly.

But the most frightening part is the blades themselves.

Once they pierce through the elves, they explode.

The explosion injures even the surrounding elves who haven't been stabbed.

Though they look like swords, they're more like missiles.

It's the same kind of swords that Kusama used to blow up the teleport points.

These dangerous exploding swords are flying around everywhere.

The elves have no way of dealing with such powerful anti-air fire.

"Stop!"

Without thinking, I swing my sword toward Kyouya.

It wasn't my intention. My body just moved on its own.

"Yeah right. You really think you can cut anyone with such a crummy sword?"

Kyouya repels my blade easily.

Above us, the barrage of sword missiles continues.

On the ground, Sophia's red liquid engulfs the elves, melting them into nothing.

Somehow, Fei has removed the red liquid from Hyrince's shield.

But there's no time to be relieved.

The battlefield around us has turned into a hellscape.

"Sorry, Shun, but I need you to go to sleep for a bit."

The sword in Kyouya's hand sweeps toward me.

In that moment, I feel like everything's happening in slow motion.

"Shun!"

I hear Katia cry out.

But I don't have time to avoid Kyouya's sword.

I grit my teeth, preparing for the imminent pain.

But instead, someone slips in front of me.

Blood whirls through the air.

Someone else's body weighs down on mine.

The body of Anna, who took Kyouya's blade in my place.

"A... Anna?"

I catch her falling body, covered in blood.

She doesn't answer.

"C'mon, I wasn't going to kill you. If she didn't cover you like that, she wouldn't have died."

Kyouya's cool voice falls empty on my ears.

She's dead.

Anna's dead.

She died to protect me.

The second I realize that, I invoke my Mercy skill without a moment's hesitation.

I'm not letting Anna die like this!

She came all the way here with us out of guilt over being brainwashed by Hugo.

Maybe this is atonement for her, but it's the last thing I want!

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Taboo LV9] has become [Taboo LV10].>

<Condition satisfied. Activating the effect of Taboo. Installation in progress.>

As soon as I revive Anna, something floods into my mind.

“Gaaaaaaah?!”

My head throbs with pain.

I feel like it's going to split in two, but it doesn't.

I writhe around on the ground as it flows into me mercilessly.

Katia runs up to me. “Shun! Stay with me!”

She performs Healing Magic on me.

But there's no point.

This isn't the kind of pain that Healing Magic can do anything about.

“You! What did you do to Shun?!”

Fei glares at Kyouya and Sophia, but they both just look confused.

Of course they would. They have nothing to do with my current state.

This is my punishment for maxing out the Taboo skill.

<Installation complete.>

And now, I know the true meaning of Taboo.

“Diiie!”

But time isn't going to stop while I process this transformation.

While Sophia looks at me in bewilderment, one man sees a perfect opportunity.

It's Hugo, finally pulling himself up off the ground after I beat him down.

He's been holding his breath, waiting for his chance to deliver a vengeful blow to Sophia for betraying him.

But his blade never reaches her.

Sophia blocks it easily with her broadsword and flicks it back, sending him flying.

"Dammit! Go to hell! You're still just stupid Rihoko!"

"Hmm?"

The moment Hugo utters that name, seething rage seeps from Sophia's body.

When she was Shouko Negishi, this was the nickname people used to mock her behind her back.

"Real Horror Girl," or "Rihoko" for short.

She was given this nickname because she was bony and thin and always had a dark expression on her face.

That name hardly applies to Sophia in this world, who has a totally different appearance and aura from the old Shouko Negishi.

This seems to be a sore spot for her, because now she's radiating murderous rage toward Hugo.

Even though it's not directed at me, I still have to stop myself from trembling.

However, she herself doesn't attack Hugo physically.

Instead, a slim white hand suddenly grabs Hugo by the back of the head.

In the next moment, something wriggles out of Hugo's ears and disappears into the hand of the person standing behind him.

Hugo crumples like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

The person who did it stands quietly above him.

Her eyes are closed, and she makes no further movements.

I have no idea how long she's been here.

"Master, would you mind not interfering like that?"

If there's one word to describe the person Sophia calls Master, it would be "white."

A white little girl.

There's no other way to describe this girl but "white."

White hair.

White skin.

White clothes.

There's almost no color anywhere on her but white.

Seeing the girl, Hyrince's eyes widen.

I recognize her, too.

There's no mistaking her from Hyrince's description.

The last person Julius fought.

The person who killed him.

But I know her for another reason, too.

Fei is also staring at her, at a loss for words.

I understand why.

We were told this girl was dead, after all.

Ms. Oka, the one who originally gave Katia that information, looks even more shocked than Fei.

It seems Ms. Oka herself had no doubt that she was dead.

“But... how?”

Ms. Oka whispers in disbelief.

In response, the white girl bows her head.

“It’s been a long time, Ms. Oka.”

The white girl, my brother’s enemy.

I’ve seen her face before, though the colors were different then.

Even with her eyes closed, there’s no mistaking it.

I saw her face often in my previous life.

In our class, there were a few people who particularly stood out.

Kengo Natsume, who was the leader of the boys.

Mirei Shinohara, the leader of the girls.

Shouko Negishi, who stood out in a negative way as Rihoko.

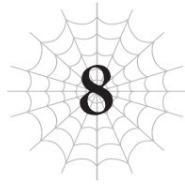
But there was one person alone who stood out more than them.

The boys all admired her for her beautiful looks, while the girls watched her from afar.

Aside from Mirei Shinohara, who harassed her, everyone else had a hard time ever talking to her because she seemed so unapproachable.

“Wakaba...”

The person before us is none other than Hiiro Wakaba, a reincarnation who was supposedly dead.



EVOLUTION, DIVISION, PROPAGATION

Since Güli-güli was nice enough to provide me with food supplies, I've decided to give evolving a shot.

I'm still not sure if this wimpy body can handle evolution, but I'm just gonna trust that it'll work out!

So I begin the evolution as I chow down on the earth dragon corpses.

As soon as the evolution starts, I can feel my SP decreasing at an alarming rate, so I speed up the task of stuffing earth dragon meat into my stomach.

My SP is decreasing almost as fast as I can refill it with food.

As I continue this little game of chicken, my body starts to change.

By the time I've polished off several earth dragons, the changes have stopped, and the evolution is complete.

That was close!

I almost ran out of SP there.

Just how much SP does it cost to evolve, anyway?

Well, I guess it was probably only this bad because I forced an evolution on my new freshly hatched, inexperienced body.

If I was in my original body's condition, I'm sure it would've been a lot easier.

Now then, how are my stats looking?

<Arachne	LV1	Nameless	
Status:	HP: 5,331/38,111 (green) +0 SP: 33,557/33,557 (yellow) (details) Average Offensive Ability: 35,799 (details) Average Magical Ability: 42,170 (details) Average Speed Ability: 41,063 (details)	MP: 5,681/44,024 (blue) +0 (details) : 924/33,557 (red) +0 (details) Average Defensive Ability: 35,682 (details) Average Resistance Ability: 42,068 (details)	
Skills:			
[HP Ultra-Fast Recovery LV8]	[Height of Occultism]	[Magic Divinity LV8]	[Magic Power Conferment LV10]
[Magic Conferment LV3]	[Magic Power Super-Attack LV3]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV10]	[SP Minimized Consumption LV10]
[Destruction Super-Enhancement LV7]	[Impact Super-Enhancement LV8]	[Cutting Super-Enhancement LV6]	[Piercing Super-Enhancement LV7]
[Shock Super-Enhancement LV7]	[Status Condition Super-Enhancement LV10]	[Mental Warfare LV10]	[Energy Conferment LV10]
[Ability Conferment LV7]	[Energy Super-Attack LV5]	[Divine Dragon Power LV8]	[Dragon Barrier LV6]
[Deadly Poison Attack LV10]	[Enhanced Paralysis Attack LV10]	[Rot Attack LV7]	[Heretic Attack LV9]
[Poison Synthesis LV10]	[Medicine Synthesis LV10]	[Shieldsmanship LV3]	[Thread Genius LV10]
[Iron Defense LV7]	[Divine Thread Weaving]	[Thread Control LV10]	[Psychokinesis LV9]
[Throw LV10]	[Expel LV10]	[Dimensional]	[Kin Control]

		Maneuvering LV10]	LV10]
[Egg-Laying LV10]	[Concentration LV10]	[Thought Super-Acceleration LV6]	[Future Sight LV6]
[Parallel Minds LV10]	[High-Speed Processing LV10]	[Hit LV10]	[Evasion LV10]
[Probability Super-Correction LV10]	[Stealth LV10]	[Concealment LV2]	[Silence LV10]
[Odorless LV8]	[Emperor]	[Offer]	[Conviction]
[Hades]	[Corruption]	[Immortality]	[Heretic Magic LV10]
[Wind Magic LV10]	[Gale Magic LV10]	[Earth Magic LV10]	[Terrain Magic LV10]
[Seismic Magic LV1]	[Light Magic LV8]	[Holy Light Magic LV3]	[Shadow Magic LV10]
[Dark Magic LV10]	[Black Magic LV10]	[Poison Magic LV10]	[Healing Magic LV10]
[Miracle Magic LV10]	[Spatial Magic LV10]	[Dimensional Magic LV9]	[Abyss Magic LV10]
[Hero LV2]	[Great Demon Lord LV1]	[Charity]	[Perseverance]
[Pride]	[Rage LV3]	[Usurp LV4]	[Satiation LV10]
[Sloth]	[Wisdom]	[Destruction Super-Resistance LV6]	[Impact Nullification]
[Cutting Super-Resistance LV6]	[Piercing Super-Resistance LV6]	[Shock Super-Resistance LV6]	[Flame Resistance LV9]
[Flood Resistance LV3]	[Gale Resistance LV8]	[Terrain Resistance LV9]	[Bolt Resistance LV3]
[Holy Light Resistance LV6]	[Black Resistance LV9]	[Heavy Super-Resistance LV8]	[Status Condition Nullification]
[Acid Super-Resistance LV8]	[Rot Super-Resistance LV6]	[Faint Super-Resistance LV1]	[Fear Super-Resistance LV4]
[Heresy Nullification]	[Pain Nullification]	[Suffering Nullification]	[Night Vision LV10]
[Panoptic Vision LV4]	[Jinx Evil Eye LV9]	[Inert Evil Eye LV8]	[Sealing Evil Eye LV3]
[Antimagic Evil Eye LV2]	[Repellent Evil Eye LV7]	[Warped Evil Eye LV4]	[Annihilating Evil Eye LV6]

[Five Senses Super-Enhancement LV10]	[Perception Expansion LV8]	[Divinity Expansion LV9]	[Celestial Power]
[Ultimate Life LV10]	[Ultimate Movement LV10]	[Fortune LV10]	[Fortitude LV10]
[Stronghold LV10]	[Skanda LV10]	[Taboo LV10]	[n% I = W]

Skill Points: 165,700

Titles:

[Foul Feeder]	[Kin Eater]	[Assassin]	[Monster Slayer]
[Poison Technique User]	[Thread User]	[Merciless]	[Monster Slaughterer]
[Ruler of Pride]	[Ruler of Perseverance]	[Ruler of Wisdom]	[Wyrm Slayer]
[Fearbringer]	[Dragon Slayer]	[Ruler of Sloth]	[Monster Calamity]
[Champion]	[Human Slayer]	[Human Slaughterer]	[Rescuer]
[Medicinal Technique User]	[Saint]	[Savior]	[Ruler of Charity]
[Guardian]	[Human Calamity]		>

Am I seeing this right?!

My stats went up a ridiculous amount!

They were already really high after I absorbed Mother's power, but since I leveled up a bunch of times after that, I guess they're really out of control now.

It definitely helps that my stat-increasing skills like Skanda all got maxed out because of Mother.

And now here we are!

Looking at the numbers, it's hard to imagine anyone out there being stronger than I am.

And yet I'm still not on the same level as the Demon Lord. Ouch.

Well, that covers my stats, anyway.

But the main feature of this evolution wasn't increasing my stats.

No, the biggest selling point was the changes to my form.

First of all, I've gotten a lot bigger.

I'm still small compared to the adult taratect I saw when that arch attacked, but I'm definitely not travel size anymore.

But frankly, I don't really care about that.

The biggest change is the part that's grown out of my head.

The upper body of a human.

It kinda feels like I have two minds, in a weird way.

Sort of like Parallel Minds but also different.

It's almost as if I have two brains thinking about the same thing at the same time. In fact, that's probably what's happening.

I also have two fields of vision now.

One is the same as before, aside from being a little higher, since my body is bigger.

The other is a view from a higher position than that.

I slowly peer around at my surroundings from that vantage point.

Oh man.

Up until now, my head's been connected to my torso, so I had to turn my whole body if I wanted to look around. But now, I can secure a wide range of vision just by moving my neck.

I look down.

Oh hey, boobs.

I guess I really am female, then.

Most males probably wouldn't have a chest like this.

Since I couldn't tell what was what on my old spider body, I worried from time to time that it might actually be male, but I guess it was female after all.

Well, I kinda figured, since the Demon Lord looks like a girl anyway.

Hmm. I'm technically only around two years old or so, but I've got an adult body.

I look at my hands, flexing them experimentally.

It's perfectly normal that my fingers move when I will them to, but I'm excited nonetheless.

In fact, I can tell that I'm starting to smile.

I'm usually the fairly expressionless type, but it's great that I can smile naturally now if I want to.

Yep. This is great.

I have a human body.

It's been so long, I was starting to forget what it felt like.

My lower half is still a spider, but I'm very familiar with the sensation of this upper half.

I lean over to examine that lower half.

Then the spider eyes of my lower body and the human eyes of my upper body meet.

Whoa, I'm making eye contact with myself!

The face I see there surprises me.

It's... my face.

The way my face looked in my previous life.

My eyes are red and my skin and hair are super-white now, but the actual facial features are exactly the same.

Since I've been reborn and all, I was kinda expecting a new face, so this is a pleasant surprise.

The smile on my human face deepens.

It's sort of turning into a smirk.

Oh geez.

What's going on here?

I'm so happy that it's hard to describe.

Hee-hee. Heh-heh-heh-heh!

My feet tap around on the floor like they're trying to dance.

In fact, I kinda do feel like dancing!

After basking in my happiness for a little while, I decide my upper half probably doesn't look super-appropriate, so I make a bra out of thread.

As I'm finishing up, the huge amount of eggs around me starts to shake.

One of the shells breaks, and a tiny spider appears.

Then another and another.

A few of them already contain my transplanted Parallel Minds.

My Egg-Laying skill produced a total of one thousand eggs.

I used one of them myself, so there are nine hundred and ninety-nine left.

"All right, ladies and gentlespiders! Let's see what you've got!"

I address the newborn babies out loud.

Ooh.

That's right. Since I have a human form now, I can actually talk.

To be honest, I did this to test out the Egg-Laying skill and attempt my Parallel Minds transplant experiment, so I hadn't really thought about what happens once they hatch.

I guess I'll just let them fend for themselves in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

What do you mean, I'm a bad parent?

There are a few Parallel Minds mixed in there, which are basically me, so they can be parents in my stead.

I guess it wouldn't be so bad to leave them a little food, though.

I take out some food from Spatial Storage that I haven't finished eating yet and put it on the ground.

The baby spiders flock over to it at once.

Look at all these little spiderlings crawling around. It's so... creepy.

Anyway. What am I gonna do now?

I've achieved my goal of evolving into an arachne, which I originally wanted to do so that I could communicate with humans properly and thus get ahold of a decent meal.

But now that the Demon Lord's made a mess of my whole local god thing, it'd be a pain to try to make new contact with people.

Even when they were worshipping me, I didn't know how to communicate with humans.

Just because I'm an arachne who looks and talks more like a human now, that doesn't mean I'm suddenly good at social interaction.

And since the Demon Lord's shown up, I can't go back to that town anymore.

It's a bummer, but I'm gonna have to leave that place behind.

Alas, my sweet, sweet offerings...

I guess I'll make one last check to see if there are any more offerings near the forest entrance, and then I'll skedaddle.

With that, I teleport to the forest near the town, but there's just one little problem.

The town is on fire.

And a bunch of soldiers are fighting in there.

One side is the town's defense force.

The other is waving a flag I saw back on the battlefield, the Ohts flag.

Did they send a separate force directly to the town on top of all the troops at the battlefield?

One of the gates has been broken open, and the Ohts soldiers are storming into the town.

The defenders are fighting hard, but most of their forces are out on the battlefield, so they don't have the numbers to last for long.

At this rate, the town's going down.

But there's something that catches my attention even more than that.

A group of elves is attacking the lord's mansion.

file.18**status****HP**

? ? ? / ? ? ?

MP

? ? ? / ? ? ?

SP

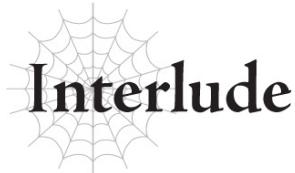
? ? ? / ? ? ?

ARACHNE**LV.01**

Average Offensive Ability : ???
 Average Defensive Ability : ???
 Average Magic Ability : ???
 Average Resistance Ability : ???
 Average Speed Ability : ???

skill ???

A monster with no confirmed sightings in recorded history. As such, there is little to no information about it, and it is shrouded in mystery. It is said that the human part of the monster's body has the appearance of an exceptionally beautiful girl, but this is only a rumor, the truth of which is unknown. Because there are so few witnesses, it is questionable whether this monster even exists at all. The only sightings occurred during periods in which the Nightmare of the Labyrinth or a Nightmare's Vestige were also sighted, so it is thought that witnesses may have simply mistaken them for this creature. Because its very existence is in doubt, it is impossible to measure the danger level of this monster.



THE SERVANT'S STRUGGLE

I am a servant of the Keren family.

I live to serve my master, my mistress, and their young daughter.

So it was unthinkable for me to be defeated by thieves or to put the mistress and her child in danger.

A most unacceptable blunder.

Yet instead of reprimanding me, my master was concerned for my safety.

I am blessed to serve such a wonderful man.

Which is exactly why he is worth putting my life on the line for.

“Merazophis. How fares the evacuation of the townspeople?”

“Unfortunately, it does not seem to be going well.”

“I see.”

My master’s face is full of anguish.

The Ohts soldiers have invaded his beloved town.

They must be a detachment that separated from the main troops to attack the town directly.

Ohts has carried out a foul strategy to target the innocent townspeople, without even blinking an eye.

My master likely intends to stay until the very end.

He has a strong sense of duty.

To him, it would be inexcusable to flee while any of his people still remain.

Because he is staying, his wife intends to stay, too.

She wants to be close by his side until the very last moment.

They truly are a perfect pair.

That is why I have bottled away my own paltry love for my mistress.

It would be an honor to die in their service.

“Merazophis. Please take care of my daughter... of Sophia.”

My master’s words put a stop to my resignation.

He wants me to flee and take the young miss with me.

“Master, I cannot—”

“Merazophis. You are the person I trust most of all. I want to place her life in your hands.”

“I feel the same way. Please.”

My master and mistress are making a request of me.

Not an order. A request.

“Very well. I shall protect her no matter what.”

I wonder what kind of face I’m making right now?

No doubt it is becoming unfit to be seen by their eyes.

I use my sleeve to wipe away the tears that blur my vision.

Then I accept the young miss from my mistress’s arms.

At that moment, someone bursts in through the window.

“Go!”

My master pushes my back, forcing me out of the room.

I run through the corridor and reach the entrance hall.

But there are more intruders there, bows at the ready as if they were lying in wait.

I quickly turn back to head for the rear entrance, but then a terrible pain strikes my back.

I grit my teeth and try to start running, but as soon as I take the first step, an arrow pierces my leg.

I tumble forward to the ground.

Trying to protect the infant in my arms, I land in a poor position.

As my arm hits the ground, it emits a dull, dreadful sound.

Pain so severe that it threatens to render me unconscious assails me.

Most likely, my arm has broken.

But the intruders afford me no time to recover.

Pushing my back against the wall, I somehow manage to stand.

Something that was already stabbed into my back, likely an arrow, gets pushed in even deeper as a result.

I hold the young miss tightly with my broken arm and use my free hand to pull the sword out of my belt, preparing to face the enemy.

There are four of them in total.

All of them wear hoods that conceal their faces.

Outside the wide-open doors to the entrance hall, I see the mansion's guards lying on the ground.

It seems I should not expect reinforcements.

As it stands, I am already a dead man walking.

I doubt anyone would say I stand a chance.

Still, I have no choice.

As if in mockery of my determination, the intruders draw their bowstrings.

With my back against the wall, I cannot move a single step.

If they would only come within the range of my blade, I would at least be able to put up a fight, even if in vain.

Can I not be allowed even that much?!

My own powerlessness nearly puts me on the verge of tears.

In that instant, I feel a prickling pain in my neck.

Looking down, I see that the young miss is biting me.

Not only that, but her teeth have pierced my skin, and she is drinking my blood as it flows from the wound.

I barely have time to question what's happening before my body undergoes a dramatic transformation.

Somehow, it grows warmer in direct proportion to the blood I'm losing.

Strength wells up within me, and the pain of my wounds starts to fade.

It's as if for all the blood seeping out, something else is flowing into me.

A feeling of empowerment engulfs my entire body.

I feel as though I'm becoming a different person, no longer myself.

Under normal circumstances that would be horrifying, but my mind is too intoxicated with a sort of sweet numbness.

Without knowing why, I feel as though I can win now.

I move my legs, even the one that was rendered immobile by an arrow.

Nonetheless, I take a step forward and immediately find myself in front of one of my opponents.

Then I thrust my sword directly into his startled face.

For some reason, the resultant blood that splatters across my face is terribly appealing.



Its smell tickles my nose like the fragrance of a fine wine.

Something strange is happening to me.

But I do not question it too deeply.

Whatever has occurred, it has granted me the power to protect my young mistress.

Why should I not use that power to the fullest?

As the intruders draw back in surprise at my sudden change, my sword lashes out at them without mercy.

But just as I'm about to finish off the last one, a powerful impact strikes my back.

It's as if it's shaking my whole body into pieces.

Unable to bear it completely, I fall forward.

The young mistress is thrown from my arms, tumbling to the floor.

"A vampire? It is fresh, so its stats are still low, but it could be troublesome if it reaches adulthood."

I force my head to move, looking at the man who struck me from behind.

Unlike the others, his face is unhidden by a hood.

He seems to be a young man.

But there's no way to judge his real age from his appearance.

Because his fully visible ears are long and pointed.

The characteristic feature of the long-lived elves.

Why are the elves working with Ohts? But more than that, what worries me most is the direction the man is approaching from.

He's coming from the direction of the room where I last saw my master and mistress.

Did something happen to them?

The worst possible scenarios cross my mind.

“That baby is the progenitor, then.”

“What shall we do?”

“Kill it.”

The surviving hooded figure speaks with the elf.

I cannot allow them to put their words into action.

“Are you certain, my lord?”

“Just tell Oka it got caught up in the battle and we couldn’t reach it in time. If we allow a vampire to live, it will cause nothing but trouble in the future.”

“Very well.”

The hooded person approaches my young mistress.

I leap to my feet at once and block the hands reaching for the child.

“I will not allow you to lay a hand on the young miss.”

The hooded figure falters.

The elf man, however, simply stares at me with cold, narrowed eyes.

“Submit, and we will grant you a painless death. Why go so far to protect the child? That is a vampire. It will only bring misfortune into the world.”

A vampire?

The bloodsucking creature from fairy tales?

Does this mean the young miss is a vampire?

I suppose that would explain my sudden transformation.

But that does not change anything.

"That matters not. I have promised to protect her with my life. She was entrusted to me."

Carrying out my master and mistress's wishes.

That is my sole duty.

Whether the young miss is a vampire or not makes no difference.

"How foolish."

The elf gathers magic power in his hands.

Until suddenly, he's attacked by a white nightmare.



WORST ELF EVER!

Just as the elf is about to finish off the family servant, I cut in to attack.

Telepooort! And then a swift punch to the face!

That's right! Since I have a partly human form, I can punch things now!

I still can't really kick, though!

The elf crashes into the wall.

While the other hooded guy is staring at the scene in shock, I take the opportunity to chop his head right off with Cutting Thread.

Whew, talk about a speedrun.

Pretty impressive, if I do say so myself.

I bet I could even beat a TAS runner right now.

This is probably the fastest way to do things.

I look back at the servant guy. He's near death from all his injuries, yet he's still gallantly trying to keep the baby bloodsucker safe.

In his eyes, I see that he's quite wary of me.

Hmm. I guess it's natural not to trust a half human, half spider who just popped up out of nowhere, but I did help you, you know. Couldn't you lose the attitude?

But because I'm so, sooo nice, I suppose I'll heal him despite his rudeness.

“What?”

As his wounds recover thanks to my Healing Magic, the man looks at his recently transformed body in shock.

"You are not an enemy?"

I simply shake my head.

Not sure if that's enough to clear up his doubts or not.

Just to confirm, I Appraise the guy and see that his race includes "vampire."

Ooh, that naughty little bloodsucker turned him into a vampire! Maybe because they were in a tight spot?

So this servant guy's name is Merazophis.

Geez, that's long. We'll just call him Mera. Sorta makes him sound like a low-level fire spell, but let's not worry about that right now.

I walk over to where the baby bloodsucker is lying on the ground and pick her up.

First I check with Appraisal whether she's hurt at all.

The servant guy is freaking out, but I'm not gonna do anything. Relax.

Although I gotta say, babies are so soft and squishy, it makes me think they're probably really tasty.

They're small, so there's not much meat on them, but still.

I bet those stretchy little cheeks are delicious.

Maybe I'll sneak a teeny little taste?

I guess the cheek would be kinda weird, so how about just an arm?

It's totally fine; I'll just heal it afterward.

Just a liiittle bite.

As these thoughts go through my mind, the baby's clothes start getting a little wet in the crotch area.

Oh, gross. She's peeing, isn't she?

Ahh. Well, I guess I can't blame her, since her life might be in danger?

And she's a baby, so there's that.

But she's a high schooler on the inside, so I dunno...

I mean, if it were me, I'd probably die of embarrassment.

Or maybe just kill whoever witnessed it right then and there.

I'll just pretend I didn't see anything.

That's what kindness is all about.

Plus I don't really feel like eating her anymore.

Since she's unharmed and all, I politely hand her back to Mera.

He takes the baby bloodsucker without a word.

"Hrmm. What a bizarre creature, and an unwelcome interruption."

I turn to find the source of the voice.

The elf I sent flying is standing up, dusting off his clothes as if nothing happened at all.

Whoa. This guy's pretty tough.

A punch from me didn't work on him, even with my crazy-high stats?

I owe you an apology, TAS runners.

Apparently I'm not on your level yet after all.

I Appraise the elf's status.

<Cannot be Appraised>

Now, that's not the result I expected.

Huh? What?

Can't be Appraised?

It'd be one thing if my Appraisal was blocked, but I can't Appraise him at all?

Even when I use Professor Wisdom to try to force it, I still get the same result.

You're telling me that Wisdom, which was able to get at even the Demon Lord's stats when they were hidden by administrator authority, doesn't work on this guy?

This could be bad.

I thought I could beat anyone but the Demon Lord now, but is it possible that this elf fella is just as bad as the Demon Lord or possibly even worse?

Uh-oh.

Maybe I shouldn't have charged in here not knowing how strong my opponent was.

Should I grab the baby bloodsucker and the servant and get out of here with Teleport?

"Are you Ariel's kin, perhaps? Yet I have never seen a creature with a form like this. Who are you, exactly?"

I don't have to answer that.

And the fact that he knows the Demon Lord's name only confirms that he can't be good news.

Retreat, retreat!

"You are not getting away. Activate Anti-Technique Barrier."

Around the elf, the world suddenly shifts.

I've never felt anything like this. It's as though the world itself really is changing.



Everything looks the same.

Sounds, smells, taste, touch, none of that has changed, either.

But something about the world is different.

It's like this one spot has been cut off from the rest of the world. Like we've suddenly been flung naked and defenseless into the middle of a winter wasteland.

What's going on?

It feels like a world that was once kind has suddenly turned its back on me.

What's happening to me?

But I have no time to worry about these strange feelings.

The Teleport magic I was trying to invoke evaporates. And as if that wasn't enough, my constantly active skills like Divine Dragon Power, Battle Divinity, and Magic Divinity get canceled out, too.

This barrier can block skills as well as magic?!

Even the Demon Lord's Divine Dragon Barrier couldn't do anything like that!

"Hmm. I believe you may just be worthy of being my opponent. My name is Potimas Harrifenas. Remember that name. There is no need for you to introduce yourself, as you are no doubt about to die by my hand."

The elf called Potimas sways slightly.

A moment later, he approaches me at a ferocious speed, raising a fist to strike.

Wait a second!

Aren't elves supposed to be good at magic but physically not very strong?!

I always pictured elves being bad at hand-to-hand combat!

But if this guy's opening with a punch instead of a magic spell, he must be a powerhouse

fighter or something?!

That's not how elves are supposed to be!

But he's not so fast that my speed can't handle it.

Unlike the Demon Lord, at least my eyes can still follow his movements.

I dodge his fist with ease... almost.

“?!”

The elf's fist passes right in front of my human face.

As it grazes my cheek, it cuts my skin just a little.

I wasn't able to dodge it completely.

But I thought he wasn't too fast to handle?

My body wouldn't move the way I wanted it to, so I ended up getting grazed.

Crap.

This is really not good.

In fact, it's even worse than I thought!

I thought Potimas's barrier rendered magic and skills ineffective.

But I was wrong.

It's far, far worse than that.

Magic, skills, and even stats.

The barrier cancels out all of them.

It's a barrier that rejects the system.

Inside this barrier, I'm barely any different from your average Joe.

And now I'm trapped in this hopeless situation.

Every ounce of confidence drains from my body.

My strength is entirely dependent on the system.

My stats, my skills.

Without those, aside from the fact that my lower half is a spider, I'm just like any ordinary human.

But I guess that's to be expected.

The only factors making me anything other than ordinary are the stats and skills given to me by the system.

All the power I've built up until now...

It's all been taken from me in an instant.

My mind goes completely blank.

I have to do something, but I can't think of a single plan.

As I stand around in shock, Potimas comes at me with a roundhouse kick.

Its approach feels slow to me, but I can tell that it would cause a huge amount of damage to any normal human.

I mean, it's so sharp that I can hear his foot cutting through the air!

The kick is aimed toward my spider head, so I avoid it by moving backward.

But while I intended to hop several feet away in an instant, my body doesn't move the way I want, and I make it only a single step back.

The elf's toes literally pass right before my eyes (the spider ones).

Eek!

If Thought Acceleration wasn't slowing down time, I wouldn't have been able to dodge that!

Huh?

Wait a sec.

Thought Acceleration is working?

It totally is.

That must be why Potimas's kick looked slow to me.

Wait, what? So I *can* use skills?

While Potimas is still finishing the kick I narrowly avoided, I aim some thread at him.

In the end, this thread is the skill I can count on more than any other.

But before the thread leaves my body, it loses its shape and vanishes.

It isn't working after all.

I can't use it.

So why can I use Thought Acceleration, then?

I test all my skills in rapid succession, sorting out which ones I can use and which ones I can't.

Some of them work without a problem, while others definitely don't.

I avoid Potimas's punches or kicks or whatever as I investigate the difference.

Soon, I realize that the skills that work entirely within my body are the ones I can use.

Conversely, skills that affect things outside my body like thread and magic won't work.

So Potimas's mystery barrier isn't perfect.

Maybe everything in the air that the barrier covers is affected, but inside the body, the barrier can't reach.

Or something like that anyway.

And from the looks of things, my stats aren't completely gone, either.

Otherwise, someone who was always as unathletic as I was wouldn't be able to avoid this elf's crazy-fast attacks.

But what exactly is going on?

It's like I can feel my stats trying to strengthen my physical abilities, but the effect of the barrier is slowing them down.

And stat-increasing skills like Battle Divinity and Magic Divinity get snuffed out the second I activate them.

If I try to Appraise my own stats, I get an error that prevents me from figuring out the exact numbers.

But going on my intuition alone, I feel like I'm about a tenth slower than usual.

So my other stats are probably in a similar state, right?

Maybe, but it's not that simple.

First of all, my defense is looking bad.

To be honest, it doesn't seem any better than an ordinary human's right now.

I mean, getting grazed by Potimas's attack was enough to cut my skin, and just moving quickly is doing damage to my feet.

My body can't handle my movements.

I'm guessing this difference is because my defense isn't working on my skin.

The speed stat strengthens my muscles inside my body, so I think that's why the barrier isn't affecting it as much.

But defense mainly works on my outer skin, which is making contact with the air.

And by that, I mean it's basically making contact with the barrier.

That's why my defense is down so much.

Maybe on the inside my defense is working about as well as my speed, but on my skin it's no better than a normal person's.

Getting caught by a direct hit from one of Potimas's attacks in this state definitely means I'll take a lot of damage.

If there's one bright side to all this, it's that Potimas himself can't use skills and magic and stuff, either.

That's why he's attacking me physically like this.

I can't use my magic and thread and stuff, either, so physical attacks are my only option, too.

This'll be my first purely physical fight since I was reborn, won't it?

I've been depending on magic from the moment I could use it, and before then I relied on my thread, Poison Fang, and Poison Synthesis.

I've never fought a purely physical battle with no thread or magic before.

I can't believe I'm getting into a fistfight right after evolving into an arachne.

No, I guess maybe it's a good thing I evolved into this first.

Before I evolved, my only physical attack options were my scythes and my teeth.

But now I can also do punches and head butts and stuff!

...Is it just me, or am I better off sticking with the scythes and the biting?

Since my stats are so low right now, I kinda don't think punching him with these scrawny-looking arms would do very much.

All right. Let's just stick with the scythes as my basic attack.

I can always use punching as a feint or whatever.

So I dodge Potimas's latest punch like a champ, then counter by whipping a scythe up at his exposed chest.

Boom! One hit for me!

A grating metallic *clang* echoes as my scythe tears through Potimas's body.

...Sorry, that was a lie.

It doesn't tear through anything.

In fact, my scythe blade is what ends up getting damaged.

Because my lowered stats reduce the strength of my scythe and because Potimas's body is just that hard.

Wait a minute, what?!

Why was there a metallic sound when I hit what should've been his flesh?!

It was like, *CLANG!!* And loud enough to make your hair stand on end!

Is your body made of steel or what?!

Nah, I'm just kidding. He's probably wearing some metal armor under his stupid clothes.

It doesn't look very thick, so I guess it must be made from pretty strong metal.

When I turn to face the elf again, I see that his clothes have been ripped open across his torso.

Through the tear, I can see a glimpse of his skin.

Hmm? Wait, skin?

Why is there skin under there and not metal armor?

Looking more closely, I notice there's a cut in his skin, too, and underneath that skin I see a metallic glint.

Huh? Metal under his skin?

Does that mean the inside of his body is made out of metal?

I guess I wasn't kidding!

This guy's body is seriously made of metal?!

What's going on here?!

Are you a damn robot?!

Come on, what the hell is this dude?!

While I'm busy freaking out about Potimas's weird body, he presses the attack.

Completely disregarding the cut across his chest.

He quickly closes the distance between us, and this time he swings an open hand at me in an attempted grab.

He must have figured that if I'm going to dodge and counter his punches and kicks, he should do something that stops me from moving.

I dodge away from his hand and keep moving backward.

I've never experienced close-quarters combat like this before.

If he pulls me into a sleeper hold or something, I won't be able to get away.

All I know how to do are simple punches and cuts with my scythe, stuff like that.

I'm sure any professional fighter would say that my stance is all wrong or whatever.

My only hope is to keep fleeing on foot from Potimas's attacks while getting in counterattacks when I have a chance.

Potimas and I are locked in a fast-paced dance around the small, restricted space of the mansion entrance.

Mera clutches the baby bloodsucker to his chest, crouching in a corner to keep her from getting caught in the rumble.

Since we don't seem to be getting anywhere, I grab a vase from a random shelf and fling it at Potimas.

The expensive-looking vase flies right at Potimas.

Flowers and water scatter through the air as it smashes to pieces against the elf's face.

Sorry about that. I'll pay for it later—or I would, but I have no money.

I'm very, very sorry.

As I silently apologize to Mera in my heart, Potimas charges at me again, heedless of the vase shards everywhere.

Shit!

I should've known a vase wouldn't damage this freak!

I'm still in my vase-throwing pose.

I tossed it in the hopes of catching Potimas off guard, but now it's put me in a pinch instead.

As the frightening elf bears down on me, I force my legs to move and evade!

The recoil pitches my human upper body forward, but it's better than letting him catch me.

Okay, it damaged my back, so that sucks.

But Suffering Nullification makes that easy enough to bear.

Heh-heh.

I'm sure a human would've had trouble recovering from a throwing pose so quickly, but I, a great arachne, have eight wonderful legs!

I can split roles among the legs that stepped forward for my pitch and the ones that are now carrying me away.

Not like some two-legged loser!

But Potimas doesn't slow down, intent on catching up to me anyway.

He's not just trying to grab me. He intends to tackle me!

As he pitches forward like a quarterback, I hastily jump to avoid him!

I fly over his head like an Olympic vaulter, swiping at him with my scythe while I'm at it.

Behind me, Potimas loses his balance and hits the floor with a *thud* as I make a perfect landing.

Ten points!

No time to sing my own praises, though. I quickly swivel around to keep my eyes on Potimas.

He's back on his feet in a matter of seconds, glaring at me.

There's a huge slash across the top of his head, through which a metal skull is clearly visible.

He looks like a certain murderous robot from the future. You know the one.

Dun-dun-dun!

So you're really, truly, actually a robot, huh?

That's a robot, all right. We got a live one here!

I mean, come on!

Are you kidding me?!

What happened to elves treasuring the blessings of nature and all that crap?!

Why are they an ultra-technologically advanced super-civilization now?!

I thought this was a fantasy world!

Since when were there sci-fi elements, huh?!

Don't change the world-building on me now!

I know I'm making a lot of jokes about this, but even in the calmer part of my brain, an alarm is going off.

It tells me this thing shouldn't exist in this world.

The system doesn't allow it.

Because it's that kind of mechanical technology that brought this world to the brink of collapse in the first place.

World-destroying technology like that shouldn't still exist here.

Yet this guy is using it without a care in the world.

He must be out of his mind.

No sane person would use something like that in this world.

Now I really feel like I have to stop this guy, and not just for the sake of my immediate survival.

But my attacks don't work on that steel body of his.

He's not landing any hits on me, either, but it's taking everything I've got to avoid him.

I could slip up at any moment.

"You are more persistent than I expected. How irritating. I did not want to use this, but you leave me no choice."

Instead, Potimas changes the game.

His right arm falls away with a metallic *clank*.

What emerges instead is unquestionably the barrel of a gun.

Excuuuuuuse me?!

How far are you gonna take this genre-bending thing, exactly?!

Wait, I'm in trouble here!

I hastily kick off the floor and run along the wall.

Bullets follow close behind me, leaving a trail of holes.

Sure. If you can't use magic, just use something physical, like guns.

I get that, but come on!

This doesn't seem fair!

I dash along the wall, avoiding the machine gun-like rain of bullets.

Soon I angle upward, reaching the ceiling.

I keep running upside down in an effort to avoid the gunfire.

It's not really working, though!

No matter how fast I move, I can't completely dodge an endless rain of bullets in this weakened state!

Several bullets pierce my body, tearing through skin and flesh.

Thanks to Suffering Nullification, there's no pain, but I can still feel the sensation of foreign objects entering my body.

This calls for desperate measures!

I reach the point of the ceiling directly above Potimas.

Then I let myself fall.

As I plummet straight toward him, Potimas concentrates his fire on my human head.

Bullets burst through it, ripping my head to shreds.

You fool!

Yes, that is my real head!

But I still have another one where that came from!

Even if you shoot my human brain to bits, I've still got my spider brain.

As long as one of the two remains, I can still function just fine!

Perhaps alarmed by the fact that I'm still moving after evidently losing my head, Potimas's expression turns sour.

I decide to fix that for him with a nice gravity-boosted punch to the face.

Since I used my full strength with no regard for the likelihood of breaking my arm, Potimas's face crumples inward, his neck twisting at an unnatural angle.

The impact sends him spinning like something out of an action movie, crashing into the wall.

Meanwhile, bullets keep spraying out of his right arm, scattering in all directions.

I quickly check to make sure the baby bloodsucker and Mera are all right. They don't seem to have been hit.

Potimas slumps down, still pointlessly firing bullets into the floor.

Then the sound stops abruptly.

Is he out of bullets?

I guess he didn't want to use it because he had limited ammo.

More importantly, is he dead?

As I hesitate for a moment, wondering whether to attack, Potimas snaps back to his feet.

His neck is still twisted at a frightening angle.

He smacks the side of his head with his left hand, forcing it back into place with a nasty cracking sound.

I know I'm one to talk, but that's pretty damn creepy.

Still, this is bad.

I lost the use of my right arm and one of my heads in that last attack.

And my automatic regeneration isn't working.

I probably won't recover unless I can get rid of that barrier.

My opponent, on the other hand, barely looks damaged at all.

He seems to be out of bullets, at least, but that came at a high cost for me.

I'm out of my league.

This could be serious.

If I die here, the barrier might prevent Immortality from working.

That leaves egg revival as my last option, but all my eggs just hatched.

I don't know if I can transplant myself into a baby who's already hatched, since I've never tried.

For that matter, I don't know if I could even do that from inside this barrier in the first

place.

If I get killed now, that might actually be the end.

I charged in here on a whim, and now I might be facing my doom. How bad can my luck get?

Should I have just forgotten about the baby bloodsucker and not gotten involved in the first place?

Argh, there's no point thinking about this now!

It's too late for regrets.

I gotta figure out how to deal with this situation.

"Hmm. You're quite dangerous. If I do not deal with you now, I suspect it will cause no small amount of trouble in the future. I shall make this place your grave."

Wooow. He's officially declared that he intends to exterminate me.

Thanks but no thanks.

It doesn't seem like this guy plans on letting me get away, then.

If I want to make it out of here alive, I have to defeat him somehow.



Both of us assume fighting stances.

Isn't there anything I can do here?

Since this jerk is literally made of steel, it'll be tough to do much physical damage to him.

If I want to do that, I have to use outside forces like I did with gravity earlier and be prepared to damage my own body in the process.

With my defense lowered like this, my body can't even handle the recoil of my own attacks.

All he has to do is attack without worrying about defense. Meanwhile, I can barely deal him any damage and end up hurting myself in the process.

At this rate, I'm going to lose.

I have to find a way to turn things around.

My thread doesn't work in here.

The cloth I made to cover up my chest earlier hasn't disappeared, though, so it looks like thread made outside the barrier in advance is all right.

But I can't create any new thread.

All I've got is the cloth wrapped around my chest.

And I can't use Thread Control to move that, so it's not useful as anything but armor.

Thanks to the barrier, it doesn't even seem to provide any defense.

Thread is part of my very nature as a spider, and the barrier prevents me from using it.

All I've got left is what essentially amounts to a slightly pretty, white scrap of fabric.

Useless.

I can't use magic, either.

It evaporates before I can even put a spell together, never mind activate it.

What's left? Evil Eyes?

But they're not much different from magic, so I doubt those will work, either.

Potimas points his right-arm-turned-gun at me, even though he should be out of bullets.

Instead, the muzzle glows and shoots out a bullet of light.

Yikes!

Good thing my gut told me to dodge anyway!

I probably would've been blown into atomic particles if that hit me!

It totally blew up the wall behind me!

Wait, what even is that thing?

Since the barrier's still active, it can't be a magic attack. Is it a plasma bullet or something?

Potimas fires another one of the mysterious light-ball things.

Thanks to the few seconds between the time the muzzle glows and when it actually fires, I manage to dodge it again.

Unlike the bullets he was using before, he doesn't seem to be able to use these rapid-fire.

If he could, I wouldn't be able to dodge them all.

After I avoid the second shot, Potimas changes tactics.

He starts closing the distance between us, still pointing the gun at me.

I guess if you can't hit something, the logical next step is to do it up close and personal.

We both already know that I can't break through Potimas's defenses.

I don't have any long-distance attack methods right now, but since he has nothing to fear from my short-range attacks, either, this guy can fight me at whatever distance he wants.

He keeps getting closer, trying to land a one-hit kill shot that I can't avoid.

It's a very simple plan and a very dangerous one.

He's looking to clinch his victory.

And all I can do is keep running away.

I have no choice but to avoid letting him get too close.

Without any means of turning things around, my frustration starts to build, not to mention panic.

I feel like I'm nearing death with every passing second.

Shit.

In that moment of fear, I move a fraction of a second too slowly.

Potimas seizes that moment, his gun muzzle glowing.

It comes after me faster than I can dodge.

It's no use. I can't get away in time.

Out of sheer desperation, I use the one thing I haven't tried, my Evil Eyes.

Jinx Evil Eye, Inert Evil Eye, Repellent Evil Eye, Sealing Evil Eye, Antimagic Evil Eye, and, knowing full well that it might destroy me, Annihilating Evil Eye.

But just as I expected, none of them work.

Except for one.

“What’s this?”

For the first time, a bit of alarm disrupts Potimas’s calm composure.

His right arm suddenly twists around.

The one Evil Eye that activates successfully is Warped Evil Eye.

This Evil Eye can bend space itself, hollowing out whatever happens to occupy the affected area.

In this case, I used it inside Potimas’s right arm.

That’s right. Inside his body.

The barrier doesn’t have any effect inside my body.

So it shouldn’t affect the inside of Potimas’s body, either.

In that case, if I have a way of attacking the inside of his body directly, I can use it without the barrier stopping me!

Warped Evil Eye attacks space, regardless of what occupies it.

So it can target the interior of Potimas’s body no problem.

Talk about a twist, both figuratively and literally!

Just goes to show you should always give something a try, even if you don’t think it’ll work.

Now that I know I have a chance at winning, I activate Warped Evil Eye again, this time aimed at the inside of Potimas’s head.

“Tch!”

But before I can hollow out that metal head of his, he takes evasive action.

Warped Evil Eye attacks a space not a target.

In other words, it's easy to avoid if you just get away from that space.

On top of that, the harder the substance inside the space is, the more time and energy it takes to twist it.

If I want to hollow out any part of Potimas's steel body, it's going to take quite a bit of time.

And in that time, Potimas can easily dodge.

I was able to do it to his arm earlier only because he was distracted and preparing to fire it at me.

Now that he knows I have a means of hurting him, he'll proceed with caution, too.

Unless he makes a serious error, it's safe to assume that he'll dodge my Warped Evil Eye.

Still, now our positions are reversed.

In one fell swoop, I gained a weapon that can kill Potimas and also destroyed his means of finishing me off: his right arm.

But when it comes to close combat, Potimas still has the advantage.

It's anyone's game.

Potimas seems to recognize that, too, and is watching me intently.

I watch him right back, waiting for a chance to strike with Warped Evil Eye.

The tension heightens, and just as it reaches its peak...

“S’up, guys? Magical Demon Lord Ariel has arrived!”

Something strange comes crashing through the ceiling.

Huh? Okay, um, what?

Are my eyes playing tricks on me, or is the Demon Lord standing right between Potimas and me, striking a ridiculous pose?

Huh? What's going on here?

Wait, was Miss Demon Lord always this weird?

"Ariel...?"

"Yeah, duh. Need me to go back and do the intro again or what?"

I can't blame Potimas for being confused.

We were in the middle of a life-or-death struggle, and she just shows up and starts cracking jokes?

Could you get any more awkward?!

"Hmm. It's unfortunate that I cannot use Appraisal while the barrier is active. Now I have no means of judging whether you are the real Ariel or a fake."

"C'mon, I'm the real deal. Besides, I don't wanna hear that from someone who's using a fake body, y'know."

"Truly, my ears are burning."

Potimas and the Demon Lord are totally ignoring me.

Judging by their conversation, that robot body must be a temporary one.

The real Potimas must be somewhere else, using a remote controller or something.

"So hey, Poti, old buddy. What're you doing here?"

"Hmph," Potimas responds smoothly. "What, indeed?"

In the next moment, the ground shakes.

"Spit it out."

The Demon Lord just kicked the ground.

A simple kick, not using skills or magic, and it was still enough to cause a local earthquake.

But that physical change isn't important right now.

Not compared to the terrifying rage I can suddenly feel from the Demon Lord.

"So you are real, then."

"Was there any doubt? Now hurry up and spill it."

The Demon Lord is emitting a terrifying aura now. It's hard to believe she's the same person who was goofing around just a minute ago.

Her rage isn't directed at me, but it still makes it hard to breathe.

Y-yikes.

This is getting a little too scary for me...

Considering how high my Fear Resistance level is, the Demon Lord's anger shouldn't be making me feel such immense terror.

Um, excuse me? I don't really know what's going on here, and I didn't wanna fight that guy in the first place, so could I go now, please?

"It appears you have not changed at your core, if nothing else. Though I do not know what strange turn of events has led you to conduct yourself in such a foolhardy manner. I appear to be at a disadvantage here."

"No kidding. Can you just tell me what you were up to, then? Or would you rather I force it out of you?"

"Neither, thank you very much."

Potimas recklessly charges the Demon Lord.

"Hmph."

It happens in an instant.

Her arm lashes out almost carelessly.

That alone is enough to blow Potimas's body, the body I struggled so hard against, into smithereens.

All that remains is Potimas's head and a bit of his neck and clavicle.

"So this body is not enough to contend with you, either. This is an unforeseen loss on my part."

"I'll be happy to do the same to your real body sooner or later."

Her voice is dripping with hatred.

I almost wanna ask how she makes herself sound so scary.

"Ha. We shall see about that, little girl."

In response, the Demon Lord simply crushes Potimas's head under her foot.

It's almost anticlimactic.

I mean, I didn't really know what I was getting into with this little encounter, so my sense of dramatic tension could've been higher about it. But still, that guy was freakin' strong.

One wrong move could've gotten me killed for good.

But I don't feel any sense of victory or even the relief of having survived.

Because now another threat has appeared before my eyes.

She's even worse than that so-called elf Potimas.

Since he's been killed, or rather destroyed, the barrier is gone, and I can use magic and skills again.

But I still don't think I stand a chance of beating the Demon Lord right now.

Maybe I can just sneak on out of here?

"You there. Little Miss Spider."

Eek!

"Or would you rather I call you by another name? Hiiro Wakaba, perhaps?"

...How does she know that name?

Wait. More importantly, she's speaking Japanese.

"Anyway, it seems like that little *gift* you delivered has gotten all mixed up with the rest of me. I am the Demon Lord, Ariel, but I'm also a part of Hiiro Wakaba. I think Ariel is still the dominant one, but I can't actually tell, myself. See what I mean? My personality's changed a bunch, right?"

I don't exactly have a deep friendship with the Demon Lord.

But I can still tell that something's different about her.

I mean, I don't think the old Demon Lord would've done that whole magical-girl-entrance bit.

"What I'm saying is, because part of me still remembers being your former body brain, I feel kinda weird about trying to kill my old body now," the Demon Lord continues cheerfully.

"Although, I kinda thought I'd finished you off in that last battle. I mean, my Abyss Magic should've literally erased you. So why are you still alive and well? I don't get it. Killing you the normal way doesn't work, and killing you in a special way doesn't work, either. Can you even be killed at all? I mean, seriously. Since you seem to be practically immortal for some reason, I really don't even wanna fight you anymore. I'm scared, to be honest."

The Demon Lord? Scared of me?

The being whom I basically consider to be terror incarnate is saying that she's the one who's scared of me.

At first I think she must be joking, but her expression is serious, and there really is a hint of fear in her eyes.

"No matter how many times I kill you, you don't stay dead, and you keep getting stronger. I'm serious—I don't wanna deal with such a scary opponent anymore. How would you feel about a truce?"

That's exactly what I want!

I nod my agreement immediately.

But then the Demon Lord takes things a step further.

"Great. 'Cause I could use your help. See, you're the scariest thing ever if you're my enemy, but you'd be the best ally ever if you were on my side. Here's what I'm thinking. Wanna join forces with me?"

With that, the Demon Lord offers me her hand.

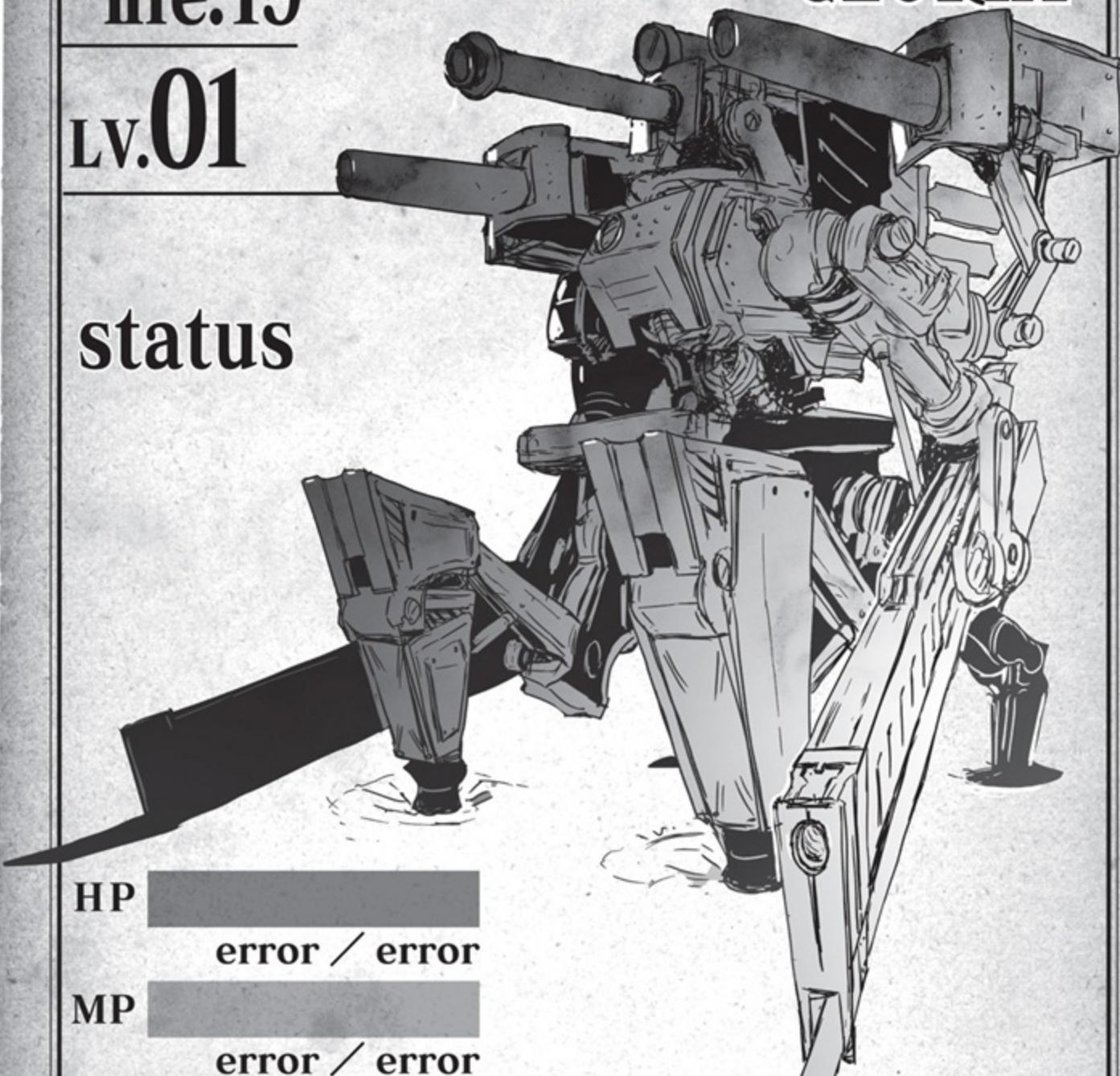
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Average Magic Ability : ???

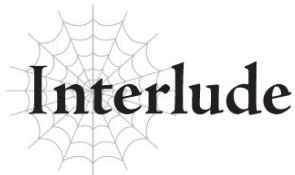
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CLASH OF THE ANCIENTS

I remember when White and I first teamed up.

She wouldn't stay dead no matter how many times I killed her, so the only solution I could think of was to propose a ceasefire and try to win her over to my side.

Not dying because of the Immortality skill is one thing.

But White came back even after I hit her with Abyss Magic, which even the Immortality skill shouldn't have been able to save her from.

That was the last straw.

By that point, the part of White that was in me, the Parallel Mind once called "body brain," had already blended with me completely, leading to my current self.

Once I was certain no more changes would occur, at least not against my own will, I didn't have any reason to continue treating White as an enemy.

I guess I was still a little bitter about her killing the queen, her army, my puppets, and so on, but there was nothing to be gained by fighting her anymore.

Besides, for whatever reason, I had a gut feeling that I'd be the one to go down eventually.

So I gave up on trying to defeat White and shifted gears to trying to recruit her instead.

I lost the queen, but I gained the powerhouse who defeated her.

On top of making a dangerous enemy into an ally, this meant I could keep a close eye on her at all times.

It was a bit of a gamble, since she was no less dangerous then, but I didn't have any

other choice.

At the rate things were going, I definitely would've gotten killed by White someday.

I won that bet and gained an invaluable ally in the process.

Yes, a very important and invaluable ally indeed.

It's been more than ten years since then.

The two of us worked hard together to get to where we are now.

"It's been quite the journey."

This is something I've desired since long, long ago.

And today, it will finally come to fruition.

When I think of how long it's been, the ten years I've spent with White seem like they've gone by in blink of an eye.

Although they were ten very eventful years.

As emotions briefly overcome me, I look up to see a mechanical menace that shouldn't exist in this world standing in my way.

The only creatures who would use such a device are the elves.

More specifically, only the one called Potimas, I suppose.

"You remember what I told you before, right?"

"Who can say? I hardly have the time to memorize every word spoken by a little girl."

Potimas's voice echoes through the speaker of the first of the army of machines.

I face down the army with a sneer.

"You think these little toys can stop me? Shouldn't you have sent the hero after me

instead?"

Not that it matters, since White should be on her way to that hero right now.

"A hero is merely the plaything of the administrators. I have no need for such trifles."

"We'll see if you still feel that way a few minutes from now."

A swarm of spider monsters assembles behind me, enough to oppose Potimas's mechanical forces.

All the taratects that live in the Great Garam Forest have gathered here, with the giant queen taratect leading the way.

The imperial army and even the demon army are here only to even out the numbers.

My real forces are this swarm of spiders, including the queen taratect.

Not to mention a few very dependable associates, especially White.

With all this preparation, I have to make sure we succeed, y'know?

"Potimas. I'll say it again. Today, I'm going to kill the real you."

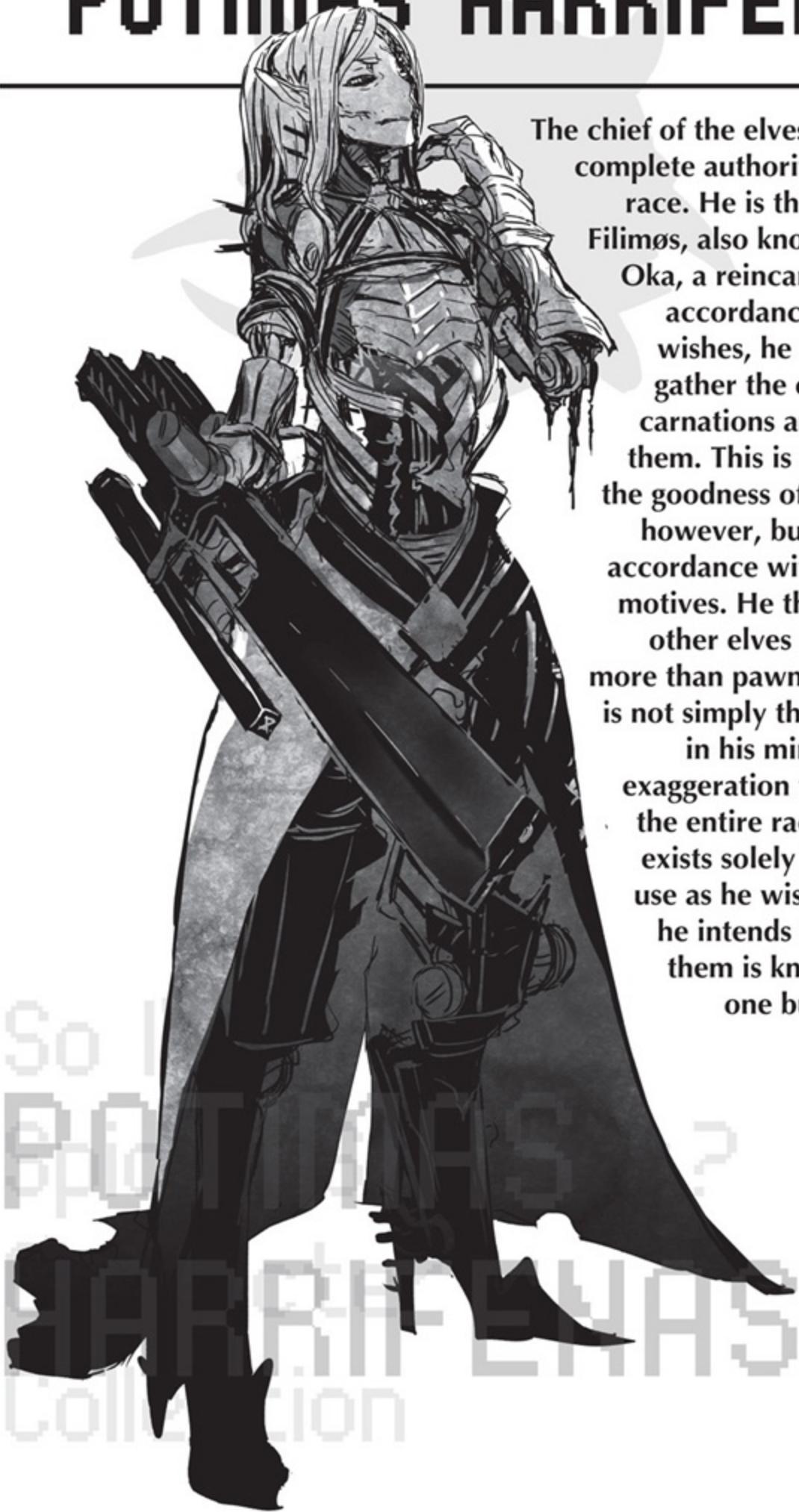
"We shall see about that."

The machine army invokes their barrier.

One that cancels out the very system that governs this world.

But a silly thing like that won't stop me from stepping forward.

POTIMAS HARRIFENAS



The chief of the elves, he holds complete authority over his race. He is the father of Filimøs, also known as Ms. Oka, a reincarnation. In accordance with her wishes, he sets out to gather the other reincarnations and protect them. This is not due to the goodness of his heart, however, but rather in accordance with his own motives. He thinks of all other elves as nothing more than pawns. Potimas is not simply their leader; in his mind, it is no exaggeration to say that the entire race of elves exists solely for him to use as he wishes. What he intends to do with them is known to no one but himself.

So I
POTIMAS?
HARRIFENAS
Collection



Final Chapter

A NEW JOURNEY BEGINS

In the distance, the town is blazing brightly.

Two pairs of eyes gaze at the flames.

They belong to Mera and the baby bloodsucker in his arms.

The baby watches the town where she was born and raised burning to the ground.

Mera, too, swore his loyalty to the baby bloodsucker's parents.

I have no way of knowing what the two of them are thinking as they watch the town burn.

But I figure I'll let them keep looking for as long as they need.

The Demon Lord is standing around nearby.

My longtime enemy, with whom I've chosen to join forces.

"So? Gonna answer me or what?"

The Demon Lord smiled cheerfully.

But her eyes weren't mirthful in the least.

I didn't know what would happen to me if I said no.

The Demon Lord thinks of me as some deathless monstrosity, but it's not like I can really keep resurrecting myself indefinitely.

Not that she needs to know this, but I'm not actually sure if my egg revival technique would work right now.

My eggs have all hatched, so all those little babies are wandering around with their own free will now.

Can I basically hijack one of those babies back to revive myself in its body?

I'm not sure. If anything, I feel like I probably can't.

It's likely it worked originally only because the baby hadn't been hatched yet, so it didn't have a mind or self of its own established at all.

Which meant if the Demon Lord killed me, I might not have been able to come back.

What if I had to fight her, then?

I'd lose, that's what.

Meaning that route was a dead end.

Ah-ha-ha... ha... ha.

I literally couldn't say no!

But if you really thought about it, it wasn't actually such a bad idea, right?

The Demon Lord can keep an eye on me, her mysteriously unkillable enemy.

And I can use the Demon Lord as a bodyguard.

We each think of the other as a serious threat, so it's more beneficial to both of us if we join forces instead of fighting each other.

On top of that, the Demon Lord thinks I'm completely immortal.

Hopefully, that means she wouldn't risk breaking our truce by trying to attack me again.

In other words, the Demon Lord isn't going to betray me.

Even though I could very well betray her!

Is it just me, or does this treaty work out in my favor?

Especially considering the way she phrased it. "*Join forces.*"

I don't like the idea of working under someone else, but if we're joining forces, that means we're on equal footing.

I won't have to worry about the Demon Lord being my worst enemy anymore.

She won't have to keep trying to fight an inscrutable opponent.

And we'll each gain the other as a powerful, dependable ally.

Is this a win-win situation or what?

In the worst-case scenario, if it doesn't work out, I can always just use the Demon Lord until I figure out a way to beat her, at which point I can betray her.

On the other hand, she's not likely to betray me, since she thinks I'm immortal, so I don't have to worry about that.

It's certainly more logical than refusing her offer, going back to being enemies, and living my life on the run.

After making all these calculations in a matter of seconds, I silently took the Demon Lord's hand.

After that, Mera went to confirm the fate of his master and mistress.

The lord and his wife had already been killed by the time I came charging onto the scene.

Potimas murdered them.

Mera probably suspected that, but I think he wanted to confirm it with his own eyes.

Otherwise, he might not have been able to or wanted to believe it.

He hugged the baby bloodsucker to his chest but shielded her gaze as he looked at the

bodies of his master and mistress.

Of course, Mera doesn't know that the baby bloodsucker is a reincarnation and already has a fully developed consciousness.

But the fact that he would make sure to keep a child from seeing the remains of her brutally murdered parents still speaks volumes for his character.

As does the way that his normally serious face crumpled as he openly wept.

Unfortunately, we couldn't dwell on this spot for too long.

Because the Ohts army was closing in on the mansion from all sides.

The Demon Lord and I could easily wipe out one measly army of humans without breaking a sweat.

But we weren't going to do that.

There wouldn't be any point.

The lord and lady of the house were dead, and the town was virtually destroyed.

Even if we slaughtered their army now, it would be too late.

Lashing out at them anyway would only be pointless violence.

Since the Demon Lord and I don't have deep connections to this town, it wouldn't even be revenge.

The people of the town might want to get revenge on Ohts, but to me, it seemed somehow wrong for us to do that for them.

Instead, we decided to withdraw.

Finally, Mera pulls his eyes away from the burning town.

"You finished?"

“Yes.”

There's a tremble in his voice as he answers the Demon Lord.

But behind it, I think I sense a will that can't be broken.

“Please accept my gratitude for your assistance, belated though it may be.”

Mera bows his head politely to the Demon Lord and me.

But when he looks up again, there's a bit of suspicion in his eyes.

“I apologize for asking such a rude question after you've just saved our lives, but might I inquire as to who you are?”

Well, yeah.

We might've saved his life, but I'm still a half-human, half-spider arachne.

And based on her entrance, the Demon Lord might be even weirder.

Magical Demon Lord? Come on...

Talk about sketchy.

You can't blame the guy for having his doubts.

“I am the one and only Demon Lord, Ariel, in the flesh. And this is the spider monster you guys were praising as the Divine Beast until recently—or her evolved form anyway.”

“The Divine Beast?!” Mera looks at me in surprise.

Uh, so you're just gonna ignore the part about her being a demon lord?

“Hmph. Come on, I'm the Demon Lord here. Can't I get a little respect?”

The Demon Lord puffs her cheeks irritably.

Weirdly childish but also pretty cute.

“Maybe I should make myself a little clearer, then.”

The Demon Lord’s frightening aura suddenly intensifies.

She must have turned an Intimidation-like skill from off to on.

It doesn’t really work on me much, but the overall effect is definitely dramatic.

Mera’s entire body breaks into a sweat.

His expression is frozen with fear.

As a little bonus, I can sense all the living creatures around us simultaneously running away.

“I am a genuine, bona fide demon lord. Demon Lord Ariel is my name. Nice to meet you.”

Geez. When she stops acting like such a weirdo, she really is a terrifying demon lord.

I’m sure Mera is crystal clear on this fact now, as well.

I doubt there are many others out there who can produce such an intimidating aura.

“Demon Lord... But... why?”

He probably wants to run away screaming right now, but instead Mera stays rooted to the spot, holding the baby bloodsucker protectively.

On top of that, he even asks a question, though his voice cracked while he did.

This guy’s got guts.

“Well, it’s a long story, but basically...”

Then the Demon Lord explains our history.

She tells Mera how she and I were enemies until recently, and that while she was chasing me down, she saw that her longtime enemy Potimas was here and decided to intervene.

"He's the biggest piece of shit in the entire world, see. If I find him, I gotta crush him. But the thing earlier was basically a puppet that he was controlling from afar, so those'll probably keep coming back no matter how many times I break 'em."

An awful thing like that will keep coming back?

Scary.

"So really, it was just a coincidence that I ended up helping you. I didn't set out to save your butts or anything. This one probably did, though," she adds, looking at me pointedly.

Noticing this, Mera looks in my direction, too.

Ugggh.

Do I really have to talk now?

I don't think I'd do a very good job explaining things...

"Right. So basically, I'm guessing she helped you because she comes from the same place as that baby you've got there. Right?"

As I remain silent, the Demon Lord decides to speak for me.

I guess that's nice, although I'm not sure I appreciate her talking about my business like that.

"The same place?"

"Yep, that's right. Okay, question time. What's your name, little missy?"

The Demon Lord grins broadly as she peers at the baby bloodsucker's face.

"Lady Ariel, the young miss cannot speak yet."

"Ohhh, gotcha, gotcha. Can't move your little mouth properly yet, huh? How about I hook you up with some Telepathy, then?"

"I do not believe that is the problem..."

"Sure it is. 'Cause this kid is a reincarnation from another world, just like our spider friend here."

The demon casually reveals the baby bloodsucker's and my big secret.

"Reincarnation?"

Mera furrows his brow. He's probably not too familiar with the concept.

"See, a certain dumbass from this world did some stupid crap and ended up causing trouble for another world."

"Pardon?"

"Just listen. Basically, a bunch of kids from that world ended up dying because of this world's problems. And the god felt bad about that, so he grabbed the souls of those kids who died and popped them into this world to be reborn as babies. In other words, reincarnations."

"Uh-huh..."

Mera's expression says clearly that he has no idea what the Demon Lord is talking about.

Well, yeah. You can't just drop a crazy story on someone like that.

"These reincarnations are born with their memories from their previous lives. And they got a nice little bonus from that god, too. I'm not sure if that's why, but I'm pretty sure the guys who attacked you lot are after the reincarnations, by the way."

Hmm?

Wait, really?

Does that mean that Potimas elf guy is targeting reincarnations?

"Forgive me, but what does this story have to do with...?"

"Hrmm? Wow, you're slow on the uptake. I'm saying that baby there is one of these reincarnations."

“Eh?!”

“Isn’t that right, Sophia? So? What was your name in the other world, huh?”

The baby bloodsucker looks visibly shaken by the Demon Lord’s questions.

“*Shouko Negishi.*”

Then, after a moment, she reveals her name through telepathy.

“Sweet, we got a name! So she really is a reincarnation, and a vampire, too! Yeesh, talk about having problems. Anyway, Miss Spider over there is a reincarnation, too, just like the baby. So I’m guessing she was keeping an eye on her out of a sense of kinship, trying to protect her from all those problems. Am I right?” She looks at me again.

Um. Hmm.

I guess I was kinda looking out for her, so she’s not wrong, per se?

Denying it would be a pain, so I just nod an affirmation.

“Well, now you’re all caught up on our whole situation. My turn to ask questions. What are you guys gonna do now?”

Both Mera and the baby bloodsucker seem flummoxed by the Demon Lord’s question.

Mera is probably still in shock over the revelation that his young vampiric ward is actually a reincarnation, and I doubt he has any idea what to do next.

“If you ask me, you’ve got a couple of options here. First, you could just go to another town in Sariella. Second, flee to a different country. Third, show up in Ohts. Okay, that third one’s not a great option, but I honestly wouldn’t recommend the first two, either.”

The Demon Lord carries on disinterestedly.

“You two are vampires now, not humans. Can you imagine how hard it’s gonna be to get by in human society when most people think you’re some creepy legend come to life?”

Instead of Mera, it’s the baby bloodsucker who turns pale at that.

"Merazophis, I'm sorry. I turned you into a vampire. It was the only thing I could think to do at the time."

The baby seems to feel guilty for turning Mera into a vampire, altering his life forever.

But I don't think she had much of a choice.

Turning him into a vampire to fight for both of them was the only way they could've gotten out of that mess.

If I were in her place, I'm sure I would've sucked Mera's blood to make him into a vampire without a second thought.

"Please do not apologize. If anything, it is I who should do so."

"What? Why?"

"Because I could not protect you. I am terribly sorry."

Mera bows his head to the baby bloodsucker in his arms.

"Besides, if you had not done what you did, I would have died. I cannot be anything but grateful for that."

"But you're a vampire now. You can't live as a human anymore..."

"That is all right. In fact, it may be for the best so that I might better protect you."

"Merazophis... you still want to protect me?"

"My master and mistress entrusted you to me, young miss. Thus, I shall protect you for as long as I might live. Whether you are a vampire, a reincarnation, or anything else, it makes no difference to me."

"Merazophis...!"

At Mera's bold declaration, the baby bloodsucker repeats his name as if overwhelmed with emotion.

Mm-hmm. This is moving stuff.

Although I'm not sure if the Demon Lord needs to be bawling about it next to me?

I mean, I know it was touching and all, but to the point of crying about it?

I don't know. Maybe I'm just insensitive.

"Oh, this is too much! Just come with me, you two. I'll take you under my wing!"

Hoo, boy. Looks like they set her off somehow.

Well, I guess it's fine.

I would've felt a little weird about rescuing them and then ditching 'em to fend for themselves anyway.

"Pretty good deal, right? I mean, I'm the Demon Lord. Just so ya know, there's pretty much no one in this whole world who can beat me. You'd be pretty lucky to have my protection, no? I mean, you probably realize this, but those guys who attacked you were no ordinary thugs. But I can fend 'em off easily. And in the demon territory I rule over, nobody's gonna give you a hard time for being a vampire. So you'll be safe from the elves, and you can live freely as vampires. It's two birds with one stone! So whaddaya say? Want to come to the demon territory with me?"

Mera and the baby bloodsucker exchange looks.

"I shall abide by whatever you choose, young miss."

"All right. Just let me think about it a little, please."

"Sure, no prob! Take your time; think it over. How 'bout you travel with me for a little trial period, though? You don't wanna get attacked again right away, I'm sure. Let's head for the capital of Sariella, shall we? Once we get there, you can make up your mind."

With that declaration, the Demon Lord determines our next course of action.

We're traveling to the capital of Sariella.

There, the baby bloodsucker and Mera will decide whether they want to stick with the Demon Lord.

And, uh, it kinda seems like I'm coming along, too?

I feel like I've just been going with the flow lately, but I guess that's fine.

Whatever the baby vampire decides, I might as well see it through to the end, considering that I've already come this far and all.

With the threat of the Demon Lord squared away, it's not like I had any immediate plans anyway.

Oh, but I would like to lay some eggs somewhere.

Gotta keep those backups around in case I need to use egg revival.

Come to think of it, what should I do about the Parallel Minds and all the other babies I left in the Great Elroe Labyrinth?

Guess I'll just leave them to it.

I'm sure they're getting by just fine on their own.

I would live to regret making that choice.

I sorely underestimated just how estranged from me my Parallel Minds had become.

And in the future, I would end up paying for it dearly.

"All right, you guys, let's start our preparations. We've got lots of work to do if we want to wipe out all of human- and demonkind!"

~~~~~"Yeah!"~~~~~

# AFTERWORD

Hello there. I'm Okina Baba.

We've finally reached Volume 5 of this series.

Five seems like a pretty good place to leave off, don't you think?

Is it just me, or does it feel like a sort of special, exciting number?

Oh, it's just me? All right, then.

Old man: "Ahem."

What is it, Mr. Ronandt?

I feel like you're going to confuse people, showing up in the afterword like this.

Old man: "In the web version, I seem to recall that I played a large role in both the spider and S sides of the story right around now. And yet it seems that I am not in this volume at all, no?"

Nope, you sure aren't. Not a single trace. Your name's not even mentioned once.

Old man: "Why, then?!"

I couldn't help it.

Your part got sacrificed to a terrible phenomenon in the world of adults known only as a "page-count limit"!

Old man: "O-of all the—"

But fear not, friend!

For you are going to play a seriously major role in Volume 6! If all goes according to plan, at least.

So please look forward to the exciting antics of Elder Ronandt, who you could even call the real hero of this series if you really wanted to, in the next volume!

Old man: "It sounds to me like you're making things up."

It'll be fine! Probably.

As of now, I really do plan to write Mr. Ronandt's role in a very different way from how it played out in the web version.

In fact, the entirety of Volume 6 is going to differ quite drastically from the original web version of the story.

Perhaps the fate I've managed to avoid in Volumes 4 and 5 will finally catch up to me, and I'll write a volume that's 100 percent new content?

How very frightening.

Incidentally, while the advertisement for Volume 4 said that it contained sixty thousand characters of new text, that was actually just the count as of the writing of that ad copy. By the time I finished, it was apparently even more than that.

And Volume 5 has gone just about the same way.

Ha-ha-ha. I'm such a hard worker.

Now on to the thank-yous.

As always, I want to thank Kiryuu-sensei for drawing such charming and beautiful illustrations.

And also as always, I want to thank Asahiro Kakashi for drawing such charming and hilarious poses.

Let me also thank my editor K and everyone else who was involved in bringing this book into the world.

And all of you who have picked up this book.

Thank you very much.

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