

Spider So I'm a So What?

OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU

8





White

Once a spider monster, she has finally attained a completely human form. However, she's currently in a weakened state without stats or skills.

Ariel

An Ancient Divine Beast. She's heading for the Mystic Mountains while protecting White, Sophia, and the puppet spiders.

Sophia

A vampire Progenitor. She has an attachment to Merazophis that goes beyond master and servant, and is growing into a strange young girl.

Merazophis

Gives his all to protecting Sophia while keeping his promise to her late parents close to his heart.



When Mr. Oni sees my
face, he suddenly freezes.

Huh?

Wait, does he actually
recognize me?

If I speak to him now,
I might be able to set
him straight!

Slowly, carefully,
I say his name.

"Sasajima?"

Spider so what?

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Illustration by
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ON**
New York

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So I'm a Spider, So What?, Vol. 8

Okina Baba

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by Tsukasa Kiryu

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KUMO DESUGA, NANIKA? Vol. 8

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The Ogre's Wail

"U...urgh...aaagh..."

The cry echoed in the quiet night.

Other animals fell silent at once, as if out of fear of whatever was producing the noise.

In the absence of all other sound, what filled the air instead was a thick stench of blood.

Even the wind dared not blow where that dreadful smell lingered, leaving the place heavy with the presence of death.

The remains scattered across the ground could be identified only by the one who had unleashed the wail.

The moon hid itself behind thick clouds, as if to say it could not bear to look upon such a tragedy.

Sounds of biting and chewing mingled with intermittent growls.

As is nature's way, the victor fed upon the flesh of the vanquished.

However, the victor's skin was raised with goose bumps, and not because of the cold.

"It's okay. I'm still fine."

In a trembling voice unbecoming someone who had triumphed, the victor repeated these words, almost desperately hoping they were true.

"I haven't lost my mind yet!"

This declaration went unheard, disappearing into the dark and lonely night.



I'M WEAK

Blue sky. White clouds.

It's a little chilly, but that's no big deal thanks to the sunlight.

Ideal weather, really.

The perfect day for a picnic!

"Hff...hff..."

However, reality isn't quite so kind.

The sunlight might be a blessing to any normal person, but for us, it's nothing more than an annoyance.

And one of us is practically at death's door already.

Namely me.

"Is your friend there all right?"

A soldier looks at me with concern.

But I don't even have the energy to respond.

"It's fine. She's always like this."

"She doesn't seem fine to me..."

At the Demon Lord's words, the soldier looks even more concerned, and he starts to approach.

"What I mean is, she's *not* fine, so can you hurry up and let us in, please? She needs rest, as you can obviously see."

"Ah, right. Hmm... All right, go ahead. Stay safe."

The Demon Lord pays the appropriate toll for all of us, allowing us to pass through the gates and head into the town.

I'm still in the carriage Mera is driving when we enter.

We're currently in a borderland near the Renxandt Empire.

This is a northwestern town, not too far from the demon territory.

The Renxandt Empire is a human realm that borders the demon lands, making it the front lines of the war between humans and demons.

In other words, since we're trying to reach said demon territory, getting here means our goal is finally within sight.

Of course, we're not planning on just waltzing through the border where the humans and demons are having their little face-off, of course.

To the northwest of the Renxandt Empire is a steep mountain range called the Mystic Mountains.

It separates the human and demon territories, so if we cross over that, we'll arrive in the demon realm.

However, as its name suggests, it's incredibly difficult to cross the Mystic Mountains.

It's already hard enough to survive at such high elevation, but the place also happens to be crawling with monsters who thrive in that brutal environment.

The mountain range is covered in snow and ice, and the high altitude means there's low atmospheric pressure and thin air.

Throw in some monsters that are built to withstand all that and, yeah, most hopeful climbers would probably die trying.

But that's only if we're talking about any old average Joe.

We've got an all-star group led by the literal Demon Lord, so no way some stupid mountains are going to slow us down.

...Or are they?

"You okay, White? Just kidding, you're obviously not. Hang in there, friend; we're almost to the inn."

The only response I can muster for the Demon Lord's encouragement is a faint nod.

Why am I acting like this, you ask?

'Cause I'm carriage-sick and tired, that's why.

All jokes aside...

I guess it started when I got drastically weakened following a certain incident.

Around two years ago now, a UFO that was really an ancient weapon appeared from beneath the wasteland.

The damn thing was so big, you'd have to measure it in miles, and it came with a ton of machines to boot.

And to top it all off, the UFO was carrying a bomb that could blow away an entire continent if it went off.

But somehow, we managed to win the fight against that ancient weapon.

The UFO was brought down.

And the bomb—the biggest problem of all—was taken care of, too.

Because I ate it.

Yeah, yeah. I don't know what I was thinking, either.

What was I hoping to accomplish by eating a bomb about to explode?

But it *did* solve the problem somehow.

In retrospect, I wanna be like, *The hell was I thinking?!* but it's hard to joke about something that actually worked.

I absorbed the bomb's energy by swallowing it.

Maybe it's because I was trying to imitate the Demon Lord's Gluttony skill when I did it, because I wound up taking in enough energy to blow away a continent.

Then, as a very unexpected side effect, all that energy caused me to undergo deification; as in like, I turned into a god.

Turns out the real definition of a god is just a being who contains a vast

amount of energy.

And since I absorbed the energy of a bomb that could start Armageddon, I definitely met those qualifications.

Yay! Now I'm totally invincible!

...Is exactly what didn't happen.

In reality, it's actually kinda the opposite.

See, by becoming a god, I got myself kicked out of the system that forms the foundation of this world.

The system controls skills, stats, and all that other fun stuff that doesn't exist on Earth.

So what happens when you suddenly exist outside that system?

Answer: You lose all your stats and skills.

All the strength I'd built up so far was in the form of stats and skills.

Without all of those, I'm basically just a normal person with a bunch of extra energy.

Without my stats, I no longer have the power to punch a boulder and break it, the sturdiness to withstand the recoil from doing that, or even my too-fast-to-follow speed.

Without skills, I can't make thread, cast magic, or use my Evil Eyes.

Gone, gone, gone. It's all gone!

Having all the energy in the world without knowing how to use it is, like, a total waste of talent.

And it was skills and stats that made using that energy super-simple.

If having the system's support was like riding a bike with training wheels, this is like being on an oversized motorcycle—without knowing how to ride!

Sure, the vehicle's technically way better now, but that doesn't mean anything if you don't know how to ride it in the first place.

Which is why as of now, I'm no better off than any regular old human.

In fact, by the standards of this world, where everyone receives the benefits of the system, I'm pretty damn weak.

Now that I think about it, even by the standards of Earth—given that I don't have the physical energy to talk at all—I'm crazy weak.

It reminds me of my memories as Hiroyo Wakaba.

When we did physical fitness exams at school, I always came in dead last. Ugh.

And it looks like my current physical specs are around that same level.

Which means I can't even walk for too long without getting laid out like this.

Ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha.

For a while there, I had nothing to fear except for the likes of the Demon Lord and Potimas, but now I'm exhausted and rolling around in a carriage.

What a joke.

I mean, it's not very funny, but I can still laugh.

"Uh-oh, White's having convulsions. This could be bad."

Peering in at me, the Demon Lord instructs Mera to drive faster.

The carriage speed increases, and so does the degree of bumpiness.

Ulp.

I don't feel so good.

I clench my teeth, trying to get through it.

Then I feel someone poking at my cheek.

I'd normally say, *Who did that?!* but it's pretty obvious who the prime suspect is.

Sure enough, when I open my eyes, I see Fiel prodding me with a fingertip.

Ever the prankster, Fiel is the most likely candidate to do this sort of thing, followed by Riel, who can be hard to read.

I listlessly push Fiel's finger away.

Just leave me alone, please.

At that, Fiel stops poking my cheek, but instead she starts rubbing my head for some reason.

Actually, it's more like she's grabbing my head and dragging it around.

I mean, I appreciate the concern and all, but could you be a little gentler about it?

Having my head get rolled around like this just makes me feel even— Urgh!

Just as something very unladylike starts to rise in my throat, a kind rescuer stays Fiel's hand.

It's Ael, the eldest daughter-like puppet spider.

Ael catches Fiel's hand, forcing her to stop shaking my head around, and lands a little chop on Fiel's forehead to boot.

Yeah, that's it! Get her, girl!

It's not like hitting her head will hurt her anyway, since the puppet spiders' real bodies are the tiny spiders hiding inside.

Though they look like young girls, these bodies are really just puppets being controlled by the spiders within, so there's no problem with getting a little rough.

However, Fiel doesn't seem to understand why Ael hit her.

I can almost see a question mark floating above her head.

When they do stuff like this, they really do seem just like little girls.

Although the reality is that they're way too strong for the average monster to take on.

If Fiel or Ael felt like it, they could probably pop my head right off, which is why having one of them shake me around is a bit scary.

As for the other young puppet-spider girls, Sael is in her usual seat, glancing back at her sisters' exchange but not moving from her spot.

This is pretty standard for Sael. She's not very independent, so it's rare to see

her move on her own.

The last of the sisters, Riel, is staring into space with an unreadable expression.

What are you, a cat?

Is there something in that empty spot that only you can see or what?



We've been traveling together for a long time now, but Riel is still a mystery to me.

As for the final little girl of the group, though she's not a puppet spider, the baby bloodsucker is sitting in her seat gazing out at the scenery, unconcerned with my plight.

At first, she'd gotten worried about me each time I collapsed. But when it kept happening practically every day, she must have figured there was no point in worrying or something, because for a while now, she's just been leaving me alone.

This must be how the father of a teenage daughter feels, I bet.

Like, things are totally awkward between us now.

Actually, I think the reason she stopped talking to me is that Mera's been making a point of looking after me!

I'm sure Mera just sees it as paying back a debt, since I saved his hide and all. Even if that wasn't the case, he's too considerate to ignore someone who's obviously not feeling well.

So whenever I go down for the count, Mera always gallantly comes to my rescue, which is probably what's got Vampy ticked off.

She must know as well as I do that Mera's not being nice because he's attracted to me or whatever, but considering how damn possessive she is, it's no surprise that she doesn't want to see him caring for another girl.

The bloodsucking duo's relationship hasn't changed much over the past two years.

I mean, Vampy has certainly grown some, but she's still just a little girl.

And Mera's obviously not going to consider such a young girl a potential romantic interest, so he still stays well within the bounds of a regular master-servant relationship.

But I do have to wonder if he ever entertains the thought...

Our baby bloodsucker has grown quite a bit over these two years.

She's still a little kid, yeah, but there's already hints of the serious beauty she'll become one day.

Everyone's cute when they're a baby, but as you grow, you start to develop your individual facial features and all that stuff.

The baby bloodsucker is still in the stage of life where everyone is cute, but it's also the stage where you can start to get an idea of what someone is going to look like when they grow up.

And our itty-bitty vampire is one hell of a looker with elegant facial features.

Overall, she looks like her mother, but she's got her father's eyes, as they say.

Both her parents were attractive, so at this rate, she's definitely gonna grow into a real bombshell.

Maybe then Mera will consider her, I guess.

Still, even if that did happen, I bet Mera would be like, *A servant must never fall in love with his master!* and get all angsty about it.

But that's in the distant future, and it's up to the baby bloodsucker whether she'll get her way or not.

Anyway, at the moment, Mera is still preoccupied driving the carriage.

As the only man among a group of young girls, he ends up bearing a lot of scrutiny.

When we enter a town like this, Mera often has to be the face of the group.

It used to be that me and the puppet spiders stayed outside of town because of our appearances, but now that I'm fully human-shaped, there's no point anymore.

When I got deified, my form changed from a half-human, half-spider arachne to a fully human body.

And now that the puppet spiders resemble humans at a glance, it seems mean to make them wait outside, so they come into town with us, too.

Nobody's caught on so far, so we should be fine.

If anything, I'm our biggest worry, not the puppet spiders.

I appear more or less human now, but there's one problem: my eyes.

I've got compound eyes now, with my pupils containing a bunch of smaller pupils.

In fact, it's a total of five pupils per eye—two regular, human-size pupils with four smaller pupils in each—which is pretty freaky even to me.

If you count both sides, that's ten eyes altogether, the same number I had as an arachne before I turned into a god.

Like, why is the rest of me more or less based on Hiroyuki Wakaba but this one part has to be like an arachne?

Why not be more considerate and give me normal eyes, too?!

Thanks to that whole situation, I have to avoid letting people get a good look at my eyes when we go out in public.

That means I usually pull a hood down over most of my face to make it hard to see.

Even then, someone might catch a glimpse by chance, so I usually default to keeping my eyes closed while we're in town.

As a result, the people in towns we visit wind up thinking that I'm a blind, sickly young noblewoman.

Me, a noblewoman? No way.

Oops. Even now, I can't be sure nobody's looking.

Heaving a sigh, I close my eyes.

When I do that, I become even more painfully aware of the carriage swaying, which makes me feel even sicker, but I don't have much of a choice.

In fact, the group bought this carriage specifically for me, so I'd be a huge jerk to complain about it now.

That's right. We bought this because I keep passing out all the time.

Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to get anywhere quickly.

I'm so wimpy now that I can't walk along even flat ground for too long.

So of course there's no way I could keep up with the others in the mountains and forests we've been traveling through so far to avoid being seen.

All that said, now that deification has given me a more or less human appearance, we've got one less reason to avoid being seen in the first place.

I guess that could be considered a lucky break.

So now that we can use actual roads to get around, the Demon Lord was nice enough to buy this carriage with her own pocket money.

I know, pretty bougie, right?

I guess she's had all kinds of jobs before this demon lord gig, so now she's loaded.

I don't know how much a carriage costs, but I'm guessing it's not the kind of thing a normal person can just pick up on impulse.

Still, this was a necessary expense.

Yes, my inability to travel on my own was a big part of it, but there's another problem that was just as important.

Namely: our stuff.

Until now, we'd been storing all the stuff we needed for our journey with my Spatial Magic.

Spatial Storage is a spell that conveniently lets you put objects into a separate dimension and take things out or put things in whenever you like.

And since everything goes into another dimension, it doesn't take up space or weigh anything.

It's the perfect spell for carrying luggage.

But now I can't use magic anymore.

And I was the only one of us who could use Spatial Magic.

In other words, we now have to carry all the stuff that we were able to just stow in Spatial Storage until now.

Not to brag, but my magic abilities were pretty crazy, which means I was able

to fit a considerable amount in Spatial Storage.

So carrying all that stuff on our backs would be a bit difficult.

Given the Demon Lord's and the puppet spiders' stats, I'm sure they could manage somehow, but that would require some enormous backpacks.

That seemed a little silly, which was why we wound up with this carriage.

As an aside, we only managed to get all the stuff that was stuck in my Spatial Storage because Güli-güli was nice enough to retrieve it for us.

I don't know if he used his administrator's authority or if he simply manipulated space to force my Spatial Storage open or what, but otherwise we would have lost all our stuff, so I'm grateful.

Spatial Storage is a form of magic, so you have to provide it with magic power to keep it going.

With my magic abilities gone, it would've eventually run out of the power I put into it, and the whole pocket dimension would have disappeared along with everything inside.

Thank you, based Güli-güli.

That being said, I was shocked at the amount of stuff he pulled out.

I'd just been shoving things in there without thinking, so it really piled up over time.

We're talking the meat and parts of monsters I'd hunted, things like that.

And the clothes and stuff that the puppet spiders and I had been making to kill time.

Plus a set of camping tools and so much cookware and spices that I half expected to see a literal kitchen sink come out.

Really, there was no end to it all.

It was way too much to cram into a single carriage, so we had to dispose of some, as much as it pained me to do so.

We bought the biggest carriage they had, and that *still* wasn't enough to keep everything.

Still, it's big enough to fit all of us with room to spare, plus it has a separate space for luggage.

I think it's supposed to be for merchants traveling long distances.

Of course, that means it's super-heavy, so it's bound to be tough on the horse pulling it...but this is a fantasy world, remember?

This isn't actually a horse-drawn carriage. It's wyrm-drawn.

The creature's shape does resemble a horse, but its face is definitely that of a wyrm.

Specifically, it's an earth wyrm, the kind that's actually used fairly often in place of a horse in this world.

It's got way more strength and stamina than a horse, and since it *is* still a wyrm, it's totally battle ready, too.

That being said, its stats are all around the low hundreds, so I'm not really expecting too much from it.

But this wyrm is pretty impressive from a normal person's perspective, making it the best possible creature for pulling a carriage, or so I'm told.

I mean, it's a substitute horse, but it's also an earth wyrm.

As I experienced firsthand with Araba, earth-type wyrms and dragons all share a deep code of honor.

These guys are no different. They'll only obey someone who they've accepted as their master.

Which also means once they decide that's what you are, they'll be loyal to you for life.

Oh, by the way, as you may have gathered from me saying *these guys*, we've actually got two earth wyrms pulling this carriage.

It's a two-horse—no, two-wyrm carriage.

Does that mean it runs on wyrmpower, not horsepower?

Anyway, these earth wyrms are popular because of their loyalty, but since they also have to acknowledge you as their master first, your stats have to be at

a certain level or they'll never obey you.

They usually obey only knights and stuff, who usually ride on top of them directly as cavalry mounts.

Putting that all together means there's not a whole lot of people who have an earth wyrm pulling their carriage.

Never mind *two*.

Obviously, we stand out a little bit.

And by *a little bit*, I mean a lot.

On top of that, when people find out it's mostly just young girls riding in this already unusual wyrm-drawn carriage, we stand out even more.

More than half our members appear to be little girls, and Mera's the only man to be found.

Given this unique setup, we tend to be the subject of a lot of gossip in every town we visit.

Usually, I pass out in the local inn as soon as we arrive, so it's Mera and the Demon Lord who end up gathering that sort of information.

Speaking of which, we better get to an inn soon, or there's gonna be trouble.

This carriage moves way too much!

My butt and my inner ear are under attack here!

Seriously, it's not funny.

If anyone out there is thinking, *A carriage can't bounce around that much*, I invite you to try it out for yourself sometime.

There aren't any paved roads here, either.

Some of the bigger roads are paved to an extent sometimes, but not the rural back roads like this one.

We're talking the bumpiest dirt roads you've ever seen in your damn life.

Take a carriage onto a road like that and there's going to be some serious jostling.

You ever been sitting and had your butt bounce right out of the seat?

It's just like an amusement-park ride.

Except it's not fun at all!

Thanks to that, my whole body hurts (especially my butt), and getting bumping around in every direction is making me feel sick.

Throw in my now-pathetic physical stamina, and you've got a recipe for disaster.

Once we get into town, the bouncing lessens a little bit, but by now the pain, discomfort, and queasiness have taken their toll.

The Demon Lord really splurged on this carriage, so it's about as good as they get, but it's still rough on this new body of mine.

I mean, this is loads better than walking on my own two feet, sure, but still not ideal.

What I need right now is a bed that doesn't shake!

Ah, once we get to the inn, I'm gonna sleep forever...

"White? Whiiiite? We made it to the inn, okaaay? Uh-oh, you don't look so good. You're not just pale anymore; you're white as a sheet. I picked the right name for you, huh?"

Um, aren't I always white as a sheet?

I do feel worse than normal right now, though.

"Merazophis, would you do the honors?"

"Yes, of course."

The Demon Lord doesn't need to specify further than that.

Immediately, I suddenly feel someone directing murderous wrath toward me, but I'm just gonna ignore it.

Definitely my imagination.

My limp body is gently lifted off the floor of the carriage.

I don't have the energy to open my eyes, but Mera must be carrying me

bridal-style.

That's what usually happens when I go down like this, so I'm used to it by now.

I'm also not surprised by the creeping sensation that someone wants to kill me, which I'm still ignoring.

I can't help it, okay?!

If I could stand on my own right now, I would! Believe me!

But I can't, so I got no choice but to have Mera carry me like this!

Like, come on. Everyone else in this group basically looks like a child.

Sure, because of their stats, some of them are a lot stronger than they look.

But don't you think it would stand out a little too much if a tiny girl was carrying a grown-ass woman over her shoulder?

The Demon Lord's not as small as the others, but there's still a major difference in size between us.

If anything, since Mera's the only man in our group, people would probably give him looks if he let anyone else carry me.

Which means it's inevitable that Mera has to carry me, okay?

So quit blaming me, Vampy!

Don't start turning into a crazy stalker when you're still basically a toddler.

If I open my eyes right now, I'd probably spot a wee vampire glaring at me with a face straight out of a horror movie, so I'm just gonna keep 'em shut like dead weight.

Well, it's not like the dead-weight thing is an act anyway.

Opening my eyes would seriously be more trouble than it's worth.

Instead, I just let myself get carried until I'm lowered onto a bed.

Ohhh.

It's soft. It's not moving. Am I in heaven?

Actually, it could be a little softer, but this is an inn in some hick town in the middle of nowhere, so I'm not gonna complain.

Right now, I'm happy just to be able to lay in a real bed.

Yep. I'm not lifting a single finger.

Gonna go right to sleep!

Good night.





MONSTER ENCYCLOPEDIA
file.24

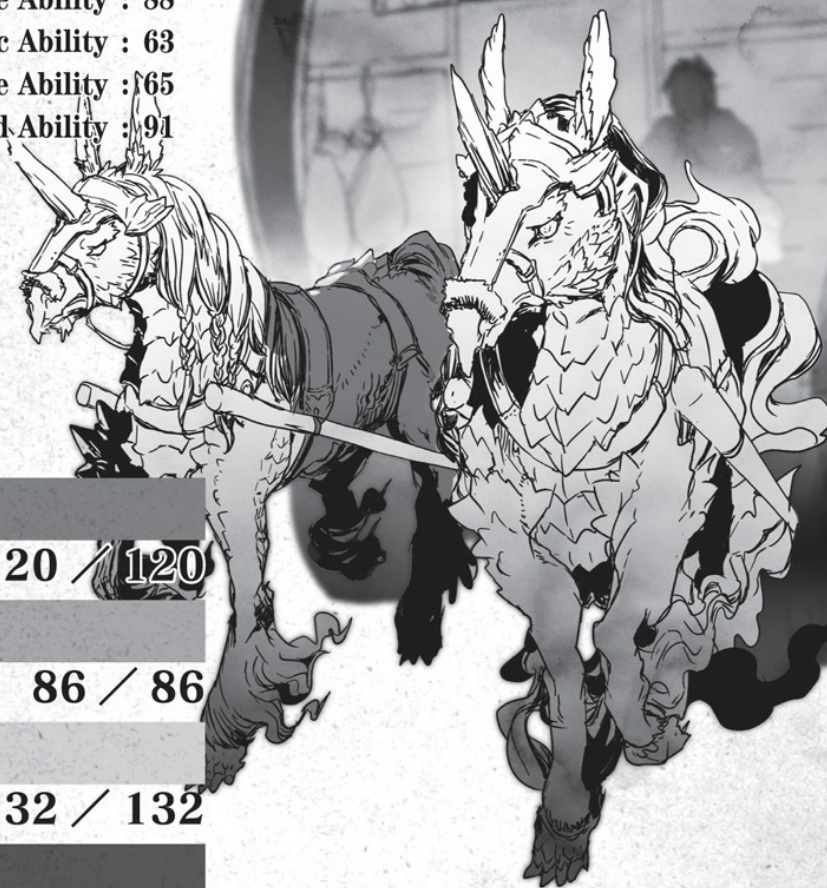
FENERUSH

LV.01

status

Average Offensive Ability : 89
Average Defensive Ability : 88
Average Magic Ability : 63
Average Resistance Ability : 65
Average Speed Ability : 91

HP  120 / 120
MP  86 / 86
SP  132 / 132
 132 / 132



skill

[Earth Wurm LV 1] [Evasion LV 1] [SP Recovery Speed LV 1] [SP Lessened Consumption LV 1] [Terrain Nullification]

A lesser earth worm with a physique similar to a horse. They tend to be quite docile and almost never attack humans. Because they are very loyal to a master whose strength they have acknowledged, they are popular as steeds. As a result, earth worm eggs are highly valued, and it's common to see adventurers attempting to sneak into earth worm nests around breeding time. Though they are normally calm, if the time to fight comes, they will use their powerful legs and high speed to trample the enemy. Danger rank D.



THE OGRE'S ORIGIN

I've always hated crooked things.

When I close my eyes, I can still picture that village as vividly as ever.

It was a small village, so small that even with a child's stride, running its entire length would take almost no time.

The door of the house across from mine was slightly warped, and a stain on the house behind mine was in the shape of a bird.

Such insignificant things are precious memories to me now.

As I walked around that village, my little sister would run with all her might to keep up with me.

She still couldn't speak very well, so I don't know where she got all that energy, but still, she stuck close to me, never leaving my side for a moment.

Even I couldn't help but dote on such an adorable little sister.

Even if she wasn't human.

Green skin, a wrinkly face vaguely reminiscent of a monkey's, and those cute round eyes all added to her charm.

She bore a strong resemblance to the race called "goblins" that often appeared in fantasy stories in my old world.

Which made sense, because that's what she was.

And since my younger sister was a goblin, that meant I was, too.

I don't know how it happened, but I just woke up as a goblin one day.

That's the only way I can explain it.

I still remember my former life, if I can call it that—my life as a human, as Kyouya Sasajima.

But those memories cut off abruptly in the middle of an classical literature class in high school.

I have no idea how those memories connect to me becoming a goblin.

But I knew right away that this wasn't a dream and that I would have to live as a goblin from now on.

And while most people might find this strange, I actually quite enjoyed life as a goblin.

A small, simple village, with none of the complex branching side streets of Japan.

Instead of complicated human relationships, the villagers all shared a close bond, possibly because of the harsh environment in which we lived together.

And most of all, goblins are a simple, straightforward race.

In the fantasy stories of my old world, goblins were often depicted as the weakest and perhaps stupidest of the “demi-human” races.

That wasn't entirely inaccurate here.

However, the impression they give in reality is very different.

There were many monsters in the mountain range where the village was located, and goblins were among the weakest of them.

But they're strong enough to fight against those strong monsters by working together.

They might be weak as a race, but they make up for it with tools, skill, and the strength of their camaraderie.

And while they're considered dim-witted, that's only because most of them are illiterate. A short talk with them makes it clear they're no different than the average human.

They have enough intelligence to live an average life perfectly well.

If anything, I gained a sense of reverence from watching them, like monks

who have achieved a level of enlightenment.

They carry a certain nobility that makes it impossible to mock them as stupid.

Especially if you've observed them simply going about their daily lives like I have.

Every day begins with a prayer.

They give thanks to the world, the goddess who protects the world, and their daily bread.

After that, they set about their work.

The goblins who haven't evolved undergo training, and the ones who have evolved into hobgoblins help train them.

Then those who are strong enough form a hunting party and head out from the village.

The village is nestled deep within a steep mountain range, a dangerous natural environment brimming with powerful monsters.

When the goblin-hunting parties set out on their task, only about half of them return.

The reason the goblin village manages to survive despite this is that goblins reproduce quite a lot.

All of this is more or less in line with my image of goblins from my old life.

When the hunting parties return, the other goblins welcome them back and mourn the fallen.

Then they say a prayer of thanks for the food that the hunters risked their lives to bring back.

Goblins must constantly face death so the village can survive.

Those who stay behind offer them pressed flowers for good luck.

Each gift of flowers contains a strong, intense wish for the hunters to return safely.

The hunters hold those feelings close to their hearts as they set out on a life-

and-death journey and return.

In order to live.

And to keep the village alive.

In a few words, the lives of goblins seem primitive, mainly revolving around hunting.

But there is a strong sense of purpose that can be gained from this way of life, one that wasn't present in my old life in Japan.

Fighting in order to live; dying so that others might live.

There is no good or evil in that cycle, just the brilliance of life.

As I watched them live this way, my admiration deepened.

I hoped to fight for the village one day, just like the hunting parties did.

So that my little sister who followed me around could live.

That was all I wanted...

Without so much as a cry, a young man falls to the ground with a sword through his chest.

His body sinks into the white snow, dyeing it a deep red.

In a few moments, severe blood loss will kill him.

"Dammit! Shit!"

Another man readies his sword and swears.

He wears fur armor, the garb of a savage tribe.

The humans known as "adventurers" often wear armor and weapons made of the monsters they have slain.

Equipment fashioned from a monster's parts sometimes inherits a certain degree of that monster's power in life. So while fur might not seem very protective, it probably still carries some of the defensive power of the monster it once belonged to.

Clearly, it's not just there to protect the man from cold.

The man's stance is proof enough of that. He has the air of a human who's accustomed to fighting.

But even he can make mistakes.

In a panic, he lets out a yell.

A decision that leaves him wide open.

"Gah?!"

The man goes flying backward.

He managed to block the sudden attack with his sword.

But getting caught by surprise has thrown him off balance, or perhaps his opponent is simply too strong, so his defenses are down.

Unable to completely cancel out the attack, he's knocked back and collides with a nearby tree.

The tree lets out a dry sound and cracks under the strain.

Coughing up blood, the man rolls out of the way of the falling tree.

Its leaves scatter, and snow flies into the air from the ground.

The snow glistens in the air, blocking the man's vision for just a moment.

So I pierce through the curtain of snow as I strike.

"Ngh?!"

I can see the man's face stiffen.

He's still half sitting up, in the midst of trying to stand.

One of his hands is on the ground, and while the one holding his sword is still free, he's in no position to swing it with any amount of strength.

In this moment, he cannot dodge or block.

His life is as good as mine.

I can see that he knows this as well as I do.

But instead, I stop, pulling myself back.

An arrow whizzes past me, cutting through the air with a sharp, shrill sound.

Following it with my eyes, I watch as it bores a large hole straight through a tree.

If it had hit me instead, that hole would be in my body right now.

That was close. If they'd waited a moment longer, they might have actually hit me.

Although the man's life would have been forfeit if they had waited.

It was the best possible timing as far as saving the man's life, but considering the overall situation, I don't know if that was the best option.

Really, I shouldn't be analyzing this like I'm casually looking on from the sidelines.

I'm the one fighting these men, after all.

"Rukusso! Run for it!"

The man stands up and shouts.

Didn't he learn from his mistake of letting his guard down while yelling a moment ago?

But seconds later, another arrow comes flying to cover the man.

In order to dodge, I have no choice but to move away.

"Rukusso, forget about me! Just go!" He continues shouting at the boy who's firing arrows.

Taking my eyes off the man for a second, I glance at the young bowman he called Rukusso.

Standing a short distance away, the boy was clearly uncertain what to do about the order to leave.

Should he run away, or should he stay here and fight me?

"Run! Go and tell Gotou or Regg that this—this is no ordinary ogre!"

At that, the boy named Rukusso reluctantly turns around and starts to run.

As I watch him sprint away, it's my turn to hesitate.

Should I let him go, or...?

“Not a chance!”

Lost in thought, I realize my reaction was a second too late.

I duck my head, barely dodging the sword as the blade passes in front of my face.

But the man's doesn't stop there as he follows up with another sharp swing.

It's not fast.

And I can't say it's terribly precise.

But there's so much determination in his reckless swing that I can't help retreating from it.

“Hff! Hff!”

His shoulders heave.

I can tell that attack must have been taken the last of his strength.

On top of that, blood is trickling from his mouth as he gasps for air.

Looks like he wasn't able to completely recover from hitting that tree before.

“Ha! I might be some second-rate adventurer, but I can at least use my last moments to buy enough time for my junior to escape with his life! Come at me!”

The man roars defiantly, as if to shake off any fear that might be taking root.

In reality, I can already see a slight waver in his eyes that he can't quite hide.

As he grips his sword, his hands are shaking, and not just from the cold.

Some part of me feels strangely detached while I continue watching him.

But I'm unmistakably the one fighting him, and now my body moves on its own to kill him.

It's as if my body and mind are working independently of each other.

How did it come to this?

I just wanted to live out a quiet, peaceful life as a goblin...

“Take this!”

The man charges toward me.

He called himself an adventurer, which means he's made a living of defeating monsters.

In this world, there are creatures called monsters, considered a threat to humans everywhere.

An adventurer's job is to fight these monsters.

Which means that by fighting me right now, this man is simply doing his job.

Because from a human's perspective, I'm just another monster.

It's no surprise, really.

In the fiction of my old world, goblins were almost always the villains of the story.

Although I'm not even a goblin anymore.

I've evolved all the way into an ogre, which is far stronger and larger than any goblin.

From a human adventurer's perspective, I'm sure a monster like me should be killed on sight.

And yet...

"You damn scum!"

"Who are you calling *scum*?"

"Wha—?!"

Evidently surprised that I can speak, the man slows his reactions.

Leaving me the perfect chance to sink my blade into his chest.

"Guh?!"

"Who's the real scum here? You're the ones who came after our village. You forced me to do those horrible things!"

Images of the past flash across my mind.

The houses of the village, all aflame.

The goblins fleeing, the humans chasing them down.

My little sister squeezing my hand as we ran.

The human who caught up and seized me.

And then the order.

That horrible command.

“Wh-what...?”

“You humans are the worst scum of all!”

The memories send fury coursing through me.

I let that violent passion take control, sending MP into the blade still deep in the man’s chest.

The MP activates the blade’s special effect, surrounding it in flames.

In an instant, the flames swallow the man up and destroy him.

Damn.

I gave in to my fury and killed him in an instant.

Shouldn’t I have made him suffer more first?

...No, wait. That’s not what I should be regretting here.

This man was just an unrelated adventurer who happened to be passing through.

Of course, they’re the ones who attacked me first, so I was just defending myself.

But it was probably wrong to take it this far.

As that thought passes through my mind, a self-derisive sneer rises to my lips.

Wrong or not, as soon as I took a life, things like good and evil likely lost all meaning.

I never had to think about good and evil, not when I was in the goblin village anyway.

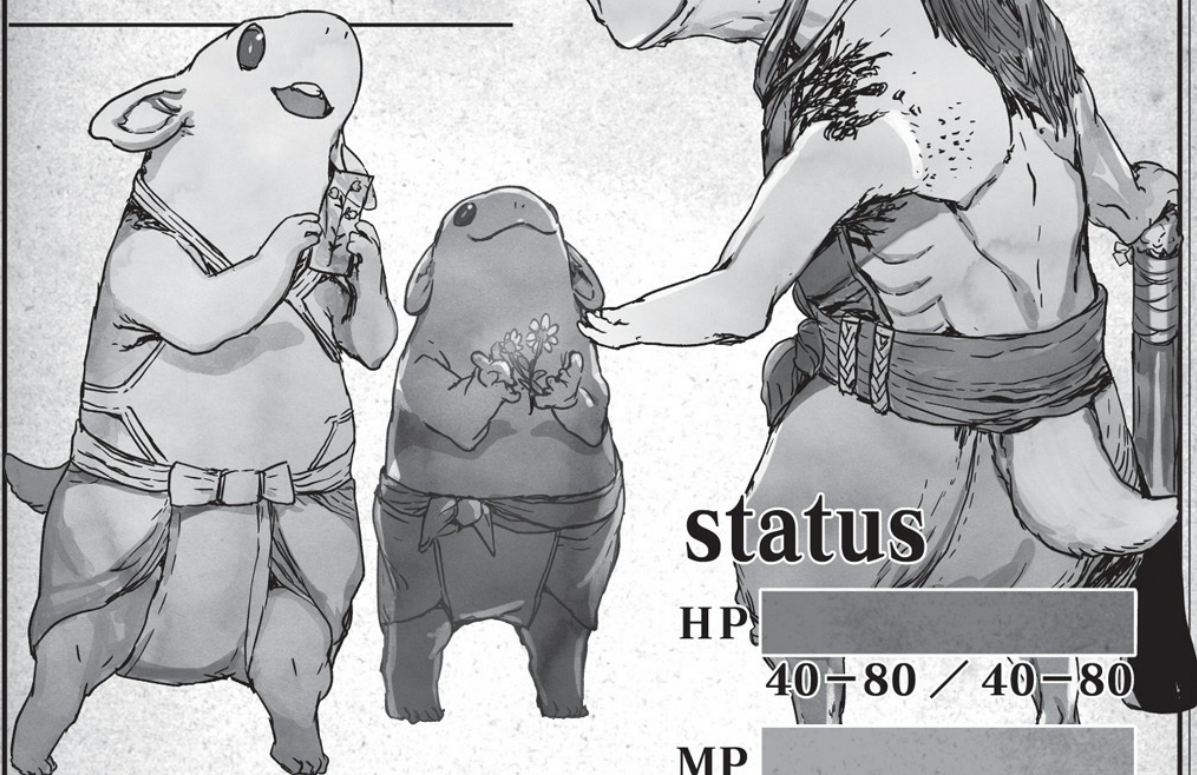
And yet, now...

Why did things end up like this?


MONSTER ENCYCLOPEDIA
file.25


GOBLIN



LV.01—10



status

HP 
40—80 / 40—80

MP 
40—80 / 40—80

SP 
40—80 / 40—80

40—80 / 40—80

Average Offensive Ability : 30—60
Average Defensive Ability : 30—60
Average Magic Ability : 30—60
Average Resistance Ability : 30—60
Average Speed Ability : 30—60

skill

Various, depending on the individual

Small-statured, humanoid monsters. Individually, they are not particularly strong, but they are capable of cooperating in battle. As the race of monsters that most closely resembles humans, goblins have skills that vary greatly from one individual to another. They will never betray other goblins and fight bravely no matter the circumstances, causing them to be both feared and admired by adventurers. They have a strong sense of kinship; warrior goblins are always given a flower as a charm to protect them. Their danger level varies based on the individual as well as the size of the group.



I'M A SHUT-IN

Good morning.

The sunlight streaming in through the window is so bright and annoying.

Damn you, sun...

Fortunately, the sunlight doesn't reach my bed thanks to the layout of this inn.

At least I don't have to worry about waking up with the sun right in my face.

Still, just because it's not directly touching me doesn't mean I can let my guard down.

You can't underestimate the power of the sun.

That bastard affects us in all kinds of ways just by existing.

Pretty scary, right?

Why am I so afraid of the sunlight, you ask?

Because I'm an albino, of course.

Yeah, I know.

If you were going to point out that I've been that way for a while now, please don't bother.

I mean, considering how my whole body is pure white and I've got red eyes to boot, it did cross my mind that it might be albinism, okay?

But I didn't experience any of the side effects, so I figured I just happened to have a similar coloration.

But since deification, I've learned that I was wrong.

If sunlight touches me directly, it hurts.

Like, a lot.

Albinism is a condition in which the melanin pigment isn't produced properly, resulting in white skin, hair, and so on.

The eyes are red because the blood vessels are visible through the irises.

And it so happens that the presence of melanin is important for reducing the harm caused by ultraviolet rays, so if you don't have much, those UV rays become a serious problem.

If sunlight hits me, I get sunburn-like symptoms immediately.

You might think sunburns aren't a big deal, but you'd be wrong, okay?

Sunburns can increase your risk of skin cancer. Plus, they hurt like hell.

And this stupid world doesn't have sunscreen or anything sensible like that, so it's actually kind of a huge problem for me.

Of course, there is Healing Magic in this world, so I guess it's all right in theory, but that doesn't mean I want to be in constant agony.

In fact, the Demon Lord's already treated me with Healing Magic plenty of times over the past two years.

Ideally, I'd just avoid doing anything in direct sunlight, but it's hard to keep that up over such an extended journey.

I seem to remember that albinism can also affect your eyesight, but my eyesight doesn't seem too bad.

Sure, it's not as good as it was before this deification business, but I'd say I can see about as well as the average person.

Is it because I've got ten pupils?

Your guess is as good as mine, buddy.

Still, it's better than walking around half-blind.

Anyway, I'm guessing the reason I never suffered these symptoms before is thanks to my super-high stats.

My defense was so high that ultraviolet rays didn't affect me.

Pretty crazy, right?

Guess all I have to do is raise my stats.

Except that I don't have them anymore!

Please, stats, come back to me!

...Nope, didn't work. Still don't have any.

Looks like UV rays are just one more thing I'm gonna have to deal with.

Turning away from the sunny window, I look around the room.

Wait, there's somebody crouching in the corner!

That scares me for a second, until I look closer and realize it's just Sael.

She must have stayed behind to look after me.

No one else is in the room, and I don't hear anyone outside the door.

I guess everyone else went out.

Wait, even the bloodsucker duo? Why are you guys going out in broad daylight?!

What kind of world is this that I have to be more afraid of sunlight than freaking vampires?!

It's all because their stats are so damn high!

Gimme those stats, dammit!

Okay, there's no point in taking it out on the bloodsuckers.

It's not like Mera and the kid got those stats without any effort.

They used to be nothing but a baby and her caretaker, but they've been training hard over the course of this journey and they've come a long way.

Without my Appraisal skill, I can no longer tell how strong they are.

But according to the Demon Lord, they're still coming along quite nicely.

It's kinda like training has become part of their daily routine.

I guess it was me who got them into that habit, but it's impressive that they're keeping it up even though I can't teach them anymore after the whole turning-into-a-god thing.

Is this how it was with Pavlov's dogs?

Or are they just a couple of weirdos?

Well, I guess I get why Mera wants to keep training.

In the past, he wasn't able to protect the baby bloodsucker's parents.

I understand all too well the feeling of wanting to be stronger after suffering because you were too weak.

When my home went up in flames and I had no choice but to run away, I was frustrated beyond belief.

Mera must have felt a similar way, or probably even worse, since he lost the people he cherished.

He's probably training now so that he'll be able to protect the person he cares about if anything like that happens again.

Even if the person he's trying to protect is kind of a monstrous vampire... But let's just ignore that part.

Ahem. Anyway.

The baby bloodsucker, huh?

Her training regimen has taken a weird turn.

Most recently, she's been training by having mock battles with Ael.

And that's kind of what's so weird in the first place.

I know Ael looks like a little girl, but she's actually a super-strong monster with stats over a thousand each, y'know?

She could probably destroy a whole town on her own, maybe even a whole damn country.

And this kid is having practice battles against her?

There's definitely something weird about that.

I mean, Ael isn't going all out, of course.

If someone wants to fight Ael at her full strength, they'd better have an elder dragon or something on your side.

But even so, it's crazy that Vampy can hold her own against Ael in a mock battle.

Not to mention, those battles get so intense that they can't even have them in front of people.

You ever been in a carriage when two of the people just up and vanish, and then you hear a bunch of booms and crashes echo in the distance?

We're talking comic book-level sound effects here.

If their fights are that crazy, I guess I can see why Ael would agree to them.

I bet some rando monsters wouldn't even stand a chance against Vampy anymore.

Those are some scary little girls.

By the way, Ael is the only one who participates in these mock battles.

Why, you ask?

Because the other puppet spiders don't know how to hold back.

Sael might accidentally kill the baby bloodsucker.

Riel, on the other hand, might accidentally kill the baby bloodsucker.

Fiel, you guessed it, might accidentally kill the baby bloodsucker.

So by process of elimination, Ael is the only one who can do it.

With the others, the only outcome I can see is Vampy accidentally getting killed.

And one of those who might accidentally kill someone, Sael, is currently lurking in the corner glancing at me.

Sael almost never acts on her own without being told what to do.

Sometimes her total lack of independence gets on my nerves, but that also means that she'll faithfully carry out any orders you give her, which means she

ends up on guard duty like this a lot.

Unless an emergency arises, she doesn't have to do anything, so it's perfect.

Although if an emergency *did* arise, I don't think she'd be much help.

I can't even picture Sael staying on her toes and adapting to a situation on the fly.

She can probably make the most basic decisions as a bodyguard, or so I'd like to think, but this is Sael we're talking about, so...

At least I don't have to worry about her doing something totally unexpected like Riel, but it's still a little anxiety-inducing.

Other than that, she's just as strong as Ael, but...having power and being able to use it are two very different things.

Putting these rather rude thoughts aside, I sit up slowly in bed.

I've been lying around for a good five minutes or so since I woke up.

Back when I had the Thought Acceleration skill, I could dwell on pointless thoughts as long as I wanted and only a few seconds would pass in real time, but that's not the case anymore.

Time doesn't conveniently slow down for me when I get lost in thought.

In other words, while I've been making this pointless, rude analysis of Sael, she's just been sitting timidly in the corner of the room the whole time.

That's pretty impressive in its own way.

If it was Fiel, I'm sure she would've gotten impatient and jumped on me by now.

When you think about it that way, maybe Sael is actually well suited to this kind of job.

For the most part, the only thing she has to do is sit still.

Riel is decent at sitting still, too, but in her case, I feel like there'd be a real danger of her forgetting that she was supposed to be a bodyguard in the first place.

I guess this is what they mean by choosing the right person for the job.

Although there is one more reason she ends up staying behind on guard duty pretty often.

Unlike her other limbs, one of the left arms that's hidden by her long sleeves looks just like a puppet's arm.

For the most part, the puppet spiders' bodies are almost indistinguishable from humans thanks to my magical modifications.

Not only their appearance, but even the feel of their skin is similar enough that you wouldn't know at a glance or a touch.

However, Sael's left arm got destroyed by an enemy tank right before the UFO incident two years ago.

And since I got deified, I can't produce thread anymore, which of course means I can't make puppet parts with thread, either.

The Demon Lord has the same Divine Thread Weaving skill, so I casually thought she might be able to reproduce it, but she said, "Yeah, no, I can't," and threw in the towel immediately. I guess what I was doing was actually kinda crazy.

The Demon Lord did help me at the time, but I guess she couldn't quite reproduce human skin like I could.

So Sael's left arm is currently in an incomplete state, and while it functions just fine, it would probably look pretty strange to most people.

People might even guess that she's a monster if they saw it, similar to how my eyes might give me away.

Which is why Sael often ends up being a shut-in like me.

I stand in front of the dresser in the room, then beckon to Sael.

When she hesitantly shuffles over, I gesture to her to help me get dressed.

Sael and the other puppet spiders love dressing me up, so I have them help me fairly often.

Heh, it's so nice of me to offer to be these little girls' dress-up doll for their

entertainment.

It's definitely not because doing it myself is a pain.

Nope, definitely not.

Sael retrieves some clothing from our luggage and carries it over.

Today, she's picked out a short-sleeve shirt and a miniskirt, both of which show a considerable amount of skin.

Her fashion choices for me tend to be surprisingly bold.

Why is this the only time she decides to be independent?

She's a puppet, so she doesn't breathe, but I swear I can almost hear her huffing and puffing with glee.

Well, I guess it's fine, since I'm going to wear a robe over it anyway.

Giving up, I let her dress me however she likes, then rub some lotion with a sunblock-like effect over my skin for good measure.

It's not as effective as the Japanese stuff, but it's better than nothing.

Folks in this world don't seem to be too concerned about skin care, or I guess they don't have to worry about sunburns and stuff thanks to their stats, so there aren't a lot of beauty products like this.

In fact, most of the common folks here spend their days just trying to survive, so only rich people can buy luxury products like this in the first place.

Which means makeup and the like is actually pretty expensive.

This stuff puts a considerable strain on the Demon Lord's wallet, I bet.

But I have no choice!

I'm not having her buy me this stuff for beauty's sake; it's because I'll definitely burn without it!

As I make excuses to myself, Sael finishes helping me into my clothes, so I sit on the stool in front of the dresser.

Sael looks excited as she starts brushing my hair.

Since it's rather smooth and frizz-free, it takes only a few strokes before she

moves on to tying my usual braid.

I'm crazy susceptible to sunlight for the most part, but for some reason, nothing seems to damage my hair.

I'm still careful about covering up with a hood so it won't get any sun, of course.

I do find it a little mysterious that my hair always stays this smooth, though.

You don't think I'm subconsciously using my godly powers to keep my hair looking nice, do you?

Hmm. I can't say for sure that that's not the case, which is a little concerning.

It's better than having unruly hair, so I guess I can't complain.

But if I can use my powers for that, why can't I use them for anything else?

It's been pretty rough not having any powers these past two years.

Every time something goes wrong, I imagine how much easier life would be if I had them again.

So as Sael continues arranging my hair, I focus with all my might.

In my mind's eye, I picture thread.

White, thin, sturdy spider thread.

I imagine it coming out of my fingertips.

But no matter how hard I will it, thread doesn't appear.

Nothing happens if I try to picture Dark Magic or focus power in my eyes to use Evil Eyes, either.

While I'm trying these things, Sael finishes her work.

Checking in the mirror, I see myself looking perfectly well-groomed.

No luck today, just as I suspected.

Over the past couple of years, I've been trying all kinds of things to get my old powers back.

I've tried meditating to see if I could detect the flow of magic power and

weight lifting to regain some physical strength—like I said, all kinds of things.

But every single attempt has ended in failure.

Skills and stats are how the system forces this world's inhabitants to use their power, after all.

In other words, it's a support system that helps guide people on how to use their power correctly.

Now that I don't have that support anymore, I can't use my power.

But the system is nothing more than that: a support system.

In the end, we're the ones who are actually using the power.

By that logic, it should be possible to use my power even without the system's help.

Güli-güli said himself that if I just learn how to do that, I could be as strong or even stronger than he is.

But I've got no idea how to go about that!

I'm like a little Japanese boy going around yelling, *KOMEHAMEHA!*

Obviously that's not gonna work!

How do I make it work?!

Just work already, dammit!

Ugh. I seriously have no clue.

Since I don't know how to use my supposedly amazing power, I'm just falling flat on my face before I even begin.

It's like I haven't even made it to the starting line yet.

I used tons of skills and stuff before deification, so I have some idea of how it's supposed to feel, or at least I thought I did.

At first I was optimistic that I'd figure out how to use it pretty fast, but it's already been two whole years.

Even I'm starting to freak out now.

What if I never figure out how to use my powers, and I just stay this weak forever?

That's not gonna happen, I think (I hope), but I guess it's actually normal for humans not to have power in the first place.

Skills are an unnatural power granted by the system in this world, unlike Earth, where there were no superpowers or anything like that.

It's normal to not have powers.

Maybe that's just how it's gonna be for me from now on.

But I know for sure that an enormous amount of power is resting inside me somewhere.

I just don't know how to tap into it yet.

All I need is some kind of awakening that helps me figure out how to wield my power, and I'll finally be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel, I hope.

Swallowing a sigh, I stand up.

I pull out my usual unfashionable robe from our luggage and throw it on.

It seems like a waste after Sael got me all dressed up, but I want to expose as little skin as possible, and I need a big hood to cover these creepy eyes of mine.

Besides, I have other reasons to hide my face, too.

So I pull my hood down low and head out of the room, Sael following behind me.

The inn we're staying in is three stories, with our room on the second floor.

The first floor is probably a dining hall, so I'll start with a late breakfast.

But when I go down the stairs and step into the dining area, there are already other customers, despite the time of day.

Two men are drinking booze in the early afternoon and chatting away.

Judging by their clothes, they're probably adventurers.

I've kiiiinda got a bad feeling about this, but my hunger wins out, so I keep moving.

The two adventurers notice Sael and me entering the dining hall and stare at us dubiously.

Yeah, I guess I can't blame them for being suspicious of someone wearing a sketchy robe with their hood up even though we're inside a building.

Taking care to ignore the adventurers, I attempt to walk past them.

I would've liked to avoid them entirely, but they're sitting at the table closest to the entrance, so no such luck.

Left with no other choice, I walk by their table.

That's when it happens.

"Whoopsie!"

One of the men stumbles, clearly deliberately, and yanks off my hood.

The two men smirk at me.

Now they've done it!

I close my eyes immediately, so at least they don't see those.

But obviously, with my eyes closed, I can't see anything.

I don't know what these two buffoons are going to try next.

"Ooh! What a beaut!"

I feel their breath unexpectedly close to my face, reeking of alcohol.

As I draw back, startled, I feel a sudden impact near my neck.

It's nothing too forceful, but clearly one of the men has put his arm around my shoulders, although I can't actually see it.

Drunken bastards!

This is why I don't like to show my face!

Look, I know it's weird to say this about myself, but I'm actually pretty hot.

Between my stunning good looks and my unusual skin color (or lack thereof), I tend to draw waaay more attention than I'd prefer to.

Which is why I avoid showing my face as much as possible.

But these drunks pulled off my hood, and now they have the nerve to mess with me even further?!

At first, I manage to remain calm.

Or rather, it's more like my brain can't even process what's happening.

But after the next attack, my thoughts go flying in another direction entirely.

"Ooh, you've got more going on than meets the eye, eh?"

Huh?

What?

Hmm?

I feel a squeezing sensation.

Right around the area of my chest.

He's feeling me up!

Honestly, I'm amazed I don't faint on the spot.

If anything, I'm sure I'm seconds away from doing so.

But then I hear the drunk say something else.

"Hunh? What do you want, brat?"

Oh crap!

Without another thought, I reach out for Sael.

My eyes are still closed, so I'm just going on my instincts, but luckily I manage to grab her small shoulder.

Through my hand, I can feel her stop moving.

Whew, that was close.

If I was a second too late, a serious tragedy might've unfolded just now.

As you may recall, Sael doesn't really act independently.

But there are certain things that she knows she's supposed to do, based on prior experience.

And in this situation, I know exactly what Sael was about to do: eliminate the enemy.

You might think it silly for a powerful monster to regard some run-of-the-mill drunks as enemies, but Sael seriously can't make judgment calls like that.

She doesn't worry about the finer details. She just identifies anyone who messes with any of us as an enemy.

If it were Ael here, she would probably be able to chase off the drunks without anyone getting hurt, but Sael isn't good with such delicate maneuvers.

All she can do is what she's already been ordered to do, so you have to be extra careful around her in situations like these.

As much as I hate to say it, these guys probably shouldn't get the death penalty for groping me.

And now it's *my* job to save the lives of these drunken assholes even though they're the ones who harassed me?

Unreal.

...Honestly, if you really think about it, should I really protect them at all?

If they're gonna get drunk first thing in the morning and start harassing any girl who passes by, wouldn't they be better off dead anyway?

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

Just as my mind wanders down this dangerous path while I start seriously considering letting Sael do her thing, someone shouts from the back of the galley.

Instinctively, I open my eyes a bit to see who's speaking and find a well-built older lady stomping toward us from the kitchen.

She's even bigger (and wider) than these well-built adventurers.

"If you're going to bother other customers, I'll have to ask you to leave!"

"Oh, uh, we're sorry."

Shrinking away from the woman, the drunks seem to sober up in an instant.

“Don’t apologize to me! Apologize to this poor girl!”

“Y-yes, ma’am! We’re sorry!”

You rule, lady!

The adventurers give me a quick bow before hustling out of the dining hall.

“Honestly. This is the problem with adventurers.” The lady heaves a sigh. “I’m sorry, young ladies.”

She’s got nothing to apologize for. If anything, she saved me, so I should be thanking her.

For the time being, I try to communicate with gestures that it’s no big deal.

“Not all adventurers are such awful boors, but my goodness. You’re a real beauty, too, so you’d best be careful.”

Yeah, that’s why I was wearing a hood and hiding out in the inn.

Although I guess maybe wearing a hood inside only makes me stand out more.

“Especially lately, when so many adventurers from abroad are coming to town. There might be some shady folks slipping in with the crowd, so mind you don’t get mixed up in anything dangerous.”

Huh?

Why are out-of-town adventurers gathering here?

Most adventurers in this world seem to pick one town and stay there.

Their job is to defeat monsters, after all.

They have to ward off any monsters that get too close to town every day, so they don’t usually stray far from their respective towns unless there’s a major reason.

So what’s the big development bringing people here right now?

“Seems an ogre’s appeared close to town. It’s even beaten a few adventurers who went out after it, too. So now other adventurers are gathering from the nearby towns and villages to fight it. Scary stuff, wouldn’t you say?”

Huh.

Ogre, you say?

If it's turned the tables on a few adventurers, it must be pretty strong.

Some of the monsters in this world are similar to the ones that appeared in the stories back on Earth.

Maybe a certain evil god decided to make this one for a little entertainment.

I've never seen an ogre in person, but they seem to be fairly common monsters that show up all over.

Which usually means they're the kind of monster that humans can handle.

So it's unusual for them to be all that strong, but if this one's killing adventurers, it must be a pretty special individual.

Not that I'm one to talk, but weirdly strong monsters do pop up once in a while, so I'm sure this is just another case of that.

For our group, though, an ogre's not even a threat worth mentioning.

No matter how strong it might be, it can't beat the puppet spiders with their thousand-plus stats, and even in the unlikely event that it could, we've got the ultimate weapon known as the Demon Lord on our side.

So this is really nothing to worry about.

"Now then! You came to get some grub, right? I'll cut you a good deal to make up for all that fuss!"

Yaaay!

I'm way more interested in that than some random ogre!



Interlude

A CERTAIN ADVENTURER'S OGRE HUNT

“Thank you all for gathering here today!”

The guild master’s rough voice echoes through the first floor of the guild hall.

The entire lobby is packed with adventurers who have gathered from nearby towns.

They’re all here to participate in the ogre hunt.

After the young adventurer Rukusso barely managed to escape with his life, he spread the word about the dangerous ogre.

Our guild master took action immediately, requesting aid from nearby guilds and sending out the call for adventurers.

The bait: the magic swords said to be wielded by the ogre.

Even adventurers have a hard time coming across magic swords.

It’s been announced that whoever defeats the ogre will be given the swords as a reward.

Naturally, adventurers from all over have come to join the hunt.

Of course, I’m also joining in for a chance at the magic swords, too, so I can’t really judge the others for it.

“Yo, Gotou. Yer lookin’ more serious than usual. Guess you’re all fired up to get revenge for your fallen comrades, eh?”

My fellow A-rank adventurer Regg throws an overly familiar arm around my shoulder.

We’re two of the highest-ranking adventurers in town.

“What makes you think that, huh? I’m just here for the magic swords, same as you. I ain’t the kinda guy who cares about revenge.”

“Whatever you say.”

I shake his arm off roughly, but Regg doesn’t seem to believe me in the slightest.

“Listen up, you lot! We’ve got a special request!”

Just as I’m about to snap back at Regg, the guild master’s voice bellows over us.

“As you know, we’re after a unique ogre! Its stats are believed to be higher than an ordinary ogre’s, and it possesses equally unique unknown skills!”

Though normally rowdy, the adventurers listen to the guild master in rapt silence.

I don’t want to be the one to interrupt, so I shut my mouth as well.

“Now, there are three things you should know about this ogre!”

This information had to have come from the survivor of the advance team of adventurers.

“First, it has abnormal regenerative ability! It heals itself in a way that cannot be explained by any known skills! We’re told its body will suddenly emit light, and then its wounds will be gone without a trace! There are even reports that it might be able to recover its MP and SP this way as well! One team of adventurers was able to corner the ogre, only to be wiped out after this monster’s fearsome recovery ability overwhelmed them!”

A murmur runs through the crowd of adventurers.

Among them, I see a young man biting his lip.

Rukusso, a promising young adventurer.

He was the sole survivor of the advance team.

And now, after treating his wounds, he’s joining the quest in order to avenge his fallen friends.

The rest of his team were friends of mine, too.

“Second! Its combat capabilities can suddenly increase tremendously! The effects are similar to Mental Warfare, but it’s clearly something more! The boost doesn’t last long, but its stats will be higher as long as it’s active! There’s no change to its physical appearance, so you’ll have to trust your gut!”

This doesn’t seem like much of a counterstrategy, but that’s how adventurers do things.

We constantly adapt and play things by ear.

That’s the fundamental rule, or maybe the hidden secret, of being an adventurer.

“Third! The ogre has magic swords! Two, no less!”

At that, the crowd of adventurers chatters excitedly, and everyone’s eyes seem to light up.

It’s no surprise, since most of the people here are after those swords.

“Quiet down! We’ve confirmed that the magic swords have fire and lightning properties! As promised, the two adventurers who contribute most to defeating the ogre will receive these swords!”

A cheer rises throughout the lobby.

Most adventurers can only dream of owning a magic sword one day.

“All right! Now, get out there, you lot!”

As soon as the guild master gives the order, the adventurers all head out to find and eliminate the ogre.

It’s a huge crowd, and all of them are adventurers experienced enough to be trying for a magic sword of their own.

No matter how strong this ogre might be, I doubt it can simply fight its way out when up against a mob like this.

“All right, Gotou! Let’s see which of us comes out with a magic sword!”

“Yeah, right. It’ll obviously be me.”

Bantering lightly, Regg and I head out to search for the ogre, too.

The magic sword is the main goal.

But I guess I can avenge the brave folks the ogre killed while I'm at it.

"This isn't happening."

How did we arrive at this current situation after that triumphant charge?

Adventurers flee in every direction.

An explosion coming from below blows the lower halves of several unfamiliar adventurers right off.

Some who managed to escape that fate were instead pierced by a flying sword or caught up in the resulting explosion.

Exploding swords? What in the world is happening?

The same scene unfolds all over the battlefield.

"No one said anything about this!"

Does the monster have more than two magic swords?!

I've never heard of an exploding magic sword.

And who would ever expect that it would have so many?

The ogre that's creating this hellscape has taken up camp among the trees, pulling out magic swords that are thrust into the ground around it and throwing them one after another.

With each sword throw, an explosive *boom* echoes, and the number of adventurers decreases.

A massacre.

This is a massacre.

"Aaaaah!"

Hearing a desperate battle cry, I turn to see Rukusso holding his bow at the ready.

"You damn fool!"

I curse at him without thinking.

It's obvious at a glance that Rukusso could never defeat this ogre.

I doubt his arrows will even leave a scratch on that beast.

Besides, how daft do you have to be to yell out before you attack someone?!

Rukusso looses an arrow.

But just as I expected, the ogre dodges the shot easily.

Then it pulls a sword from the ground and flings it toward Rukusso in clear retaliation.

"Tch!"

Clicking my tongue, I fling myself between Rukusso and the oncoming magic sword, swinging my own sword up to block it.

"Gah?!"

As soon as my blade deflects the magic sword, it explodes.

Damn, that hurts!

The shock wave sends me flying backward.

Dammit!

So they explode even if you parry them?!

My arms...seem to be intact.

I'm covered in blood, but I survived somehow.

"Urgh..."

But while I'm fine, Rukusso was still close enough to get caught up in the aftermath of the explosion.

His stats are lower than mine, so even though I'm the one who took a direct hit, he seems to worse off.

"You all right?!"

Of course he's not all right, I snap at myself as soon as the words leave my mouth.

Anyone can see that the boy lying on the ground is anything but all right.

He needs treatment right away, or he'll die.

"Damn you!"

But as if to prevent that, the ogre raises another sword aloft.

If one more of those exploding swords hits us, even if I survive somehow, Rukusso is as good as dead!

"Aaaaargh!"

But the thrown sword gets blocked before it reaches us.

"Regg!"

"Gotou! Take Rukusso and get out of here!"

Regg deflected the exploding sword just like I did and is now covered in wounds.

"I'll buy you some time! Go!"

"Regg! Regg, wait!"

Heedless of my cry, Regg charges toward the ogre.

Another sword flies toward him, and Regg disappears in the explosion of flames.

"Reeeeeegg!"

Even as I shout, I gather up Rukusso and start to retreat.

As I glance back one last time, I see the ogre's sword slicing off Regg's head.

"Dammit! Dammit all to hell!"


That day we tasted utter defeat.


MONSTER ENCYCLOPEDIA
file.26

OGRE KING

status



HP  658 / 658

MP  1127 / 1127

SP  656 / 556

 657 / 557

LV.01

Average Offensive Ability : 640

Average Defensive Ability : 638

Average Magic Ability : 975

Average Resistance Ability : 986

Average Speed Ability : 631

skill

[HP Auto-Recovery LV 9] [MP Rapid Recovery LV 3] [MP Minimized Consumption LV 3] [Magic Power Perception LV 10] [Magic Power Operation LV 7] [Magic Warfare LV 2] [Magic Power Conferment LV 6] [Magic Power Attack LV 1] [SP Recovery Speed LV 2] [SP Lessened Consumption LV 2] [Battle Divinity LV 10] [Energy Conferment LV 1] [Energy Attack LV 1] [Swordsmanship LV 1] [Cutting Enhancement LV 3] [Piercing Enhancement LV 1] [Fire Enhancement LV 1] [Lightning Enhancement LV 1] [Heretic Attack LV 1] [Fire Attack LV 1] [Lightning Attack LV 1] [Throw LV 3] [Concentration LV 10] [Thought Acceleration LV 1] [Prediction LV 1] [Parallel Minds LV 1] [Arithmetic Processing LV 1] [Memory LV 2] [Hit LV 4] [Evasion LV 4] [Intimidation LV 1] [Presence Perception LV 1] [Enma] [Curse LV 8] [Fire Magic LV 5] [Lightning Magic LV 5] [Healing Magic LV 3] [Heretic Magic LV 6] [Demon Lord LV 1] [Dignity LV 1] [Wrath] [Prayer LV 3] [Destruction Resistance LV 1] [Impact Resistance LV 1] [Cutting Resistance LV 1] [Piercing Resistance LV 1] [Shock Resistance LV 1] [Fire Resistance LV 1] [Ice Resistance LV 2] [Wind Resistance LV 1] [Lightning Resistance LV 1] [Status Condition Resistance LV 1] [Faint Resistance LV 1] [Fear Resistance LV 3] [Heresy Resistance LV 5] [Pain Resistance LV 8] [Clairvoyance LV 2] [Five Senses Enhancement LV 1] [Divinity Expansion LV 1] [Life LV 1] [Magic Mass LV 1] [Instantaneous LV 1] [Persistent LV 1] [Strength LV 3] [Solidity LV 3] [Monk LV 1] [Protection LV 1] [Running LV 1] [Taboo LV 6] [Naming LV 7] [Fantasy Weapon Creation] [n% I = W]

A unique ogre that appeared at the northwest edge of the Renxandt Empire. Also known as the Sword Demon. It has a previously unheard-of skill that allows it to produce magic swords, which allows it to defeat many adventurers single-handedly, causing huge losses. Though it's difficult to tell from the giant size of the ogre and its skill with magic swords in close combat, its magic stats are actually higher, since producing magic swords uses a great deal of MP. Since it has defeated so many humans, which afford higher experience points than monsters, its level and stats have grown much faster than its skills. The empire later assessed its danger level as a high A.



THE OGRE'S MAGIC SWORDS

What have I done? What am I trying to do?

If you asked me to summarize my old life in a word or two, I wouldn't know how to answer.

It's probably the same for a lot of people, right?

By most standards, I was still pretty young when my life ended, but I still don't think it was short enough to be summed up with a single word.

But if you asked me whether it was a good life, I don't think I'd be able to nod.

"Kyouya, you're a pretty stubborn guy, aren't you? Keep that up and you'll miss out on some of the best parts of life."

The person who told me that was Shun, one of my high school friends.

One of the only friends I'd made since starting high school, he'd occasionally whip out sharp observations like this that cut right to the heart of the matter.

Our other friend, Kanata, was generally better at reading the room, but Shun had the ability to see right through your expression and catch a glimpse of the deepest parts of your heart without breaking a sweat.

I tried my best to act the part of a quiet, normal kid in high school, but I guess he saw through that...

Up until high school, I led a pretty rough-and-tumble life.

It all started when I was in kindergarten.

A bunch of older kids were trying to hog all the playground equipment, so I tried to chase them off on my own.

We'd been playing on the equipment first until these older kids suddenly

showed up.

I put up such a fight that I made one of the older boys cry.

In the end, a teacher stepped in before the fight escalated any further.

But then she got mad at me, as if I was the one to blame.

Why did I get in trouble for doing the right thing?

At the time, I didn't understand at all.

Looking back, though, I get it: Because I picked a fight, the other kids who were playing with me got caught up in it and got hurt.

Some of the kids my own age ended up crying, too.

The ones to blame for starting everything were definitely the older kids who had shown up and tried to take all the playground equipment for themselves. I have no doubt about that.

But was it right for me to pick a fight with those kids?

I'm still not sure.

But I think that was the moment when I first learned that my sense of right and wrong didn't necessarily match everyone else's, although I only vaguely understood that at the time.

After that, I still stuck to my own beliefs about what was right.

Even if that meant using my fists, which it often did.

In elementary school, I stopped bullies.

In middle school, I beat up boys who tried to shake down younger students for money.

I could go on and on listing these examples.

The more I acted on what I felt was right, the more others distanced themselves.

I found myself with fewer and fewer allies and more and more enemies.

By the time I graduated middle school, people in the neighborhood had given me the nickname "little ogre."

I think it was because I was so short at the time.

All I was doing was what I thought was right, but nobody else seemed to see it that way.

In fact, they all seemed to think I was in the wrong.

So when I started high school, I picked a place that was a little farther away from my neighborhood and decided to be on my best behavior.

Just like that, my days became almost laughably peaceful.

As long as I turned a blind eye and pretended not to notice certain things, it was easy to live as a normal high schooler.

But once in a while, I found myself wondering: *Am I really all right with this?*

I played video games with my friends, stressed out about tests, thought about what to do after graduation.

As I lived out this normal high school life, a certain gloominess settled in the back of my mind.

Just like Shun said, I was being inflexible, missing out on life.

What does it really mean to be “right”?

Which course of action should I take if I want to do the “right” thing?

Looking back now, I can see all too clearly that worrying about such things was a luxury.

Once I’ve defeated all the adventurers, I let out a sigh of relief.

At the same time, the strength leaves my body.

I must have built up a considerable amount of fatigue without even realizing it myself.

Unlike the fights in my old life, these life-and-death struggles are incredibly stressful, as you might expect.

No wonder I find myself slumping to my knees as soon as the battle is over.

Still sitting on the ground, I heave a long sigh.

A burned smell surrounds me: not of wood but of flesh.

As well as the metallic stench of blood.

Looking around, I see the corpses of adventurers strewn everywhere.

Holes in the ground, created by the explosions, tell of the ferocity of the battle that just occurred.

I used up all the magic swords I had on hand.

Now I'll have to make more.

Weapon Creation. That's my unique skill.

This skill, which I've apparently had from birth, allows me to conjure up weapons at the cost of MP.

Depending on the amount of MP used, it can even add special effects to the weapons.

As a result, I can create what's known as magic swords.

The first time I noticed that this skill existed was during dinner in the goblin village.

There were no forks or knives in the goblin village, so we normally ate with our hands.

It happened when the meat from the day's hunt was on the dinner table.

It was so tough, I found myself wishing from the bottom of my heart that I had a knife.

Just like that, a flash of light filled the little room, and in the next instant, there was a knife in my hand.

It was a lot shabbier than the kind of knife I'd been picturing, but it was still unmistakably a knife.

Mysteriously, a knife had just appeared from thin air.

We didn't know how it had happened until we used the village chief's Appraisal Stone, the only one in the village.

The results showed that I had the Weapon Creation skill.

Once we learned that, my daily life changed ever so slightly.

I produced as many weapons as my MP would permit.

All I wanted was to be of some use to the village.

Unfortunately, since I had so little MP at the time, those shabby knives were about the best I could produce.

And making one of them used up all my MP, so I always had to wait for it to recover.

Even so, everyone in the village was grateful, since it gave them the ability to cut up the food they'd previously had to eat with their hands.

I was so happy that I kept making knives whenever I could.

Continuously making knives meant that my skill level went up, my MP pool increased, and so on, until I was able to make a proper kitchen knife.

I would've liked to make forks, too, but as the name implies, Weapon Creation can't make anything but weapons.

I was probably able to create table and kitchen knives only because they're technically usable as weapons.

Small knives, kitchen knives, and later, large knives that could be used to butcher meat.

After that, I moved on to short swords.

Then I was finally able to make proper long swords.

Gradually, I became able to make better, stronger weapons.

Until then, the goblins never had the means or resources to craft good weapons, but that changed dramatically thanks to my Weapon Creation skill.

Soon, they were able to defeat monsters they could never best before, greatly expanding the area in which they could hunt and explore.

That meant more supplies of meat and more resources that could be gathered.

My power was helping everyone in the village.

I was so happy and proud that I devoted myself even more intently to

Weapon Creation.

Thinking back, that was probably the most fulfilled I've ever been.

The more weapons I made, the more my skill level increased, which let me make even better weapons.

And better weapons meant a better life for everyone.

What could be more worthwhile?

I now have far more MP and higher skill levels than I did at the time, so the amount and quality of weapons I can make doesn't even compare to my abilities back then.

I couldn't add special effects to weapons in the past, either.

I'm growing more and more.

But that isn't fulfilling to me at all.

How can I be happy about making weapons used to kill people?

I once made weapons to defeat monsters for the sake of our livelihood, but now I make weapons to kill humans.

Though I'm making weapons in both cases, there's an enormous difference.

...Then again, I guess a weapon is a weapon.

That much doesn't change.

However, the way you use it changes its nature profoundly.

I'm using these weapons to kill people now.

I guess that's the only difference.

That's not the purpose I honed this skill for, but here I am.

I gaze at my surroundings again.

The broken earth.

The remains of adventurers, blown away or cut down.

Some of them are still in one piece, but many more are unrecognizably mangled.

It was the magic swords I made that did this to them.

Land mine swords.

As the name implies, they're magic swords with a similar effect to land mines.

Usually, magic swords use the wielder's MP to produce effects, so they're used continually until they break.

The same is true of the two swords I use as my personal weapons, the flame katana and the lightning katana.

But land mine swords are different.

I preload them with plenty of my MP when I create them.

Then all their stored energy is unleashed at once when they explode.

Magic swords are supposed to be used over a long period of time, so if you imagine all that power coming out in a single moment, you can guess how intense that would be.

Still, it's not as if the power they have is actually all that impressive.

Since they don't have a wielder providing MP like most magic swords, they become one use only in exchange for an extra bit of kick.

Considering the amount of MP it costs to make them, regular magic swords are probably a lot more cost-efficient.

Still, the one-use-only swords are definitely more powerful, and the fact that they can be used without spending MP is a huge point in their favor.

And since I have only two arms and can therefore wield only two magic swords, the land mine swords are a lot more useful.

Once they've been set, they explode on their own as soon as someone steps on them.

All I have to do is create the land mine swords and set them in the ground.

There's only one of me, so obviously I'm at a disadvantage whenever I'm outnumbered. That's why I developed the land mine swords.

I can set them up as traps to help level the playing field.

The best part is, the more magic swords I make with Weapon Creation, the better my skill level gets.

With a higher skill level, I can create even better magic swords.

That means it's in my best interest to create as many swords as I can, but like I said earlier, I can wield only two swords at a time.

Even if I insist on equipping myself with more, like you might in a game or manga, it's not like the extras will do me any good.

And since I'd prefer not to let the magic swords I make go to waste, creating one-use swords that can be used from a distance was the perfect solution.

By that same logic, I also developed exploding swords for throwing along with the land mine swords.

These aren't that different from the land mine swords, but the most attractive feature is that I get to choose who to attack and when.

At first, I thought I'd try making guns or something, but it seems that my Weapon Creation skill can't make modern weapons.

Blades and bludgeons are no problem, but I can't make anything that uses gunpowder.

So I developed exploding swords as the next best thing, and they turned out to be incredibly powerful.

Since they're swords, my Swordsmanship skill boosts their attack power, and my Throw skill increases the accuracy and impact, so being hit by one already does a lot of damage.

And since they explode on top of that, they've got more raw power than even the land mine swords.

In fact, they're even more lethal than guns.

The only difficulty is that, unlike land mine swords, I have to actually throw them myself, so I can't use them if the target is outside of my throwing range.

But I can make up for that by using them in combination with land mine swords.

I place land mine swords all around me to make it difficult for enemies to get too close, and if they manage to do so, I can just throw an exploding sword at them.

The land mines create an invisible wall of defense, and the exploding swords are my battery.

In a way, I guess that makes me a living fortress.

Still, both land mine swords and exploding swords are consumable resources.

After they've been used once, that's it.

My land mine sword defenses and my exploding sword offenses both have a limit.

When all is said and done, the only thing I can always rely on is myself and my own two swords.

The flame katana and the lightning katana.

They're real, proper magic swords, unlike the one-use-only land mine and exploding swords.

Since they're shaped like katanas, maybe it would be more accurate to call them magic katanas.

Just as the names imply, they're imbued with the powers of fire and lightning respectively.

If I channel my MP into them, the blades become enveloped in flame and lightning, explosively raising their attack power.

They can shoot fire and lightning as well, allowing me to keep enemies away at midrange.

On top of that, just equipping them raises the wielder's defense, granting resistance to fire and lightning, and even increases and heals HP and MP.

It's not as effective as skills, but since they decrease damage and help with healing, they're incredibly useful for long battles.

And since they can even automatically repair damage to their own blades, they're virtually indestructible, as long as they aren't completely destroyed in a

single attack.

Making swords with this many useful effects was difficult even for me.

I'm extremely proud of them.

I even used the Naming skill to give them names, enhancing their effects further.

The Naming skill gives a name to objects or living beings, which improves their effects, raises their stats, and so on.

Naming living things can also give the namer influence over the named, so if a living creature doesn't have a name, giving them one can place them under your power.

The naming alone doesn't have that much effect, but if used in combination with other skills, you can even control the named living thing completely.

Which is how I...

An awful memory comes to mind.

I shake it off, trying to regain my composure.

After they formed such a large-scale hunting party, I doubt the humans will give up so easily.

In fact, now that they know that such a dangerous monster exists, they'll probably get even more desperate to defeat me.

They're not wrong to think that I'm a danger to humans, so I can't blame them for making that call.

Still, that doesn't mean I don't find it aggravating.

Anyone would be angry if they were attacked like that.

As long as they're going to keep coming after me, I'll make preparations and be ready for them.

I'm not going to try to reach an understanding with humans now.

Humans can't be trusted.

In fact, I'd like to wipe them all out.

Dark emotions start to well up inside me.

The taste of blood fills my mouth.

At first, I thought I must have clenched my teeth so hard that I bit my own cheek, but then I realize that I'm biting one of the adventurer's corpses.

The tastes of blood and flesh in my mouth trigger old memories, bringing back the rage I felt back then.

All that fury threatens to take over my mind, but I shake my head rapidly, fighting it off.

Not good.

I have to remain calm.

It's all right. I'm fine.

I haven't lost my composure.

I have to stay calm and prepare for the humans' next attack.

Tearing the dead adventurer to pieces with my mouth, I start thinking up my strategy to kill the next humans who come after me.



THE OLD MAN IN MOURNING

A heavy silence permeates the rocking carriage.

Even an old man such as myself would not venture to make a joke in this atmosphere.

The beautiful scenery of the imperial capital unfolds just outside the carriage window, but inside, the mood is dark and melancholic.

But this much is understandable, considering our destination.

Seated across from me, Tiva closes his eyes and bows his head grimly.

Tiva was in charge of leading the imperial army's attack on Sariella in order to support the Ohts Kingdom, but thanks to the attack on Keren County by those spiders I was following, that invasion is no longer possible. Instead, we are returning home.

Tiva was investigating something else, too: the recent cases of children being kidnapped.

These abductions are happening not just in the empire but all over the world, and Tiva is in charge of leading that investigation.

At first, people suspected someone was capturing children and selling them as slaves.

But now, the scope has become even bigger.

The current theory is that a sizable organization is undertaking these crimes for a greater purpose.

In order to crush this organization and rescue the kidnapped children, Tiva led an imperial army to chase after the kidnappers.

However, the search has been less than fruitful.

They located a hideout of the organization, but the only people they were able to capture were hired thugs.

There was no sign of whoever is running the organization and no further leads hinting at its true purpose.

If even this large-scale investigation turned up neither hide nor hair of the leader, they must be quite formidable.

And now, we are headed to the home of one of the families victimized by these kidnappers.

A mother whose baby was kidnapped three years ago.

As you may gather from the state of our carriage, it is not good tidings we carry.

No, it is grim news indeed.

However, it is not the child's death we must report.

"Sir Ronandt, I do not think you need accompany me inside."

Unable to bear the silence, Tiva speaks.

He has said the same thing countless times since before we entered the carriage.

However, my answer is the same.

"How many times must I repeat myself? It is my burden to bring this news."

"But—"

"Enough!"

My sharp tone silences Tiva at least.

I am the one who brought this information back to the capital to begin with.

I will not let anyone else bear this burden.

Tiva stays silent, perhaps sensing my determination.

The carriage proceeds through a quiet aristocratic neighborhood, finally

stopping in front of one of the mansions.

For a noble family's home, it is rather small.

That in itself is nothing unusual.

However, this mansion's overall appearance separates it from the rest.

The garden is in ruins, and the house itself is damaged and dirty.

It's obvious at a glance that it hasn't been properly tended to in years.

The place is in such a terrible state that the entire grounds seem to give off a dark atmosphere, even in the middle of the day.

A listless butler stands waiting for us in front of this desolate house.

"Welcome. Thank you for coming."

The butler bows respectfully.

Tiva and I bow briefly in return, then follow the butler inside.

Unlike the outside, the inside of the mansion has at least been minimally cared for.

The relative lack of furnishings makes it seem a bit dreary, but it has certainly been cleaned quite well.

And yet, the bleak, dark atmosphere remains.

The butler brings us to the parlor, where the master of the house is waiting.

"Thank you for coming today."

The lady we've come to see bows her head automatically.

The practiced gesture is just the same as I remember it last, but her appearance has changed drastically.

She looks...gaunt.

She used to be an impressive beauty even by the imperial capital's standards, but now she's a shadow of her former self.

Her skin has lost its luster, her body has grown weak and emaciated, and she has aged far beyond her years.

Having seen her in her prime, the effect is shocking.

Knowing that I have to tell her something that will only drive her deeper into despair, even I feel hesitation.

Now I understand why Tiva kept repeating himself.

He was trying to stop me for my sake, but perhaps most of all, he wanted to prevent putting these people through any further suffering.

But still, I have no choice.

This is something she must know.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Sir Ronandt.”

“Quite.”

Normally, I should respond that she’s looking well, but I cannot bring myself to tell such a blatant lie.

Given my uncharacteristically hard demeanor and Tiva’s glum silence, the woman has probably already guessed that we’ve come bringing bad news.

Her already pallid face grows a shade paler.

“I shall get straight to the point.”

Once we’ve finished our greetings and a lady-in-waiting has brought us tea, I cut to the chase.

“Sir Ronandt...”

“No good can come of beating around the bush, Tiva.”

Tiva is clearly signaling that I’m moving too fast, but in this case, I think it best not to hesitate.

The lady of this house is a smart woman.

No doubt she has some sense of why I requested that we meet today.

If I drag out the conversation now, I will only cause her more anxiety.

Sooner or later, I must tell her the truth.

So it’s for the best to do it as quickly as possible.

“Buirimus is dead.”

At first, she doesn't react to my blunt words.

Or rather, I should say she *can't* react.

She freezes up without so much as a blink, leaving Tiva and I to hold our collective breath in silence.

Time passes this way, until eventually the woman's eyes begin to waver.

Then, as if the meaning of my words has finally sunk in, she undergoes a quiet but drastic change.

Looking upward, she covers her face with both her hands and begins to sob with a muffled voice.

Tiva and I sit in silence still, watching over her quietly.

As the woman weeps, I think back on my memories of Buirimus.

Truth be told, I didn't interact with Buirimus very often.

He was a talented summoner, one of the prominent masters in the empire.

As such, we had occasion to meet a few times, but that was true of most any of the influential people in the empire.

We weren't close enough that I could call him a friend, and while he seemed to respect me as a higher-ranked mage, I doubt Buirimus felt particularly close with me either.

One could say that we were more than acquaintances but not yet friends.

We would have had no relationship of note at all, until that incident.

The incident when we encountered that great being in the Great Elroe Labyrinth and found ourselves fighting for our lives together.

This was four years ago, when Buirimus and I led an expedition of elite troops into the Great Elroe Labyrinth in order to locate a mysterious monster that had been sighted within.

According to eyewitnesses, it emitted such a dreadful aura that it was clear at a glance that this monster was a force to be reckoned with.

At the same time, there were also rumors that its actions showed a surprising level of intelligence, so the summoner Buirimus was sent in the hopes that he might be able to tame the monster.

Of course, I was accompanying them in the event that the monster was indeed so evil that it needed to be destroyed.

But the mission ended in disaster: except for Buirimus and me, that great being wiped out the entire force.

At the time, I had too much confidence in my powers.

I was convinced that surely no monster could ever be stronger than I, even though I knew that legendary monsters existed, well known as beings too powerful for any human to face.

It was this hubris of mine that brought about that tragedy in the labyrinth.

If I had not burned that great being's nest so rashly, perhaps the massacre could have been avoided.

I know there is no use in dwelling on such things, yet I cannot help but think of it.

Now, if events had ended there, I would still feel regret, but I doubt I would feel so indebted toward Buirimus.

Certainly, I would still feel the guilt of letting his subordinates be annihilated, but perhaps we still could have drank together as fellow survivors.

However, this was not to be.

The higher-ups of the empire decided to place all the blame for our terrible loss squarely on Buirimus.

That great being, who is now known as the Nightmare of the Labyrinth, ventured into the wider world after our encounter and began to wreak havoc.

Rumors spread that it had left the labyrinth because our party had provoked it.

I do not know if this is truly the reason that great being went outside.

But even if not, it was very unfortunate timing.

As soon as the Nightmare left the labyrinth, it destroyed an Ohts fortress, then took up residence in Sariella—Ohts's sworn enemy—and began to help them.

Notably, Ohts is an ally of the empire.

If the empire took actions that had a negative effect on their ally, they couldn't possibly ignore it.

Someone, somehow, had to take the blame.

And that responsibility fell to Buirimus.

He and I were the only two survivors.

And none of the higher-ranked officers were willing to step forward and shoulder the blame.

Normally, that would mean that both of us would have been held responsible, but my position prevented this.

I am the empire's leading court mage. In other words, I am the strongest mage in the empire, and some even say I am the strongest human mage in the world.

Perhaps I, too, believed that before I met that great being, but now such an empty title brings me no joy.

But for the empire, it carries a great deal of meaning.

They can use my name and power to intimidate other nations and keep them in check.

Since the conflict with demons has quieted down, the Renxandt Empire has lost some of its prestige.

The sword-king whose skills had earned him the reputation as a god of swordsmanship suddenly disappeared, and without the threat of demons hovering over them, the government officials grew corrupt.

Dishonorable nobles began to flaunt their power, and even the better ones compared the sitting sword-king to his predecessor and found him lacking.

And of course, if there is discord within the empire, then those outside it will

begin to lose their faith in its strength.

Thus, if they wanted to avoid harming their increasingly tenuous position, the officials of the empire could not afford to sacrifice me, one of their precious trump cards.

Following this logic, those in power made it the official story that I was not involved in the Great Elroe Labyrinth incident.

Thus, though the blame should have fallen on both of us, it landed on Buirimus's shoulders alone.

I was given the sentence of house arrest, scarcely more than a slap on the wrist, while Buirimus was sent away to the Mystic Mountains in the northwest, a much crueler fate.

The Mystic Mountains is an unforgiving mountain range on the border, populated by countless powerful monsters.

It's such a dangerous and rarely explored place that it's on par with the Great Elroe Labyrinth, so being stationed there is essentially a death sentence.

Yet, Buirimus accepted this fate and left without voicing any protest about the decision.

Even knowing that his wife had finally given birth to their first child.

"This is quite the stroke of bad luck. I've just learned that my child has been born, yet I must be in this dark cavern without even seeing the child's face."

I remember Buirimus's crooked smile as he said this in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

There was bitterness in his words, but it was eclipsed by the optimism in his eyes.

The face of a father excited to meet his child.

When we faced the master's fearsome attack, and he bought me enough time to activate Teleport, I have no doubt he was thinking that he refused to die before seeing his newborn child's face.

And survive he did, only to be sent away to face certain death once again.

As soon as his treatment was finished, no less.

Which meant that he never got to meet his child before leaving.

On top of being denied the moment he had so looked forward to, even if he did return from his dangerous posting, he would still carry the burden of being the one officially responsible for a failed expedition.

And there was no guarantee that he would come back alive at all.

From his wife's perspective, her husband had returned with near-fatal wounds, only to be sent away to his possible death without even the chance for a reunion first.

I can only imagine the heartache she felt.

And part of the blame lies with me, too.

I allowed the leadership to place the blame on Buirimus, and still I live free of consequences.

Of course, in deference to that guilt, I wanted to do all I could to support the wife he left behind.

"Thank you, but the thought alone is more than enough."

When I ignored my house arrest and visited this mansion, his wife politely declined my offer.

"I have always known there was a possibility that something might happen to my husband someday. I married a soldier, after all."

She offered me a fleeting smile.

Though she was putting on a brave face, even her makeup could not hide the redness around her eyes.

"He did everything in his power to come home, I know. And since he came back alive this time, I'm sure he'll be back again."

First she claimed to be resigned, but this statement of hope said otherwise.

I know not how to describe my feelings in that moment, except perhaps embarrassment.

At the time, I was fully prepared for her to curse or shout at me.

But I never imagined she wouldn't think to blame me at all.

She had no thoughts to spare for anyone but her husband.

I didn't occupy even a fraction of her thoughts.

I had assumed in my egotism that my existence would be a matter of great import to her, that she would blame me for what happened to Buirimus.

But in her eyes, I didn't matter one inkling.

Somehow, between this and my fateful encounter with that great being, I was becoming painfully aware that I had thought too highly of myself.

Perhaps her concern for her husband, Buirimus, and their newborn child left no room to contemplate me at all.

Either way, it was clear that I was insignificant to her.

Though I was called humanity's strongest mage, I was keenly aware that to her, at least, I was nothing more than a trifle.

Thus, I became aware of my own ego and felt embarrassed.

In the end, despite his wife's refusal, I found ways to help her anyway.

I felt my mind could not be at ease if I did nothing. Perhaps it was more for my own sake than for Buirimus or his wife.

I also reached out to all my connections to find ways to help the troops in the Mystic Mountains, where Buirimus was being sent.

The rest was up to Buirimus himself.

But while he was away, another tragedy occurred.

The kidnappings.

Buirimus's own child was among those who were being kidnapped all across the world.

Tiva led a special operation to try to track down the kidnappers, but to this day, there has been no progress.

"I apologize that you had to see me in such a state."

Buirimus's wife's voice is still shaking as she pulls herself together to apologize.

Tiva and I quickly assure her that she has nothing to apologize for.

After her streak of ill fortune, there was no doubt that her heart had reached its breaking point.

And then this terrible news.

I could only imagine her feelings.

"What...happened to him?"

"We don't yet know the details. But when I went to check in on him, I found that his entire troop had been wiped out."

Due to certain circumstances, I have been demoted to a station at a fortress in the north.

It is relatively close to the Mystic Mountains, so I received information about Buirimus's squadron there.

When I learned that their regular communications had suddenly ceased, I quickly went to investigate, myself, only to find utter destruction.

"Though it's not certain, we believe that the cause was a unique ogre that appeared around the same time."

Buirimus was highly skilled, so there were not many monsters that could wipe out his entire troop so easily.

And around that time, word had just started to spread of a powerful ogre that had killed several adventurers.

Surely this was no coincidence.

"It's been decided that I will soon lead a special force to find and defeat this ogre. Though it may be small comfort, I will be sure to avenge your husband."

"And I will do everything in my power to get your child back home as soon as I possibly can," Tiva promised.

"...Thank you."

Buirimus's wife bowed her head weakly.

"Do you think it'll be all right?"

As we sat in the carriage on our way back from the mansion, Tiva stared out the window.

He didn't specify a topic, but no doubt he was referring to Buirimus's wife.

"Who can say?"

Even I do not know the answer.

Try as I might, I cannot hope to understand the feelings of a woman who just learned her husband has died and whose child has been kidnapped.

It is not my place to carelessly say, *She'll be all right*.

"That depends on your work, good Tiva."

Some say that a mother regains her vigor if her lost child is returned, so perhaps Buirimus's wife, too, could recover if things went well.

"You must now face this with all your strength."

Tiva nods heavily.

Of course, it's not as though I think he was ever handling this investigation half-heartedly.

Tiva has always been a hard worker, and he has his own reasons for taking this case especially seriously.

"I swear that I will bring those children back alive. I swear it."

His voice contains an edge that he can't quite disguise.

It goes beyond righteous fury toward the kidnappers to a deeper, more personal rage.

You see, Tiva has a son.

Or perhaps I should say *had*.

His son had a wife, and they had even given him a grandchild.

The babe was born around the same time of year as Buirimus's own son.

It was his son's first child and Tiva's first grandchild.

Happiness beyond compare.

But after one fateful day, his son and his family were gone, never to return.

Their carriage had gotten into an accident.

However, in a later investigation, it was discovered that the tragedy was no accident at all but deliberately engineered by someone.

In fact, the methods strongly resembled the modus operandi of the kidnapping organization.

Had they targeted Tiva's grandchild and accidentally killed all three?

Or did they have some other reason?

That I do not know, but it means that Tiva lost his son, daughter-in-law, and grandchild all at once.

Thus, this man has a very powerful reason for hunting down the kidnapping organization.

I'm sure he feels just as strongly about it as Buirimus's wife.

"I shall assist you to the best of my ability."

Now that it's come to this, I cannot simply sit by in silence.

I have a dreadful premonition about this organization.

A feeling that if they're left alone, it might lead to something truly terrible.

"...Even after your demotion?"

Tiva looks at me blandly.

Why, you little...!

I scowl at the low blow.

For reasons entirely beyond my control, I've been sent to the north at present.

In fact, I did not have permission to be in the capital today, so I cannot move freely.

“Harrumph! To send me away for such a ridiculous reason!”

“No, I think it’s a natural punishment for nearly killing a hero. In fact, you should be pleased that you were not executed.”

“That was just a trifling amount of training! *Nearly killing* is an outright exaggeration!”

The reason for my demotion is simply that I was training Julius, my first apprentice.

He demanded that I take him under my wing, so train him I did.

However, Julius’s homeland and the so-called Word of God religion objected to my methods, and the Renxandt Empire unfortunately agreed, so I was banished to a far-off northern post for doing nothing wrong in the slightest.

I suppose even the empire couldn’t cover for me if other nations were angry with me.

But why would they get so angry about a small bit of training?!

“No, that could hardly be called training. By anyone else’s standards, that was torture, understand? You must realize, Sir Ronandt, that your idea of common sense does not match the rest of the world.”

“Hmph!”

This is ridiculous!

I just hit him with the smallest amount of magic to build up his resistance!

It makes no sense whatsoever to punish me for such a thing!

“Very well, then. I shall just do whatever I can. Starting with avenging Buirimus’s death.”

Sitting in the carriage, my thoughts were already on the ogre that killed Buirimus.



I'M STUFFED

Right now, I'm locked in a desperate battle.

Things aren't looking good.

It's been a long time since I faced a predicament like this.

But that doesn't mean I'm going to give up!

I will win!

No matter what it takes!

"U...urgh!"

"Miss, you don't need to force yourself to finish it, all right? If you're full, it's okay to leave some on the plate."

That's nice of you, lady, but there's no way in hell!

I refuse to leave a speck of food on this plate!

That's right. I'm eating my lunch in the inn's mess hall right now.

And eating, and eating, and eating!

"Hurk!"

"See? You've clearly reached your limit, young lady! You've been at it for almost an hour now, but if you can't eat it, then that's that."

Delicious food is right before my eyes.

As you may have guessed from the presence of those adventurer assholes from earlier, this inn is for the general public, so it's not fancy like the kind of place nobles might stay.

And all the food definitely emphasizes quantity over quality!

Bam! Tons of bread!

Boom! Tons of veggies!

Pow! Tons of meat!

And so on.

But this lady must be a pretty good cook, because even though the food is humble, it's also surprisingly flavorful and hearty.

That's right. It's delicious.

It's delicious, but I can't quite finish it!

"Urrrrgh!"

I groan despite myself.

How can I possibly leave this delicious food unfinished?

No! Noooo! I won't do it!

But my stomach has reached its limit, my throat is closing up shop, and my mouth refuses to take another bite.

My body won't listen to me. I've been betrayed!

What insanity is this?!

How can I allow such a terrible tragedy?

I can't, obviously!

"Wehhh..."

"Miss?! Please don't cry, miss! There, there, it's all right. Okay?"

The nice lady comforts me, but that doesn't change the reality that I can't finish the food in front of me.

The greatest misfortune that's befallen me since becoming a god is the fact that I can't eat as much as I used to.

Battle power?

That's not nearly as important as food!

Until now, with my monster body and Satiation skill, I could eat way more

than you would think possible just from looking at me.

Thanks to that, it's been ages since I last experienced the feeling of being too stuffed to eat another bite.

I just ate and drank as much as I wanted.

But now that I'm a god, the tiniest amount of food makes me totally full!

Thinking about it, it's pretty obvious that without the Satiation skill, I'd be able to eat only the same amount as an average person.

If anything, Hiroyo Wakaba's body always had a small appetite, so I need only about half the amount of food most people might eat to feel full.

Yeah. If I remember right, cup ramen or a convenience-store bento box was enough to satisfy me.

Depending on which kind, sometimes I couldn't even finish the whole bento box.

So since my current body is based on that, it's no wonder I suddenly have a small appetite.

My heart wants to keep eating, but my body refuses to accept it.

Do you have any idea how awful that feels?!

Even now, no matter how much I want to finish the food in front of me, just looking at it makes my body want to puke a little bit!

Uuurgh, this is the worst.

What did I do to deserve this, God?

Okay, I know I've done plenty of bad stuff, but still.

Not to mention, *god* in this world mostly refers to that awful you-know-who...

Unreal.

Absolutely, positively unreal...

Utterly heartbroken, I push the cold food in front of me over to Sael, who's sitting across from me.

Sael has already demolished a giant plate of her own, but like most spider

monsters, she has the Satiation skill, so she can eat a lot more than you'd expect.

Even though her actual body is a palm-size spider, the skill allows her to eat several times her own body weight in no time flat.

She may have had the same meal I did, but I bet she can still finish my leftovers.

In fact, it's been a while now since Sael finished eating, so I bet she's already getting hungry again.

Ugh, to think that I of all people would have to relinquish my food to someone else!

Sael looks at my face, then my plate of food, then at the chef lady, then back at me and my food...

Uh, don't get stuck in an infinite loop, okay?

Just eat it already, dammit!

Sael doesn't seem to be able to escape the loop, so I just shove some food into her mouth.

Why are these little girls each so unique anyway?

Shouldn't they all be more like their mom, the Demon Lord?

Since she made them with the Egg-Laying skill, they're basically just inferior clones of her, y'know.

So why does she produce such weirdos?

Yeah, I said it. Weirdos.

They're weird, okay?

Except for maybe Ael. Thank goodness for her.

Sometimes I feel like Ael's the only one holding the puppet posse together.

For a second, it occurs to me that there might've been more individuals like Ael among the puppet spiders I killed a long time ago.

When the Demon Lord and I were still at war, I killed no less than seven

puppet spiders.

The four who are around now are the only survivors from that battle.

When I think about it that way, my relationship with the idiot who's stuffing her face mindlessly with food in front of me (also known as Sael) is actually pretty complicated.

Luckily, all three of them except for Ael are idiots, meaning they don't really think about that kind of thing and warmed up to me pretty quickly, but I bet Ael and the Demon Lord herself had some thoughts about it when we first teamed up.

I'm guessing Ael just calculated that it was in her own best interest to accept me quickly.

In that regard, she's definitely the talented eldest sister.

It's entirely possible that some of the other puppet spiders I killed were just as talented as Ael or maybe even more so.

If that was the case, it might've been easier to keep these idiots in check.

I imagine it for a moment.

Picture this: a total of ten little girls milling about.

Each of them acts on their own, so Ael just throws in the towel and lets them do whatever they want.

What is this supposed to be, a preschool?!

...Okay.

I hate to say it, but I'm glad there are only four of them.

Since there are only three problem children, Ael can handle them just fine.

Yeah. I just gotta stay positive.

Sael looks at me in confusion as she demolishes the last of my food.

Well, since she's a puppet spider, her face doesn't actually change, but I can pretty much tell at this point how she's feeling anyway.

Looking at Sael's blank expression, I shrug and pat her on the head.

That night, the Demon Lord returns with a troubled look on her face.

The baby bloodsucker looks furious, too.

Something must have happened.

“I have two pieces of bad news,” the Demon Lord begins once we’ve all gathered together.

Unlike the baby bloodsucker, she doesn’t quite look murderous, but her brow is furrowed deeply.

The Demon Lord is usually pretty easygoing, so when she’s this serious, it usually means trouble.

“First, it looks like we’ll have to stay in this town for a few days.”

I tilt my head in confusion.

Our plan was to gather supplies for crossing the Mystic Mountains and leave right away, since this is the best time of year to make the journey.

This world does have seasons, even if they’re not as dramatically different as in Japan.

Right now, it’s technically summer.

It’s kind of chilly outside, but still.

The Mystic Mountains are so cold that they’re covered in snow all year long.

If we don’t cross while the weather is even slightly warmer than usual, it’s gonna be a rough trip.

Before my deification, we might’ve been able to push through even in winter, but now I’m way too much of a burden for something so adventurous.

Because of me, we can’t use the route we originally planned: the shortest way across that the Demon Lord took on her way here.

I mean, we’re talking hundreds of miles of mountain, y’know?

I can’t even stroll across a flat plain without passing out!

Therefore, our new plan is to wind through the gaps between the mountains, avoiding high elevations as much as we can.

It's still gonna be tough, but it's the best we can do.

This roundabout route is gonna take way longer, and considering the possibility of unforeseen occurrences, it's in our best interest to leave as soon as possible.

If we miss this chance, we'll have to hang out in this town for a whole year until summer comes around again.

So why would we be staying in town any longer than necessary?

"The road we're supposed to take is under a blockade. Apparently some super-evil monster has appeared, see. It's an ogre, but it's killed a bunch of adventurers already, so they're saying it's too dangerous to leave town. What awful timing, right?"

That makes sense, unfortunately.

The lady who made me lunch mentioned something about a dangerous ogre, too, come to think of it.

For the safety of the townspeople, it's only natural that they wouldn't want anyone to go in the direction where a dangerous monster's lurking about.

But still, considering that the Demon Lord's strong enough to crush some stupid ogre with one finger, it's a bit pointless to insist that she not leave town.

"So we're stuck here until they get rid of that ogre. The imperial army's apparently putting together a whole big squad to take care of it, so we'll just have to wait it out till then."

Gotcha.

So we have to chill out in this town for a few days until they take care of that ogre, huh?

And wait a sec, they're bringing in the army?

Guess this ogre must be stronger than I thought.

I'm sure the Demon Lord could still beat it with one punch, though.

In fact, wouldn't it be faster for her to go take care of it herself?

She's technically got an adventurer permit, so why doesn't she just beat the

ogre as an adventurer or whatever?

“Why don’t you just defeat the ogre yourself, Miss Ariel?”

Ooh, looks like Vampy was thinking the same thing.

“Hrmmm. We don’t wanna stand out here, so I’d like to leave that as a last resort. Plus, there’s supposed to be some famous mage and swordsman in the army that’s coming, so we wouldn’t want to pick a fight with them.”

The Demon Lord doesn’t seem to want in on the whole ogre-hunting biz.

I can’t imagine that the army would be upset if the Demon Lord beat the ogre first, and even if they were, I’m sure she’s strong enough to handle them.

But it’d still be a pain for sure, and in the worst-case scenario, it could slow down our trip through the Mystic Mountains even further.

Since the imperial army’s supposedly gonna beat this ogre without her help, I guess she’d rather just wait until they take care of it for her.

We’re probably only delaying our departure by a few days, so it shouldn’t affect our journey anyway.

If it were a few weeks, that’d be another story.

“So we’re going to sit tight until the ogre gets beaten. Merazophis, be careful not to draw any attention, all right?”

“Of course.”

Mera nods.

If anyone was going to cause a problem here, it’d be Mera.

Sael and I do run the risk of being spotted as monsters, but that just means we have to stay out of sight as much as possible.

As a natural shut-in, I have no problem with staying inside, and I don’t wanna go out into the sun anyway.

And Sael wouldn’t go outside unless she was specifically told to do so.

But Mera’s situation is different.

He and the baby bloodsucker are vampires.

The little one's a Progenitor, so her title cancels out normal vampire weaknesses, like sunlight and needing to periodically drink blood.

But Mera doesn't have that advantage.

He takes a small amount of damage if sunlight touches him, and he has to drink blood occasionally.

The latter is the real monkey wrench. It means Mera has to attack people and drink their blood.

And not just any blood. Human blood is by far the most effective.

The blood of monsters like us gives him only enough energy to hold him over temporarily.

Since Mera used to be a human, drinking human blood is the only way to keep him going, for whatever reason.

Okay, I don't understand the specifics, but basically it means he has to drink human blood to get the results he needs.

Which means he's been attacking humans every night to drink their blood whenever we visit a town, but now the Demon Lord's saying he has to cut that out.

We wouldn't want to draw the imperial army's attention.

"Fortunately, I have some in reserve, so I'll be all right."

Mera's not talking about carrying around bottles of blood or anything like that.

Since his Vampire skill has leveled up, he gained the ability to stash the blood he drinks inside his body.

He can gradually stockpile any excess blood, so now he can go for a short while without drinking blood if he absolutely needs to.

"So yeah, that's the first problem, but it's not super-serious. It's the other problem that's kind of the big one."

The Demon Lord crosses her arms, still looking serious.

For some reason, though, something about her expression says that she's not

quite convinced.

What in the world happened?

“To sum it up, we just got attacked by a group of elves.”

The Demon Lord is saying that our greatest enemy of all, the elves, has just come after us.

After two years of unnerving silence, Potimas has made an assassination attempt.



A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH A NEMESIS

It happened earlier this afternoon.

“Huh? The road is blocked off?”

Miss Ariel’s voice echoes through the guild.

There aren’t many people here, and it’s not particularly large, so Miss Ariel’s voice is pretty clear.

“I’m afraid so. An extremely dangerous monster has appeared near the road up ahead. Until the monster has been dealt with, the road is closed. We truly apologize for the inconvenience.”

The receptionist bows politely.

This place is an adventurers’ guild.

Adventurers are essentially professionals whose job is to defeat monsters, and this guild is where they gather.

Monsters have a tendency to aggressively attack humans, so in order to ensure the safety of the town and major roads, there have to be people to fight those monsters.

That’s where adventurers come in.

In this world, even the smallest village or town has to have adventurers, who are generally well respected by society.

This town is no exception, which is why they have this adventurers’ guild.

A single step out of town is where the realm of monsters begins.

In addition to hunting monsters, adventurers also protect ordinary civilians who have business outside town.

Which is why you can never have too many.

“Ahhh. Is that why there are so few people here?”

Ariel looks around and nods.

A town this size should have a healthy population of adventurers, yet the guild is almost entirely devoid of people.

They must all be out hunting for that monster right now.

“No, erm...”

The woman trails off vaguely.

Peering at her, Miss Ariel frowns as a thought comes to mind.

“Don’t tell me... Have this town’s adventurers been more or less wiped out?”

““Huh?”” the receptionist and I utter in unison.

I shoot a nervous look at the receptionist, but she isn’t paying me any mind, just staring at Ariel with a pale face.

Judging by her expression, it’s all too evident that Miss Ariel’s guess was correct.

I suppose the receptionist and I were surprised for different reasons: I was surprised because Miss Ariel’s words came out of nowhere, and the receptionist was surprised because she’d guessed the truth.

“I see. Well, that’s unfortunate.” Ariel sounds somewhat detached or maybe annoyed. “I guess there’s nothing we can do about the blockade, then. So are they actually going to defeat that monster?”

“Er, yes. The army is being mobilized and should be on its way.”

“An army? Not adventurers from other towns?” Ariel asks.

“Ha, not a chance. No adventurers are ever gonna beat that thing. Besides, the only adventurers left around here right now are from other towns. They were too late to join the hunting party, so lucky for them, they got to live.”

Instead of the receptionist, one of the adventurers answers Miss Ariel’s question.

One of the few adventurers in this mostly deserted guild.

“Mr. Gotou...,” the receptionist murmurs somewhat pityingly.

The man approaching us with a lopsided grin must be named Gotou.

And judging by the receptionist’s attitude and the way he speaks as if he’s seen the monster, he must be one of the few survivors of the wiped-out adventurers.

“Nice to meet you lovely ladies. The name’s Gotou. Might not look it, but I’m an A-rank adventurer. Though that title ain’t worth much after I ran away from that ogre with my tail between my legs.”

Gotou shrugs bitterly.

Looking closely, I see that his eyes are red around the edges.

He must have had close friends among the adventurers who were killed.

“Yeah? So what’s an A-rank adventurer like you doing here now?”

Rather harshly, Miss Ariel ignores his obvious plight.

Not even a word of comfort for this clearly wounded man?

Well, I suppose it might be strange to comfort a complete stranger who suddenly started talking to you.

“Oh, nothing. Just thought I’d do ya a little favor.” Gotou smiles wryly at Ariel’s cold demeanor, but then his smile fades to a serious expression. “I’m willing to bet you’re a lot stronger than you look, but if you’re thinking about going up against that ogre, I’d think again. That thing’s a beast. If you underestimate it just ‘cause it’s an ogre, you’re gonna end up regretting it, just like all of us did. That thing’s a walking natural disaster, same class as any elder wyrm.”

It sounds like the dangerous monster that’s appeared is an ogre, albeit a very unusual one.

But what really catches my attention is that Gotou discerned Miss Ariel’s true strength so easily.

Miss Ariel looks like a child, not an all-powerful being, but those with sharp

senses might detect a hint of the sheer intimidating aura rolling off her.

Even if she turns off the Intimidation skill, she can't quite suppress it because of the effects of titles and such.

But with her high Stealth, she can generally hide that, too, so only people with particularly strong intuition should be able to see through it.

If he picked up on Ariel's true nature, then this Gotou must be pretty strong himself.

I guess he's an A-rank adventurer for a reason.

"The army that's coming is being led by Elder Ronandt and Elder Nyudoz. Just let them take care of it. No need to try face a monster like that by yourself."

I don't recognize the names Gotou mentioned, but based on his tone, they must be quite strong.

Perhaps even strong enough to defeat an ogre with the strength of a full-grown wyrm.

"Hrmmm. All right, then. We'll wait it out until that ogre's taken care of. Not that I planned on meddling with the thing myself in the first place."

Miss Ariel shrugs.

From her perspective, this is probably an unwelcome bit of advice.

Whether it's an ogre, a wyrm, or even a dragon for that matter, it wouldn't even pose a threat to Miss Ariel.

It would be a simple matter for her to defeat it, if she felt so inclined.

But she doesn't seem to want to, so either she's trying to be polite or just wants to avoid drawing too much attention to herself.

"Glad to hear it. What business ya got up that road anyway? It don't lead anywhere but the Mystic Mountains, y'know."

For a moment, Gotou's eyes seem to glint sharply.

Could he have caught on to Miss Ariel's true identity?

No, surely he'd have no way of knowing that she's the Demon Lord.

But he might have picked up on the fact that she's not human. If he sensed her power to a certain extent, he knows there's more to her than meets the eye.

Plus, she's traveling with a bunch of little girls in tow, including myself.

Right now, our group consists of Miss Ariel, Merazophis, Ael, Riel, Fiel, and me.

Aside from Merazophis, all of us appear to be children.

Ariel looks just barely old enough to be called a "young lady," but the rest of us look even younger than that.

I'm sure our group looks very unusual to other onlookers.

I wonder if they assume Merazophis is our guardian?

At any rate, since Miss Ariel is our leader and he knows that she's more powerful than she looks, I'm sure he finds us quite suspicious.

"Well then, it must be obvious that our business is in the Mystic Mountains," Miss Ariel responds casually.

Should you really be admitting that so honestly?

"And what might that be, eh?"

"Why should I have to tell you? I wouldn't give you any more information unless we were close enough to be sharing a bed first."

...I wish she wouldn't throw around such adult topics so casually.

You'll be a bad influence for all the little girls here, y'know.

Although I guess all of us, including me, are actually older than we look.

Ael, Riel, and Fiel are monsters like Miss Ariel, so they're hardly young.

And while my body is as young as it looks, my mind has been around for much longer.

If you include my previous life, I'm pretty grown up, no?

I do feel like I don't fully have control over what my body does sometimes, but my mental age is quite high, I think.

If you take my age in my old life into account, I'm surely an adult by now.

I always assumed that once I reached my twenties, I'd naturally calm down and become more mature, but I never imagined that I'd actually end up back in the body of a child.

But I suppose it was unrealistic to assume that I'd turn into a proper adult based on age alone.

I suppose I hoped that the people who used to look down on me would become a little easier to deal with in adulthood, too.

But looking at myself now, I can't help feeling like all of that was just wishful thinking.

...Wait a moment.

Does that mean that I haven't actually done that much growing up mentally, but I'm avoiding that fact and giving up instead?

No, that can't be.

I'm a proper lady.

I might look like a young girl, but I have to be well-balanced at least on the inside!

I'm an adult.

I'm an adult!

All right.

"Guess you got a point. Sorry to bother ya."

While my mind was wandering in an unexpected direction, it seems like Miss Ariel settled things with Gotou.

He's peeling away, so it looks like there won't be any unnecessary trouble.

If he'd been too persistent, it might've ended badly, considering Miss Ariel's true identity.

In the worst-case scenario, Ariel and company might have beaten him to a pulp.

Really, Miss Ariel could destroy this whole town if she was so inclined.

By wisely choosing to withdraw, Gotou might've just narrowly escaped death.

"Any other information worth noting?"

"Ah, no, I don't believe so."

Ariel abruptly turns back to the flustered receptionist.

"Oh, right. They were building a village at the foot of the Mystic Mountains, but the place is a total ghost town now." Contrary to the receptionist's words, Gotou provides some other news. "Rumor has it that the ogre might've killed 'em all. If you knew anyone there, well, I'm sorry for your loss."

"Huh. Well, I didn't, so I guess that doesn't make much difference to me."

At Ariel's response, Gotou's eyes glitter again.

"Mr. Gotou, that information's supposed to be top secret..."

"Oops, my bad! Totally forgot. Pretend you didn't hear that, all right?"

Miss Ariel rolls her eyes and shrugs in response.

"Let's go, shall we?"

Deeming it pointless to stay here any longer, Miss Ariel leads us out of the guild.

As soon as we exit, I use a certain skill.

It's a vampire Progenitor skill that creates familiars.

I use it to make a mouse familiar and leave it at the guild house.

This gives me the ability to link my consciousness with the familiar.

In this case, I have it approach Gotou without being spotted.

Then I listen closely.

"When is the army arriving?"

Through the familiar's ears, I hear Gotou's voice, sounding much more serious than before.

"Oh, erm, we d-don't know the particulars just yet..."

The receptionist stammers.

Maybe Gotou's sudden change in demeanor is making her nervous?

"Well, shit. The hell's going on in this place? Is this town cursed or what?"

"P-pardon?"

As Gotou mutters darkly, the receptionist stares at him in confusion.

As I watch through the familiar's eyes, Gotou heaves a heavy sigh and speaks again.

"I'd bet anything that those folks were demons."

"What?!"

The receptionist exclaims with shock.

"Shhh! Keep your voice down! I'm not positive yet, but no human that age would normally carry themselves like that. Demons often look younger than they actually are. Most likely, that was a group of demon spies, using their appearance to blend in and gather information about humans. Bet they're planning to go through the Mystic Mountains and retreat into the demon realm once they're done here, yeah?"

Wow.

That's not exactly right but still pretty darn close.

"They are?! Oh no! Whatever shall we do?!"

"I told you to keep it down! For now, I dunno if this town's forces would be able to deal with 'em, what with us adventurers being in this sorry state. If those guys are going to leave without causing any trouble, there's no sense in pissing them off for no reason."

Oh?

I thought this was going to end up being a huge pain, but it seems like Gotou is willing to just wait and watch.

"Really? Are you sure that's all right?"

"It's not exactly my first choice, but something about those girls gave me the

feeling we wouldn't be able to beat 'em. They must be pretty well-trained demons. I know they seem small, but they looked at me like I wasn't worth a damn. Like they knew they'd be able to easily deal with me if it came down to a fight."

Well, he's not wrong.

"Ugh, maybe I should retire from being an adventurer already. My confidence is in pieces here."

Gotou seems seriously down in the dumps, and the receptionist, unsure whether to comfort him or how to do so, simply watches him anxiously.

"Anyway. Make sure you tell the guild master about this, yeah? In fact, maybe it'd be faster if I do it myself."

"W-wait! Shouldn't we tell the Church, too?"

"Yeah, good point. You take care of that, then. I'll go talk to the guild master."

With that, Gotou heads up some stairs behind the reception desk.

The receptionist hesitates for a moment, then tells the few remaining adventurers that she's stepping away from her desk for a little while and goes outside.

She's probably off to tell the so-called *Church* about us.

That probably means the Word of God religion, right?

In that case, she's probably wasting her time.

I'm sure the Word of God people are already well aware that we're in this town.

During our journey, I've learned that the organization known as the Word of God religion is truly terrifying.

They have a church in just about every town and village, and all these churches constantly provide the organization with information in secret.

Since being reincarnated into this world, I've become painfully aware of the true value of information.

Here, it's perfectly normal for something that's common knowledge in one

town to be completely unheard-of in the next.

That's a huge adjustment from Japan, where you could look up anything online whenever you wanted.

In extreme cases, one town might be panicking on the verge of starvation while the next town over is flourishing with an overabundant harvest.

In this world, information mostly travels on foot.

So the farther away one place is from another, the longer it will take for information to arrive.

There are some special methods like teleportation, but there are precious few individuals with the skill.

You'd have to be a Spatial Magic master or powerful enough to be able to use a teleport gate.

Both of those things are completely inaccessible to the average person.

Which is why in this world, people don't really understand the value of information.

If you don't have any way of knowing what's going on in other places, it might as well not be happening at all.

By establishing churches in various places around the entire world and staffing every outpost with people who have a certain skill, the Word of God religion can gather information from everywhere at once.

That skill is known as Fartalk.

It's an advanced form of the Telepathy skill that allows you to communicate telepathically with people who are far away.

When I was a baby and still couldn't speak properly, I relied on this skill quite a bit.

But in this society, most people consider that skill pointless.

The common view is that you might as well just communicate in person directly, and most of all, you have to use scarce skill points to acquire Telepathy.

After all, the only other way to get skills is by doing related actions until you build up enough proficiency to acquire the skill naturally, and there's no "related action" for Telepathy.

Well, I guess there *might* be, but there's certainly no way you could acquire Telepathy just by living your life normally.

That means the only sure way to acquire the Telepathy skill is to use skill points, but those are a highly limited resource.

I was born with a huge amount of skill points, maybe because I'm a reincarnation, but most people aren't born with any at all.

The only way to get skill points is to obtain them naturally as you age or level up.

And that only earns you very small amounts, so people have to be cautious about how they spend them.

As a result, there aren't that many people who choose to use skill points on something like Telepathy, it seems.

I do think it ends up being a useful skill if you have it, but most people won't spend their valuable skill points on something that's only mildly convenient.

But the Word of God religion really uses the Telepathy skill to its maximum potential.

They have their personnel train up their Telepathy until it evolves into Fartalk, allowing them to converse with people who are far away, and then they dispatch those personnel to far-off towns and villages so that they can gather information instantly.

The resulting information network is one of the Word of God's greatest assets.

In a society where towns can't even communicate conveniently with their neighbors, this religion can gather information from any of their churches across the world.

Frankly, there's no organization in this world that could possibly beat the Word of God religion in an information war.

If the Word of God was so inclined, they could easily spread false rumors or cover up any inconvenient truths.

And they use that informational power to keep their influence strong.

The Pontiff's strength is proof enough of that.

And since the Word of God has this information network, I have no doubt that they already know where we are.

We're too important for the Pontiff to ignore, especially Miss Ariel.

In addition to their church-based information network, no doubt they have surveillance on us as well.

In the incident two years ago, the Pontiff was able to appear in front of us in no time flat, even though we were carefully avoiding the public eye.

So even if that receptionist goes running to the Church, I'm sure she'll only be telling them what they already know.

And I don't think the Pontiff would be stupid enough to make an enemy of Miss Ariel just because of that.

I'm sure he'll handle the situation gracefully.

That's the one thing he can be trusted to do.

...Even if it leaves me with complicated feelings to trust the man partly responsible for my parents' deaths with anything at all.

At this time, even as my senses are linked with my familiar in the guild, I'm also walking along with Ariel and the others.

Not only am I focusing on the familiar, I'm thinking about unnecessary things, which I suppose means my guard is down.

"...shi!"

That's why I react a second too late.

I hear a shout and feel someone grab my arm.

"Huh?!"

Whirling around, I see a small girl.

She looks just as young as I do—no, even younger.

And she's reaching out from an alleyway, grabbing my arm.

Normally, I might freeze up in the face of such an unexpected event.

But this time, I react on pure instinct.

Because this girl's ears are long and pointed.



“An elf! Don’t touch me!”

I shake off the girl’s hand and push away her small frame with all my might.

On top of that, I even cast magic at her.

My Ice Magic courses through the alleyway, freezing it over.

However, the elf girl has already disappeared before it can freeze her.

I felt something strange when I pushed her away, and I realize belatedly that she was holding hands with someone.

That person must have used Spatial Magic to teleport away with the girl.

What if her hand had still been on my arm?

I would’ve been teleported along with them.

That must have been the goal of their attack. They used a little girl to get me to let my guard down in the hopes of abducting me.

“Are you all right?”

“I think so.”

“For now, let’s just get out of here before anyone notices.”

Miss Ariel guides the others and me away from the alley.

Since I used my magic to the best of my ability, the entire alley is frozen over, which is sure to draw attention.

Considering the situation with Gotou, it might lead to some major problems if anyone finds out we were involved in this ruckus.

“Did she call you Negishi?”

On our way back to the inn, Miss Ariel murmurs something to me.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m sure it was just my imagination.”

Though she brushes it off lightly, Miss Ariel’s expression looks grim.



THE OLD MAN FIGHTS AN OGRE

“Urrrgh.”

“What’s the matter, Master? You finally gonna croak ’cause you’re so damn old or what?”

I drop a fist on the head of my incredibly rude second apprentice.

“Owww! What the hell, old man?! Are you out of your mind, smacking a young lady on the head like that?! Wait, no, I’m sorry. You’ve been out of your mind for a long time now.”

Even a light smack isn’t enough to stop this young lady’s foul mouth.

She’s always been crass, but it seems to me that she’s only gotten worse over the past few years.

I originally hired Aurel as an assistant of sorts, but after a surprising turn of events led me to realize her magical potential, I made her my second apprentice.

Specifically, this happened when my first apprentice, Julius, was halfway through death’s door, and Aurel used Healing Magic to save him.

Imagine my shock when I saw a tearful Aurel re-create Healing Magic just based on what she’d seen before.

After all, using magic without the assistance of a skill is a feat I have only ever seen performed by the master.

It was only for a moment, but when she cried out, “Sir Hero, don’t die!” and managed to replicate a healing spell, I was struck with admiration.

With enough training, she could be as powerful as I—no, perhaps even more

so.

Thus, I somewhat forcibly made her my apprentice, but the unfortunate reality is that she seems to be utterly unmotivated.

Still, she already has more talent than your average adult mage, so my eyes did not deceive me.

“The problem, old man, is that you’ve filled your whole head to bursting with nothing but damn magic. If it seeps into your body, too, and makes you explode or something, you’d be doing the whole damn world a favor, I guess.”

...No, it’s definitely not my imagination. Her abusive language toward me has grown far more colorful over the years.

As I raise my fist again in silence, my apprentice emits a strange little shriek and dodges away, taking cover behind an elderly knight in golden armor.

“Sir Ronandt! Do you think it chivalrous for a knight to raise a hand against a child?!”

The armor-clad individual bellows so loudly that I fear for my eardrums.

“I am no knight, so that is of little consequence to me. Besides, this is simply my method of teaching. Have you not heard of ‘tough love’? If anything, my second apprentice here is at fault for attempting to flee.”

“Oh-ho! I see!”

The old knight, who is all too easily won over by my words, is called Nyudoz.

As you might guess, he is something of a muscle head.

To borrow Aurel’s phrase, his head is filled with nothing but muscles, just like the rest of his body.

In other words, he is a moron.

However, as a veteran who once fought alongside the previous sword-king, his strength is indisputable.

He is a master swordsman, perhaps even on the same level as the previous sword-king himself.

Though he is just as far along in years as I am, he is still on active duty,

standing guard over the northern fortress.

Of course, this is only due to a command from the nobles who do not wish to let the lowborn Nyudoz too close to the heart of power, but a simpleton like him is happier swinging his sword around in the thick of battle anyway.

Today, he is assisting me in leading the assault against that ogre as a field commander, but he is far too foolish to actually do any commanding.

“Very well! Go and accept your beating, then!”

“What the hell kind of logic is that?!”

Nyudoz grabs my second apprentice and pushes her in front of me.

He’s a moron, all right.

“Ah, forget it. But, Nyudoz, could you lower your volume a tad? My ears can scarcely bear the pain.”

“Oh-ho! And how might I go about lowering my volume?”

...Ah, forget it.

Somehow, this simpleton is beloved by all his soldiers. Truly, some things in this world are beyond comprehension.

As I stare at him grimly, a messenger runs up to inform us that the soldiers have taken their positions.

“I see. Then preparations are complete.”

“Indeed! No ogre stands a chance against my sword and your magic! For the sake of our fallen brethren, let us turn this beast into rust upon my sword!”

I cannot help but agree wholeheartedly with Nyudoz’s declaration, if not with his volume.

With Nyudoz at the front and myself at the rear, no ordinary enemy stands a ghost of a chance.

However, this ogre is no ordinary enemy.

“Apprentice Two. Do you remember the intelligence we received about this ogre?”

“Uh-huh. You know I do.”

“Then, as practice, please recite the traits of an ordinary ogre and the unique traits of this one.”

Instead of following my instructions, my apprentice looks at me suspiciously.

“Is there a problem, child?”

“No, no. I was just wondering—you didn’t already forget what they told us at the guild, did you, Master?”

“Nonsense. Of course not. It’s this fool who’s doubtless forgotten.”

I point at Nyudoz, and understanding dawns on Aurel’s face.

Nyudoz is standing with his arms crossed, looking serious.

But serious though his expression may be, it’s obvious that he’s forgotten what we were told.

The man’s brain consists of nothing but muscle, after all. I’m sure any and all explanations go in one ear and out the other.

Even if the information contained within was gained at the cost of many adventurers’ lives.

“Ahem. So a normal ogre is no big deal, right? They’re humanoid monsters, and their intelligence varies from one to the other. But most of them are supposed to only be as smart as a human of around three years old, so they can’t do much more than speak a few simple words and wave their weapons around. Your lesser ogre has the physique of a grown human male, give or take. When they evolve, they get bigger, and supposedly an Ogre King is several times the height of a human. They’re generally power types, just like you’d expect, so they’re not super-fast, but their attacks are pretty damn strong. Since they’re humanoid and all, a few of them might have magic or other unexpected skills, but that kinda thing is rare as hell. Most ogres move in groups and rarely leave their territories. Uh...I guess that’s about it? Is that good enough, old man?”

“Indeed it is.”

I nod my approval.

Apprentice Two's description is quite accurate.

"So with all that in mind, could you describe the ogre we're about to face?"

"With all that in mind? I mean, are we sure this thing's even an ogre? It has next to none of the features I just listed."

Hrmmm. She's not wrong, but I wish she'd just get on with the explanation.

"This ogre has a whole bunch of special skills, and it seems to be pretty damn smart. A lot of the details are still shrouded in mystery, but we know that among its skills there's something that provides sudden, total recovery. Its wounds, magic, and even energy can just get completely maxed out of nowhere, apparently. Also, its stats can temporarily go way the hell up. Far as we know, the effect doesn't last long, but it's crazy dangerous in combination with the whole healing thing. And the most important thing is it seems to have a skill that allows it to make magic swords."

"Magic swords, you say?!"

Why is Nyudoz responding only to that last part?

In fact, why is he reacting this way at all when we heard the same explanation at the guild?

He reacted the same way the first time, but clearly he's already forgotten.

"An ogre with magic swords, indeed! Perhaps my beloved blade has found a worthy opponent!"

Nyudoz's sword is a magic sword, too.

I guess this sparked his competitive nature...

"Yeah, I don't think it's that simple. It doesn't just *have* a magic sword; it has a skill that can *make* magic swords, remember?"

An ogre with magic swords would be surprising enough on its own, but a skill that can make magic swords is completely unheard-of.

"Hrmmm?! Now, how exactly is that different?!"

"It's incredibly different, you idiot."

A monster with a magic sword would be bad, but a monster that can create

magic swords using a skill is infinitely worse.

If it just happened to have magic swords, then we would need to worry only about those swords' abilities.

Magic swords are powerful weapons either way, but they have a limited range of abilities.

If you know what a magic sword is capable of, there are plenty of ways to counteract it.

But if the ogre can create magic swords freely, and especially if it can change those magic swords' abilities at will, then it's all but impossible to prepare in advance.

We were told that the ogre fought with two magic swords—one fire and one lightning—but it's possible that the situation has changed since then.

We have no idea what our opponent will be planning.

And if it can create magic swords, that means it could have any number of them.

One magic sword is dangerous enough, so having more than one is a serious threat.

And this ogre even has magic swords that it doesn't mind destroying in the course of combat.

It seems that it can produce them without limit, after all.

In fact, the adventurers who fought the ogre before were wiped out by exploding magic swords.

Magic swords are generally far too valuable to use and throw away, but if you can make them in unlimited quantities, it's quite a different story.

This ogre can produce many different kinds of magic swords and use them disposably without hesitation.

What a troublesome opponent.

"Do you understand now? Hrmmm. It seems that you do not."

I attempted to explain why a skill that creates magic swords is so dangerous,

but Nyudoz's only response is steam rising from his ears as he attempts to process the information.

I thought I phrased it as simply as possible, but it seems that even this was too difficult for a moron of this caliber.

"In other words, I suppose, this enemy is very strong."

"Oh-ho! Yes, I understand everything now!"

No, I don't think you do...

"Shall we go over our strategy, then?"

Ignoring Nyudoz, I turn my gaze to my second apprentice.

My apprentice senses the meaning behind my gaze and begins to explain the basics of our strategy.

"Yes, sir. Our strategy is simple. We'll station soldiers around the area so the ogre can't run away. Then we'll nail it with a huge magical barrage, close in on the bastard, and finish it off."

Hrmmm. Well. I suppose that's correct.

I wish she could've explained with a bit more depth, however.

The reason I'll be starting with a preemptive magic strike across a wide area is in order to neutralize the exploding magic swords that killed more than half the adventurers in the previous battle.

These swords were evidently buried underground and explode when stepped on.

Most likely, a certain amount of pressure causes them to go off.

This is precious information paid for in blood by many an adventurer.

We have no way of knowing exactly how many trump cards the enemy possesses, but this strategy should eliminate one of them, at least.

It's hard to say whether that information was worth the sacrifice of all those adventurers' lives, but they died all the same, so we must accept it and act upon this information with reverence and respect.

“That’s the long and short of it, Master. We’ll be counting on ya.”

“What are you saying? That is your job, is it not?”

“Huh?”

Apprentice Two stares at me for a moment, then slowly points at herself.

Silently, I nod.

“Whaaat?! *Me?!?*”

She’s overreacting, as usual.

All she has to do is sweep the area clean with powerful magic.

“I can’t do it! No way in hell!”

“Young lady! You should never deem something impossible before you’ve attempted it! You won’t know what you’re capable of unless you try!”

For once, Nyudoz actually says something sensible.

Indeed, I don’t believe I’ve asked the impossible of her in the least.

I proposed this only because I believe my apprentice can do it.

“Indeed, there is no harm in giving it a try. Even if you fail, the worst that can happen is that I will laugh at you for hours afterward.”

“Wow, Master, you’re the worst!”

“I believe you mean *best*.”

My apprentice continues whining for a while, but eventually she senses that I have no intention of relenting and grumbles as she starts channeling her magic.

Hrmmm. It appears that she’s chosen the Gale Magic spell Falling Sky.

It is a wide-range attack spell that strikes the ground with a blast of air.

It isn’t particularly lethal, only powerful enough to slow down an advancing army, so it isn’t a terribly popular spell.

However, when you reach my level of aptitude, you can easily crush someone to death with it.

And the advantage of this spell is that it consumes relatively little MP despite

its wide range.

This is the perfect spell for my young disciple to cover the entire area of the ogre's forest.

A good judgment.

However, her slow, sloppy rune structure proves that she still has a long way to go.

After quite a while, Apprentice Two finishes her spell and activates it.

The compressed air smashes down onto the ground, shaking the very earth.

Branches snap off the trees in the area, and the snow piled on the ground goes flying into the air.

Then another set of tremors runs through the ground, different from the ones caused by Falling Sky.

The trees that weren't completely destroyed by my apprentice's spell break free at the trunk before getting blown away, and the snow disappears into eruptions of flame.

It looks as if a powerful fire-type spell has unfolded before us.

"Goodness me."

Despite myself, I murmur in surprise and admiration.

Aurel's spell has set off the exploding magic swords the ogre set in the ground, just as it was supposed to.

However, I never expected the results to be so drastic.

How many magic swords must have been in the earth to cause such massive destruction?

If we had charged in without a plan, it would have resulted in nothing but a second act of the tragedy that befell the first adventurer band.

We shall have to tread even more carefully from here on out.

As my assistant stares at the blaze before her, she slumps to the ground in shock.

Although I suppose part of that is exhaustion from expending so much of her magic energy.

“Now’s our chance! All units, charge!”

As soon as the explosions cease, Nyudoz shouts an order.

It isn’t as loud as the explosions were, but surely the soldiers must have all heard him.

They start to move immediately.

But if they were able to hear it, the ogre must have heard it as well.

Without a doubt, it will soon be on the move.

“Nyudoz, I shall join you on the front lines. Fall back, Apprentice Two.”

“Oh-ho!”

“Gotcha, sir.”

Nyudoz and I march forward with the soldiers.

Since my apprentice has used up her magic, it’s best for her to stay away from the front lines.

Sharpening my senses, I proceed toward where the ogre’s presence seems strongest.

The ground has been torn up by the explosions, while fallen trees also slow our advance.

Crossing over the difficult terrain carefully, we proceed slowly but surely toward the ogre.

“Hrmmm?! ”

However, the ogre will not simply wait for us to arrive.

Something flies toward us and lands in the ground before our eyes.

“A magic sword?! ”

Nyudoz’s shout is correct.

“It’s going to explode! Stay away from it!”

Obeying his order, the soldiers give the magic sword a wide berth.

However, a dreadful premonition strikes me, and I Appraise the sword.

“No! Fall back!”

Just as I shout a warning, another magic sword comes flying and lands in the earth some distance from the first one.

And before the soldiers can react, a bright light arcs into the air.

“Is it too late?!”

Watching the front lines fall back, I realize that my warning might not have made it in time.

The sword sticking out of the ground wasn’t an exploding one.

It’s imbued with lightning.

A powerful electric current surges between the first sword and the second.

The soldiers standing at the front are brought down by the electric shock.

A scent of burning flesh fills the air.

The ones who took a direct hit were probably killed instantly.

What horrifying power.

And that’s not the only thing to fear about these magic swords.

A wall of lightning now blocks our way forward, covering the ground between the two swords.

The same lightning that was powerful enough to kill those soldiers in an instant is flowing continuously, forming a formidable barrier.

If we try to press forward recklessly, we’ll only increase the number of casualties even further.

But we cannot simply withdraw without doing anything.

“Hrmph! I shall pull that sword out of the ground myself!”

“Foolishness. Even you would not be unharmed if you touch that sword.”

As I stop Nyudoz from running up to the sword that’s producing the lightning,

a new magic sword comes flying through the lightning barrier.

Unlike the others, this one is clearly aimed straight toward us.

“Watch out!”

I quickly prepare a spell and launch it at the magic sword.

A Fireball, the kind of magic I specialize in best, crashes into the sword and causes an explosion in midair.

The shock waves send several soldiers flying to the ground.

Fortunately, they’ve only been knocked down and aren’t severely injured, but I have no doubt that it would have ended quite differently if that explosion struck them directly.

So the ogre is able to throw exploding swords as well as planting them in the ground.

This does not bode well.

If we’re pinned in place by this lightning barrier, the lot of us will be sitting ducks for more of those exploding swords, worsening our losses.

We simply must do something.

I look past the barrier to see beyond.

Though it should be impossible to see it with the naked eye, my Clairvoyance skill allows me to detect where the ogre stands.

It holds a magic sword in each hand, preparing to throw them this way at any moment.

What an enormous creature.

The magic swords in its hands are average-size long swords, but the size of the ogre makes them look like daggers.

Ogres grow larger each time they evolve.

In which case, it’s safe to assume that this ogre has evolved a considerable number of times.

In fact, it has evolved to a King, the pinnacle of the ogre species.

The ogre flings one of the magic swords.

I use another spell to meet it in midair, the resulting explosion eliciting more shouts among the soldiers.

“Don’t lose your heads!”

Thanks to Nyudoz’s scolding, they manage to hold the line.

However, if they keep getting attacked one-sidedly, some of these soldiers will surely flee soon.

I have no intention of simply waiting around for that eventuality.

“We’ve let this beast have its way long enough. Time for a little surprise of our own.”

No doubt my current expression is a rather evil one.

“It’s your time to shine, Nyudoz.”

“Hrmmm?!”

I place a hand on Nyudoz’s shoulder.

Shortly afterward, he disappears on the spot.

Then he reappears again, directly in front of the ogre’s eyes.

“Grrrgh?!”

“What?!”

Nyudoz and the ogre let out surprised cries at the same time.

Spatial Magic: Teleport.

I used that spell to surpass the lightning barrier and send Nyudoz over to the ogre.

Perhaps I should have warned Nyudoz first, but it’s possible that the ogre would catch wind of our plan with augmented hearing or the like, so I felt this was the best way to catch the creature off guard.

Besides, Nyudoz functions on pure animal instinct.

If nothing else, I trust him to take the appropriate action without even

thinking.

Sure enough, his surprise lasts only a fraction of a second before he slashes at the ogre.

As Nyudoz's sword closes in, the ogre abandons the magic sword it was ready to throw and instead draws one of the magic swords at its waist to block the attack.

It must have changed its mind because blocking with the throwing sword would cause it to explode, hurting the ogre itself.

The monster was able to judge that in an instant and calmly decide on appropriate countermeasures.

What a terrifying creature.

The two swords clash; then their wielders both leap back.

With that, the sword fight between Nyudoz and the ogre begins.

The ogre swings its two swords, blocking Nyudoz's attacks.

Its swords are of strange make: slightly curved blades with only a single sharpened side.

They look small compared to the ogre's giant body, but when they lock with Nyudoz's long sword, they appear to be about the same size.

This seems ill-suited to the ogre's giant stature, but not enough so to create an opening.

Most likely, the creature evolved so rapidly that it outgrew the swords that had been the proper size some time ago.

Nyudoz, who was once famous as a master of swordsmanship, seems to be handling the ogre's two-sword style with ease.

Though the ogre may have more weapons, it's far outmatched by Nyudoz's excellent swordsmanship, so it cannot quite gain the upper hand.

Hrmmm.

If one of its one-handed swords can block Nyudoz's attack, then the ogre would seem to have the advantage in brute strength.

But no doubt Nyudoz is far superior in technique.

There is a certain crudeness to the ogre's movements.

As if it hasn't received any proper training and is fighting on pure reflexes.

I suppose that is indeed the case.

How would an ogre possibly undergo formal training?

But if it's a match for Nyudoz even without training, this creature has terrifying potential.

An even match, eh?

But Nyudoz is known as one of the greatest masters of swordsmanship.

His old age has not tarnished his abilities, and now that the previous sword-knight has vanished, he is undoubtedly the strongest swordsman in the empire.

How can this ogre hold its own against him?

If we don't do something about this monster here and now, it might soon grow beyond our ability to fight it.

On top of that, there's the unknown power the adventurers' guild described: a sudden, drastic increase in stats, as well as total recovery.

Nyudoz is holding his own right now, but we must not let our guards down yet.

I activate Earth Magic.

An earthen spear bursts from the ground, pushing up the lightning sword that was stuck there.

The magic sword is stuck in the tip of the protrusion of earth.

With the sword in the air, the lightning barrier it was emitting has been raised as well.

"Now! Charge through the gap!"

As I shout, I deal with the other magic swords in the same way.

It's a simple solution that allows us to deal with the lightning swords without touching them.

As I move the rest of the swords, a path opens up for the soldiers, who begin to charge toward the ogre.

No matter how strong it might be, being outnumbered will surely leave the monster at a disadvantage.

If it had the kind of unthinkable strength wielded by that great being, this would be a different story, but if it is only about as strong as Nyudoz, the support of the soldiers should be a big help.

As well as my own support, of course.

If the ogre favors using fire and lightning, it's safe to assume that it has a high resistance to damage from those elements.

In that case, my best bet for a long-distance attack is perhaps light.

I prepare a spell.

It's the lowest grade of Light Magic.

Normally, it has a low cost, but I supply the spell with an excessive amount of magic power.

It's a technique I learned from those spiders.

It took more than two years to perfect, but as a result, my mastery of magic has been massively enhanced.

Now, even when I cast a low-grade spell, I can successfully increase the amount of magic used in order to make it many times more powerful.

And yet, the amount of time it takes to invoke does not change.

I am still far below the level of that master of magic, but I've taken another step closer to the heights of occultism.

Soon, I activate my extra powerful Light Magic spell.

The advantage of Light Magic is that it hits almost as soon as it is fired, making it easier to accurately aim at a small area.

Thanks to that, I can avoid the rapidly moving Nyudoz and strike only the ogre with my spell.

The Light Magic lands squarely on the ogre's feet, just as I planned.

The direct hit slows the ogre's movements.

Immediately spotting the opening, Nyudoz strikes out boldly.

The ogre swings the sword in its right hand, producing fire from the tip.

However, the raging flames don't reach Nyudoz.

For Nyudoz's sword is a magic sword, as well, this one imbued with Wind Magic.

The blowing wind scatters the flames before they can take hold.

Nyudoz pushes right through where the flames were, bringing his sword down toward the ogre, who blocks the strike with the magic sword in its left hand.

Lightning crackles out of the second blade, and Nyudoz is blown backward.

But such a minor blow could never kill that man.

As the ogre focuses on driving Nyudoz away, I hit it with more Light Magic.

This time, the spell has more power than before.

The magic strikes the ogre right in the head.

Even this mighty monster surely cannot survive if it loses its head.

The ogre's body twists and falls.

As it goes down, it flings the sword in its hand.

A vain struggle, but the lightning sword strikes one of the approaching soldiers, stealing away his life.

What an unlucky soul.

But this is where it ends.

And yet, a moment later, the ogre is surrounded by light and stands up.

The wound I inflicted upon its head is disappearing.

Impossible!

We were indeed told that it had the ability to completely recover, but how could that apply even to a fatal wound?!

Unthinkable. This is as if we were fighting an immortal beast.

If its healing was able to save it from that head wound, the only way I can think to defeat it would be to tear it apart so completely that even that healing could not re-form it.

Then I suppose a lesser spell simply won't do, even if enhanced with more magic power.

Even a greater spell may not destroy it unless I provide it with extra magic.

Can I do it?

Yes, I have reached a level of confidence where I can infuse a lesser spell with extra magic power and pull it off perfectly.

However, when it comes to more advanced magic, I am still a touch nervous.

The only spell of mine powerful enough to blow away that ogre's giant body would most likely be Inferno Magic, the advanced form of the Fire Magic at which I so excel.

Inferno Magic is already difficult to cast and control, so if I add magic on top of that?

It would be next to impossible, even for me.

In fact, Inferno Magic is not meant to be used by one person alone in the first place.

It is a spell generally constructed by multiple mages using the Cooperation skill.

My second apprentice often tells me that I must not be human to be able to use that spell on my own, but now I face an even more impossible task: infusing this spell with extra magic.

However, I cannot fail if we are to have any hope of defeating that ogre.

I have no choice but to make it work!

"Grrr?!"

The ogre growls.

For a moment, it seems as if its eyes have met mine through my Clairvoyance skill.

Hrmph! How unfortunate. It seems to have noticed me.

“Nyudoz! Keep it pinned down!”

“Got it!”

If I’m attacked while preparing a spell, I have no way of defending myself.

Nyudoz responds to my order to keep the ogre in check, boldly attacking it.

The soldiers follow his lead, slowly forming a circle around the monster and closing in.

No doubt Nyudoz will be able to keep the ogre occupied long enough for me to complete my spell.

Even with its incredible recovery power, the ogre cannot possibly survive an Inferno Magic spell infused with extra magic power.

This shall be the finishing blow!

“GRAAAAAAH!”

A roar from the ogre dispels my thoughts.

It’s an animalistic, earsplitting roar, a stark contrast to the ogre’s almost humanlike behavior thus far.

And that isn’t the only change.

The force emanating from the ogre is far stronger than it was mere moments ago.

This pressure... It’s akin to the presence of the earth dragons I once encountered in the Great Elroe Labyrinth!

No, it’s even stronger!

According to the information from the adventurers’ guild, the ogre was suspected of having three unusual abilities.

One was producing magic swords.

One was complete recovery.

And this is the final one: an unnatural increase in stats!

Just as the rumors said, this dramatic transformation cannot be explained by any known skills like Magic or Mental Warfare.

Since I am observing the phenomenon with Clairvoyance, not the naked eye, I cannot Appraise the ogre.

I have no way of knowing just how drastically the creature's stats have increased.

However, judging by its overwhelming presence, I do not think Nyudoz and the others stand a chance against it.

In fact, I doubt that even I can bring this beast down.

But we cannot turn back now!

Though it may be a vain struggle, I shall strike the monster with my Inferno Magic spell!

"Hrmmm?!"

But unfortunately, I'm unable to activate the spell after all.

Before I can do so, the ogre whirls around and charges away.

Giving the soldiers surrounding it no time to react, the ogre crashes right through their ranks.

It moves too quickly for my eyes to follow.

"It...ran away...?"

For a few moments, I stare after the fleeing ogre in disbelief.

The other soldiers seem to be just as flummoxed.

"Hrmph! I must admit, the creature runs splendidly!"

Nyudoz's absurd remark brings me back to my senses.

I turn in time to see him putting away his beloved Wind Magic sword, a clear sign that the battle is over.

Nyudoz knows as well as I do that we cannot pursue this creature.

Why the ogre fled, we cannot know for sure.

But whatever the reason, it is doubtful that we could catch up to the fleet-footed monster; even if we did, I cannot say for certain whether we could defeat it.

The ogre's abilities were simply far too unusual.

Perhaps I should have risked the danger to gaze upon it with my naked eye and done my best to Appraise it.

If we knew anything about its mysterious abilities, perhaps we could come up with some kind of countermeasure.

"Well then, what to do now?"

It would be extremely dangerous to chase after the ogre.

However, we cannot simply ignore it.

Above all, I swore to Buirimus's wife that I would avenge him.

My own pride will not allow me to go back on that promise.

"I suppose we must regroup and decide how best to pursue the creature another day."

"That will not be necessary."

I was speaking only to myself, and yet, a voice answers me.

A person clad in black clothing kneels behind me.

How did they get so close to me without my noticing?

Who...? No, there is only one organization that keeps such people.

I already know this person's identity.

"A dog of the Word of God, are you?"

"Indeed."

Despite my rude phrasing, the person confirms without hesitation.

Their emotionless voice hides their thoughts the way the black fabric they've donned hides their face.

Such is always the way with the covert agents employed by the Word of God.

Cloaked in shadows, the legends about them say they dispose of heathens, monsters living among humans, and so on.

Though they are normally the stuff of rumors alone, one has appeared before me now.

“And what might such a dog want?”

“Allow us to take care of that creature, please.”

The operative responds with a concise request.

So these shadowy agents intend to defeat the ogre themselves?

“This is empire territory. You ask that while knowingly entering our lands?”

I glare at the black-clad operative, attempting to remind them of the consequences for a foreign agent who does as they please in the empire.

The Word of God may be a powerful organization that transcends borders, but if they aim to interfere with our army’s official business, that will certainly be a problem.

Meddling with another nation’s domestic affairs could easily create an international incident.

“Yes. We understand.”

Judging by the response, it’s clear they realize the risks involved.

In other words, the Word of God must have a strong reason for doing so.

Or perhaps showing themselves before me like this is supposed to a gesture of good faith.

With their high capacity for stealth, surely they could have done whatever they’re planning without my ever noticing them.

The question is, if I refuse their request, will they give up and turn back?

If they choose to instead act in secrecy, I doubt I would have any way of knowing.

“And how do you intend to deal with the creature?”

“We can promise that it will be of no disadvantage to the empire.”

That does not quite answer my question.

Perhaps they cannot reveal their plans but can assure us that no harm will come to the empire.

“...Very well, then. We shall leave it to you.”

“Your cooperation is appreciated.”

I reluctantly agree to the Word of God’s request.

For one thing, it’s entirely possible that they would act on their own if I refused.

And most of all, it would be difficult to defeat that ogre with our power alone.

It has shocking recovery power, and its stats may even surpass those of an earth dragon.

Since it ran away, there may be some limitation or weakness to exploit, but it would be foolish to move our troops based on mere wishful thinking.

I cannot repeat the same error I made in the labyrinth.

...I am sorry, Buirimus.

I wanted to avenge you with my own two hands, but it seems that is not to be.

If the Word of God is willing and able to fulfill that goal instead, I must grant them the right to do so, even if it may break my heart.

“Once again, I must remind you that this is empire territory, and you must act accordingly. Is that clear?”

“Of course.”

The black-clad operative nods at once.

I suppose I have no choice but to trust them.

“I am terribly sorry to chase this with an additional request, but there is a certain personage currently staying in the nearby town. The adventurers’ guild may ask you to do something about them, but please, we must request that you

do not interfere.”

Hrmmm?

This request seems completely unrelated to the matter at hand.

And yet, the operative seems more desperate about this than the matter of the ogre.

The length and politeness of the request is made that painfully obvious.

“What do you—?”

“Hrm! Who goes there?!”

As I start to ask a question, Nyudoz interrupts me with a shout.

Turning, I see him charging in our direction at top speed.

I suppose I cannot blame him for finding a completely black-clad agent of darkness to be highly suspicious.

Nyudoz is always quick to react in such a way.

“Thank you for your continued cooperation.”

“Ah, wait!”

Ignoring my exclamation, the black-clad individual disappears.

I cannot help but be awed by such agility.

“Sir Ronandt! Are you all right?!”

“Yes, I’m fine. I shall tell you in more detail when matters have settled.”

Feeling a bit of heat from Nyudoz, I nevertheless set off to gather the soldiers.



THE OGRE PURSUED

“Hff! Hff!”

The fierce winds force my white breath to trail behind me.

Without turning back to watch it disappear, I run with all my might.

I was naive.

Going in, I did not think myself too prideful or too careless.

In fact, it seemed to me that I was overpreparing due to needless anxiety.

And yet, I was naive.

The fact that I’m running away so shamefully is proof of that.

After I defeated one troop of adventurers, I started readying myself for the next battle.

To put it simply, that first battle was a massacre.

I made preparations in advance and intercepted them with my full power, and it went even more smoothly than I imagined.

However, I wouldn’t say that it was an easy win.

In fact, it was a close call.

I used up every one of the magic swords I’d prepared and had to run myself ragged before I managed to shake the enemy, so it wasn’t as one-sided a slaughter as it may have seemed to the attackers.

The adventurers I killed probably didn’t notice, but they’d actually driven me pretty close to the wall.

Without my special trait of fully recovering when I level up, I probably would

have been killed.

It was only because there were so many of them, and of such high strength, that I was able to receive so many experience points and reliably level up.

It's pretty ironic that their strength and numbers are what allowed me to win.

However, that worked only because they were still weaker than I am.

As long as I'm up against enemies I can defeat individually, one-on-one, there's not too much to worry about, but if any of them were stronger than me, I wouldn't be able to count on beating them and leveling up to recover.

Not if I can't beat them.

And for all I know, there are plenty enemies out there who I can't beat.

Even if there aren't, a group of several strong contenders around my level of strength would also make it much harder for me to win.

That's why I have to undertake all these preparations.

I continually make magic swords as long as I have the MP.

When my MP runs out, I practice with my katana.

Among the previous group of adventurers, there was actually one swordsman was able to match me.

If he hadn't been injured in the process of closing in, I might've been in serious trouble.

See, I have magic-oriented stats.

Creating magic swords requires using a lot of MP, so my magic stats are higher than the rest.

My physical and defense stats are a lot lower than most would probably assume from my bulky physique.

After the battle with the adventurers, I evolved again and became an Ogre King.

This species seems to have a special trait that makes my physical stats rise much higher than before.

My magic stats are oriented toward making magic swords, so they're not actually all that useful in battle.

All in all, I had little choice but to fight with my lower physical stats, but luckily I'd been able to scrape by so far.

Even my relatively low physical stats were still higher than those of the adventurers.

Besides, I can make up for that in a pinch with Battle Divinity, an advanced skill that greatly increases my physical stats.

If I activate that, I can defeat just about anyone.

But I think that adventurer who managed to get close to me had stats on par with my own, or maybe even higher.

If our stats are around the same, then the victor is determined by sheer skill in battle.

And I'm sure that adventurer was far better than me.

My swordsmanship, feints, and strategies couldn't measure up to that man's experience.

The only reason I was able to defeat him was that he was already injured, and I was lucky enough to level up and recover.

I'm sure that adventurer wasn't anywhere near the strongest in the world, so I had to improve myself so that I could win even without my fortunate advantages.

If an even stronger human shows up, I might get killed.

I'd evolved and gotten stronger after that battle, but I couldn't let my guard down.

I knew I would have to be prepared to take on my next enemy with everything I have.

But despite my best efforts, all my preparations fell apart so easily.

These new attackers must have used some kind of magic, a wide-range attack that destroyed the land mine swords and tore up the surrounding land.

They slipped past the lightning fence swords that I set up to slow them down with the dirty trick of teleporting, then had the nerve to topple them by moving the very ground itself.

And then there was the old knight who attacked me. He was even stronger than the adventurer from the previous battle.

His face under the helmet was clearly creased with wrinkles, yet the strength and sharpness of his swordsmanship showed no signs of being dulled by age.

It was a good call to practice with my swords after the previous battle against those adventurers.

Otherwise, I probably would have been cut to pieces.

The man was a master of swordsmanship.

And clearly, he was a veteran of countless battles.

In terms of brute strength, Battle Divinity gave me the advantage.

But he had enough experience and talent to make up for that with ease.

I couldn't let my guard down for a second, but I couldn't focus solely on the old knight, either.

Because the mage who teleported the knight over to me was attacking me from a distance.

The two elderly men had me pinned down, and when a spell blew a hole through my head, I knew I was on death's doorstep.

But luck was on my side: a sword that I threw half reflexively managed to hit one of the soldiers and kill him, and even more luckily, that caused me to level up and fully recover, which was the only thing that could have saved my life.

It was a truly one-in-a-million stroke of luck.

If anything had gone even slightly differently...

The thought alone makes me shudder.

The only reason I'm alive now is because I got lucky.

And that's the only reason I was able to get away, too.

My vision was swimming with red, my consciousness fading.

But I somehow managed to hold on to my senses and get through it.

If I'd lost control, I have a feeling I would never have been able to get it back.

I'm hanging on to my sanity by a thread.

I had to string together all the reasons I needed to leave and run away, or I would have given in to my violent fury and lost myself to a reckless rampage.

In that situation, I'm sure I could have beaten the old knight and the old mage.

However, that victory would only lead to my own destruction.

It's all right.

I'm fine.

I can still think rationally like this.

I haven't lost my mind yet...

"Hff! Hff!"

It gets harder to breathe, so I stop running.

Since I've been dashing at full speed, I'm completely breathless and worn out.

But I've probably gotten far away by now.

I covered a significant distance, so I doubt my attackers could have kept up with me all this way.

Just as I breathe a sigh of relief, a beam of light grazes my cheek.

"?!"

A tiny trickle of blood beads on the shallow cut across my cheek.

Before I even feel any pain, I whirl toward the source of the beam.

There, I see the same elderly mage who shot my head with magic before.

"Wh...ah!"

I'm shocked for only a moment, until I realize how he's gotten here.

That's right.

This old mage can use a dirty trick that should be against the rules: teleporting!

No matter how far I run, he can disregard the distance and simply use Teleport to catch up.

As I stand, dumbfounded, the old mage glares at me and raises his wand.

"Aaaargh!"

Unable to suppress the chill creeping up my spine, I bellow as I start to run.

Instead of the usual anger that threatens to set my body aflame, this time I feel raw terror that nearly freezes me in place.

Rationally, I know that fleeing on foot is pointless against a mage who can teleport, but my fear overpowers all reason.

Unable to collect my thoughts, I let my instincts take over and I break into a run.

Forcing my exhausted legs to keep moving, my breath completely ragged, I push on.

Wheeze...pant... As I gulp down the cold air, pain seizes my chest.

My sides ache, and I can barely lift my feet.

But still, I keep running.

Another beam of light shoots at me from behind.

It hits the ground some distance away, barely missing me.

Remembering the blow that obliterated my head before, I feel my feet grow heavy.

But if I stop moving now, it'll be the end, so I force myself to go on with my last reserves of strength.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Fear Resistance LV 3] has become [Fear Resistance LV 4].> <Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Heresy Resistance LV 5] has become [Heresy Resistance LV 6].> I

hear a voice in my head, but I don't have time to stop and think about what it means.

How far have I run?

I've lost all sense of time. I don't know if it's been minutes, hours, or even days.

I just keep running, without any destination in mind.

Propelled forward by panic, I keep moving as far as my body will carry me.

And just as I stop, thinking that I can't run anymore, another light beam comes toward me.

Then the cycle repeats itself.

That elderly mage won't let me be.

Terrible fear washes over me, dragging my feet forward.

No matter where I run or how fast, that mage is always one step ahead, waiting for me.

Gradually, the exhaustion wears on my mind, until my thoughts are too hazy to come together properly.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Fear Resistance LV 4] has become [Fear Resistance LV 5].> <Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Heresy Resistance LV 6] has become [Heresy Resistance LV 7].> At some point, the fear of not knowing how long I have to run starts to give way to a bubbling rage.

Why am I running away?

It's only one person.

The old knight isn't here.

I can kill him, can't I?

Exhausted by all the running, resentful of the way I've been driven into a corner, I feel my fear turn to anger.

That's right.

I don't need to run.

If he intends to chase me wherever I go, I'll just have to kill him.

I stop dead in my tracks.

A beam of light hurtles toward me.

It grazes my body, but I don't feel the same kind of fear as before.

Instead, I'm overcome with rage, strong enough to drive my body forward.

"GRAAAAAH!"

Howling, I charge right toward the elderly mage.

"?!"

The old mage's expression doesn't change, but I can tell that he gasps slightly.

Setting my flame katana ablaze, I swing it at the old man.

The mage is unable to dodge my attack, and it cuts right through his body.

"Huh?"

However, even though the blow definitely connected, it feels as if my sword is cutting through air.

It's so unexpected that I nearly lose my balance and fall forward.

Instead, I stumble two or three steps before regaining my balance.

My body passed right through the old mage.

"Wha—?"

For a moment, I'm not sure what's happening.

It's almost as if the old mage is just an illusion, and my sword and my body both went right through him.

No, wait a second.

Not *almost*. Is that actually what's happening?

An illusion?

I spin around immediately, but the old mage is no longer there.

Checking my surroundings frantically, I see a black-clad person standing not far from where the old mage appeared to be moments before.

The person is dressed from head to toe in all black, like a ninja.

There's not a hint of skin, so I can't even tell if this person is human, never mind what their gender might be.

"Fear dispelled. Illusion partially dispelled."

The black-clad person murmurs emotionlessly, and I finally have some idea of what just happened to me.

Illusion and fear.

Someone created the illusion that the old mage was still chasing me and used some kind of skill to inflict fear on me so that I wouldn't realize what was going on.

In video game terms, they used multiple status condition changes on me.

If you're aware what's going on, then it's nothing too major, but having it done to you in real life is a terrifying combination.

I never knew people could fight like that in this world.

But more than being impressed, I feel the rage growing inside me.

Anger at myself, that I was fooled so easily into running away from nothing.

But most of all, anger at the person in front of me, who's responsible.

"Graaaaah!"

In a fit of rage, I charge toward the black-clad person.

But the person dodges easily, with movements so light and nimble that they appear virtually weightless.

"Withdraw."

With a simple word, the black-clad person turns around and flees.

"You're not getting away!"

I chase after them as they run.

Another chase scene, but this time the roles are reversed.

As I pursue the person in black, we seem to be moving at around the same speed: I'm not getting any closer or farther away.

The person in black just keeps running, never once looking back.

Eventually, we reach a place that seems somehow familiar.

Then the black-clad figure stops abruptly.

Without hesitation, I slice into their back with my sword.

But my attack goes straight through the person's body, jabbing into the ground.

It's the same feeling as before.

Another illusion?!

I've been had!

They must have switched out with an illusion sometime during the chase.

Or maybe I was chasing an illusion from the very beginning.

Realizing that I've been playing into their hands the entire time, I grind my teeth.

The anger is so strong that it threatens to turn my vision red.

Looking up, I see several people staring at me in shock.

Then, when I look more closely, I realize that I know this place.

It's that awful village where I was once held captive.

But I killed everyone who lived here already.

Where did these people come from, then?

With a snap, the rage inside me starts to overflow.

"Aaaaargh!"

Unable to hold it back any longer, I cut the nearest person down with my sword.

Sliced in half by my flame katana, the two pieces of the corpse catch flame.

Seeing that, the other people all start shouting something.

What are they saying?

I can hear the noises they're making, but I can't seem to process them as words.

It must be a different human language from the one I learned.

Well, whatever.

That doesn't matter right now.

If they're in this village, then I don't care who they might be.

I'm going to kill all of them.

I start to cut down the next person.

At the same time, a small girl runs over to me, shouting.

"Sasajima!"

It's a familiar name. My name. But not one that anyone in this world should know.

Are the illusions so strong that they even affect my hearing?

Don't call me by that name!

I have no right to answer to that name anymore.

Kyouya Sasajima is the name of a human who died long ago.

As if to dispel the illusions, I swing my flame katana at the screaming girl.



Interlude THE PONTIFF AND THE SHADOW AGENTS

“So you succeeded in luring the ogre to the empty village where the elves were lying in wait?”

“Indeed. I used Heretic Magic to guide it.”

“And the Appraisal of the ogre?”

“As you suspected.”

“...I see. So it really is a reincarnation.”

“...Then should we have done otherwise?”

“From your perspective, did it seem like it could communicate?”

“No.”

“Then that is your answer. If it causes harm to the human race, then it is an enemy of mine, reincarnation or otherwise.”

“As you say.”

“My apologies to your son. But this, too, is for the sake of humanity.”

“I am certain Sajin will understand.”

“I wonder. Unlike us, the reincarnations are victims who were brought to this world without their consent. If he knew that his own father had chased one of his classmates to his death, then he would surely grieve. Best to keep this incident a secret.”

“Yes.”

“Will you be able to monitor the battle between the ogre and the elves?”

“That won’t be a problem.”

“Excellent. Then please continue to keep watch. Take note of how much damage the ogre is able to deal to the elves.”

“No, I was unclear. My apologies. The battle is already over.”

“Oh? That took much less time than expected.”

“The elves only had ordinary forces, but I believe the main cause was the ogre’s high combat capabilities.”

“Am I to gather from your turn of phrase that the elves were defeated?”

“Indeed. Aside from one who appeared to be the elves’ commanding officer and a young elf girl, they have been completely annihilated. The surviving pair fled via teleportation.”

“A commander and...a young girl?”

“Yes. Blond hair, blue eyes. Being an elf, her true age was difficult to gauge, but in human terms, she appeared to be only two or three years old. Her purpose there was unclear. She was not wearing any special equipment at a glance. However, it’s possible that she was attempting to call out to the ogre.”

“And were you able to read her lips?”

“Not in full. She was too far away and not facing me entirely.”

“I would appreciate whatever you did understand or any educated guesses.”

“*Sasaji...pleez lissen toomie...teechur*. That is all I was able to pick up.”

“Well, that is certainly unclear. Ah, unless...perhaps it was the language of the reincarnations...?”

“...”

“...I suppose it’s too soon to tell. But no, perhaps we had best act under that assumption. Thank you, your report has been invaluable.”

“Of course.”

“Now, what did the ogre do after the battle?”

“It began moving toward the Mystic Mountains. Shall I pursue it?”

“The Mystic Mountains... No, there’s no need.”

“Are you certain?”

“What stage has the ogre’s Rage skill reached?”

“...Wrath.”

“Truly?! I see. That is indeed the worst case imaginable. Then we should not make the mistake of pursuing it. Let the ice dragons of the Mystic Mountains take care of it. Even if the dragons do nothing, it won’t be a problem if the ogre emerges in the land of demons. If it takes up residence in the mountains, that is acceptable as well. As long as the creature does not return here, there is no need to provoke it. But we should continue to insert agents in the nearby towns, just in case it does return.”

“Understood.”

“Then go about your business. Oh, and do not forget to follow up on the situation with Lady Ariel.”

“We have already used the Church to place pressure on the guild. The adventurers and the imperial army will not lay a hand on her.”

“Excellent. Thank you for your service.”

“Of course.”



Interlude

A CERTAIN ADVENTURER'S NEXT STEPS

I stare at the sword in my hand.

It has no scabbard, so its blade is bare.

The single-edge long sword with a slight curve is a design rarely seen around here, where straight, double-edge blades are the norm.

The gleaming blade looks masterfully wrought, as if there isn't a thing it couldn't cut through.

Just holding it in my hand seems to fill me with power.

In fact, according to Sir Ronandt, who gave it to me, it really does have the effect of strengthening its wielder.

On top of that, he said that it can control lightning.

Even compared to other magic swords with special effects, it's in a class all its own.

I can't even imagine how much money this single sword must be worth.

If I sold it, I could probably live in luxury for the rest of my days.

Yet, despite how amazing this sword is, my feelings are mixed.

"Ahhh..."

A sigh escapes my lips.

Do I really have any right to wield this sword...?

"Don't interfere with them'? What's that supposed to mean?"

This was a little while ago, when I went to the guild master's office.

I was there because I'd received orders from the guild master not to interfere

with the group that showed up at the guild a few days ago, the ones who were most likely demons.

“Dunno. But that’s what the Church told us. Seems they’re closely linked with the Church, and they personally guarantee that there won’t be any problems.”

“The Church?”

My voice sounded doubtful, but I don’t think you could blame me for that.

Why would someone working in service of the Word of God religion be supporting such a shady group?

“S’right. So don’t try any funny business, got it?”

“...I don’t like it.”

“Well, it don’t matter if you like it or not. Thanks to that ogre, this town’s lost just about all its adventurers. You wanna pick a fight with the Church in that state? You know the guild took out a huge loan from the Church, yeah?”

I knew what the guild master was getting at.

The Church is no ordinary religious group.

Many adventurers faithfully adhere to the Word of God religion, which believes in honing one’s skills in order to hear the Divine Voice.

As a result, the guild and the Church have a close connection, and they frequently help each other.

What would happen if the guild was to take action against the wishes of the Church?

The other guilds would all shun us, and the Church might even withdraw its financial support.

After the incident with the ogre, that kind of trouble might even bring our guild down entirely.

So the guild would probably prefer to cut off any adventurer who caused trouble like that.

In this case, that means me.

It's the guild master's job to protect the guild, so I can't blame him for prioritizing the Church's desires over mine.

I understood all that, but it didn't mean I had to like it.

"Should we talk to the imperial army?"

"If the Church says they're not a problem, do you really think that's a good idea?"

"Right."

If we went to the imperial army about this, it'd be like ignoring what the Church told us.

"Gotou. I don't know what's got you all worked up about this, but the Church gave us their word. If they're that confident about it, I'm sure it'll be fine. There's no sense in jumping to conclusions here, okay? If anything does happen, the blame'll fall on the Church for telling us not to worry when we raised suspicions, not us. We'll just let the Church handle it, yeah?"

The guild master was right, of course.

But I couldn't help feeling like if we left that group to their own devices, something terrible was going to happen.

Just then, the door swung open, and two old men entered.

"Pardon the intrusion. Oh, Guild Master, perfect timing."

It was Sir Ronandt and Sir Nyudoz of the imperial army, who'd been sent out to deal with the ogre.

"You've returned safely! That must mean you were able to defeat that ogre, then!"

The guild master looked excited, but Ronandt's expression was grave.

"Well, about that. Unfortunately, I cannot quite say that we defeated it."

Sir Ronandt is the world's strongest mage, and Nyudoz is a master of swordsmanship.

And yet, even with them leading an army, they weren't able to defeat that ogre.

It's a bit hard to believe, but Sir Ronandt would have no reason to lie.

"Th-then it got away...?"

"Indeed. But we can discuss the details somewhere quieter."

"All right. We'll go to the upstairs room, then."

The guild master and the old men headed for the stairs.

As they went, the guild master shot me a meaningful glance.

It came out as more of a glare, so he was probably warning me not to say anything reckless.

But in the next moment, Sir Ronandt rendered that look meaningless.

"Hrm. If I may?"

With that, Sir Ronandt turned his gaze toward me, and I suddenly felt a strange sensation assail my body.

I'm not too familiar with it, but I could still tell it was the feeling of being Appraised.

"Oh-ho. Rather impressive. Come along with us, then."

Sir Ronandt must have approved of my Appraisal results, because he invited me along.

The guild master and I both stared, dumbfounded, but the two elders went on ahead as if it was perfectly natural.

You never can tell what these big shots are thinking.

Thus, I got a rare glimpse inside the guild master's room, and Sir Ronandt allowed me to listen in on the tale of their battle with the ogre.

As the man himself said, it seemed as if both sides suffered losses.

What would have happened if the ogre had stayed and fought instead of fleeing?

Honestly, I'm not so sure anymore.

And it seems that Sir Ronandt and the others couldn't tell, either.

Which was probably why he decided to entrust it to the servant of the Church who appeared directly afterward.

When I heard that, my first thought was: *The Church again?*

Until now, I'd never paid much mind to the Church, but now I'm beginning to find it highly suspicious.

"They certainly have their secrets, but I have faith in their abilities if nothing else. If they say that they will take care of it, then there is no need to worry about the ogre any longer."

As an important person who has supported the empire for countless years, it seems that Sir Ronandt has his share of experience with the Church.

If Ronandt says it is so, then we should assume that the ogre is as good as dealt with.

"And as far as the group that the Church told you not to interfere with that you were discussing before, I believe it best to trust them on that count as well."

"...You heard all of that?"

"I might not look it, but I've got a good pair of ears. Think you can keep up, youngster?"

In contrast to the guild master's grim expression, Sir Ronandt wore a mischievous grin.

He and the other elder were outside while we had that conversation inside the guild.

How good must his ears be if he could hear through walls?

"At any rate, we shall not be making any further moves. In fact, we cannot. We must take measures to make up for the adventurers who were lost in this incident. Starting with setting up a patrol of soldiers in and around this town. The guild is short on manpower, is it not?"

True enough, since the ogre defeated us so handily, we lost a great deal of adventurers.

That meant it had gotten harder to fend off monsters, defend travelers going from town to town, securing supplies, and so on.

Worse, it wasn't just this town's adventurers who were wiped out by the ogre—there were many losses among the adventurers from neighboring towns and villages as well.

Which meant this whole region was currently short on adventurers.

If the imperial army was going to help shoulder that burden, it'd be a big help.

"So you understand this means we have no time to waste getting mixed up with a group of travelers who may or may not be dangerous. I wouldn't mind investigating personally, but the Word of God religion has been displeased with me since the hero incident. If I anger them any further, it will likely lead to more than just a demotion for me. I am sorry."

So the rumors that he took on the young hero as an apprentice and nearly killed him in the name of "training" are true.

I doubt the Church would make an enemy of the peerless mage Ronandt unless they had a serious reason for doing so.

"Thus, you see, there is nothing we can do. If anything happens, you shall simply have to complain to the Church."

It wasn't exactly reassuring, but there was nothing else to be done.

I'd have to do my best to accept it, even if it still bothered me.

But then Sir Ronandt added a new concern to my list of troubles.

"Nyudoz. Give it here."

"Hrmmm?! Can I speak now?!"

"Not yet. You're too loud. Just give me that thing we talked about and stay quiet."

"Hrmmmph!"

Grumbling, Sir Nyudoz lapsed back into silence.

Just as Sir Ronandt said, his voice was painfully loud, so it was probably for the best.

He may be an amazing swordsman and all, but still.

“Here. You can have this.”

Sir Ronandt handed me the object that Sir Nyudoz had passed to him: a magic sword.

And now that same sword is in my hand.

It’s one of the magic swords that the ogre had wielded.

When it fought Sir Ronandt and company, it seems the ogre left behind one of its swords as it fled.

The imperial army took it back with them as the spoils of war, but for some reason, Sir Ronandt saw fit to give it to me.

I did my best to refuse, insisting that I couldn’t accept it, but he forced it on me anyway.

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

I stare at the sword, at a loss.

I didn’t accomplish anything in the battle with that ogre.

Do I really have any right to receive this sword?

No, I don’t think so.

Maybe I should go return it after all.

Besides, I was already thinking about quitting the adventurer business.

I ran away from the ogre, and Regg and my other adventurer friends are all dead.

I’ve lost my confidence and drive.

So I figured once things settled down, I’d retire from adventuring and spend the rest of my days at my leisure.

But if I quit now that there are so few adventurers left already, this guild might actually be done for.

I planned to just keep at it half-heartedly until the guild pulled itself together, but now that I’ve been given this fancy sword, I feel like I have no choice but to

work like a dog.

Reaping the rewards even though I was no help at all in the fight against the ogre would make everyone think less of me.

Especially the friends and family of the adventurers who were lost.

If I toss them aside and accept this gift, I wouldn't blame them for hating me.

The only way to avoid being subjected to all that resentment would be to work hard to contribute to our town's recovery.

"Ugh. What am I gonna do?"

As I grumble to myself, the door of the guild opens.

"Ah, Mr. Gotou."

Turning around, I see Rukusso enter.

He was severely wounded in the ogre battle, but he got treated just in time to survive.

If the healing had happened any later, he'd probably be dead.

Although Regg gave up his own life to buy enough time for me to get him to a healer...

"Rukusso, eh? What is it?"

Rukusso is dressed in casual clothes.

They're the clothes of a civilian, not an adventurer.

That's not how people dress to go to the adventurers' guild.

"Mr. Gotou... I think I'm going to quit being an adventurer."

"I see."

I kind of suspected that was what he would say.

There are probably quite a few adventurers like me who are thinking about quitting after everything that happened.

Rukusso is just one more of that number.

"And I'm probably going to leave town, too."

“I see.”

This isn't too surprising, either.

This town is full of memories of his time spent adventuring with his friends.

It'd probably be tough to stay here, constantly being reminded of all that.

“D’you know where you’re gonna go?”

“Yes. I intend to go back home to my family. My parents are farmers, but I ran away to become an adventurer because I didn't want to take over the farm. I'm going to go back, apologize to my parents, and start over.”

Many adventurers tend to be outcasts.

In a profession that so many people have joined because they have no other options, Rukusso is one of the lucky few who has somewhere to go back to.

“Gotcha. Well, you'll be missed.”

“Thank you. I wanted to make sure I spoke to you before I left, Mr. Gotou, since you've done so much for me. I only wish that I could give my thanks to Mr. Regg, too.”

The man who died protecting Rukusso.

I'm sure that's a heavy burden on the young man's heart.

“C'mon now. You knew him. I'm sure he'd just yell at you not to look so gloomy.”

“Ha-ha. I suppose you're right.”

“He saved your life. So the least you can do for him is be more positive like he was and lead a long, happy life, yeah? That way he'll know it was worth laying down his own life.”

That's the kind of man Regg was.

He wouldn't hesitate. He'd be proud to die protecting his comrades.

“Right. I will!”

Rukusso nods tearfully.

“Take care of yourself, kid.”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Gotou, I always looked up to you and Mr. Regg. I wasn’t able to become an amazing adventurer like you two, but you both saved my life, so I’ll treasure it forever!”

“Good. Find yourself a pretty wife or something, have some kids and grandkids. Just make sure you’ll be able to say it was a good life in the end.”

“Yes, sir! I guess I’d better start looking for lovers, then.”

“That’s the way!”

Both of us chuckle, and I stick out my hand.

Rukusso grasps it and gives me a firm handshake.

“Take care.”

“You too, Mr. Gotou. Do your best out there.”

Rukusso smiles warmly as he leaves.

Do my best, huh?

I’m sure he didn’t mean it that way, but the timing is pretty pointed.

“...I guess I’ll try to do my best a little longer.”

Since Regg saved his life and all, it wouldn’t hurt to try to be the kind of man who Rukusso would continue to look up to.



I'M HITTING THE ROAD

It's been a few days since the elves attacked.

After that spike of excitement, things have been uneventful around here.

Just like the previous two years, at least up until the attack in question.

From the UFO incident two years ago until just recently, Potimas has been alarmingly silent.

Knowing his personality, you'd think he'd come after us the second he spotted a weak point.

Since I became a god, I've basically got nothing *but* weak points, yet there hasn't even been a peep, never mind an attack.

Frankly, it's almost a bit of a letdown, but it also makes me even more paranoid.

Like, he's definitely in the middle of preparing some new evil plot, right?

And yet, when he finally makes a move after two years of silence, it's just some weak attempt to kidnap the baby bloodsucker via teleportation? That's kinda small potatoes for Potimas.

Considering how long it's been since last contact, it seems like a pretty sloppy plan, so I'm kinda confused about why he didn't try something more impressive.

I mean, sure, using Teleport to kidnap someone is pretty effective.

If you suddenly grabbed someone and disappeared with them to who knows where, we'd have a hard time following up.

There'd be no way of knowing where they teleported, after all, or if it's even

within a distance that we could follow them.

Frankly, teleporting should be against the rules.

There aren't many mages who can use it in the first place, so I doubt even Potimas has many teleport users on his side, but I can't rule out the possibility entirely.

Assuming he sent one of his precious teleport users after us, maybe this was meant to be a serious attack? But I don't know why he would use a little girl for that, so all I can do is scratch my head over here.

Yep, it's a mystery.

The Demon Lord has been making some troubled expressions lately, so maybe she's thinking the same thing I am.

Or, I dunno, maybe she's hiding something from me.

For some reason, it kinda seems like she's waffling about something or other.

It's like she wants to say something, but she doesn't have evidence to back it up, so she's keeping it to herself.

Of course, knowing her, she keeping quiet for my sake, and she'll spit it out if the need arises.

Since I'm no use in battle right now, there's probably nothing I can do to help anyway, so I'll just trust in the Demon Lord's plan for now.

And what is her plan, you ask? Operation: Stay Inside!

Yep. We're just holing up in the inn and going out as little as possible.

This way, we can't be unexpectedly attacked, and it's easy to keep our guard up.

What happens if they attack the inn?

Well, I guess that's the inn's problem.

Sorry, inn. But if you're gonna blame anyone, blame the people attacking us.

Besides, if they fought seriously, the Demon Lord or the puppet spiders could level this whole town, never mind the inn.

Fortunately, that hasn't happened, so everything is peaceful for now.

You got lucky this time, inn.

So what have we been doing while we're stuck inside, you ask? Well, Professor Demon Lord has been giving us a crash course on skills.

"You there, Jealousy Girl."

"That's not very nice, but I suppose you're not wrong. What is it?"

"Why must you never raise your Jealousy skill level? You have ten seconds to answer, please."

"Erm... Because the Seven Deadly Sins skills can affect your mind and soul?"

"Is that your final answer?"

"...Yes, it is."

"Thaaaat's right!"

Miss Demon Lord, isn't this comedy routine a little old?

"The Seven Deadly Sins skills influence your thoughts and emotions based on their respective sins, or rather, based on the original holders of each skill. In other words! Since you have the Jealousy skill, Sophia, you're prone to becoming crazy stalker!"

The Demon Lord points sternly at Vampy.

A crazy stalker, huh...?

Wait. Is it just me, or is it already too late for that?

"Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't be affected by any such thing."

The baby bloodsucker stares at the Demon Lord with narrowed eyes.

The Demon Lord and I stare right back.

This is the problem with crazy stalker girls. No self-awareness.

"Wh-why are you looking at me like that?"

"Aaanyway, just make sure you don't raise your Jealousy skill any more, all right? It's not good; we'll leave it at that."

I guess that's what the Demon Lord wanted to say.

"Try to avoid the other Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Heavenly Virtues skills, too. The Pride line, the Wrath line, and the Greed line are especially dangerous."

"What about Gluttony, Lust, and Sloth?"

"You won't get the Gluttony line as long as you don't overeat, so you're probably fine. Besides, even if you do get it, that one doesn't corrupt your mind too badly. And at your age, you shouldn't have to worry about Lust, either. Erm, you don't, right?"

"Why would you phrase that as a question? No, I wouldn't worry."

I wonder about that...

"Okay. Let's just agree not to worry, then. And Sloth barely corrupts your mind at all, so that's not a problem."

"Sloth? That sounds like the kind of thing that would cause serious corruption..."

Yeah, really.

It seems like it'd turn you into a lazy good-for-nothing.

"Oh, well, the Sloth line's special. Like, the original holder of Sloth wanted to slack off but couldn't and even ended up dying of overwork in the end. See, I know what it sounds like, but it actually just makes your enemy's SP go down faster. So it really just means that the user works harder while everyone around them loses the ability to work at all."

Now that she mentions it, I guess it's true that the effect of Sloth was to make the enemy's HP, MP, and SP go down more rapidly.

Instead of letting the user rest, it kind of forces the enemy to rest.

"So even if you do get it, it doesn't have a huge effect on your mind. It is super-bad luck, though."

Bad luck? But I used to have that skill...

Let's just not think about that.

“So as for the bad ones, the Pride line of skills makes you gain more experience. That might sound like a good thing, but I can’t say I recommend it.”

Ding-ding-ding!

Hello, I had that skill!

I had Pride!

“Sure, gaining extra experience might sound like a really good deal in theory, but it’s bad news. For one thing, it seriously messes with your head. You’ll start seeing every living thing as a potential source of experience points. It practically turns you into a berserker.”

Ding-ding-ding!

Are you saying I was that bad?!

The worst part is I can’t say you’re entirely wrong!

“And the skill’s effect comes with a serious pitfall, too. Basically, it forces the holder to keep growing at a rapid pace. And everyone has limits. If you just keep on gaining more and more experience without taking those limits into account, eventually it’ll be your undoing. Like, literally.”

Ding-ding-ding!

Are you saying I was literally doomed?!

Was I, like, just steps away from bursting like a balloon?!

That’s so freaking scary!

“So make sure you don’t pick up the Pride line of skills, all right?”

“Okay.”

The baby bloodsucker nods, probably intimidated by the Demon Lord’s grim face and the terrifying potential of the Pride skills.

It’s fine, though.

I mean, I didn’t explode, and Pride wound up being a huge help to me.

So I don’t regret picking up Pride at all!

Not even a little!

“The Wrath line is almost as scary, but just picking up the skill isn’t too bad. The real problem with Wrath is what happens after you activate it.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you activate a Wrath-line skill, your stats go way up. It doesn’t cost any MP or SP, either. Obviously that makes it sound awesome, but it comes with some serious caveats. Basically, you lose your mind.”

Hoo, boy.

I used to have Anger, the lowest step on the Wrath line of skills.

But I tried it only once, then never used it again.

“When you activate it, you start seeing red. It makes you want to go on a rampage basically. And the more time passes, the worse the effects get, until you don’t even have the presence of mind to turn the skill off anymore. Pride might wrap you into a bit of a berserker, but this one literally makes you go mad.”

“Is there any way to get back to normal?”

“Nope. You either have to turn off the skill or die. And once your mind has been afflicted by Wrath, it becomes harder to stay in control. So even if you get any Wrath skills, make sure you never, ever activate it.”

Ding-ding-diing!

I did it only once, but I definitely did activate it!

I turned it off right away, though, ’cause it seemed like bad news.

I didn’t realize *how* bad, obviously. Yikes, that was close.

“As for the Greed line, well, you can probably see how that would be bad, right? There’s a certain dignity to being poor, you know.”

Even as the Demon Lord says that, she’s stretching her legs out and drinking some pretty expensive alcohol.

What happened to being honorable?

Eventually, after we lived as shut-ins for a while, the path out of town was finally reopened.

Word is they chased away that ogre.

I'm a little concerned that it's "chased away" and not "killed," though.

Especially since, as it happens, the army chased the ogre into the Mystic Mountains.

"Well, if that's not foreshadowing..."

The Demon Lord frowns seriously.

"But the Mystic Mountains is a whole region made up of an enormous mountain range. It's awfully unlikely that we'd run into it, no?"

Vampy rolls her eyes, but the Demon Lord clicks her tongue.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. So naive. Sophia, you innocent little angel. You're underestimating our ability to attract trouble like a magnet."

The Demon Lord looks smug, causing the bloodsucker to roll her eyes even harder.

Sure, if you think about it logically, the odds of us running into one ogre in a big ol' mountain range are pretty low.

But when you think about all the trouble we've gotten caught up in on our journey so far, then yeah, I'm pretty sure we're gonna run into it!

"Either way, it doesn't change our plans. We'll just hope we don't run into it, but I don't really care if we do."

The Demon Lord shrugs off the subject and starts getting ready to depart.

Some random ogre isn't any threat to the Demon Lord, so what does she care?

It's probably best for us to head into the mountains before we get mixed up in any more funny business in this town.

From what I'm told, there's at least one adventurer in this town who thinks we're a bunch of demons, and they've even told the imperial army about their suspicions.

If we hang around here too long, we might get into a scuffle with the army, so we're heading for the hills before that happens.

“Come back anytime!”

The innkeeper lady smiles brightly as she sees us off on our way out of town.

Since the inn could’ve gotten destroyed because of us if things went south, I guess the Demon Lord paid her a little extra for her trouble.

But from the innkeeper’s perspective, we were just good customers who left a generous tip, so it makes sense for her to treat us so nicely.

Whew. I’m really glad the inn didn’t get destroyed.

Not long after, we make our way to an abandoned village at the foot of the Mystic Mountains without any trouble.

We had no problems getting out of town and none on the way here.

I was afraid we’d have trouble with the army during the former or with the elves during the latter, but it was actually a perfectly peaceful journey.

Maybe *too* peaceful, in fact?

Honestly, at this point I’m almost a little disappointed that nobody’s coming after us.

But as soon as we arrive in the village, that feeling vanishes.

The state of the abandoned village is...disturbing.

Based on the information we gathered before coming, this place was attacked by someone—most likely that ogre—and got destroyed.

No one has tried to rebuild it since then, so the ruins have just been sitting here abandoned.

Part of the reason is that as soon as the village was built, it was basically treated as a base camp for anyone trying to pass through the Mystic Mountains.

Since this place was destroyed, it was just taken as even more proof that the Mystic Mountains are too difficult to pass, so nobody wanted to fix it up.

We knew all that going in, but even if we hadn’t, it’s not too surprising that there’s no one here.

Most of the houses are run-down, and there are dark-red stains all over the

place.

If you think about the reason this village is now abandoned, the identity of those stains becomes all too apparent.

This must have been a horrifically violent tragedy.

Given these conditions, no normal person would want to try to live here again, even if some of the houses were intact.

“Hrm. Guess we’ll stay in one of these houses for the night.”

But I guess you can’t exactly say that any of us is normal in this group.

Leave it to the Demon Lord to want to stay the night in a village that’s almost certainly haunted.

But yeah, I guess I’m down to stay here, too.

If it’ll keep me out of the wind and rain, I’ll stay in a haunted house or village or whatever else.

I hate sleeping outside in the cold!

“Wait a minute.”

Just then, Vampy starts sniffing the air and making a face and calls out for us to stop.

She’s sniffing all over the place like crazy. Are you a dog or what?

“I smell old blood *and* fresh blood. Why do you think that is?”

Hrm?

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that a vampire can tell the difference.

Wait, but what does she mean, *fresh* blood?

The old blood obviously has to be from the villagers who were killed here.

So who does the fresh blood belong to?

Does that mean someone else has died here since the village was abandoned?

“Oh, you noticed? I think it’s the smell of elf blood.”

The Demon Lord sniffs casually as she responds.

Wow, so we've got an even bigger blood expert than the vampire here.

So it's elf blood, huh? Got it.

...Wait, what?

"I bet they were lying in wait here for us. But it seems like someone else attacked and wiped them out. I guess it must've been the ogre that was fleeing in this direction, no?"

Oh wow. That's...uh... Yikes.

Talk about bad luck.

I guess if you're going to pass through the Mystic Mountains, it'll almost certainly be by way of this village.

And since there's no one else around, it'd be easy to attack us and get away with it.

It's the perfect spot for an ambush.

But before we got here, the ogre that was being chased down by the imperial army showed up and attacked them instead.

Sucks to be them.

I'd almost feel bad, if they weren't out to kill us.

"You're saying they *lost* to the ogre?"

Vampy sounds surprised.

Hey, that's a good point, actually.

Those elf bastards got done in by an ogre?

I dunno what kind of forces they brought with them, but if they were planning to take on the Demon Lord, they must have prepared accordingly.

And they still couldn't beat that ogre?

Uh, maybe this thing is scarier than I thought.

"Yeah." The Demon Lord nods. "Based on the evidence, that's the only

explanation I can think of.”

Gotcha. So the elves were definitely beaten by that ogre.

If it was an orc, you’d have the makings of some steamy fanfic here.

No, I guess it’d work with an ogre, too.

One pile of elf smut, coming right up.

There might even be some BL potential, since Potimas literally got ripped a new asshole two years ago.

By me, that is.

Why am I letting my mind wander in such a stupid direction? No matter how scary strong that ogre might be, I’m sure there’s no way it’d be a match for the Demon Lord.

She’s easily the strongest being in the world.

The only way to stand a chance of beating the Demon Lord would be to have power outside of the system.

You know, like Güli-güli or Potimas.

But Güli-güli’s a special case, and even Potimas couldn’t necessarily beat her.

No matter how strong the ogre is, as long as its strength is defined by the system, it doesn’t stand a chance against the Demon Lord.

Otherwise, it’d be a serious problem for me, the Demon Lord’s favorite freeloader!

“Hrmmm.”

The Demon Lord strokes her chin, as if she knows I’ve been silently praising her.

There’s a hint of more complicated emotions in her expression, though.

She’s clearly deep in thought about something.

I don’t want to interrupt her brainstorming session, so I look around at the abandoned village again.

The traces of blood on the walls are fresh, hinting at a brutal massacre.

But now that I think about it, that's all there is.

If the Demon Lord or the puppet spiders went all-out in battle, the damage would be way worse than this.

Every last house would be demolished without a trace, and there might not even be any blood left at all.

Because when these guys fight, they literally obliterate their enemies.

There wouldn't even be bodies left to bury.

I should know, since the Demon Lord actually did blow me to bits once.

Man, I seriously thought I was a goner that time. I would have been, too, if I didn't have the Immortality skill.

Once you've seen that kind of insanely destructive power, a situation like this where there's proof left behind seems totally banal by comparison.

It's clearly the aftermath of a battle, but one within the scope of human comprehension, at least.

If Potimas had busted out the kind of weapons he used in the battle against the UFO two years ago, the kind he would probably use to deal with the Demon Lord, it wouldn't look like this.

Those weapons are on the level of insanity, too.

If they'd been used in the battle, I don't think this village would still be standing.

In fact, no matter how strong the ogre is, I don't think it would've bested the elves if they had those weapons.

Which means that the elves were lying in wait without any fancy weapons.

Hrm? Is it just me, or does something smell fishy here?

Between this and the previous attack, I just can't figure out what Potimas is trying to do.

For our first contact in two years, it certainly doesn't seem like Potimas is seriously trying to kill us.

Potimas should know better than most that you can't beat the Demon Lord with some half-baked plan.

So if he set up an ambush without any weapons, it's almost like he wasn't expecting to win.

Like he was just wasting manpower for no reason.

But why would Potimas do something so pointless?

It's not like I know him that well or anything, but I've got a certain sense of his personality.

Based on what I know about him, these actions don't make any sense.

It's almost like I'm missing some key piece of the puzzle.

The Demon Lord's current attitude just adds more credibility to that theory.

Has she noticed something that I haven't?

As I look at her, she keeps glancing toward me and Vampy, then quickly averting her eyes.

"Well, this means less enemies for us without us having to do any work. Let's just say it worked out in our favor, hmm?"

What's up with that?

It's an awfully vague, half-hearted stance for the Demon Lord to take.

She's definitely gotta be hiding something.

"It doesn't seem like there are any elves or ogres around, so this place is probably safe. Let's spend the night here and start making our way through the Mystic Mountains tomorrow, shall we? This'll be our last chance to take a nice, long rest for a while, so make sure you really recharge."

In the end, the Demon Lord doesn't tell us whatever it is she's keeping to herself.

Well, if she doesn't think we need to know, then she's probably right.

I'm sure there's nothing I'd be able to do anyway, so it's probably best not to ask.

It would be some time until I finally found out what the Demon Lord was hiding.

About the despicable plan that Potimas had for the reincarnations.

Was it for the best that I didn't find out at the time, or was it a terrible mistake?

I still can't say for sure.



Interlude TEACHER

We return to the elf village via teleportation.

“Hrmmm. This is certainly unexpected.”

As I look at the back of the small, despairing figure in front of me, I murmur to myself quietly enough that she cannot hear.

Though as she trembles with her hands pressed to the ground, I doubt she would hear me anyway.

This little girl's name is Filimøs.

I, Potimas Harrifenas, am her father.

However, she is usually called Oka.

She has been reincarnated into this world after coming from another, retaining her previous memories, which is why she prefers to be called by her old name.

It's a symptom of her lingering regret and attachment to her old life.

Oka's feelings about her old world seem to be quite strong.

Otherwise, she would never have had the idea to gather the other reincarnations from all over the world, for no other reason than that they are from the same place.

Even with the skill she has that would suggest such a thing.

Oka's unique skill, Student Roster, conveys information about the reincarnations.

The skill gives only specific information, and only about reincarnations, so it is not a terribly user-friendly skill.

On top of that, the information it gives is incredibly sparse, leaving much to be desired in the way of details.

Frankly, the skill is completely useless.

Or at least, it would be, were it not in my hands.

I have a powerful organization at my command that I have built up over many years: the elves.

If I use them well, I can make great use of even that limited information.

We have now succeeded in gathering more than half the reincarnations.

The only other individual who would have been able to make such good use of Oka's skill is most likely the Pontiff of the Word of God religion, Dustin.

If Oka had fallen into his hands, it would have been very inconvenient indeed.

To that end, I must profess thanks to whatever divine intervention delivered Oka to me.

Thus far, things have gone rather swimmingly, but it will likely be more difficult from this point on.

It's safe to say that this most recent incident was a failure beyond even my imagination.

"Why...?" Oka murmurs in a trembling voice.

I cannot see her face from here, but it is easy to tell that she is in considerable shock.

From what she has told me, Oka's old world was a fairly peaceful one.

By comparison, this experience must have been too shocking for her to bear.

After all, aside from Oka and myself, our entire party was slaughtered.

To make matters worse for her, that situation was caused by one of her fellow reincarnations.

From her perspective, one of her own students perpetrated this massacre, which must be difficult to swallow.

Reincarnation though she may be, she is still a child of less than thirty years

between her two lives, so perhaps this was too harsh a thing for her to witness.

What happened exactly?

The simplest explanation is that we were attacked by an ogre.

But on a deeper level, it was actually the result of all kinds of complicated, interwoven circumstances, making it difficult to get the full story.

Even I cannot grasp everything that took place.

It began, I suppose, when I planned to tease Ariel and her companions.

Yes, tease.

A childish act, I must admit, but there is no more accurate way to describe it, as it held no deeper meaning.

Since Ariel travels with two reincarnations, I thought it would be amusing to introduce them to Oka and force them to fight each other.

Ariel has a surprisingly compassionate side, despite appearances.

And she cares deeply, too deeply, for her companions.

So if her companions were forced to clash with one of their own, it would no doubt be distressing for her.

In the end, *distress* is the most I expected to accomplish, since I doubt it would be enough to enable me to deal with her.

That is why I must describe it as *teasing*.

All it would accomplish is reveal the depth of my resentment, as such an action is entirely cost-ineffective.

But I suppose, after the humiliation they put me through, I had to do something of the sort for my own peace of mind.

It was especially spiteful to wait until Oka had grown a bit before carrying out the plan, if I do say so myself.

But when I finally attempted it after two years, there was an unexpected problem.

It was all well and good when the vampire girl attacked us at first.

In fact, that was exactly what I wanted.

I was not certain what would happen if I allowed Oka to try to speak to her first as she wished, but I hadn't imagined that she would just attack blindly.

Although I suppose I knew Ariel had already raised the vampire girl to be distrustful of elves.

In fact, I am not sure why I didn't expect to be attacked.

Still, from my point of view, the girl's speedy and decisive reaction was even better than I could have hoped.

If we had teleported away a second later, Oka would have died.

That normally would not be a problem, but if Oka died before they figured out who she was, then I'd lose my chance to torment them successfully.

That would be a bit of a shame.

However, Oka's value has gone down considerably since she was first born.

Thanks to the information from her Student Roster skill, we've collected most of the reincarnations.

And we already have a general idea of where the others are.

If we wanted to capture them, we probably could, but it would be foolish to lay a hand on the children of royalty or other powerful families too carelessly.

We already have more than the sample size we need, so there is no point in going after the others needlessly.

Besides, Dustin has already made his move with the hero. It would be unwise to take any more actions that are too obvious.

And if we can no longer make any serious moves regarding the reincarnations, Oka's value is considerably lowered.

She still has value, but it would be no major blow to lose her.

She's useful to have around, but it's not particularly a problem if she's not.

That is Oka's current value to me.

So I thought it would be fine if she died in the process of this teasing, but...

“Oka.” I address the still-trembling girl. “Was that really a reincarnation?”

At my question, she jumps to her feet.

Raising her head, she looks at me with a face still red with tears.

“Erm! That, well... I-it’s just...”

She opens her mouth, but the words that come out are nonsensical.

I suppose she doesn’t know what to say herself.

But amid her stammering, I suspect that some part of her is still trying to cover for that creature.

Shall I summarize her probable thoughts?

That was definitely a reincarnation, but she believes he had a reason for acting that way.

“Oka,” I repeat coldly as she continues to mumble. “Give up. That thing was no longer human.”

Oka freezes up in shock at that.

I’m sure she knows that herself, deep down. She simply does not wish to admit it.

Watching her dazed expression, I let my mind drift back to what happened before.

We led a unit of elves to the abandoned village at the foot of the Mystic Mountains to lie in wait.

It was originally built to help the empire conquer the Mystic Mountains, but for some reason or other, all the villagers died, or so I am told.

Because of that incident, no one ever comes near the empty village.

However, if Ariel and the others are aiming to cross the Mystic Mountains, they would have no choice but to pass through the village.

It sits directly in front of the entrance to the mountain range, after all.

Even if they tried to avoid it, we would be able to figure that out from the abandoned village.

It was the ideal place for an ambush...until that thing showed up.

“GRAAAAH!”

The ogre howled as it ran straight down the road toward the village.

Were it any ordinary ogre, this would not be a problem.

Because Oka was with us, I brought only ordinary elves without any special weapons.

However, they were still skilled fighters specializing in magic.

After all, they were meant to take on Ariel, even if I did not expect them to win.

They were really present only for my peace of mind. They were moderately useful yet ultimately expendable soldiers.

There was no reason they shouldn't have been able to handle an ogre.

And yet, Oka and I were the only survivors.

Even I would have fallen if I were not in a body that could use Spatial Magic.

I had heard that it defeated some adventurers, so I knew it was no ordinary ogre, but I never expected it to be that exceptional.

I already had my suspicions that the ogre might be a reincarnation.

There was one reincarnation on Oka's Student Roster who fit the description.

The information contained on the Student Roster is the reincarnation's place of birth, current condition, and the time and cause of their death.

This one was born in the Mystic Mountains, its condition had been fluctuating wildly these past few days, and its time and cause of death were constantly being revised.

When a reincarnation's condition fluctuates, that means they are in the midst of a battle.

And each time the time and cause of death are updated, it means they have avoided the possibility of dying in their current battle.

The death information already tends to be vague, and it often doesn't end up

coming true.

But when it changes that frequently, it means the reincarnation in question is repeatedly coming close to death.

Taking all this information into account, I strongly suspected that the ogre in question was a reincarnation.

After all, it was constantly getting into battles near the Mystic Mountains and using decidedly un-ogre-like strategies to defeat adventurers.

I was all but certain, but I decided to prioritize Ariel and company instead.

For even if the ogre was a reincarnation, there would be little point in bringing it to the elf village.

Reincarnations are difficult to keep as pets unless they are powerless.

If this ogre has already defeated multiple adventurers, it would be far too difficult to control.

This is why I chose not to tell Oka that the imperial army was attempting to subjugate the ogre, and I even thought it might be for the best if they succeeded.

Oka was quite concerned about the creature and had talked me into promising that we would search for it after dealing with Ariel.

Either way, I agreed because I assumed that she would no longer be able to worry about the ogre after encountering Ariel, although it has certainly come back to bite me now.

Especially because I have no doubt that Dustin was involved in the matter.

For the ogre to just happen upon us with such impeccable timing is all but unthinkable. No doubt someone was manipulating the ogre behind the scenes.

My guess is that Dustin's beloved pet project—those covert operatives of his—was responsible for guiding the ogre straight to our location.

I must admit, though they are my enemy, they are infuriatingly competent.

However, since we were able to confirm that the ogre was a reincarnation in the project, I suppose I shall let it pass.

After all, my goal was only to tease Ariel and her little friends.

It was not a particularly constructive plan, nor was its failure a terribly big loss.

When I Appraised that ogre, it unmistakably had the n% I = w skill held only by reincarnations.

The ogre is without a doubt a reincarnation, then.

And one who we certainly cannot control.

If I brought out the Glorias, which I have kept hidden from Oka, then I would undoubtedly be able to defeat it.

However, I have no interest in keeping a mindless beast as a pet.

That thing was no longer human.

Soon, it will forget that it was ever human to begin with.

There would be no advantage in having a thing like that in our village.

“Still, isn’t there anything we can do?” Oka asks, as if in response to my thoughts.

No doubt it was a coincidence, but the timing is so precise that it startles me slightly.

But that doesn’t change my answer.

“No, I think not. As you saw, that thing was not human, and it didn’t appear to hear when you spoke to it. Judging by that rampage, I doubt it even has intelligible thoughts any longer. I know not whether it is because it was reborn as an ogre or for some other reason, but it has completely transformed into nothing more than a mad beast. There is no saving a creature like that.”

Not that I was interested in saving it anyway.

“But still! There has to be a way!”

“There is not. Even if there was, I have no intention of capturing that monster. It would be a waste of time and resources.”

Oka’s tear-streaked face turns dumbfounded at my bluntness.

“Besides, would you truly defend it after what you saw it do to our people?”

Personally, the loss of a few expendables matters not to me, but Oka is far more softhearted.

If I point out that she is continuing to be selfish after all those losses, it will no doubt be effective.

Besides, unlike me, Oka sees those expendables as individuals with value.

During the expedition, she spoke with every one of them, even forming a sort of friendship.

It seems that in most of society, it is the norm to mourn the death of someone you knew.

Attempting to capture that ogre would mean incurring just as many losses, perhaps even more.

Since she sees each expendable pawn as a person, that would be a difficult call for Oka to make.

Sure enough, Oka closes her mouth and hangs her head again.

Turning my back to the silent girl, I begin to walk away.

This strategy was a complete failure.

And if Ariel's group makes it into the Mystic Mountains, they are undoubtedly heading for the demon realm.

I do have some connections there, but it will be much harder to interfere with them than it was before.

So I have no choice but to call off my harassment attempts for now.

In which case, it is best to start taking action on other fronts.

Time is valuable, after all.

I cannot afford to waste a single second.

There is much that needs to be done. Where to begin?

“But I... I'm still his teacher...”

I hear Oka's soft whisper behind me, but I pay her no mind as I walk away.



THE OGRE WORN DOWN

I consume MP to create a new katana.

I need to replace the one that I instinctively threw when the old mage put a hole in my head.

One of Weapon Creation's greatest strengths is that even if I lose one of my weapons, I can re-create it as long as I have enough time and MP.

Before long, I'm swinging a brand-new sword.

My other hand releases the Appraisal Stone I used to check out my results.

The stone normally hangs around my neck on a string.

This is the same Appraisal Stone that man used in the past, so working it myself makes me sick to my stomach.

But having an Appraisal Stone is useful to examine the abilities of a weapon I've made with Weapon Creation, so I have no choice but to carry it around.

My Appraisal confirms that the newly made katana has the same lightning properties as the old one.

In fact, because I used even more MP, it's actually better than before.

And while the old katana felt a little small in the hands of an Ogre King, this one is a perfect fit.

It's not that the sword got bigger. It's my body that got smaller.

After I turned the tables on the group that tried to ambush me in this village, my level went up and I was able to evolve again.

I'd thought that Ogre King was the end of the evolutionary line, so I was surprised to find there was another option.

This evolution is called an oni.

When I evolved into an oni, my body shrank from the giant size of an Ogre King to the size of a regular human.

Though I'm definitely smaller than I was as an Ogre King, I'm still pretty tall and muscular for a human.

I'm also the right size to wear human clothes, so I borrowed some of the clothes I found in this abandoned village.

I would have preferred not to wear clothes that belonged to these people, but the cold was too harsh on my bare skin.

When I gave in and put on clothes, I found that I looked more or less like an ordinary person.

As I was rummaging through the clothes left here, I realized that the uniform worn by most of the villagers was the same as the clothes worn by the soldiers led by that formidable elderly duo.

It must be the official outfit of whatever nation controls this area.

Not that this information makes much of a difference to me.

Whether the wearers of these uniforms were acting on some official duty or not, it wouldn't change my actions.

Not in the past and most likely not in the future, either.

Even if I could go back in time, I would probably repeat the same events that happened in this village.

Not that there's any point in a hypothetical like that.

At any rate, I'm now an oni, not a goblin.

But there was something even more surprising about my transformation than the change in size.

I glance again at my face reflected in the katana I just made.

I can see the same face I had in my old life.

The only major difference being the two horns growing from my forehead.

I don't know why I have my old face now, when I never did before.

Maybe there's no particular reason.

But when I saw that face looking back at me, I fell into a daze.

...What have I been doing?

Fighting, killing, then fighting and killing some more...

It's not as though my actions in my old life were always completely righteous.

I might have thought they were at the time, but in reality, I often solved my problems with violence.

Still, a far cry from my current life of bloodthirsty killing.

Things didn't always go my way, but I never found myself in a kill-or-be-killed situation.

When I saw my old face reflected back at me, it made me painfully aware of that difference.

"Sasajima!"

Or maybe it was hearing my old name that reminded me.

There was one tiny girl among the group that was lying in wait for me in this village.

And she called out my name.

From my old world.

But I must have just misheard her amid the chaos of the battle.

An unfamiliar girl wouldn't know that name, and even if she did for some reason, she would have no way of recognizing who I was when I was in ogre form.

But even if I did mishear it, the sound of my old name has brought back memories of my old life and sent me spiraling into depression.

At the same time, half of my consciousness is perpetually consumed by a smoldering rage.

Even now, my rational thoughts are tainted by violent impulses.

Now that I've wiped out all the enemies who were in front of me, my body is obeying my orders, at least.

I guess it's calmed down now that there are no immediate enemies.

The black-clad figure who lured me here was probably among the group I defeated.

To be honest, I was only half-aware of myself while I was in battle, so I don't entirely remember who I killed or how.

That girl who called out my name might have even been a hallucination.

As long as my sense of reason was still at least somewhat functional, I'm sure I would have hesitated to cut down such a small child.

Unfortunately, I lose all sense of reason in battle, so I doubt I was able to hold back.

If the same thing was to happen in my current, calm state, would I be able to respond properly?

...I don't know.

If a battle broke out, my sense of reason would probably burn away, and even in my right mind, I might still cut that little girl down for all I know.



I should find that frightening, but there's a part of me that doesn't care.

I'm not as reluctant to kill people as I used to be.

In fact, part of me even derives a dark pleasure from it.

The swirling rage within me wants me to kill.

Yet, the more I kill, the more the rage deepens and the more violently it burns.

If I keep on fighting, keep on killing, then soon I'll be fully consumed by rage.

Of that I have no doubt.

Unless I die before then, that is.

There are humans out there who are stronger than me, like that old mage who almost killed me.

I'm sure the time will eventually come that one of them kills me.

Will I lose my mind to madness and rage?

Or will I be killed before that happens?

Neither option is a particularly good way to go.

If I want to avoid being killed, I have to come up with more counterstrategies or simply get stronger.

I list some vocabulary words in my head.

Instantaneous movement. Teleport. Warp. Spatial Magic.

<Number of skill points currently in possession: 28,000. Number of skill points required to acquire skill [Spatial Magic LV 1]: 10,000. Acquire skill?>

There it is!

This must be the teleporting skill that old mage was using.

Absorbing the enemy's tactics is undoubtedly one of the fastest ways to get stronger.

If I find it difficult to deal with, I'm sure my enemies will find it difficult as well.

I acquire the Spatial Magic skill without hesitation.

It costs more skill points than anything I've picked up before, but I think that proves just how valuable this skill must be.

Still, it seems this Spatial Magic skill won't be very useful until its skill level is higher.

I could put some of my remaining skill points into it to raise the skill level, but it might be better to save those and train it normally.

Raising my skill level a little bit probably won't be enough to let me use Teleport like that old mage.

Just then, a thought occurs to me.

Do I really need to fight at all?

...No, I don't.

The person I needed to fight, to kill, is already dead.

The only times I've kept fighting were when those adventurers attacked me or when I let my rage take over and went on a rampage.

There's no reason whatsoever for me to deliberately go looking for a fight.

If I didn't even realize something so simple, my tunnel vision must have gotten worse than I realized.

Although it's probably because my rage makes it difficult to make rational decisions.

If I keep fighting like this, I'll either be killed or lose my mind.

Then why do I need to fight at all?

Fortunately, through all the battles I've had so far, I've become relatively strong.

I'm sure I could seclude myself in the mountains and live by hunting and eating the monsters there.

That's how the goblins lived in my hometown, so there's no reason I can't do the same.

Oh, I know. That's it.

I'll go back to the goblin village.

There's no one left there anymore, but it's the only place I can go home to.

I'm sure no humans will bother me there.

Why don't I just go back to that village and live in peace?

This seems like the most natural course of action. Why did I never realize it before?

No, I'm sure I had already realized it somewhere deep down.

I just wanted to go somewhere I could expend all this rage.

Or maybe I was hoping to avoid my inevitable return to that village as long as I could.

I was so sure that I no longer had the right to call myself a goblin. I even used the Naming skill to change my name.

Although part of the reason was to overwrite the name that horrible man gave me.

Still, I could have changed it back to my old name. The reason I didn't was that I felt I'd tarnished it, that I could no longer use it.

So I guess deep down I thought I didn't have the right to go back to that village anymore, either.

To be honest, I still feel that way now.

But another feeling has overtaken that: exhaustion.

I'm absolutely spent. It's time to stop being stubborn and rest.

The other part of me, the half that's being controlled by anger, screams that it hasn't had enough fighting yet.

But that just makes me all the more determined.

I have to go back to my home village.

If I don't do it now, while I still have my sanity, then I'll never be able to go back again.

There's no time like the present, then.

I know being here in this village will be good for nothing but stoking my rage even more.

This village is abandoned now, except for me.

I'm here in this horrible, half-destroyed house.

It's the exact place I should want to avoid, but perhaps because of all the time I spent here, my feet just naturally guided me right through the door.

I was forced to make magic swords in this house.

Day after day, as my rage and hatred built up inside me.

I don't have a single good memory of this home or this village.

Just being here dredges up unpleasant memories that eat away at my sanity.

I need to get out of here as soon as possible.

Leaving the house, I find the sky covered in dense clouds, like an omen of doom.

My mood darkens even further, but I still start moving forward.

To the Mystic Mountains. To the goblin village.

Home.

As the air gets colder with every step, I abruptly stop in place.

Huh?

Where was I going, again?

I get the feeling I was heading toward somewhere very important...

But I don't remember where.

...Oh well. It doesn't matter.

If I can't remember, I'm sure it didn't matter much.

All that matters right now is finding a way to vent the rage overflowing in my heart.

Ah...so much hate.

Hate... Kill... *HATE*... KILL!

“GRAAAAAAH!”

The boiling wrath erupts as a howl.

As the howl ripples across the area like a shock wave, I can sense the living things nearby start to flee.

But I won't let them get away.

The only way to sate this anger is to kill.

I'll kill, and kill, and kill.

I'll kill every last one of them.



I'M MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

After spending the night in the abandoned village, we set out into the Mystic Mountains.

Huh?

Did we see any ghosts?

Of course not, dummy!

No matter how creepy and ill-fated this place might be, there's no such thing as ghosts in this world, period.

'Cause when you die, you're forcibly sent home to the goddess.

If you wanted to stick around here as a ghost, you'd have to be able to defy the gods somehow.

In fact, if you were strong enough to do that, I don't think you'd even be a ghost anymore.

That would be a serious problem.

So yeah, our night went perfectly fine, thank you very much.

The puppet spiders are one thing, but I don't know whether to be impressed with how fast Vampy passed out or appalled by her lack of girliness.

Wouldn't that have been the perfect time to go up to Mera, like, *I'm too scared to sleep. Can I stay with you?*

She's still just a little kid, so it wouldn't be that weird to sleep next to her caretaker.

Even without a paranormal encounter, we could at least get some drama going.

Anyway, that's the kind of stupid thing I'm thinking about as I bounce along in the carriage.

It's cold out, so I'm all wrapped up in a blanket.

Why don't I walk, you ask?

Yeah, right. You think I could walk on a mountain path like this?

I guarantee you I'd be down and out in less than an hour!

The Demon Lord knows that, too, which is why I'm on standby in the carriage right from the start.

My role in this mountain expedition is to sit still inside the carriage, just like this.

Yep. I'm basically luggage!

While everyone else laboriously drags themselves up the mountain, I get to ride in luxury all by myself.

Mm, it's good to be me.

Still, I wouldn't say the journey is very easy.

For one thing, it's cold.

Weather in the Mystic Mountains is so intense that the snow never melts here.

We're still traveling at a relatively low elevation, but it's already pretty damn cold.

Even wrapped up in this blanket with heat-emanating magic stones, I'm still freezing in here.

Okay, technically, this used to just be an ordinary stone.

But with the help of Magic Conferment, a skill that lets the user fill an object with magic, it's been imbued with Fire Magic.

The Demon Lord made it, of course.

Since it was just some rock to start with, it came at the low, low price of absolutely free.

Talk about a bargain!

She made a bunch of these magic stones while we were in town, so each of us is carrying a few.

Incidentally, I got the most, since I don't have stats to protect me from the cold.

I'm still using only one right now, but when it gets colder, I'm planning on using a bunch at once.

To be honest, I'd like to use all of them right this second.

I'm cold!

But if I start complaining when we've just gotten started, I feel like I won't be able to make it through the rest of the trip, so I'm forcing myself to bear with it.

The cold isn't the only problem, either.

I'm getting carriage-sick.

I mean, this thing really sways.

Back and forth, back and forth.

Can you blame me for feeling gross?

Urp!

Why is it swaying so much? Because this carriage isn't touching the ground.

For those of you who are thinking *What the hell are you talking about?* your reaction is justified, but think about it for a second.

How would a carriage be able to traverse an uneven mountain path?

It can't, that's how!

So how is this carriage moving, then? Good question.

The answer is: It's being carried.

By whom? By Ael.

She looks like a little girl, yet she's carrying this carriage on her back as she walks.

If any outsiders saw this, I'm sure it would look pretty crazy.

But despite her appearance, she's actually a monster with stats in the quintuple digits.

Lugging a carriage up a mountain is a simple task for her.

Unfortunately, that means that jostling around a bunch is all part of the ride.

Of course being carried on someone's back means bouncing around a lot.

In fact, she's actually being pretty careful, or I'd probably be suffering even more.

If it was any of the other puppet spiders, I'm sure they wouldn't even think to carry it gently.

Yeah. Without going into too much detail, that wouldn't end well.

Urp!

I have to bear the cold and the swaying somehow.

That might sound like a nice problem to have compared to the others who are walking outside, but I don't have stats, so gimme a break.

If I could walk on my own two feet, I'd be doing it right now!

Besides, technically they're not all walking on their own feet, either.

Vampy and Mera are riding on the earth wyrms that were pulling the carriage.

Since Ael's carrying the carriage now, that frees up the two earth wyrms for riders.

Mera tamed the pair with a skill.

While he was a human, he apparently boasted all kinds of butlering skills, including driving a carriage.

A butler as a coachman? Yeah, I know. Don't worry about it.

Anyway, that's why he had the Creature Training skill to start with, but by taming the earth wyrms, he was able to evolve that skill into Summoning.

See, there are two ways to win over a monster.

One is using a skill to force them to obey you.

That means Creature Training or its advanced form, Summoning, to force the monster to do your bidding.

The other option is to get them to acknowledge you and enter into a contract with you.

With the former, you're basically enslaving the monster by force.

Of course, the tamer has to be stronger than the monster in this case, or the skill will bounce right off.

If you weaken the monster beforehand, though, sometimes it'll still work.

You don't need the monster's consent, so you can just force it to do stuff right away.

But since you're forcing it, that means you're suppressing the monster's free will.

After it's enslaved, it's practically a whole different being that happens to have the same specs.

Once you control its free will, the monster is like a machine that only obeys orders.

On the other hand, if you get a monster to recognize you as its master and enter into a contract, then that monster retains its free will.

Of course, that means the monster might rebel against you.

But since you have a real bond linking you together, you gain a far more formidable ally than if you just force it to obey you with a skill.

Ah, the power of friendship!

So Mera is using the latter, a contract with monsters who've accepted him as a master.

Earth wyrms as a species tend to be loyal for life to anyone they acknowledge as their master, so it's much better this way. They'd probably fight to the death for him now.

Although frankly, they're the next weakest members of this party after me, so

they probably won't get the chance to do that anytime soon.

Their main job is to be beasts of burden.

That being said, if it gets too hard on them, the two riders will probably get down and lead them by the reins.

After all, the riders have higher stats than the wyrms.

Even when the earth wyrms get tired, the bloodsucker duo will probably still be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

So far, though, the earth wyrms' steps seem light.

Straining my ears, I can hear the bloodsuckers and the Demon Lord chatting.

"Are there any monsters we should be wary of up here?"

"Hmm? As long as I'm with you, you don't need to worry about any monsters, but I suppose this is ice dragon territory."

"Anything else?"

"Well, I suppose there's always goblins."

"Huh?"

Huh?

I'm just as confused as Vampy.

Aren't goblins basically the poster children for super-weak monsters?

"They've got just as much warrior spirit as any old dragon. Or should I say determination? They're weak on their own, all right, but they're not afraid to stare death in the face. And they always attack in groups, so they're a pretty serious threat to an ordinary human."

What kind of a world has goblins like that?!

This world, I guess!

But that doesn't sound like the goblins we all know and love.

Unreal.

"Oh, and I guess there are the monkeys."

The Demon Lord and the baby bloodsucker keep chatting as they walk.

Yeah, they've got enough energy to spare for chatting as we climb this mountain, if you can believe it.

I guess that'll probably change when we get higher up, though.

But that's a long way off, I'm sure.

Oh boy, do I miss the time when I still believed that.

It's so c-c-c-c-cold!

Not just cold, it's freezing!

In fact, it's straight-up painful!

I knew these mountains were gonna be rough, but this is way worse than I thought.

I'm wrapped up in a blanket with all my magic stones, and I'm still freezing my butt off.

Just bouncing around inside the carriage like this seems to be draining my stamina.

This is rough, all right.

It's been a few days since we started our trip across the Mystic Mountains.

We're still moving at a steady pace, but the farther we go, the colder and more painful it gets.

The snow whirling around in the air is pretty, sure, but it's also the worst thing ever.

As the snow falls, it piles up on top of the carriage.

Too much would make the roof collapse, so it has to be periodically removed.

Which Ael accomplishes by shaking the carriage around.

Really, just whipping it back and forth.

It's like some kind of amusement-park ride, except I'm not sure I'm gonna survive.

I feel like I'm gonna be sick.

So every day I beg the snow: Please just stop falling!

My prayers go unanswered, though...

I'm still getting whipped back and forth!

Ugh, this seriously sucks.

And of course, snow is piling up on the ground, too.

It's piled so high, it'd practically be up to my ears if I was walking.

And since it's new snow, it's super-soft, too.

If you dropped Vampy on top of snow like that, she'd probably be buried on the spot!

So the Demon Lord is leading the way, tunneling through the snow for everyone else.

Damn, she's more efficient than a snowplow.

Must be nice having stats like that.

"Hrmmm. This is a little bit strange, though. I wonder what's going on."

The Demon Lord mutters to herself as she forges a path through the snowdrifts.

I'm guessing she means it's strange that the snow is falling nonstop like this.

The biggest reason the Mystic Mountains are considered impassable is because of the dragons that make their home there.

A whole family of ice-controlling dragons lives up in these peaks, encamped right smack in the middle between human lands and demon lands.

If the humans or demons want to invade each other, they'd have to cross through ice dragon turf first, making an invasion by way of the Mystic Mountains nearly impossible.

In fact, the ice dragons are the reason it's so damn cold.

They perpetually generate cold, freezing the land around them.

Of course, the closer you get to the source, the colder it gets.

So going to the heart of the mountains is especially scary.

But that's exactly where we're headed—in fact, we're nearly there—but apparently this situation is unusual.

I guess I can see that.

I'm using all these magic stones that the Demon Lord made, but I'm still shaking like a leaf in here.

The outside of the blanket that I'm wrapped up in with the stones is actually starting to freeze.

So without the magic stones, this blanket would probably be a block of ice, and so would I.

And yet, it's snowing outside.

At this temperature, it should definitely be hail by now.

Talk about a fantasy world.

That means this snow must be a magical creation, not natural.

So who do you think is making it snow, hmm?

Obviously, that'd be the lords of the mountain, the ice dragons.

"Maybe they're trying to keep you away, Miss Ariel?"

"Nah. Even the ice dragons must know they can't beat me. Plus, we have an unspoken agreement that I won't pick fights with them. They didn't try to intercept me last time I passed through this way, so I'm guessing we're not their target."

Outside the frozen blanket, I can hear Vampy and the Demon Lord talking again.

It's way too cold for a conversation at this point, but I am interested in what they're saying.

I open up a tiny gap in the blanket so that I can hear them better.

Immediately, cold air blows in through the hole.

Too cold!

I'm gonna freeze!

"There must be another outsider in the mountains right now besides us. Maybe it's that ogre?"

Without waiting to hear more, I plug the hole back up.

Whew. I thought I was gonna freeze to death.

That ogre again, though? This guy's pretty aggressive.

It's causing problems all over the place.

Must be nice to be so young and carefree.

Although I'm technically a little kid, too, like the baby bloodsucker.

Still, first elves and now dragons? This ogre must be a battle maniac.

Why does it keep challenging one strong opponent after another?

Is it on one of those "gotta find someone stronger than me" types of quests?

If so, I've got news for you, pal: The Demon Lord, the strongest person in the world, is right here.

She'll be so much stronger than you, you'll be saying lines like, *Ngh! I can't get in a single blow...!*

That is if you even have a chance to say anything before she turns you into mincemeat. Either that or smithereens anyway.

If that ogre is the reason for this freakish weather, then frankly, I hope that does happen.

This ogre has been a huge pain in the ass, to be honest.

First we get stuck in that town, then we have to deal with this godawful weather, all thanks to one stupid ogre.

Oh, I guess it did kill those elves for us, so that's one positive.

Still more negatives overall, though.

Like, can't it just disappear already?

If this was a hero story, the ogre would probably defeat the ice dragons and stand in our way, and we'd have to drive it away with the power of friendship or whatever.

Although if the imperial army was able to chase it off, then I don't see it beating a dragon anytime soon.

Dear ice dragons, please just smack that ogre down and put a stop to this snow already.

Otherwise, I'm seriously gonna die out here!

I can hear my teeth chattering.

"Guh?!"

Just then, the Demon Lord makes a most unladylike noise.

I dunno, I don't think girls are supposed to say "Guh!"

I create a little opening in the blanket to peek outside.

Guh?!

The scene outside is so shocking that I forget about the blast of cold air for a second.

Monkeys.

My worst nightmare.

My deep-seated trauma.

How could I forget? It's the same monkeys that once surrounded me and nearly killed me in my weaker days in the Great Elroe Labyrinth's Lower Stratum!

If I remember right, they were called "anogratches" or something.

At some point during our journey, the Demon Lord told me that they're also known as "revenge monkeys." If one of their own is killed, they'll form huge groups to try to get revenge on whoever killed it.

To make matters worse, once they've set their sights on revenge, they won't give up until their target is dead.

If you see one, you should never, ever kill one.

Even if you kill only a single individual, they'll attack you in swarms.

Right.

I did find it strange at the time that they were so determined to kill a single spider, but I guess that's just their nature.

Are you kidding me?!

What kind of crappy game sends a bunch of enemies to attack you but you're not supposed to kill any of them?

How terrible do your survival instincts have to be to keep trying to avenge a single individual until every last one of you is dead?!

And those same monkeys are coming toward us right now.

Not just one or two, either. They're coming in droves.

Um, what's up with this tidal wave of monkeys?!

Are you for real?!

Nobody told me these damn monkeys lived in the Mystic Mountains, too!

""""""""""""""""""""LOOK, LOOK!""""""""""""""""""""

Don't *OOK*, *OOK* me, you stupid monkeys!

Seriously, why can't I wake up from this nightmare?!

Is this because of that stupid ogre, too?!

Did the whole swarm of monkeys run this way to escape from the battle between the ogre and the ice dragons or something?!

This ogre sucks!

“Wha—?! Yeesh!”

Even the Demon Lord is freaking out at the sight!

The baby bloodsucker and Mera are totally freezing up.

Hey, no freezing just 'cause it's cold out!

Aside from Ael, the puppet spiders are all in battle-ready positions.

At least we can count on them in times like this!

“Oh, this isn’t good. Nope, nope, nope. Here goes nothing!”

As the sea of monkeys closes in, the Demon Lord starts preparing magic.

At least, I assume so. Without my skills, I can’t even see the magic the Demon Lord is constructing.

I can just kinda tell from her pose that that’s what she’s doing, I guess.

Huh?

Wait a sec, though.

Isn’t using magic in this situation, like, a really bad idea?

“Eat this!”

I realize this just as the Demon Lord unleashes her spell.

A torrent of darkness rushes from her hands.

What is this, an evil komehameha?

With the Demon Lord’s crazy stats, the Black Magic causes a huge explosion, sending the giant horde of monkeys flying every which way.

No matter how strong the monkeys might be, I was able to defeat them one by one even back when I was a total weakling.

The Demon Lord’s magic wipes them all out in one clean sweep.

The problem is what happens after that!

The shock waves from the Demon Lord’s spell spread through the area, causing a certain chain reaction.

A mass just as big as the swarm of monkeys, or maybe even bigger, bears down on us.

A mass of what?

Of snow, duh!

It’s an avalanche!

This is weird magic snow that stays soft and fluffy even in temperatures cold

enough to freeze my blanket.

If you cause a big explosion on a mountain covered in that stuff, of course this is gonna happen! Come on!

Sure, an area-of-effect spell was the only way to get rid of all the oncoming monkeys at once, but now it's caused a disaster even bigger than that.

The Demon Lord's looking at the snow like, *Oops, now I've done it!*

You sure have, dude. Not that I can blame you for freaking out and reacting poorly with a huge swarm of monkeys coming at us out of nowhere like that!

The snow closes in on us like a tidal wave.

"RUN!"

The Demon Lord's shout is almost as loud as the deep rumbling of the avalanche.

At her command, everyone jumps into the air!

With their leg strength enhanced by stats, the spider crew moves so fast, it's like they're flying.

Then they use Dimensional Maneuvering to keep fleeing through the air.

The bloodsucker duo jumps up, too, avoiding the avalanche by a hairbreadth.

Riel and Fiel carry the earth wyrms to safety.

And I...am falling straight toward the avalanche.

Oh. Wait. What?

I'm sailing through the air.

Ael is a short distance away, holding the carriage.

Hmm?

Hmmmm?!

This is a record-scratch moment if I've ever had one.

Okay. When Ael jumped up, the recoil must've sent me flying right out of the carriage.

Even Ael wouldn't have the spare brainpower to worry about me at a time like this.

I get it now. Ha-ha-ha.

Um, this isn't funny at all?!

Jesus Christ!

Shit, shit, shit!

At this rate, I'm gonna swan dive right into the snow!

And since I'm wrapped up in this blanket, I won't be able to do a damn thing about it!

Not that I'd be able to do much of anything even if I wasn't!

"Sael! Help White, quick!"

The Demon Lord shouts an order at Sael, the only puppet spider with her hands free.

Sael, bless her heart, is always quick to act as long as she's been given orders.

She reacts immediately, catching me in midair.

But it's a second too late!

Sael grabs me right before I get swallowed up by the avalanche.

Her hands close around my blanket.

But then the blanket comes right off with an ominous ripping sound.

Frozen or not, a blanket is a blanket. It's not built to support a person's weight.

My body falls right into the avalanche, sinking into the snow.

I reach up instinctively, and by some miracle, Sael grabs my hand!

But my body's already being carried away, and the momentum drags Sael right down with me.

As we're crushed along in total confusion, Sael manages to drag us back up to where we can see the sky again.

She must have managed to push back to the surface of the snow somehow.



My arm is experiencing some distressing pain as I get dragged along, but that doesn't matter right now.

"Grab my hand!"

Speeding toward us, Vampy reaches down from the sky.

Still being crushed by the snow, I don't have the strength to reach up.

Luckily, Sael manages to grab the baby bloodsucker's hand, and then Mera grabs on as well, trying to pull us up.

But then—something slams into the baby bloodsucker.

"Ah?!"

"Young Miss?!"

It's a monkey, carried down toward us by the avalanche, and it's clinging to the baby bloodsucker!

Wait, what the hell?!

Where'd you come from?!

Why is there another monkey here?!

The monkey's tackle sends Vampy's small frame flying into the snow.

Taking Sael, Mera, and the stupid monkey right along with her.

Me? Yeah, me too, of course.

Damn you, monkeeeey!

Maybe you were just trying to save yourself from getting swept away, but now we're all getting swept away, toooo!

Still grasping one another's hands, all of us get swallowed up by the avalanche.

Isn't the Demon Lord gonna save us?!

I cast a desperate look up at the sky, and just before the snow covers my vision, I see a vast swarm of monkeys throwing themselves at the Demon Lord.

Seriously?

How are there still that many of them?

And wait, what the hell, monkeys?!

You're seriously still trying to get revenge even in the middle of an avalanche?!

What the hell's wrong with you?!

The Demon Lord won't be able to help us now.

Just as that realization hits me, the snow swallows up my body completely.

And as my vision blackens, my consciousness blinks out as well.



THE OGRE AND THE ICE DRAGON

Flames course out of the katana in my grip.

Hellfire that consumes every living thing.

But right now, it amounts to only a paltry flicker that barely serves to warm my body slightly before fizzling out.

Instead of the usual blazing fire, my katana is currently engulfed in thick ice.

“Nngaaah!”

Nevertheless, I bring the blade down on the giant creature before me.

A *clang* echoes, and sharp reverberations run through my hand.

The blow broke the ice around my blade, but instead of cutting through the enemy, my attack was repelled by the creature’s powerful scales.

They’re so tough and my movements so dull.

The bitter cold is slowing me down, making it impossible to use my full strength.

“How sad. Truly pitiful.”

The dragon, which hasn’t bothered to dodge my attack, sends a scornful telepathic message.

Ignoring it, I swing the sword in my other hand.

The lightning-wreathed blade strikes the scales, scattering purple sparks.

However, as I feared, it doesn’t leave even a scratch on those diamond-like scales.

“It won’t work, no matter how many times you try. You may possess rare

strength, but you cannot hope to defeat me. I possess incredible toughness, though perhaps not as much as my earth brethren.”

The dragon speaks in a slow, old-fashioned manner.

Despite the grand way of speaking, its voice sounds like that of a young woman in my mind.

This dragon is a female, then.

The dragon is beautiful, her body cutting an elegant curve, covered entirely in quartz-like scales.

And she commands ice.

Her mere presence causes the temperature in the immediate area to drop to freezing cold.

I coat my sword in fire yet again.

The flames go out almost immediately, but I have to do this every so often to keep my body from freezing.

What temperature could this wretched cold possibly be?

It must be in the negatives; that much is for sure.

Even Hokkaido in the winter never got cold enough to freeze your body like this.

I’m constantly buffeted by thick bursts of snow.

Clinging to my skin, the snow saps away my strength and body heat.

Since they froze over, wearing clothes actually made the cold worse, so shortly after the battle started, I threw away all but the most crucial coverings.

From a bystander’s perspective, I’m fighting half-naked.

It might sound funny, but I’m fighting for my life.

...Why am I fighting this dragon anyway?

I don’t know.

I try to remember, but I can’t think straight, as if the snow has even piled up inside my head.

I know I was trying to get somewhere.

But where? I can't remember.

I wanted to go somewhere, to go home to a particular place, but I can't remember where that was.

All I can do now is try to defeat the enemy in front of me.

"GRAAAAAAH!"

"Most pitiable, indeed. Is the desire to fight the only thought that remains in your mind?"

I keep attacking with both my swords.

My hands are too numb to move properly, and my frozen body is painfully slow.

With attacks like this, I won't be able to put a scratch on this dragon's scales no matter how long I keep at it.

But as I continue these stubbornly straightforward swings, the dragon finally draws back as if in annoyance.

"It would be a simple task to slaughter you. I would certainly like to do so, as thanks for laying waste to our mountains. But our lord has ordered us not to lay a hand on you so-called reincarnations, so sadly, I cannot put your mind to rest."

The dragon flaps her wings, taking to the air.

I feel like she's saying something important, but I just can't seem to understand.

I hear its voice, but the meaning of the words doesn't come through.

"...Still, if the cold was to finish you off, then that would only be an accident, not any fault of mine."

The dragon's mouth curls slightly.

I don't know how to read a dragon's expression, but she seems smug, almost mischievous.

That expression basically vanishes immediately, though, leaving only a cold

light in the dragon's eyes.

It's a look befitting the ruler of this glacial hell.

"May you fall to ruin in this frigid land. It would be best for your own sake, as well."

Finally, with a pitying glance, the dragon flies away.

The immediate threat is gone.

But the blizzard around me doesn't relent.

I can feel my life force draining away just by standing in it.

I have to hurry.

...But to where?

I know I was trying to go somewhere.

Why can't I remember?

I know it was a very, very important place.

But try as I might, I can't seem to remember.

I want to remember, yet part of me doesn't want to at all.

Because that place doesn't exist anymore.

I lost everything.

My family, my pride, everything.

I have no right to go back there.

Not after I a○e my own sister...

"Kill."

That voice gave me an order.

I felt myself squeezing a small, skinny neck.

"Eat."

Another order.

My fangs tore into skin, and the taste of blood filled my mouth.

...Did I just start to remember something I shouldn't have?

I don't know.

Maybe it's better that way.

Either way, if I don't get away from here, I'm going to freeze to death.

Where should I go?

As I stand there thinking, I see something go flying into the air from the ground.

Was it magic?

Well, I have no other destination.

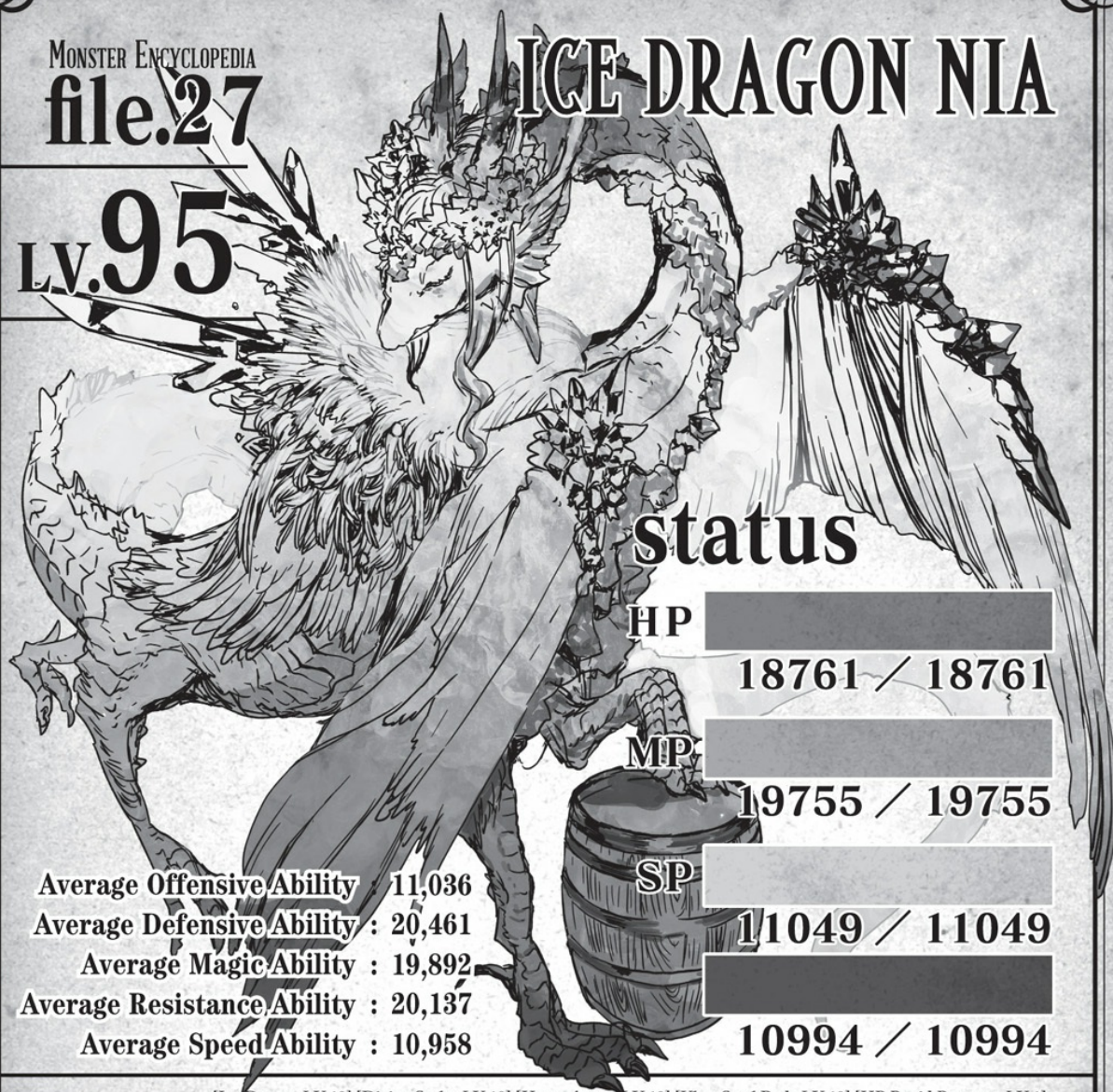
Might as well go take a look.

Forgetting my initial destination entirely, I start walking toward the first thing that catches my eye.

MONSTER ENCYCLOPEDIA
file.27

LV.95

ICE DRAGON NIA



status

HP 18761 / 18761

MP 19755 / 19755

SP 11049 / 11049

10994 / 10994

Average Offensive Ability : 11,036
Average Defensive Ability : 20,461
Average Magic Ability : 19,892
Average Resistance Ability : 20,137
Average Speed Ability : 10,958

skill

[Ice Dragon LV 10] [Divine Scales LV 10] [Heavy Armor LV 10] [Ultra Steel Body LV 10] [HP Rapid Recovery LV 1] [Magic Power Perception LV 10] [Precise Magic Power Operation LV 8] [MP Rapid Recovery LV 10] [MP Minimized Consumption LV 10] [Magic Divinity LV 1] [Magic Super-Attack LV 2] [SP Rapid Recovery LV 10] [SP Minimized Consumption LV 10] [Destruction Enhancement LV 7] [Cutting Enhancement LV 5] [Piercing Enhancement LV 5] [Shock Enhancement LV 5] [Impact Enhancement LV 5] [Ice Enhancement LV 10] [Flood Enhancement LV 10] [Gale Enhancement LV 10] [Status Condition Super-Enhancement LV 10] [Battle Divinity LV 1] [Energy Attack LV 2] [Flood Attack LV 10] [Gale Attack LV 10] [Dimensional Maneuvering LV 10] [High-Speed Flight LV 6] [Cooperation LV 10] [Leadership LV 4] [Kin Control LV 10] [Concentration LV 10] [Thought Super-Acceleration LV 4] [Future Sight LV 4] [Parallel Minds LV 3] [High-Speed Processing LV 10] [Hit LV 10] [Evasion LV 10] [Probability Super-Correction LV 10] [Stealth LV 10] [Concealment LV 10] [Silence LV 10] [Odorless LV 10] [Heatless LV 10] [Emperor] [Presence Perception LV 10] [Danger Perception LV 10] [Motion Perception LV 10] [Heat Perception LV 10] [Jinx LV 10] [Water Magic LV 10] [Flood Magic LV 10] [Tide Magic LV 10] [Ice Magic LV 10] [Freeze Magic LV 10] [Glacial Magic LV 10] [Wind Magic LV 10] [Gale Magic LV 10] [Tempest Magic LV 10] [Heretic Magic LV 10] [Destruction Super-Resistance LV 5] [Cutting Super-Resistance LV 4] [Piercing Super-Resistance LV 6] [Impact Super-Resistance LV 4] [Shock Super-Resistance LV 3] [Fire Resistance LV 1] [Ice Nullification] [Freeze Nullification] [Gale Nullification] [Terrain Resistance LV 5] [Lightning Resistance LV 1] [Black Resistance LV 1] [Heavy Resistance LV 2] [Status Condition Nullification] [Acid Resistance LV 2] [Faint Resistance LV 3] [Fear Super-Resistance LV 3] [Heresy Super-Resistance LV 7] [Pain Nullification] [Pain Super-Mitigation LV 10] [Night Vision LV 10] [Panoptic Vision LV 7] [Five Senses Enhancement LV 10] [Perception Expansion LV 10] [Ultimate Life LV 10] [Ultimate Magic LV 10] [Ultimate Movement LV 10] [Fortune LV 10] [Fortitude LV 10] [Stronghold LV 10] [Deva LV 10] [Sanctum LV 10] [Skanda LV 10] [Taboo LV 6]

The leader of the ice dragons who reign over the Mystic Mountains. One of the eldest and strongest of the already powerful dragons. The sparkling, crystalline scales that cover her body are incredibly beautiful. However, the area around her is perpetually snowy and freezing cold, and since it saps one's strength and energy, it is next to impossible to get close enough to see her. Even if one were able to do so, those beautiful scales boast such hardness that a dozen men would not be able to lay a scratch on one. Though the truth of this is dubious, an adventurer who encountered her while lost on the Demon Ridge claimed that she helps humans who offer her liquor. She is a legendary-class monster, assumed untouchable by humans.



I'M LOST

I awaken to the crackling sounds of a fire.

Good morning.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

As I lie there in a daze, Vampy notices me.

Then I remember everything that happened before I passed out, and *now* I’m wide-awake.

“How are you feeling? Everything in order?”

At that, I investigate the state of my body for a moment.

Nothing feels out of order.

I thought I remembered the arm Sael grabbed feeling broken to splinters, but now it’s perfectly fine.

The baby bloodsucker must have healed me while I was unconscious.

I nod to say that I’m fine.

“All right, then.”

Her reply is short, but I can tell that she’s relieved.

Since she saved me and all, I work up the nerve to thank her.

“Thanks.”

I might not be much of a talker, but even I have enough manners to show appreciation at a time like this.

“I-it wasn’t a big deal, all right!”

Wow. What's with that reaction?

I thought you were supposed to be the crazy stalker character, not some aggressively shy girl.

Well, whatever.

At any rate, I didn't wake up in heaven, so it looks like I survived.

That's a relief.

I sit up slowly and look around.

All I can see are walls of ice.

The baby bloodsucker must have used her Ice Magic to make an igloo for us to take shelter in, I guess.

There's a little fire burning in the center of the igloo, and Vampy, Mera, and Sael are sitting around it.

"Now that Lady White is awake, what should our next course of action be?" Mera asks, looking toward the baby bloodsucker.

"We meet up with Miss Ariel and the others, of course." She responds without hesitation. "But it would be silly to run off looking for her. Since we got swept away in the avalanche, we don't even know where we are right now. Our best bet is to give some kind of sign of our location so that Miss Ariel will come to us."

Of course. That's the first rule when you get lost like this.

Don't go anywhere.

Otherwise, you'll just get even more lost, and it'll be harder for your rescuers to find you.

Luckily, Vampy's magic can make a base for us and a fire.

That helps with the worst of the cold, and we can use the fire to melt snow for water.

Food is a bigger problem, but we just have to trust that the Demon Lord will find us soon.

That's the gist of the bloodsucker duo's conversation anyway.

Sael and I just sit and listen.

What else are we supposed to do?

I'm useless in battle, and Sael is Sael.

"If worse comes to worst, maybe we can eat this?"

Vampy holds up...a monkey.

Ah, it's the one that grabbed on to her before.

Wait, that thing's dead as a doornail!

Doesn't that mean its monkey pals are gonna come looking for revenge?!

"Well, if it happens...you know."

As if sensing my concerns, Vampy casts a meaningful glance toward Sael.

All eyes in the igloo gather on the puppet spider.

Yeah, that makes sense.

She's the strongest fighter in this group, so if anything happens, we'll have to count on her.

With all eyes on her, Sael's expression doesn't change, but she is definitely emitting a *Me? Seriously?!* kind of vibe.

Um, are we gonna be all right?

With Sael being the way she is and all?

Nah, it's fine, no problem.

I'm sure of it. Probably. Maybe.

"Then I shall emit a signal. If I cast a spell toward the sky, I have no doubt Lady Ariel will see it."

"Perfect. Thank you."

Mera exits the igloo.

By the way, this igloo doesn't have any entrance or exit.

If you want to go out, you have to use Ice Magic to make an exit.

As soon as Mera does just that, the reason for this annoying design choice becomes abundantly clear.

Eeeeeek!

What is this?!

It's freeeezing!

Mera fires a spell toward the sky and hurries back inside, closing the entrance behind him.

This is crazy, dude.

It's way too cold out there. If we left an exit open, we'd almost 100 percent freeze to death.

I don't think we could leave this spot even if we wanted to.

Vampy and crew might manage out there, but not me.

Nope. If I went outside, I'm sure I'd be a goner.

My defense against the cold, my blanket, was all frozen up even before I lost it in the avalanche.

Seems like I lost all my heating magic stones in the commotion, too.

In other words, I'm totally unarmed.

Technically, my clothes are meant to be somewhat cold resistant, but that's nothing in the face of this frigid wasteland.

So I guess our only choice is to wait until the Demon Lord and the others come running to save us.

There were still extra blankets and magic stones in the carriage, so I'll be able to get by with those.

With nothing else to do, we warm ourselves around the fire.

Vampy is prodding at the dead monkey, sniffing the blood around its mouth and stuff.

You know those things taste gross, right? Trust me on this one.

Now, after I turned into an arachne, I confirmed that my spider half and my human half had different senses of taste.

The spider half could eat all kinds of unpleasant things without much of a problem, but in the human half's case, some things were too gross to swallow.

So if that monkey tasted gross to my spider body, you better believe it's gonna be nasty for a human.

I ate tons of those things as a spider, and I hated every bite.

There's no way a human can eat one.

I gently take the baby bloodsucker's hand and pull it away from the monkey.

When she looks at me in confusion, I just shake my head.

You can't eat that.

My meaning seems to get through to her. She wrinkles her nose and lets go of the monkey.

I can't help but notice a relieved expression flashing across Mera's face.

Yeah, you didn't want to eat that, either, did you, buddy?

Maybe he just figured that desperate times call for desperate measures, and that's why he didn't stop Vampy.

He may be a servant, but he's still able to warn his master when she's about to make a mistake.

I guess during our journey, she must've gotten so used to eating monsters that she saw this monkey as a possible food source, even if it's painfully obvious how gross it would be.

I'm not sure whether to be impressed at her hardiness or disturbed at her lack of girliness again.

I mean, look at Mera's face, will you?

He's all, *Young Miss, no waaay can we eat that!*

Vampy's gotten more powerful and adaptable, but her maiden instincts have seriously lapsed.

Hmm. Well, uh, good luck with the romance, kid.

While I give the baby bloodsucker a tepid gaze, my hand casually touches the ground—and a shiver runs down my spine.

Something touched my hand when I put it on the ground.

It's an enormous white scythe.

My personal weapon that I crafted from my own body.

You could even say that it's my other half.

I thought it was still in the carriage, yet somehow, here it is.

When I absorbed all the energy of that bomb and turned into a deity, my body alone wasn't able to take in all that power, so some of it flowed into this scythe. As a result, it's got more than a few mysterious powers.

Even before I evolved, its abilities were usually based on my own skills, but what it did and when it did it varied quite a bit, and in ways that even I didn't fully understand.

Not to mention, it did all those things without my willing it to do so, as if it had a mind of its own.

Just like it's doing right now.

But it doesn't do things randomly—there's always a reason.

In this case, it probably came to me by way of teleportation, but that means something caused it to happen.

There's some reason that I need to have my scythe on me right now.

In that instant, I don't even wonder what to do.

An instinctive sense of danger overwhelms me, so I trust my instincts, grab my scythe, and stand up with it held out in front of me.

But somehow, that action winds up saving my life.

With a loud *boom*, the world around me suddenly changes.

I don't know what happened or why.

All I know is that it's painful.

It hurts.

My whole body hurts but especially my arms.

Not only that, but my vision is filled with pure-white snow.

Just as I realize that I must be lying facedown on the ground, vicious cold assails my entire body.

S-s-s-so cold!

I must be outside the igloo now.

I don't know what I'm doing out here, but I know I'm freezing my butt off!

I have to get back inside!

But when I sit up and look around, I don't see the igloo anywhere.

Instead, I see two big chunks of ice that must be the remains of the igloo.

Like what would happen if you chopped the dome in half, straight down the middle.

In fact, that's gotta be exactly what happened.

But instead of focusing on the destroyed igloo, my eyes wander over to what stands beyond it.

A person?

There's a person there.

Specifically, a man, who appears to be half-naked in this awful cold.

Actually, more than half. The only thing he's wearing is a tattered piece of cloth to cover the most vital bits.

You some kinda pervert?! Wait, this isn't the time!

But seriously, um, aren't you cold?

Okay, now's not the time for stupid reactions like that, especially not once I see his face.

It looks totally human, except for the two horns sprouting from his forehead... but that's not why.

It's the face itself that surprises me.

I know that face.

"Sael! Get him!"

While I'm frozen in shock, I hear Vampy's voice cry out.

Immediately, Sael hops out of one of the two pieces of the igloo.

The baby bloodsucker peeks out of the other, checking around.

Luckily, it looks like they were in the safe parts of the igloo, so they didn't get hurt.

Hmm? Does that mean that I got caught in whatever destroyed the igloo and thrown all the way over here?

As I belatedly realize what happened to me, the blood drains from my face.

The only reason I survived must be because I had my scythe at the ready.

I'm sure I would have died if it didn't defend me.

That would also explain why my arms hurt so much.

The scythe must have used some kind of barrier to reduce the damage.

Otherwise, with my weak constitution, I would never be able to survive an attack that could destroy the igloo like that.

Attack... That's right.

We must have been attacked.

By whom? Well, that's obvious.

There's only one new person around here.

The man with the horns over there.

So the man with the horns must be the one who attacked us.

No wonder the baby bloodsucker ordered Sael to attack him.

Sael whips out her six hidden arms and their respective weapons as she charges at the horned man.

Her crazy-high stats mean that she attacks so fast, a now-normal person like

me can't even follow her movements.

I knew that she produced her arms and pulled out her weapons before only because I'm familiar with her actions, not because I was able to see it.

It's just like how even someone who knows a lot about guns wouldn't be able to follow a fired bullet with their naked eye.

And they wouldn't be able to stop that bullet, either.

Before I can call out to stop her, Sael's already finished her attack.

Or rather, I guess she finished before I even thought about trying to stop her.

That's how fast she moves.

And no ordinary person could survive an attack from a monster like Sael.

But somehow...

"Huh?"

Vampy murmurs in shock.

The man with the horns managed to block Sael's attack with the katana he holds in both hands.

I can't believe it.

How was he able to defend himself against Sael?

And as if to prove that it wasn't just chance, he keeps parrying each of Sael's successive attacks.

It doesn't look like he's going to be able to counterattack, but Sael's attacks aren't touching him, either.

They're evenly matched.

I guess this guy with the horns is no ordinary person.

In fact, I think I know exactly who he really is.

After we've heard so much about him, it'd be crazier *not* to realize it.

The ogre. The one who wiped out all the adventurers in that town, got chased away by the imperial army, and caused all this abnormal weather by

antagonizing the ice dragons.

He honestly looks way more like a human than an ogre, but he's sporting some horns, so it's probably a safe bet.

Maybe he underwent some special evolution from an ogre or something.

Anyway, for the time being, we'll just call him Mr. Oni.

And if my guess is right, Mr. Oni is probably—

“Merazophis!”

A shriek from Vampy interrupts my thoughts.

Oof, my ears are ringing!

Turning toward the source of the cry, I see Mera looking like he's in pain and the baby bloodsucker running up to him in a panic.

Come to think of it, Mera was sitting right across from me in the igloo, which got sliced in half.

If that attack blew me away, then it must've blown Mera away, too.

But while I had my scythe to defend me, Mera didn't have anything to soften the blow.

“My deepest apologies. I was unprepared.”

Um, come on.

How were you supposed to be prepared for a complete surprise attack?

It doesn't make sense to me, but knowing Mera's serious personality, he's probably ashamed to have fallen victim to a totally unforeseen sucker punch.

I guess he thinks he should have noticed earlier somehow.

“No, it's fine. Let's just heal your wounds.”

The baby bloodsucker starts casting Healing Magic on Mera.

Uh, helloooo? He's not the only one hurting, y'know.

Just gonna ignore me?

I see how it is...

Left with no other choice, I use my scythe as a cane to drag myself to my feet.

My whole body hurts, probably from getting bowled over by that initial attack.

My arms are killing me. I wouldn't be surprised if I broke a few bones.

And on top of all that pain, the cold just makes it ten times worse.

Hmm, this isn't looking good.

I'm not gonna die immediately, but if things stay like this for too long, I might be in serious trouble.

I could freeze to death within the hour.

Shoot. We've gotta take care of this problem and make a new igloo to hide in.

How exactly are we supposed to solve this issue, though?

I look toward Mr. Oni, still locked in battle with Sael.

It really is amazing how well he's holding his own, but I think Sael's still going to win in the end.

Sael looks like she has a lot more energy to spare than he does.

Each of Sael's stats is over ten thousand, she wields six swords, she can move them in typically impossible ways because she's a puppet, and she's even got Poison and Dark Magic like any good spider monster.

Between their high stats, solid strength, and tricky strategies, puppet spiders are really difficult to take on, especially if you've never seen one before.

Thus far, they've mostly faced only enemies so weak that they could kill them in one hit or enemies like the tank from two years ago that are so strong, they can't even fight back, so the puppet spiders haven't had much of a chance to show off their skills, but they really are multitalented.

They've got the abilities of spider monsters, and since they control human-shaped puppets, they can imitate human movements, too.

Not to mention, those puppets can move in ways humans can't, and they don't need to worry about getting hurt.

Frankly, as long as their stats are evenly matched, the spider puppets can beat just about anyone.

They're invaluable allies.

...Even if it's easy to forget that when they're so useless most of the time.

Anyway, if this battle keeps going like this, my money's on Sael to win.

It's been so long since she faced an evenly matched opponent that it almost seems like she's panicking and not using her abilities to their fullest, but I'm sure that's just my imagination.

Yeah, let's go with that.

Once Sael calms down, things will turn even more in her favor, I'm sure.

But should we really be okay with that?

I mean, this oni here definitely looks like—

“You've certainly done it now.”

Interrupting my thoughts yet again, Vampy stands up slowly.

You can almost feel the rage over her precious Mera's injury rippling off her body.

I think I can actually see a black aura around her.

Um, hellooo? You're still gonna ignore me even after you healed Mera?

I managed to stand up somehow, but I'm still in pretty rough shape, y'know.

So you haven't noticed me at all? I see...

But that's going to be a bit of a problem.

I have to stop the bloodsucker from charging at Mr. Oni, so I start wobbling my way toward her.

“Lady White!”

Mera, bless his heart, notices me first.

He stands up, his body already healed by the little vamp's magic and his own automatic self-healing.

His clothes got torn up in the attack, so he looks kind of wild and sexy, like the cover of a romance novel.

Between him and Mr. Oni, that's two men now who are severely underdressed for the cold here.

"Ah."

The baby bloodsucker looks at me blankly.

What do you mean, *ah*?!

You forgot about me, huh? You totally forgot I existed!

"Oh dear! We've got to heal you right away!"

After a momentary look of *Oops!* Vampy hurriedly transitions to a panicked expression and runs over to me.

Yeah, I'm sure you really are panicked, but isn't half of it because you forgot all about me for a minute there?

As she somewhat awkwardly starts the healing, I can't help glowering at her a little.

But now's not the time for such petty thoughts.

"Look."

As Vampy heals me, I point at the oni, locked in battle with Sael.

I know it's rude to point, but I can't worry about that at the moment.

"Oh yes. That must be the ogre we've heard so much about. Ogres look a lot more like humans than you'd imagine, don't you think?"

No, I know that part.

That's not what I'm trying to say right now, though.

Wait, could it be that she hasn't noticed?

I have no choice but to say out loud what's been bothering me.

"Sasajima."

This oni's face looks very familiar to me.

But it isn't one that I've seen in this world.

His face is among Hiroyo Wakaba's memories.

Along with the name Kyouya Sasajima, a Japanese high school boy.

"What?"

Apparently, I was right: She hasn't noticed. The baby bloodsucker looks at me like I'm a crazy person.

So I'm forced to point at Mr. Oni again and say his name out loud.

"Kyouya Sasajima."

"*GRAAAAAAH!*"

Looks like that name set him off.

The oni's roar echoes through the area.

It's an inhuman sound, the howl of an ogre.

Startled by the sudden noise, Sael freezes in place for just a moment.

And the oni swings down the sword in his right hand without hesitation.

The sword is wreathed in flames, obviously different from his attacks up until now.

Sael quickly recovers from her shock and jumps back, narrowly avoiding the attack.

Cutting through air, the oni's attack smashes into the ground instead.

And then an enormous cracking sound fills the air!

Flames ripple out from the center of impact, accompanied by a shock wave.

The flames melt the ice, and the shock wave breaks the very earth!

Judging by the fact that Mr. Oni was evenly matched with Sael, I already figured his stats had to be around the ten thousand mark.

Since the earth dragon Araba was able to use magic to create pillars of earth instantly, and his stats were only around four thousand, you can tell that high stats basically grant the ability to cause natural disasters at will.

So with stats above ten thousand, just striking the ground can literally split it open.

But the results of that fracture are far wilder than I imagined.

Giant fissures start to spread from the sword stuck in the ground.

They're so deep that I can't even see to the bottom.

And by looking at the cross section of those cracks, I learn the cause of this unexpected level of destruction.

I had just assumed that this was ordinary ground, but that's not true.

It's actually made up of thick ice.

In other words, we're standing on a glacier.

The oni's flame-based attack broke the glacier, forming a giant crevasse.

Fortunately, the vampire duo and I are still standing on solid ground.

But Sael starts to get swallowed up.

Of course, Sael has Dimensional Maneuvering, so she can handle suddenly being airborne.

But that's only if there isn't someone attacking her.

"Sael!"

Vampy calls out a warning, but it's a second too late. Mr. Oni launches an attack directly at Sael in midair.

He's using the other katana, not the one in his right hand that broke the glacier.

The sword produces lightning that lands a direct hit on Sael!

Once the blinding flash and loud rumble have cleared, Sael is nowhere to be seen.

She must have fallen into the crevasse.

I don't think she's dead. If it was an enemy like the tank whose attacks could break through resistances, that would be one thing, but that was definitely lightning.

Sael has Lightning Resistance, and her magic resistance stats are over ten thousand.

She won't die that easily.

But she's probably not unharmed either, and we don't know how deep that crevasse goes, so there's no way of knowing how long it'll take her to get back up.

Our most powerful ally is temporarily out of commission.

"GRAAAAAAH!"

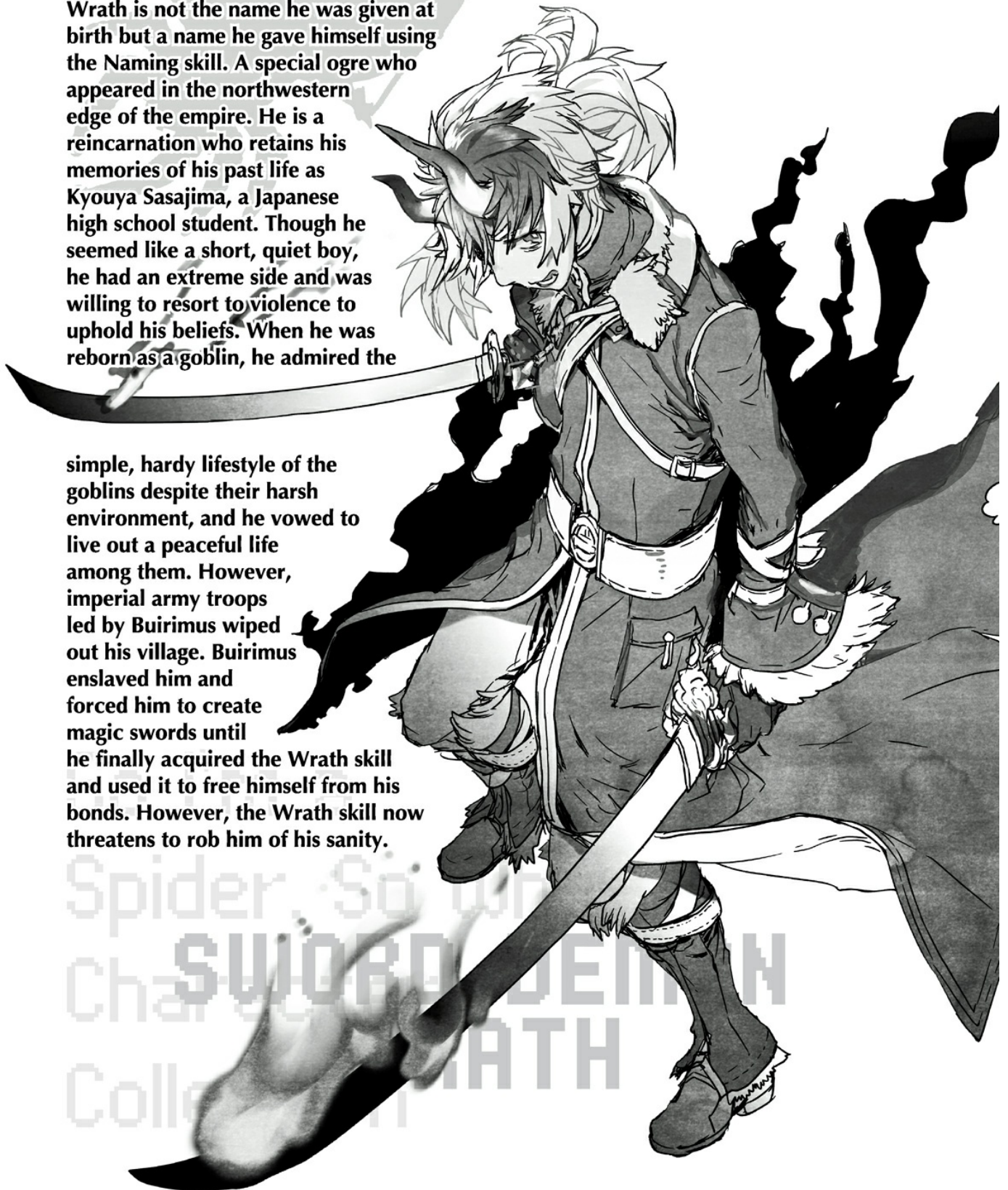
And then there's the oni, who's charging toward us with what definitely doesn't look like friendly intentions.

We're in big trouble.

SWORD DEMON WRATH

Wrath is not the name he was given at birth but a name he gave himself using the Naming skill. A special ogre who appeared in the northwestern edge of the empire. He is a reincarnation who retains his memories of his past life as Kyouya Sasajima, a Japanese high school student. Though he seemed like a short, quiet boy, he had an extreme side and was willing to resort to violence to uphold his beliefs. When he was reborn as a goblin, he admired the

simple, hardy lifestyle of the goblins despite their harsh environment, and he vowed to live out a peaceful life among them. However, imperial army troops led by Buirimus wiped out his village. Buirimus enslaved him and forced him to create magic swords until he finally acquired the Wrath skill and used it to free himself from his bonds. However, the Wrath skill now threatens to rob him of his sanity.





Interlude

THE NOTES OF BUIRIMUS THE SUMMONER

Empire Calendar 1379

Seventh day of the Month of Abu

Today I arrived at the location of my new position.

It seems that plans to create a foothold in the Mystic Mountains have been proceeding little by little since before my arrival.

I was concerned that I would have to build a village from scratch but found one already built at the base of the Mystic Mountains.

The people living there are soldiers who were sent here due to particular circumstances, like me.

They've all been stationed in this place because of bad behavior, violation of military regulations, and so on.

You might even call it a penal colony.

I'm impressed that they were able to build a village at all in a place like this, with monsters from the Mystic Mountains constantly appearing.

But this is where the hard work truly begins.

The mission that I've been given is to conquer the Mystic Mountains.

In other words, they want me to travel around this monster-ridden mountain range and secure a route to the demon realm.

There have been other attempts to cross the Mystic Mountains and invade the lands of demons, but all of them have ended in failure, thanks to the extreme cold and dense monster population of the mountains.

In other words, I've been tasked with the impossible.

I'm certain that my superiors do not expect me to succeed, either.

All they want is for me to die a dog's death in the Mystic Mountains.

Either that or they think I can at least make some small contribution to the empire by reducing the number of monsters in the Mystic Mountains ever so slightly.

I have no intention of dying, of course.

Even if I cannot conquer the mountains, if I slowly but surely produce results, perhaps I will eventually be permitted to return to the imperial capital.

The capital, where my beloved wife and newborn child await.

I cannot die before I have even seen my child's face.

I know not when I will be able to return, but I must persist until then.

Sixth day of the Month of Maya

It has been some time since my arrival here.

In the beginning, I had to spend all my time maintaining the village, but I've gradually reached the point where I can also spare some time to explore the Mystic Mountains.

However, that exploration is currently proceeding at a painfully slow pace.

We've finally gathered enough cold-resistant equipment for our group, but they become meaningless when venturing deep in the mountains.

Even a short excursion is extremely dangerous in this cold.

On top of that, monsters that thrive in these climes often attack us.

Most times, we can barely make any progress before we're forced to turn back.

And when we do make it past a certain point, goblins start to appear.

It would be reckless to attempt to engage with dangerous monsters like goblins in these conditions, so we turn back without confronting them whenever we see them.

While we must prioritize safety, we are simply not getting any results.

How am I to earn back the respect of my superiors at this rate?

I keep assuring myself to be patient.

Empire Calendar 1380

Twenty-Sixth day of the Month of Sata

Today, I received a letter from my wife.

Our daughter has been kidnapped.

As soon as I received the letter, I attempted to leave for the capital, but my aide stopped me.

This village is a penal colony in all but name.

If I leave without permission, I will be treated as a deserter.

Though I couldn't bear not to act, my frantic aide somehow persuaded me to desist.

However, I am ill at ease.

I sent letters to every last one of my acquaintances in the imperial capital, pleading for a way to get permission to return.

Surely even the authorities in the capital would not deny me when my daughter has been kidnapped.

I am concerned most, however, for my daughter's safety.

This village is a considerable distance away from the imperial capital.

Since I've just received the letter, that means that a fair amount of time has already passed since my daughter was kidnapped.

How is she faring?

I can scarcely bear to put pen to paper without knowing what might happen to my daughter as I do so.

Oh, gods.

Please protect my daughter.

Fourteenth day of the Month of Nahe

The only replies I receive from the capital say that they cannot permit me to leave this village.

It seems the conditions of my banishment are more serious than I realized.

I am being held responsible for the deaths of my entire squad, and so I was sent here because I could not provide sufficient explanation, but it turns out there is more to it than that.

The spider monster I encountered in the Great Elroe Labyrinth—the one that is now known as the Nightmare of the Labyrinth—has left its underground lair and started to wreak havoc on the surface.

There are rumors, I am told, that it was our squadron that provoked it into emerging from its nest.

This is the accusation is the real reason I've been sent to this place.

That would explain the help that Sir Ronandt has been providing.

He must feel guilty that I was forced to carry all the blame for the incident.

But it is only because Sir Ronandt was there that I survived at all.

I feel only gratitude toward him, not resentment.

Still, I am immensely grateful for his support.

In this remote region, we are always in need of supplies, and it is thanks to Sir Ronandt's support that we have been able to get them.

So I must impose upon his kindness.

Besides, I now have urgent reason to rack up more achievements.

If I wait long enough, years perhaps, I imagine things will cool down enough that I will be allowed to return.

However, if I wish to ensure my daughter's safety, I must get to the capital as soon as possible.

If I was permitted to leave, I would already be on my way, but then I would almost certainly be captured as a criminal of the worst kind.

If this was simply an internal affair in the empire, then perhaps they would be

willing to consider the extenuating circumstances and allow it, but the Nightmare caused trouble in another nation.

If the empire chose to place the blame on me and relayed that information to the other nations, then they cannot let me off so easily.

In order to get back to the capital, I must present some great accomplishment to prove my worth.

What can I possibly do?

Fifth day of the Month of Haku

Recently, the goblins have been branching out of their territory.

It used to be that we saw goblins only deep in the mountains, but lately they appear even on the outskirts.

At this rate, they will soon encroach on the land near our village.

Thus, I have had no choice but to give my men permission to engage in battle with the goblins.

I only hope that there will be no losses.

Thirteenth day of the Month of Haku

I have learned the reason behind the goblins' recent territorial expansion.

Their weapons have improved.

Goblins live far away from human settlements, forming their own small communities, but the level of their development has always been far inferior to us humans.

As such, their weapons were always quite primitive, but recently they have improved by leaps and bounds.

The weapons we seized from a group of goblins in battle were all superior in quality to our own.

Goblins are already a troublesome foe, but with weapons like these, they're exponentially more dangerous.

These weapons must be the reason the goblins have been able to steadily

expand.

But where are they getting such things?

It is no easy task to acquire weapons better than those of the empire.

The ones we are using are mass-produced products, but they are still weapons made by our homeland, which calls itself the greatest nation in the world.

Even our mass-produced weapons would never be considered inferior.

Most of all, these were sent to us with the help of Sir Ronandt.

But the goblins' weapons are far stronger, the sort that an officer of the imperial army might be given.

Even the empire would have difficulty amassing more than a handful of such weapons, yet every single one of these goblins has one.

Where in the world are they coming from?

Twenty-Seventh day of the Month of Haku

At last, we have amassed enough of the goblins' weapons to equip each of my men with one.

Today, we attack the goblin village.

We cannot simply allow them to keep expanding their territory, and most of all, taking control of the goblin village in the Mystic Mountains would be a considerable feat.

With an achievement like that, I may finally get permission to return to the capital.

We have determined the location of their village by using a bird monster I tamed to scout the area.

Since we have been prioritizing safety, our explorations have never gone that far, but it is not impossible if we push ourselves enough.

It will be a dangerous gamble, but if we succeed, the path back to the capital and my wife will be opened to me.

I have no choice.

Fourth day of the Month of Yafu

We succeeded in taking the goblin village.

Since we'd been attacking goblins outside the village to acquire their weapons and lessen their numbers, the raid went rather smoothly.

Most of the goblins left in the village were young children, their mothers, and elderly goblins.

Thanks to that, we did not suffer any of the losses I initially feared.

A few men were injured, but none was killed.

Truly, the gods smiled upon us.

Not only that, but we even resolved a long-standing mystery: the source of the goblins' weapons.

One of the goblins had a special skill the likes of which we had never seen or even heard of before: Weapon Creation.

It's a truly incredible skill that uses MP to create weapons from nothing.

With enough MP, the user can create a limitless amount of high-quality weapons.

It's a terrifying skill, but that also means it's an invaluable one to have on your side.

It was nothing short of miraculous fortune that I was able to enslave the goblin with that skill.

Fortune was on my side this day.

Otherwise, that goblin might have taken its incredibly valuable skill to the grave.

I was lucky that the goblin's level was low, too.

It generally takes a long time to restrain a monster enough to gradually gain control over it, but this goblin's level was low enough that I was able to do so more easily than I expected.

But while I've gained physical dominion over it, its mind still rebels against me.

I must continue to strengthen my hold until it is complete.

Enslaving a monster with an incredible skill like this is an even greater achievement than I could have hoped for.

I wiped out the goblin village, and I captured this goblin that can create high-quality weapons.

This should make the perfect souvenir for the imperial capital.

As soon as the empire finds out about this, they will have me return to the capital.

Soon, I can finally see my wife again.

And begin the search for my daughter.

Eighteenth day of the Month of Yafu

I wish to return to the capital as soon as possible, but first I must wait for their response.

Meanwhile, I have continued to train the goblin.

First, I must grasp the finer details of the Weapon Creation skill.

It seems to take a great deal of MP, so the goblin can make only one weapon a day at most.

Still, producing one high-quality weapon per day is extraordinary enough.

In addition, it appears that the quality of the weapon produced is directly proportional to how much MP is used to create it.

Thus, the wisest course of action would be to increase the goblin's amount of MP.

I have been capturing monsters in the Mystic Mountains and bringing them to the goblin so that it can finish them off and raise its level.

After repeating this process over and over, the goblin evolved into a hobgoblin, greatly improving its base MP.

Its Weapon Creation skill has also leveled up, allowing it to give the weapons special effects.

As unbelievable as it sounds, the creature can now create magic swords.

Magic swords. Incredibly rare weapons created from the parts of powerful monsters that carry certain special effects.

Even in the empire, only a few of the highest-ranking officers carry magic swords.

And now we can mass-produce them.

With this goblin, I am guaranteed a high position.

Surely the empire will be eager to welcome me back to the capital.

How I long to return to my wife.

Is my daughter safe?

Has my wife fallen ill with worry?

My wife and daughter are all I can think about.

Eighth day of the Month of Kade

I still have yet to receive a response from the imperial capital.

Worse, my control over the goblin is beginning to reach its limits.

It is still under my control, but there is a darkness within it now.

The creature has gained ominous skills like Anger and Curse, and they grow in level almost daily.

It is clear that even though I have control over it, the goblin still carries a deep grudge against me for destroying its village.

Another goblin that I subjugated on the same day has long since submitted to my control, but this one must have a remarkable force of will.

Somehow, I feel an ill omen about all this.

Perhaps I should not have raised its level so and forced it to eat its own kind so that it would gain titles?

It may have been wiser to wait until it was completely under my control before strengthening it.

After all, this goblin does have that mysterious skill called $n\% I = W$.

If memory serves, the Nightmare of the Labyrinth had the very same skill.

I have heard nothing further about the Nightmare; perhaps the rumors have simply not reached this far.

Still, that was an incredibly powerful monster.

It would be no surprise if it caused serious problems.

And this goblin has the same skill.

Does that mean it's of a similar nature to the Nightmare?

If so, then the day may come that I can no longer control it.

And yet, I cannot afford to let go of this goblin.

I must return to the capital as soon as possible.

The notes end here.

Interlude THE DEMON LORD AND THE ICE DRAGON

“I messed uuuup!”

Things have been going so well, I let my guard down!

I chose the wrong way to deal with those monkeys, big-time.

Shit.

White’s gonna die!

“Aaargh!”

I kick at one of the dead monkeys to vent my frustration.

It’s all their fault that things got so complicated.

I could’ve finished the rest of them with a flashy move, but I was afraid to set off another avalanche, so I wound up taking way too long to kill them all.

And while I was doing that, White and the others got swept out of the range of my detection.

I just hope they’re all right...

“Let’s go find them, quick!”

Snapping orders at Ael and company, I look down at where the avalanche led.

“In a hurry, are we?”

A telepathic voice from above stops me in my tracks.

Looking up, I see ice dragon Nia, the ruler of the Mystic Mountains.

She descends to the ground near us, landing with far more grace than you’d expect from her giant form.

“Yes. So why do you need to bother me right now?” My tone comes out harsher than I intended, but I’m pretty annoyed right now.

“Oh dear. You seem to be in a foul mood.”

“If you’ve got no business with me, I’m going to head out now, okay?”

“If I had no business with you, surely I would not have shown myself like this.”

Nia’s teasing tone just annoys me even more.

“Oh my, how frightening.”

Recognizing my frustration, Nia smirks even more infuriatingly.

For half a second, I consider killing her on the spot, but that time could be better spent looking for my lost friends.

“Come now—wait a moment.”

As I start to turn away, Nia stops me again.

Honestly, talking to her stresses me out so much that I want to ignore her.

“I would not have spoken were I simply passing through, but I do wish to raise a complaint or two about all the destruction you’ve just caused in my domain.”

“...What’re you getting at?”

“Dear me. An apology following wrongdoing is the natural course of things, is it not?”

Damn her!

Is she threatening me at a time like this?!

“I don’t think I did anything wrong, actually. It was just an accident. Not our fault.”

“Alas, think of my poor kin. With all these powerful outsiders wreaking havoc in my domain, and right under my nose at that, surely they will be unable to sleep soundly for all their terror. What a cruel fate.”

The ice dragon shakes her head with exaggerated lamentation.

I’d almost forgotten.

It's been so long since I saw her that I almost forgot which of the dragons was the most obnoxious!

"Want me to relieve them of that terror by putting them to sleep forever, then?"

I'm half-serious with this threat, but Nia seems unbothered.

"Are you quite certain? I doubt my lord would sit idly by as you slaughtered my kin."

It's awfully petty of her to name-drop Gülie right now, if you ask me.

I guess when the god's away, the dragons will play.

That being said, the god really would back her up in this situation, which only makes it even more obnoxious.

"Besides, I do not think to ask anything so dramatic of you. The liquor you have in that carriage, for example, would be more than enough."

Yeah, I guess that would be a small price to pay for her to leave me alone.

But it was a bad idea to piss me off even more at a time like this.

"I'll pass."

"Hrmmm?"

Nia looks surprised; she must not have expected me to say no.

If she thinks mentioning Gülie is enough to get everyone to do whatever she wants, she's dead wrong.

"Are you quite certain?"

"That's my final answer. You sure you wanna keep pissing me off? 'Cause I *will* end you. Don't think I won't."

Nia becomes flustered, probably sensing that I'm dead serious.

"Wait, wait! If any harm comes to me, my lord will be truly cross, you know!"

"Yeah, well, it's too late for that. I've already killed Gakia. Do I have to spell out the rest for you?"

Nia freezes. *"What did you say?"*

“Earth dragon Gakia’s dead. I killed him. The wheels are already turning; you just don’t know about it.”

Earth dragon Gakia.

The leader of the earth dragons, who protected the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

He was one of the major dragon powers, just like Nia here.

With him gone, big changes are already underway.

Knocking off one more dragon won’t change that now.

“Well? Your move.”

“All right! I’m sorry!”

Nia hurriedly apologizes, always quick on the uptake.

“If you’re sorry, could you stop this stupid blizzard already? You don’t normally make this much snow, do you?”

“O-of course. But could you not wait a little longer first, please?”

“Say what?”

“All right, all right!” My glare makes Nia quickly withdraw her request. *“I’ll stop! Just quit looking at me like that!”*

Petty people like her sure change their tune quickly when they realize they’re in hot water.

“However, controlling the weather is no small feat. I shall cease my technique at once, but it will not immediately improve, you see. Please understand.”

“Fine.”

I guess even Nia can’t change the weather this fast.

“I’m in a hurry, so bye.”

“Please leave at once. Honestly. First that little brat, and now you? What a horrid sequence of events.”

I need to start looking for White and the others right away, but something about Nia’s comment makes me pause.

“Little brat? Was it an ogre, by chance?”

“Hrmmm? No, it was an oni. At any rate, since it returned to my domain, it has caused nothing but trouble, running about and killing everything in sight. In fact, it was on such a rampage that I had to give it a stern scolding.”

Oni... An advanced evolution of an ogre.

I’m guessing that infamous ogre must have evolved, then.

But what does she mean by *returned*? “Is it originally from the Mystic Mountains, then?”

“Indeed. Once, it was but a mere goblin. Who knows what possessed it to evolve into an ogre. Well, I suppose it must have been because of the events that forced it to leave this place, most likely.”

A goblin?

Now, that’s odd.

Goblins technically can evolve into ogres, but that means giving up being a goblin, so I’m pretty sure they usually don’t do that.

Goblins take a lot of pride in their species. It’s unthinkable for one to evolve into an ogre, unless something crazy happens to give them no choice.

“What happened?”

“To put it briefly, humans attacked the goblin village and destroyed it. I believe that particular brat was then forcibly enslaved by the humans, who led it away.”

Ah. Well okay, then.

I guess that’d be a good reason for a goblin to evolve into an ogre.

Putting this story together with the ones we heard in town, I’d be willing to bet that goblin was taken to that now-abandoned village at the foot of the mountains.

Then it must’ve broken free of their control somehow and exacted its revenge.

Afterward, it ran into those adventurers and turned the tables on them, I

suppose.

“Gotcha.”

“Truly, those humans do the most despicable things. No wonder that poor little brat flew into a rage.”

Hmm?

Something about Nia’s words strikes me as strange.

Is this pompous jerk actually feeling bad for someone?

“They didn’t just destroy its village?”

“I can say no more, for it is too repulsive. All I shall say is that it may be in the brat’s best interest for it to die here.”

I guess they did more than just wreck its village, then.

“Wait, you said you *scolded* it, but you didn’t kill it?”

“Indeed. I cannot kill it directly, by order of our lord. As such, I simply arranged for it to die of its own accord with a little help from this blizzard. The creature stubbornly clings to life, however.”

...If it dies from a blizzard that you caused, wouldn’t that still be killing it directly?

I just don’t understand dragons’ logic.

And wait, why did Gülie tell her not to lay a hand on it anyway?

“Incidentally, were you not in a hurry?”

Something starts to click in my head, but Nia interrupts before I can quite grasp it.

“Oh yeah, that’s right.”

I have to find those four who got swept away by the avalanche.

The other three might be fine, but White’s weak right now.

If I don’t find her soon, it might be too late.

In fact, she might be dead already, for all I know...

Can a normal person survive getting caught in an avalanche?

Somehow, I have the feeling White wouldn't let something like that kill her, but I don't have any grounds for that.

Either way, I should really find her as soon as possible.

"Ael."

I nod to the puppet taratect who's carrying the carriage.

Ael understands what I mean right away, produces something from the carriage, and places it in front of Nia.

"What is this?"

"We'll just call it payment for the information."

Pushing the barrel full of alcohol toward Nia, I head in the direction of the avalanche's end, for real this time.

"Many thanks." Nia sounds pleased.

Waving her off without slowing down, I begin my search.



I'M IN A BIND

Mr. Oni comes charging at us with a roar.

It's just the baby bloodsucker, Mera, and me.

But I'm a normie now, so I don't even count as a fighter.

I guess the baby bloodsucker is probably the strongest of the three of us, but even she isn't as strong as Sael and the other puppet spiders.

And since Mr. Oni was an even match for Sael, I doubt our little vampire will be able to take him on.

So what am I supposed to do now?

That's obvious. Ruuuuun!

I turn away from the charging oni and flee for my life.

Vampy did a little Healing Magic on me earlier, so while I'm not at 100 percent, I can at least manage to run.

For as long as my shitty stamina holds out anyway!

But it's better than doing nothing!

It's not like I'm running away because I'm only thinking of myself, okay?

To put it bluntly, I'm nothing more than a burden in battle right now.

Aside from my total lack of strength, my defense is disturbingly low, too, so just getting caught in the middle of a battle could get me killed.

So the bloodsucker duo won't be able to fight to their fullest potential if they have to worry about me being nearby.

Look, if I would be any use at all, I'd be fighting right there with them!

But this is the reality: I'm not just useless, I'd actually make things harder for them.

It's in everyone's best interest if I hightail it out of there so I won't get in the baby bloodsucker's and Mera's way.

So no, I'm not just running to save my own hide.

I've *run* out of options! Get it?

Behind me, I hear a loud, roaring *boom*.

I guess the battle has begun.

And it's waaay too close to me, too!

I can actually feel the air crackling from close behind me.

Like, *real* close.

Yeah, I guess with my pathetic physique, even a full-speed dash doesn't amount to much.

Besides, we're talking about a beast whose stats probably rank in the ten thousands who moves too fast to follow with the naked eye.

It was stupid of me to think I could get away in the first place.

I can hear all kinds of ridiculous battle noises right behind me, like *POW!* and *KABOOM!*

Time out, time out!

Can't you at least wait until I get a safe distance away, please?!

I'm kinda super-serious right now!

But then my wish gets granted, kinda: The shock wave from one of the attacks impacts my body, sending me rolling far away.

Phew. Guess I'm just blessed with good luck as a reward for being so good all the time!

Never mind the fact that I looked really silly in the process or that if I'd rolled any farther, I would've fallen right into a seemingly bottomless crevasse.

Yikes, that was close!

I stand up and edge away slooowly, taking care not to fall in.

If I panic and try to run away, you just know the ice'll crack beneath my feet and I'll fall in anyway.

As it stands, I'm already hearing some unsettling cracking noises, so I have to be really careful with how I take my distance here.

Finally, I make it far enough away from the crevasse and check that I'm not too close to the battle. I'm safe for now.

A battle like that could easily shift a mile in any direction, so this distance can help me only so much, but it's better than nothing.

Ideally, I should keep moving to get even farther away, but...sorry, I'm kinda pooped already.

I'm wheezing like crazy, and my shoulders are heaving.

Nope. I can't move anymore.

Not to mention, the air is so cold that it hurts to breathe.

You'd think running at full speed would've warmed me up, but it only made me colder.

Right. Mr. Oni isn't the only pressing concern here.

This freezing cold is just as bad.

If I stay out in this cold much longer, I'll probably turn into an ice sculpture before you know it.

I've gotta do something, and fast.

But the best way to deal with Mr. Oni is to wait for Sael to make her way back.

Even together, I don't think the bloodsucker duo can beat this oni, so it's best if they just try to buy time.

We have to hurry or I'll freeze to death, but we have to buy time to defeat Mr. Oni. Talk about a dilemma.

Hey, why is Mr. Oni attacking us anyway?

“GRAAAAAH!”

Oh right. As far as I can tell, he’s lost his damn mind.

It kinda seems like he’s just attacking anything in sight at this point.

I mean, when he first attacked us, we were hidden inside an igloo, so it’s not like he even knew who we were before he came after us.

I guess he must’ve seen the signal Mera sent up, figured someone was there, and just came over to attack for no other reason?

Maybe it’s best to assume that he’s nothing more than a beast in humanoid form at this point. Although even a beast might be better at choosing its battles.

Hrmmm.

Something about Mr. Oni’s current condition kinda rings a bell.

He’s lost his mind.

But he has stats high enough to compete with Sael.

Is this a Wrath skill?

The Wrath line of skills, like Anger and Rage, raises your stats. And unlike Magic and Mental Warfare, it doesn’t even cost SP or MP.

Sounds great, right? But there’s a major catch.

Like they say, nothing in this world is free. Wrath doesn’t seem to cost anything, but there’s actually a very high price.

The loss of your sanity.

When you activate a Wrath skill, it makes you frothing mad, forcing you to go off the rails.

Then you give in to the anger and go on a rampage, but the scariest part is that if you don’t turn the skill off with your own will, you’ll just keep rampaging forever.

And the longer you leave the skill active, the more the anger eats away at your mind.

Lose yourself to the rage, and you’ll eventually lose the self-awareness to turn

off the skill entirely.

In the end, you'll become a berserker, indiscriminately attacking everyone and everything.

It lines up perfectly with Mr. Oni's current state.

This is just an educated guess, but I'd bet money that I'm right.

Ahhh, if only I could use Appraisal, I could prove that my theory is correct!

Oh, Vampy learned Appraisal, come to think of it.

I'm the one who suggested it to her.

But I don't have time to tell her that now.

And I *definitely* don't wanna stick my nose into that crazy face-off.

"Oof!"

Just then, the baby bloodsucker lets out a cute little cry as she gets blown away and crashes right into me!

Of course, I can't catch her in place, so the impact just sends us both rolling along the ground.

Ow.

I think I'm gonna cry.

"Hff! Hff!"

Vampy wheezes, quickly jumping away from me and standing up.

Her body's covered in cuts and scrapes, but the wounds are closing up even as I look at them.

Now, that's some speedy self-healing there, missy.

Don't suppose you could spare a little healing for the person you just crashed into and injured?

Oh, you don't have time?

Right, since Vampy got blown over here, that means Mera is holding the front lines by himself.

His sword is broken in half, so he's fending off Mr. Oni's barrage of attacks with the handle and tiny stump of a blade.

Obviously, that's not enough to block all of the oni's attacks, since he has two not-broken katanas, so Mera's slowly getting more and more wounded.

And Vampy's in an even worse situation. She doesn't have any weapons at all.

She's still just a child, so her body's too small to hold weapons in the first place.

And it doesn't help that her favorite kind of weapon is a big ol' broadsword.

It's way too hard to lug something like that around all the time, so her broadsword is usually in the carriage.

And we don't have the carriage right now, which means she doesn't have her sword, either.

It looks like she used magic to make herself an ice sword on the spot, but a single attack from Mr. Oni shatters it.

She's pretty much fighting with her bare hands.

It's crazy to take on an armed opponent like that, magic or no.

But after catching her breath for just a second, she's already trying to charge back into the fight.

I grab the hem of her clothes to stop her. Since I'm still on the ground, that means her pants.

"What?!" she snaps angrily. "I'm busy!"

Yeah, I guess I can't blame her for getting mad when I'm literally holding her back.

But I need her to listen to me for a second.

"Appraisal."

"Huh?! ...Oh."

What do you mean, *oh*?!

You forgot about it, didn't you?! You totally forgot Mr. Appraisal even existed!

How could you do that to a dear friend who was so useful to me before my deification?!

“Check for the Anger skill.”

I manage to push down my own fury enough to tell her what I’m thinking.

She doesn’t seem to know what I’m getting at, but she must feel guilty about forgetting Appraisal, because it looks like she’s doing it anyway.

“It’s not there. Ah, no, wait a second. He has a skill called Wrath!”

Wait, what?

Yikes. Okay, that’s actually even worse than I thought.

I’d assumed that maybe his Anger skill had evolved into Rage.

The Anger skill raises your stats but not nearly enough to put someone on the same level as Sael.

If it gave you that much power, I probably would’ve used Anger more myself, even with the risk of losing my sanity.

So I figured there was a good chance it had turned into the more advanced version, Rage.

But it’s already turned into Wrath?

That’s one of the super-broken Seven Deadly Sins skills.

Considering how overpowered the other Seven Deadly Sins skills are, Wrath is definitely bad news.

And if it evolved from Anger and Rage, then it must have a super-enhanced version of the same effect: sacrificing your sanity to give your stats a huge boost.

No wonder he was able to fight evenly with Sael!

I’m sure the only reason the imperial army was able to chase him off was that he must have been too afraid of losing his mind to use Wrath.

But he must have used it when he got cornered by those elves, or else he got attacked by an ice dragon and used it here in the Mystic Mountains.

Either way, he must have activated Wrath and lost his mind to get to this point.

It all makes sense.

And that means I have a plan.

“Sophia, use your Jealousy skill on Wrath!”

Vampy looks shocked by my uncharacteristically strong words.

But then her expression changes to understanding. Maybe she used Appraisal to read the details about the Wrath skill.

“Got it!”

Vampy nods and takes off.

The Jealousy skill is a lesser version of Envy, one of the Seven Deadly Sins skills like Wrath.

Its effect is similar to a skill I used to have called Sealing Evil Eye: It seals one of the target’s skills.

Obviously, that means they can’t use it anymore.

If we can seal Mr. Oni’s Wrath skill, then his stats should go way down.

On top of that, maybe he’ll even regain his sanity.

Then we can find out whether he really is Kyouya Sasajima.

If so, then he’d be the second fellow reincarnation I’ve encountered, after the baby bloodsucker. I’d like to avoid him getting killed if at all possible.

But that second *if* is a pretty big one.

This may sound cold, but I can’t prioritize his life over Vampy’s, Mera’s, and my own.

So I don’t want the bloodsucker duo to do anything too risky, but Vampy’s eyes are sorta blazing right now...

She’s definitely determined to win no matter what.

As I learned from her mock battles with Ael, it turns out the baby bloodsucker is a really sore loser.

Every time Ael beat her, she would always sulk afterward.

I guess knowing from the start that she wouldn't win didn't make her any less mad about losing.

On top of that, she seems to be a bit battle-crazy. Like, she really loves to fight.

The reason she didn't stop training even after I got deified and couldn't practice with her anymore is definitely that battle-hungry, winning-obsessed side of her.

Even now, there's a genuine smile on her face as she fights Mr. Oni.

Up till now, her expression had been serious, since her and Mera's lives were in serious danger; now that there's a hope of victory, though, she seems to be enjoying herself.

Yikes. That's hella scary, girl.

But we can't count our chickens just yet.

The Jealousy skill doesn't instantly take effect.

It'll take time to seal off the Wrath skill.

In fact, I don't even know if a crazy-overpowered skill like Wrath can be sealed at all.

The only way we're gonna survive this is if either the baby bloodsucker can seal Mr. Oni's Wrath skill or if Sael comes back to the fight.

Either way, it all depends on the bloodsucker duo being able to buy enough time.

But, uh...

An unpleasant cracking sound fills the air.

It's coming from the ground.

The ground right nearby, no less.

The creaking, splitting sound keeps getting louder with time.

We're on top of a giant glacier right now, so the ground below us is actually

ice.

Ice that's been piled up on top of real ground, since it's too cold in the Mystic Mountains for it to melt.

But Mr. Oni's attack earlier made a huge fissure, and the shock waves as the battle continues are only widening that gap.

It's freezing cold out here, yet I feel like I'm sweating.

(Cold sweat, of course.)

This doesn't look good, guys.

This glacier is going to collapse!

If this glacier is big enough to form a crevasse so deep that you can't see the bottom, what do you think is gonna happen if the whole thing breaks?

Sadly, my imagination is too flimsy to picture it.

But I know one thing for sure: *I'll die!*

I'm definitely gonna die if I get caught up in the collapse of a giant glacier!

Waaaaah!

What am I gonna do?!

For now, I better start by getting away from here.

But I'm too tired to move another inch!

I can barely even stand up!

I can't do anything at all!

Save me, Doraemon!

But no matter how much I silently cry for help, no one is coming to save me.

Reality is cruel.

Maybe I used up all my luck on that rolling escape earlier...

"Ahhh?!"

To make matters worse, I hear Vampy cry out in pain.

Her small body has been pierced through by one of the oni's blades.

Blood oozes from the wound, staining her clothes red.

Mera is lying at Mr. Oni's feet with no arms.

The oni cut off both his arms.

And yet, he's still biting Mr. Oni's leg from the ground.

Even without arms, Mera's still desperately trying to protect Vampy.

But Mr. Oni kicks him away impatiently, and without his arms, Mera can't stop himself from rolling away.

He tries to crawl back over, but it looks like his body isn't obeying him anymore, so he just writhes around.

Mr. Oni flings Vampy off his sword, too, like he's shaking away a bit of blood.

It's an awful sight.

But Mera and the baby bloodsucker are both still alive, at least.

Mera is definitely mortally wounded, but he's still moving, and the baby bloodsucker has the Undying Body skill, which lets her survive a normally deadly attack once per day, leaving her with 1 HP.

She seems to have passed out from the shock of being stabbed, but she's not dead, or at least she shouldn't be.

But they're still in major trouble.

They may be alive now, but one more attack and they'll be done for.

However, for better or for worse, Vampy doesn't get attacked again.

Why? Because Mr. Oni has set his sights on me.

Wait. *Me?!*

I whip my unmoving body into shape, forcing myself to my feet using the scythe as a cane.

It's not like I'll be able to do anything else just because I'm standing now, but I'd like to think it's better than doing nothing at all.

Just as I get to my feet, the oni charges at me furiously.

Next thing I know, he's right in my face.

Damn, this guy's fast!

The wind pressure from Mr. Oni's impossible speed blows the hood of my robe right off my head.

"?!"

When Mr. Oni sees my face, he suddenly freezes.

Huh?

Wait, does he actually recognize me?

I don't think his Wrath skill is completely sealed, but maybe Vampy's Jealousy was able to bring him back to his senses a tiny bit.

If I speak to him now, I might be able to set him straight!

"Sasajima?"

Slowly, carefully, I say his name.

Mr. Oni's face stiffens, and his eyes open wide.

After a conflicted pause, the light returns to his eyes for just a second, only to be engulfed once more by the flames of Wrath.

It didn't work?!

Then I have no other choice.

I might be weaker than an average normie now, but you better believe I'll still put up a fight!

Besides, this giant scythe is full of power.

I can't activate any of that power myself, but if I manage to hit him with it, maybe it'll produce some kind of results.

Clinging to that faint hope, I raise my scythe against Mr. Oni.

But then Vampy bites down on his neck from behind!

"Mmmph!"

She pierces right through the skin and starts sucking his blood.

A baby vampire sucking an oni's blood!

Now, there's something you don't see every day.

"Graaaaah!"

Mr. Oni howls and thrashes about, trying to shake off Vampy.

But she stubbornly clings to his body, refusing to let go.

You're in no condition to be doing something this crazy!

Mr. Oni flails around violently, stamping his feet.

The impact causes the ice to emit a new sound, a much worse sound than the ones it's made so far.

At the same time, the crevasse gets so big that it's more like a canyon, and new cracks begin to spread around it.

Then the ice starts breaking off from those cracks and falling into the crevasse.

It's like watching the ground explode!

Mr. Oni gets caught up in the collapse, sinking downward.

And then he falls.

With Vampy still attached.

"SOPHIA!"

Now, this next part isn't on purpose.

I mean, I've tried it a million times, and it always failed.

But in that instant, I guess my old reflexes just take over.

I start to picture white thread.

I imagine it coming out of my fingertips.

The thread catches Vampy and pulls her back up.

I have no reason to believe this will actually work.

But somehow, thread really does come out of my fingertips, wrap around Vampy, and stop her from falling.

After all those failed attempts, I just pulled it off super-smoothly at the exact right time.

Talk about a deus ex machina.

But I'll take it, thank you very much!

I brace my legs and pull Vampy back up.

Mr. Oni gets detached from her and falls backward into the darkness of the crevasse.

Unfortunately, I don't have any spare strength to save him.

In fact, I'm about to fall in myself!

I'm not strong enough to lift a whole person, even if it's a little girl!

I guess even if I can produce thread now, I still can't make my muscles any stronger.

Noticing my pained expression, Vampy hurriedly starts climbing the thread.

Finally, she manages to scramble back up to solid ground.

But we're not safe yet.

The glacier is still collapsing.

We have to get out of here, and fast.

"Where's Merazophis?!"

Vampy looks around frantically.

"There!"

Following her gaze, I see Mera on the verge of sliding into a fissure.

Shit!



I quickly send out more thread.

It wraps around Mera's body right as he slips over the edge, just barely preventing him from falling.

Vampy promptly snatches the thread from me and pulls Mera over.

"My apologies, Young Miss."

"Don't be sorry. I'm glad you're all right."

Mera looks at his master in anguish, but she warmly embraces him.

This is a heartwarming scene and all, but we don't have time for this right now!

We have to run, so I start to stand up.

But my legs promptly lurch to one side.

It's not because I'm too tired to stand up.

No, the ground itself is tilting.

Uh-oh.

Before I can react beyond that thought, the ground we're standing on gives way.

All three of us start to fall.

Vampy, use Dimensional Maneuvering!

I whirl to look at her, but the little girl's eyes are closed.

She passed out still clinging to Mera!

I'm not surprised, since she pushed herself so far already, but still!

Why couldn't she last, like, thirty seconds longer?!

Mera's too gravely wounded to move at all, never mind use Dimensional Maneuvering!

Just as I close my eyes and resign myself to my fate, the falling suddenly stops.

Cracking my eyes open cautiously, I see that the three of us have been caught by a white net.

And on the other end of the net is Sael.

SAAAAEL!

Perfect timing, girl!

Sael uses Dimensional Maneuvering to run through the sky, and we escape the collapsing glacier.

I always thought Sael was a little useless, but it goes without saying that, right now, she's the most dependable person in the world to me.



A NEW NEMESIS

When I open my eyes, I find myself looking up at the ceiling of a white tent.

Since it's made from Miss Ariel's thread, it's far sturdier and more weatherproof than it looks, enough so to be comfortable even in this freezing cold.

It's so nice that I'm tempted to snuggle back into the blankets for a while longer.

It might be good to get some more sleep...

Rolling onto my side, I let my eyes fall on Merazophis, lying close by.

Ahhh, he looks cool even when he's passed out from his injuries.

Wait, what?!

Then I suddenly remember everything that happened before I lost consciousness.

"Hmm? You awake?"

I look up to find Miss Ariel looking at me from a chair a short distance away.

"Yes. Good morning." My brain is still fuzzy as I mumble a greeting.

"Morning." Ariel raises an eyebrow. "You all right? Maybe you should sleep a little longer."

Kind and perceptive as always. She must be able to tell that I haven't completely recovered just yet.

"No, I'm fine."

Sitting upright, I survey my surroundings.

Merazophis is resting by my side, and across from him, White is doing the same.

Looking in the corner of the tent, I find Sael crouching meekly.

Everyone who was at the glacier is here and safe.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Hang on a second.”

With that, Miss Ariel makes me a hot cup of tea.

“Thank you.”

I emerge from the blankets and sit down on the chair across from Miss Ariel.

“Looks like you guys had a rough time of it.”

“A little.”

I nod as I drink down the tea.

It certainly was rough.

That was an extraordinary stroke of luck for all of us to have made it out alive.

“Would you mind telling me the details of what happened? I got a rough idea from White, but, well, you know her...”

I know exactly what she means.

I’m sure White tried to explain, but she’s not the type to go into detail. No doubt she just gave some one-word answers and Miss Ariel had to figure out the rest.

“All right.”

I tell Miss Ariel the whole story of what happened after we got separated.

How we made an igloo and waited inside.

How that ogre we’d heard so much about attacked us.

The life-and-death battle that ensued.

And how White called that ogre Kyouya Sasajima.

“Hrmmm. So this ogre—or, wait, he evolved into an oni, right? Well, never

mind that. Was he really this Kyouya Sasajima person?"

Unsure how to answer Miss Ariel's question, I sit in silence.

Miss Ariel waits patiently for my response.

Finally, I make up my mind to answer honestly.

"...I don't know."

"You don't?"

"No. I don't actually remember most of my former classmates' faces."

None of my memories of my old school life are good.

In elementary and middle school I was bullied, and while that wasn't quite the case in high school, people certainly gossiped about me on a daily basis.

It would be no exaggeration to say that my parents were my only allies.

So I certainly don't remember my classmates' faces very clearly.

In fact, I don't even remember their names.

So I didn't really have a face to put to the name Kyouya Sasajima.

Since White said that name after seeing his face, then maybe that oni had the same features Kyouya Sasajima did in our old world.

White has her old face, too, after all.

But I don't remember Kyouya Sasajima in the first place, so when I say I don't know, it's the truth.

Reluctantly, and with a bit of grumbling in the mix, I explain all this to Miss Ariel.

"Ahhh." Miss Ariel looks upward, her expression unreadable. "Well, in that case...I guess I can't blame you for not remembering, huh?"

"I should certainly hope not!"

I frown indignantly at her noncommittal answer.

"All right, all right." She raises her hands in surrender. "But if it really is Sasajima, what should we do? I've got Ael and the others out looking for him

right now.”

“What do you mean?”

I’m not sure what Miss Ariel is asking exactly.

“I mean, he might already be dead. But if he is alive, should we kill him or let him live?”

Ah, I see now.

She’s being considerate because he might be a reincarnation like me.

In that case, I think the right course of action is obvious.

“Kill the bastard, of course.”

“Pffft!”

Miss Ariel snorts out a laugh.

“What are you laughing at?! Rude!”

“Sorry, sorry. But, uh, I think that was kinda your own fault, Sophia.”

“It’s not very nice to pass the blame onto others.”

“Right, right.”

Miss Ariel looks somehow displeased.

“What is it? Were you expecting me to say *please don’t kill him?*”

“Hrmmm. Yeah, I guess so.”

“How absurd.”

“Absurd, huh...?”

Miss Ariel looks to the heavens and sighs.

“I mean, since you were born and raised in Japan, wouldn’t you normally feel weird about, y’know, murder? Especially when it’s a fellow Japanese person we’re talking about. Besides, from what you guys told me, this Sasajima lost control of himself because of the Wrath skill, right? He wasn’t doing it of his own free will. Shouldn’t you take that into consideration?”

“We have a term for that in Japan, Miss Ariel. It’s called *involuntary*

manslaughter. And it's still a crime."

Miss Ariel looks up and sighs yet again.

"Besides, even if I was born and raised in Japan in my old life, this version of me was born in Sariella and raised all around this world. I left my Japanese sense of ethics behind when my hometown was destroyed. And I was never all that attached to my old life anyway. So why would I feel any obligation toward someone whose face I don't even remember?"

Miss Ariel...hasn't stopped sighing since I started talking.

"On top of all that, we don't know if he would have been decent even if he wasn't out of control at the time. He even had that repulsive Kin Eater title and all."

"Huh?!"

When I saw that title in my Appraisal, I couldn't believe my own eyes.

There's only one condition I can think of that would make a person gain that title, right?

No one who would do such a thing could possibly be a decent person.

Even if he did it while he wasn't in his right mind, it's still repulsive.

"So that's what Nia was talking about. What an atrocious thing to do..."

I don't know what Miss Ariel is muttering about, so I just ignore her.

"And most importantly! That damn bastard nearly killed Merazophis! That's more than enough cause to kill him!"

Miss Ariel covers her face and groans.

"How could I possibly forgive him after he injured Merazophis so terribly? And Merazophis even apologized to me because of him! I never want to see Merazophis make a face like that again... Although it was kind of appealing in its own way. Um, I mean—! I couldn't possibly allow the bastard to live when he upset Merazophis so much. I'd like to tear him limb from limb myself, in fact. Oh, I know. I can do to him what he did to Merazophis. I'll slice off his arms, kick him around, and laugh at him while he rolls across the ground! And after that

—”

“Okay, stop, stop, stop. I get it already,” Ariel interrupts, looking exhausted. Then she mutters to herself, “Maybe we didn’t raise you right...”

I’m sorry, what was that? Did you mean to say that out loud?

As I open my mouth to press her about it, Ael and the other girls come into the tent.

“Welcome back. How’d it go?”

Ael just shakes her head silently.

“I see. No good, huh?”

She didn’t just get that from the gesture: Ariel is linked to the puppet taratects with Kin Control, so she can understand them pretty well.

They must have relayed the situation to her that way.

“So apparently the glacier where you guys fought totally broke apart, then actually slid down the side of the mountain like an avalanche. Since Sasajima must have been caught up in all that, it’d be pretty difficult to find him.”

I see.

Well, that’s a bit of a shame.

“I guess he might be dead, huh?”

“No, he’s alive.” I shake my head. “My level hasn’t gone up.”

“Ah.”

I’m still at level 1.

I haven’t actually raised my level once since I was born.

The reason for this was an uncharacteristically lengthy explanation from White: *“You shouldn’t level up until you max out your enhancement skills.”*

When skills that enhance your stats evolve, they exponentially increase how much those stats go up with each level up.

White said that one of those skills, Skanda, was really useful.

So I've been holding off on leveling up until my skills reach an advanced level, too.

You can still raise your stats and skills without leveling up, after all.

And my level still hasn't gone up, even now.

If we'd actually beaten such a powerful enemy, surely my level would have gone up quite a bit.

So he's definitely still alive, of that I have no doubt.

"Heh. And if he's alive, then we'll have to have a rematch someday."

He and I will meet again.

I just know it.

"Yikes. Now, that's a nasty smile."

Miss Ariel mutters something under her breath.

Ael looks away indifferently, Sael is trembling in the corner, Riel tilts her head uncertainly, and Fiel has a vacant look of *I don't know what's going on, but wow*.

Then my eyes wander over to White.

"...She saved me again."

"Oh yeah. She can make thread again, huh? Maybe it's like when people get superhuman strength in times of crisis?"

Miss Ariel misses the point of my comment ever so slightly.

It certainly was a miracle she was able to produce thread in that situation, so I do think it's amazing.

But to me, the most important point is that White saved me.

Again.

When I'm in trouble, White always comes to the rescue.

Two years ago, when White lost all her power, I have to admit that I was thrilled.

I selfishly thought I could finally repay my debt to her by protecting her in her weakened state. Worse, I was just gleeful to see her not all-powerful for once.

From my perspective, White was way too strong.

She could do anything, protect anyone.

So she was always saving me, and I could never pay her back.

At the same time, it felt unfair that she was so strong.

So when she got weaker, I was secretly happy.

Awful, isn't it?

But this incident made one thing clear: White is still strong.

Even in her weakened state, she was still able to rescue me.

It's not a matter of her physical prowess.

White is strong in a different way.

And I'm still weak, in body and mind.

"I want to get stronger..."

"I think you're plenty strong already, Sophia."

"Not at all."

I can't let Miss Ariel comfort me.

I'm still so much weaker than her and the others.

"I have to get so much stronger!"

It won't be easy to improve on my inner strength.

My awful nature has stuck with me since my former life.

I haven't changed much.

Of course, I haven't given up on myself yet. I have to improve, little by little.

But it's going to take time.

In the meanwhile, I can strengthen my body.

At the very least, I have to be able to defeat that awful oni.

“That’s it! I’m going to train even harder starting tomorrow. Just you watch! That bastard won’t beat me next time!”

“Hoo, boy. Just take it easy, all right?”

I clench my fists tightly.

Riel and Fiel imitate the gesture, while Ael discreetly edges away.

Sael?

She’s still just trembling in the corner.

“Hang in there, Merazophis, buddy,” Miss Ariel mumbles.

She looks concerned, but it’ll be fine!

Merazophis has already done more than enough!

It’s my turn to get stronger, and I swear I will.

So that next time, I can be the one to rescue White.

And so that when that oni and I meet again, I won’t lose.



The Ogre's Roar

Broken shards of ice litter the frozen landscape.

As if to mirror the destructive impulses of the person who broke them.

The red blood scattered across the ground evokes the image of frozen fire.

A fire that never goes out.

There's not a sound to be heard, as if everything has frozen over.

But even in that frozen field, the oni could not put out the flame raging inside him.

The more his body froze, the hotter the flame burned.

Hotter and hotter.

Searing away his humanity, leaving nothing but flames of pure rage.

All he saw were things to be destroyed.

All he heard was infuriating noise.

All he smelled was the scent of prey.

All he tasted was blood, drawn from his own lips by gnashing teeth.

And all he felt was deep, unending wrath.

"GRAAAAAAAH!"

There was no spark of sanity left in the oni's eyes as he roared.

AFTERWORD

Hello, I'm Okina Baba.

As of today, I've just about run out of clever ideas to start off my afterwords. What a pickle.

But don't worry: I haven't run out of ideas for my stories!

In fact, I've been writing so much that I've no idea how to fit it all in one book.

What a pickle.

Hmm? I'm in quite a few pickles?

Well, I can't let that get to me. Nope, nope.

But the flow of the story has changed considerably from the web version, and now I have to collect it all into volumes, so things do actually seem kind of difficult right now.

In the process, Mr. Gotou, who was just a named background character in the web version, has inexplicably stolen quite a bit of the spotlight.

Seriously, he wasn't supposed to be important at all, but here he is turning into a proper character.

And he might just have more appearances in the future, so he's really come a long way.

Almost as much as Tiva, who didn't appear whatsoever back in the web version.

But I think the character who's come the furthest is still Fei, who won a regular spot in the S story.

Anyway, in a volume where so many characters are getting different treatment from their roles in the web version, it's not just the humans who have changed.

For some reason, Miss Ice Dragon wound up being a fully fleshed-out character.

How did that happen? She didn't even have a single line in the web version.

Strange things happen every day, I suppose.

Come to think of it, there have been tons of dragons and wyrms in every single volume of this series.

I guess you could say they're the ones who have benefited the most.

Let's aim for dragons in every volume!

Finally, I'd like to say some thanks.

To Tsukasa Kiryu, who draws everything fantastically, be it human, monster, or mech, thank you so much.

And thank you to Kakashi for drawing such heated battles in the manga adaptation.

Volume 4 of the manga features some literally white-hot battles in the fiery Middle Stratum, so be sure to check it out.

To my current editor, W, and everyone else who helped make this book a reality.

And to everyone who picked up this book.

Thank you very much.

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