

Spider So I'm a Swamp?

OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU



A swarm of
white spiders
is clamoring
around my
former home.

So I'm
surrounded,
so what?





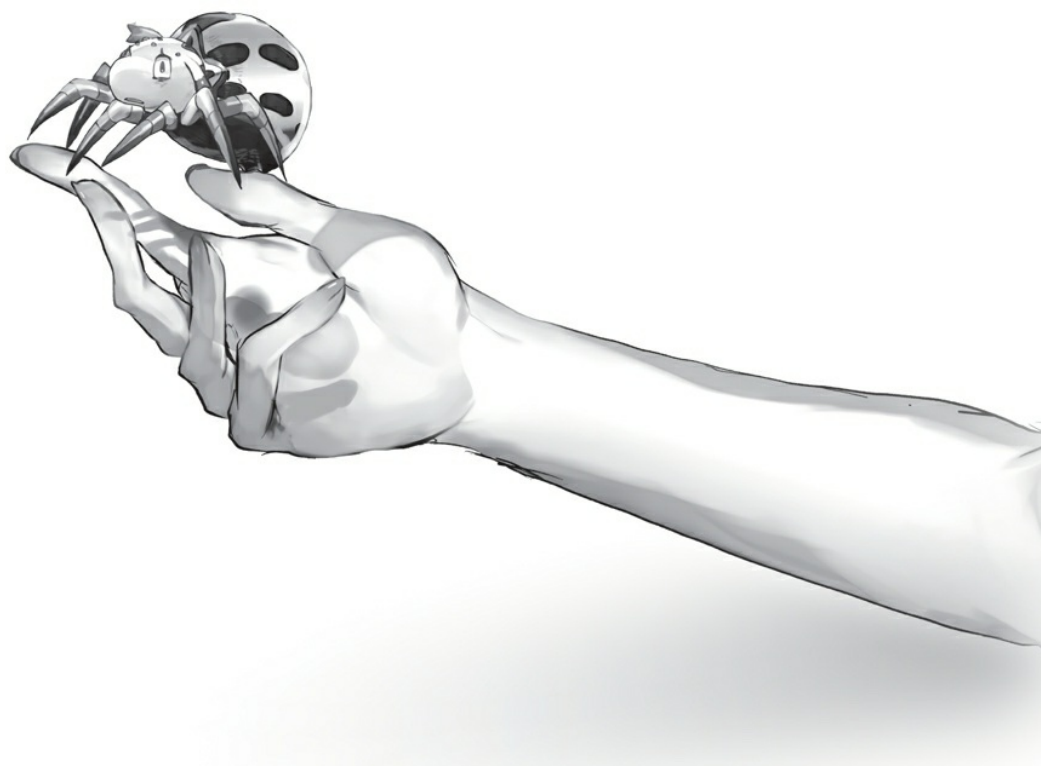
Now that the
three puppet
spiders are
incapacitated,
I tie them
up in thread
and hang
them upside
down from
the ceiling.

While
I'm at it,
let's get
Vampy up
there, too,
since this
is all her
fault in
the first
place!

Bwa-ha-ha!
It's a
hundred
years too
early for
you to
defeat me!

Spider so what? 9

OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU




New York

Copyright

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Okina Baba

Translation by Jenny McKeon

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Evil Gods Don't Smile

"Humans love to say that *boredom kills*, but it's even worse for gods, you know."

Such a level voice.

In contrast to that emotionless tone, the bald old man on the screen stomps angrily.

It's so surreal to see the stoic-looking old-timer stomping around and the girl watching him expressionlessly that I can't even laugh.

Maybe she's trying to use the movement on the screen to express her inner irritation, but if anything, it just makes her seem even weirder.

"Being bored is bad enough for humans, but gods live far longer than mortals, so finding ways to kill time is especially important for us."

She keeps fiddling with the controller as she speaks, moving the bald guy around on the screen.

The hairless adventurer kills the monsters that appear one after another.

She makes it look effortless. Because her character isn't even taking any damage, one might assume this game is easy, but if I remember correctly, it was so insanely difficult that it gave even the most hard-core gamers a run for their money.

Just how many hours has she sunk into this game?

She wasn't kidding about how desperate she was to avoid being bored.

"But as you can see, if I set my mind to it, I can do just about anything well."

On the screen, the bald guy beats the boss monster without taking a point of damage.

“I’m good at everything. As long as I want to be.”

I bet she really does mean *everything*, not just video games.

If she wanted to, she really could do just about anything.

Like guide the world to peace...or destroy it.

“It’s no fun doing something you know you’re going to be good at.”

If she gets serious about something, her success is already decided.

Since she can do anything, she already knows what the outcome will be, which makes things boring.

“That’s why I interfere as little as possible. If I meddle too much, then I’ll know how the whole thing’s going to turn out. Although I won’t hesitate if my meddling will make things more entertaining, of course.”

In the end, she’s an outsider, an observer.

Since taking action herself would lead to a guaranteed outcome, all she does is look on, like she’s watching a movie.

“Lately, I’ve had so little entertainment that I’ve been terribly bored. So I’ve got high hopes for you, understand? Make sure you entertain me for all you’re worth.”

But as she gazes at me, there’s no glimmer of those hopes in her eyes. Just pure amusement.

Those bottomless pitch-black eyes seem to stare right through me.

The self-proclaimed evil god, D, just looks at me without a word.



ARRIVAL IN THE DEMON REALM

The cart trundles along, pulled by two earth wyrms.

We're on a rough dirt road, so of course bouncing around in the cart feels just awful.

The ride's so bumpy that if you opened your mouth, you'd probably bite your tongue, so none of us are talking much. The only sound is the clunking and clattering of the cart.

Me?

I'm a grogger, so what?

You know, grogger. Because I'm super-groggy.

Heh-heh-heh. Pretty clever turn of phrase, if I do say so myself.

Typical me, right? I'm such a genius.

"You look like you're gonna die, White. Wanna take a break?"

The Demon Lord's saying something. But look! I'm doing so well that I just coined a new word. Bwa-ha-ha!

"...Um, White? Hello? Uh-oh. She's barely even conscious."

Hmph. Stupid Demon Lord. What do you know?

As if I could be knocked out by the mere bouncing of a cart!

"Lady Ariel, we will reach our next planned stop soon. Would you prefer to take a break before then?"

Mera's voice calls from the coachman's seat.

Sounds like he's suggesting we should just hang in there until we reach our

destination.

“All right. Let’s just get the rest of the way there while White’s passed out, then.”

“Very well. I shall continue.”

Come on! I told you, I’m totally awake over here!

The cart continues bouncing all the way to our destination: the first town we would visit in the demon territory.

“This isn’t quite what I pictured.”

When I wake up in our room at the inn, the first thing I hear is Vampy complaining.

Wait, what?! I’m up? I mean...of course I am. I was fully conscious the whole time.

I didn’t pass out, okay? That never happened.

Anyway, I wonder what Vampy doesn’t like about the place. Oh wait, she’s about to tell me whether I ask or not.

“It’s too normal,” she says.

I glance around the room, appraising the decor. A little fancy, maybe, but otherwise not that different from your average human inn.

Maybe it’s different on the outside? I glance out the window at the town, but there’s nothing special about the street below us, either.

Hmm. Well, I guess I understand what Vampy’s disappointed about, then.

The words *land of demons* do call to mind something a little more sinister, don’t they?

Y’know, like a gloomy place that’s permanently cloudy and buildings covered in ivy like a witch’s house. There should also be a bunch of inhuman creatures around to give the place a real sense of chaos.

But what do we get instead?

The shimmering, shining, sadistic sun.

Damn you! Your wretched light reaches this place, too?! Give it a rest already!

Ahem.

Anyway, all the buildings are normal, too. They're not exactly sparkling clean, but they seem to be maintained well enough, so there's no creeping vines or anything.

And the people walking around are all totally humanoid, no horns or wings among them.

The only key point to remind you we're not on Earth is their crazy-colorful hair. It looks a little ridiculous, but there were some colorful people in the human territories, too, so this isn't even a sight exclusive to the demon realm.

In other words, despite being home to demons, this place is no different from your average human town.

You wouldn't even know you were in demon territory if someone didn't tell you.

I mean, I guess some human towns had local differences, so it's not *exactly* the same, but still.

If I had to say, the demon lands most closely resembles the empire in human territory.

Aside from the whole humans-versus-demons thing, the empire and the demon realm are basically neighbors, so it makes sense that they would resemble each other.

Right, right. That makes sense.

...Well, I'm convinced, but Vampy still looks displeased, so I guess that's not good enough for her.

"Surprised? Demons don't actually look any different from humans."

Draped across the sofa, the Demon Lord swirls wine around in a glass, wearing a smug *Gotcha!* expression.

...So she held back on teaching us anything about demons for the sole purpose of surprising us?

We've been learning bits and pieces of demon language on the way here, since it'd be tough to get by if we couldn't talk.

But it occurs to me now that in all those lessons, there was a distinct lack of any concrete information about demon culture or general appearance. She spent literal years withholding information from us all for this minor prank.

Leave it to the old lady. You don't live for a ridiculously long time without building up a stupid amount of patience.

"White, why do I get the feeling you're thinking something really rude about me right now?"

Non, non, madame. I would never do such a thing.

"They look the same? So what's the difference between humans and demons, then?"

Good question, Vampy.

"Oh, there are lots of differences. The biggest one is their life span. Demons live way longer than humans. Still not as long as elves, though."

Just the word *elf* is enough to make Vampy scowl. She's starting to develop a visceral hatred of them, I think.

"Also, their stats improve a great deal quicker than humans'. If a human and a demon did the same training, the demon would usually have the advantage."

Vampy, who was listening curiously, furrows her brow at that. "So all the differences are in demons' favor? Doesn't that mean humans can't possibly beat them, then?"

Demons have longer lives and better stats. That alone would seem to indicate that humans don't stand a chance of winning.

But for some reason, humans and demons have a long history of warring back and forth.

The explanation for this turns out to be almost disappointingly simple.

"Demons have a way smaller population than humans."

So although humans have the upper hand on a one-on-one basis, they can't

beat humans because they're greatly outnumbered.

The demons have quality, and the humans have quantity. These things balance each other out, which is why the fighting never ends.

"Demons have long lives but a low birth rate, so their population doesn't go up. They're superior to humans in almost every way except for that, so I guess you could say it's their only weakness."

I guess no matter how skilled the individuals might be, that can get you only so far. If they can't increase their population, they'll be permanently short on manpower.

Numbers really are important. You need enough people if you want to get anything done.

You can't just have soldiers to fight on the front lines. You need people back home growing food, too.

Whether it's agriculture, animal husbandry, or hunting, you need a system to reliably feed everyone before you can even think about going to war.

"And right now, the demons are in the middle of a pretty serious population crisis. So they're in no position to go to war with humans.

"Not that any of that's my problem," the Demon Lord mutters, gulping down the rest of her wine. Then, abruptly, she calls out toward the door. "Come in already, will ya?"

I'm the only one startled by her sudden shout. Everyone else just looks at the door with composed expressions.

I guess all of them were able to sense that someone was behind the door.

Dammit! This is the problem with people who have high stats and tons of skills.

I didn't notice a damn thing!

Unreal.

"...Pardon me."

After a moment, the door opens from the outside, and an aging man steps

into the room.

His clothes aren't crazy gaudy, but you can definitely tell at a glance that they're super-high quality.

A couple people who are clearly attendants follow the man into the room.

Okay, this guy's definitely a big shot.

And then that big shot walks up to the Demon Lord and kneels.

KNEELS?!

This super-important-looking dude is totally kneeling!

And so are his attendants!

The old guy and his crew are kneeling in front of a girl who looks like a minor.

When you put it that way, this is super-weird!

"We have eagerly anticipated your return."

"Yeah, thanks."

So casual!

That's a pretty offhanded response to this big shot's grand welcome, Demon Lord!

See? He didn't react, but a few of his attendants twitched. You're totally wrecking the mood here!

"Oh, I'll introduce you to everyone. Guys, this is Erguner, the lord in charge of this area of the demon realm. Since this bit borders human lands, he's basically the ruler of the frontier. This guy's kind of an old-timer among demons, a skilled commander who's been fending off human invasions for ages."

Um, Demon Lord?

I know you're complimenting him, but it's kinda weird to explain things to us like he's not even here, don't you think?

Especially if you're gonna refer to him as *this guy* and all that.

Look, one of his attendants is even balling up a fist and trembling with rage.

“All righty, stand up and introduce yourself.”

“Right away, my lord!”

The Demon Lord orders Erguner around obliviously, but he obeys without a flicker of displeasure.

“Thank you for the generous introduction. I am called Erguner Ricep. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

With that short introduction, Erguner faces us and gives a stiff bow.

Yeah, you can totally tell from his brisk movements that he’s a military guy.

Kinda makes me want to call him “Colonel,” so I’m just gonna do that from now on.

“Colonel” has a competent, reliable sort of ring to it, don’t you think? “Major” sounds more like a schemer who works from the shadows.

Mr. Erguner doesn’t just look competent. It sounds like he really is, too.

I can’t imagine that they’d put someone incompetent in charge of protecting the border dividing the human and demon realms.

And this skilled, high-ranking man is kneeling in front of the Demon Lord.

Then again, she is the *Demon Lord*, after all. She’s the most important demon of all, so I guess it’s only natural that other demons would kneel before her.

But still...she’s the *Demon Lord*.

She doesn’t really look the part, does she?

And she doesn’t act the part, either.

Huh? You’re saying it’s because her personality’s been massively influenced by my former body brain that merged with her?

I can’t heear yooou.

“So? Whaddaya want?”

“Pardon me! The moment I heard that you had returned to our land, I hurried here to greet you. I beg your forgiveness for intruding upon your personal time, but I felt it would be far more disrespectful not to show my face as your faithful

retainer.”

The Colonel stays on one knee as he addresses the Demon Lord.

Wait, what? You came all the way here just to greet this weirdo?

Meaning you left your important post as guardian of this borderland?

Does that mean the Demon Lord is so intimidating that around here, people feel like they have to bend over backward for her?

“Much appreciated. Sorry you had to interrupt your work just to do that.”

The Demon Lord doesn’t look apologetic in the least as she reclines on the sofa.

Wow, she’s even holding out her wineglass to Mera for a refill.

C’mon, Mera. Don’t humor her.

“Well, as you can see, I’m on a break at the moment. Since you already greeted me, you can go back to your regular work now. We’re gonna stay here for two or three days, then head for the heartlands. I wanna talk to you before then, so make some time tomorrow or something, ’kay?”

So she apologizes for interrupting his work, then demands that he make time for her tomorrow in the same breath? She’s a demon lord, all right.

Man, talk about a self-absorbed boss!

It can’t be easy to clear your schedule when you have an important post like the marcher lord of a border territory.

“Understood. Shall we meet tomorrow after you’ve taken lunch, perhaps?”

So you *do* have time?!

Oh, wait. Judging by the way the Colonel’s attendant is looking at him, he probably doesn’t actually have the time.

I’m sure that attendant is frantically trying to figure out how to fix the schedule that the Demon Lord just ruined.

“Yeah, sure. See ya then.”

The Demon Lord nonchalantly confirms their post-lunch meeting.

“Then I shall take my leave at once. Please relax to your heart’s content.”

“Thanks. Think you could get me some more booze and snacks or something?”

“I shall make arrangements at once. If there is anything else you need, please speak to the servants who have been assigned to you.”

The Colonel responds to the Demon Lord’s shameless request without the slightest change in expression.

Talk about a model subordinate.

He bows and leaves the room, followed by his attendants.

Once they’re gone, nobody speaks for a while.

“...So that’s what it’s like to have power and influence,” Vampy mutters, quietly but unmistakably.

She’s obviously reevaluating her appraisal of the Demon Lord.

The Demon Lord cackles. “And if you add wealth to that, there’s pretty much nothing you can’t do in this world! You can mess around all day long, and nobody will stop you!”

Vampy’s eyes narrow even further.

The Demon Lord’s stock is plummeting!

On the other hand, Mera remains completely expressionless, pouring more wine into the Demon Lord’s glass.

Uh, Mr. Mera, should you really be letting her gulp it down like that?

I assumed this place was an inn when I first woke up, but it looks like it’s actually a room in the Colonel’s castle or something.

The wine they serve at a place like this probably isn’t the cheap stuff, y’know?

From the looks of things earlier, it seems like the Colonel is treating the Demon Lord as an honorable guest.

What if that wine is so expensive that you could build a mansion for the cost of a single bottle...?

Well, I guess I don't know if wine works the same way in this world as it does on Earth, so I have no idea if such an expensive wine even exists here, but still.

Whether it's expensive or cheap, the Demon Lord normally drinks alcohol by the barrel, so if she drinks that same amount of this wine...

Gulp. Hang in there, Colonel.

"Young miss, I believe Lady Ariel took such an attitude for well-thought-out reasons of her own."

While I'm lost in thought about the price of wine and the damage to the Colonel's coin purse, Mera speaks up like he can't bear to just watch and not say anything.

Yeah, I figured as much.

Vampy is the only one who doesn't get it. She blinks in surprise. "What? Really?"

Her eyes go from glaring at the Demon Lord to simply looking curious.

The Demon Lord grins. "I don't know if I'd go that far. It's more of a gut feeling than a carefully calculated plan, really..."

Then she trails off.

As I tilt my head in confusion at the awkward silence, there's a knock on the door.

The Demon Lord permits the person to enter, and it turns out to be a servant girl with a tea trolley. Silent but dour, she places the wine and snacks on a table and leaves the room with a short bow.

After a moment, the Demon Lord opens her mouth again.

"What did you think of that person?"

"I wouldn't quite call her hostile, but she did not seem to think too highly of us."

Of course it's Mera who responds. Vampy didn't even understand the question, and I hardly ever speak up!

Mera answering is best for all of us!

Way to read the room, Mera! My man! The ideal servant!

“Well, of course,” Vampy mutters. “How else would you respond to someone showing up out of nowhere, forcing their way in, and demanding to be waited on?”

Yeah, I guess that’s true. What kind of awful guest would do that, though?

Oh wait, she means us.

I was wondering how we got into the castle of a big shot like the lord in charge of the borderlands. We forced our way in, huh?

Yeah, I guess that would seem like a huge imposition to the people who work in the castle.

“Right, right. We’re unwanted guests, after all.”

Wow. Saying that doesn’t even make you sad?

“But that wouldn’t normally be enough to make someone hate or even wanna kill us, right?”

At those words from the Demon Lord, Vampy finally gets it. “So you’re acting rude on purpose to figure out who your enemies are?”

The Demon Lord answers with a grin.

Hiding your hatred or hostility is one thing, but if someone keeps going out of their way to antagonize you, it’s hard to keep those emotions from leaking out.

So basically, the Demon Lord was being outrageously rude on purpose, in the hopes of sniffing out anyone who might be hiding hostility toward her.

At least, that’s the official reason.

“There were definitely a few who weren’t very fond of me in the welcome party earlier.”

Yeah, like the ones who were clenching their fists and shaking.

“Does that mean you don’t trust that Erguner person, Miss Ariel?” Vampy asks.

“I’m not sure yet. I did try to get a rise out of him to see if I could figure it out,

but a veteran like him won't show his weaknesses that easily. Even if his subordinates don't like me, that doesn't tell me how their boss feels. Although considering how easily they showed it, that's definitely a case of negligent supervision on his part, at the very least."

The way the Demon Lord's talking, it sorta seems like the Colonel really doesn't like her, and she already knows it.

Man, a veteran demon, though?

I guess since demons live longer than humans, they can get pretty old. Where there's longevity, there's sly old foxes.

Anyone who lives that long is bound to end up holding some grudges. Or am I just assuming things?

Well, either way, we probably shouldn't let our guards down around this guy.

It seems like the Demon Lord is taking care to make sure no one else in the castle can eavesdrop on our conversations, for one thing.

She stops talking whenever someone approaches. And it's possible that she's taking other countermeasures that I just haven't noticed. She's probably used a spell or something to make sure our conversations can't be heard from outside the door.

"So yeah, I'm just gonna do whatever I want! No holding back!"

With that, the Demon Lord gulps down the rest of her wine and reaches for the snacks.

"...Are you sure that wasn't your number one goal in the first place?"

Vampy squints suspiciously at the Demon Lord, who ignores her and lolls around on the sofa.

This time, Mera doesn't say another word.

I wonder if he's noticed?

The Demon Lord's real goal, or at least her real thoughts.

I don't think Vampy is entirely wrong about her wanting to goof off, but that's not her real motivation deep down.

The Demon Lord said it herself: It's a gut feeling, not a well-thought-out plan.

If you ask me, I think the Demon Lord just wants to keep from getting any closer to her demon subjects than necessary.

Someday soon, the Demon Lord will have to lead the demons into war against the humans.

And she'll probably have to send them into battle almost like sacrificial pawns in order to accomplish what she wants.

Her goal requires a lot of casualties, after all.

To put it another way, the Demon Lord is basically going to be sending a bunch of demons to their graves. That's why she's trying not to get too friendly with them.

She's acting deliberately rude toward the demons so that they won't make the mistake of idolizing her.

For demons, the Demon Lord is someone to be feared and hated, someone who will send them to their deaths.

By putting herself in that position, she's trying to bear the brunt of the demons' hatred and resentment herself.

And most of all, she's probably using being hated by the demons as a way of punishing herself.

This is all just my assumption, of course. I can't read the Demon Lord's mind. But I don't think I'm wrong.

Seriously. How kindhearted can one person be?

Sure, it doesn't change the fact that she's going to send the demons to their deaths, so it's not exactly unconditional kindness, but I still think she's way too nice to call herself a demon lord.

Not that I'm complaining, since her kindness has saved me on several occasions.

As these thoughts run through my mind, I casually sit down next to the Demon Lord and help myself to some snacks.

Heh-heh. The concept of “holding back” has always been foreign to me!

If there’s something edible in front of me, I’ll eat it! Whether that makes me an unwanted guest or not!

Ooh, this jerky’s got a nice salty bite to it. Now I want a drink.

I slide my hand toward the bottle nearby, but I get caught before I can reach it.

“White? You can’t drink until you’re twenty or older, you know.”

The Demon Lord grins as she scolds me, holding my arm firmly in place.

Grrr! Come on—a little bit can’t hurt!

Besides, it’s her fault for making it look so delicious in the first place!

If someone gulps a drink down in front of you like that, of course you’re going to want to know what it tastes like!

The drinking age may be twenty in Japan, but we’re in a parallel world here, so we should be able to make an exception!

“No means no. You can’t always get what you want.”

Tch! I don’t need any sage wisdom right now, thank you very much.

I’m definitely gonna distract her and have a drink one of these days.

As I reluctantly withdraw my hand, Mera holds out a glass of nonalcoholic juice. Best servant ever!

“Merazophis, I’d like some, too.”

Of course Vampy gets jealous right away.

Yep, things are back to normal.

It’s actually kinda peaceful.

I can tell I’m slacking a bit, probably because we finally accomplished our big goal of reaching demon lands.

I’m kinda tempted to just hang out in the Demon Lord’s protection and laze around forever.

But I don't think that's gonna happen.

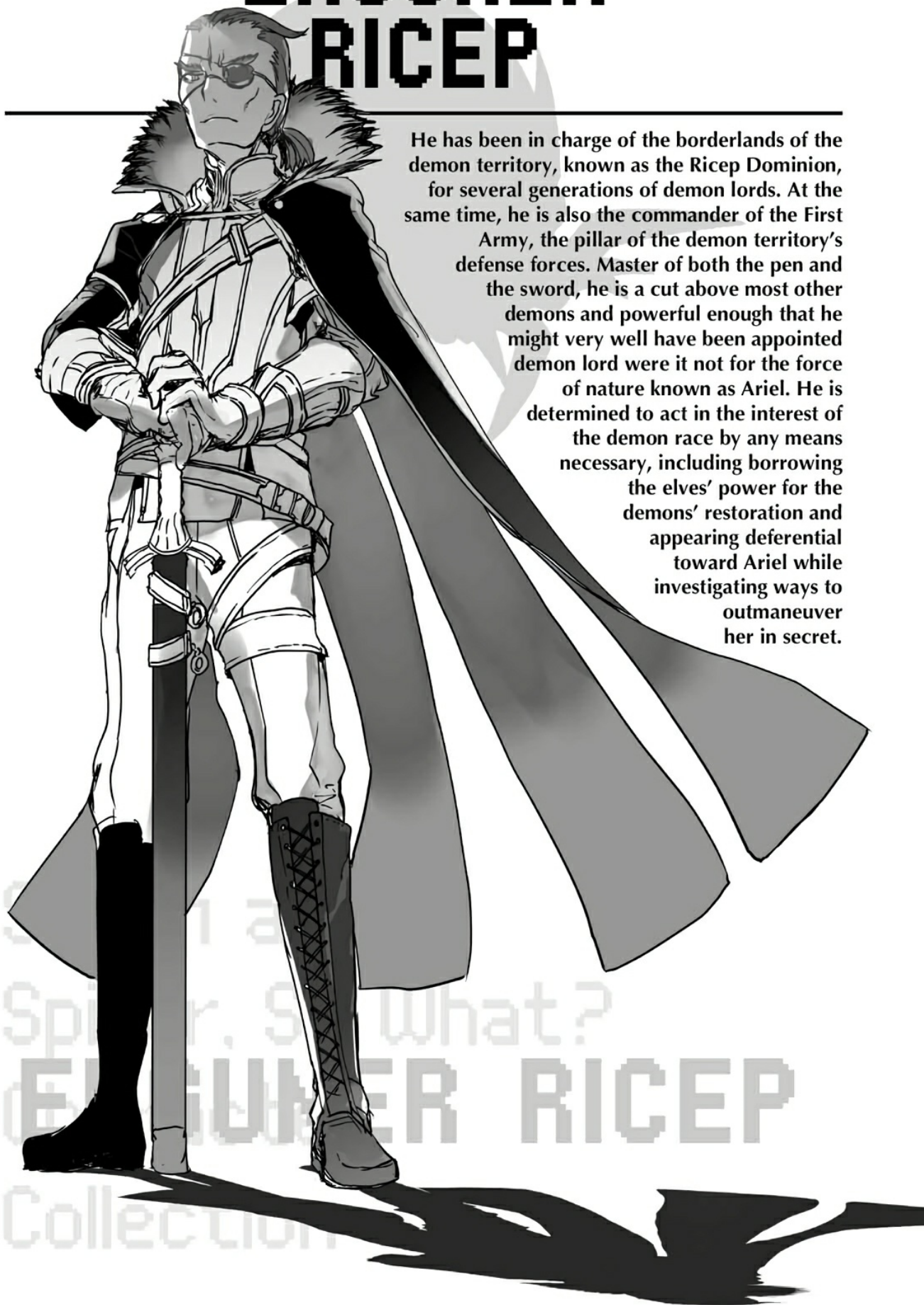
Oh, I just wish that this peaceful atmosphere would last a little longer.

What? No can do?

I see.

Sigh. Unreal.

ERGUNER RICEP



He has been in charge of the borderlands of the demon territory, known as the Ricep Dominion, for several generations of demon lords. At the same time, he is also the commander of the First Army, the pillar of the demon territory's defense forces. Master of both the pen and the sword, he is a cut above most other demons and powerful enough that he might very well have been appointed demon lord were it not for the force of nature known as Ariel. He is determined to act in the interest of the demon race by any means necessary, including borrowing the elves' power for the demons' restoration and appearing deferential toward Ariel while investigating ways to outmaneuver her in secret.



Interlude THE VETERAN DEMON'S SECRET FEUD

"Lord Erguner, it is time."

I raise my head from my paperwork when my secretary informs me that the time for my meeting with the Demon Lord has arrived. I was already well aware of this, of course.

Thus, I take my time tidying up my papers, putting down my pen, and standing up.

"Very well. Let us be about it."

My preparations are long since complete.

I begin walking without hesitation, followed by my secretary and attendants. The lot of them seem slightly more agitated than usual.

The atmosphere has been different ever since the Demon Lord, whose whereabouts have been unknown for some time, suddenly appeared at the castle yesterday.

The previous Demon Lord disappeared, eventually died in some unknown place, and was replaced with this current Demon Lord.

To be honest, I cannot deny that some part of me hoped this Demon Lord, too, would stay missing forever.

With the current state of the demon race, we are in fact better off without a demon lord.

Our many long years battling the humans have exhausted us, causing so much destruction that it has become impossible to ignore.

Our land is barren, our population—and therefore our workforce—is

depleted, and our citizens are starving.

The famine only further reduces our workforce, lowering our ability to produce food.

We cannot possibly go to war while this vicious cycle continues.

It was for this very reason that when the prior Demon Lord went missing, it was a boon to the demons.

If there is no demon lord, then there will be no war.

We put our battle against the humans on hold and focused on recovering our own strength. Thanks to that, the livelihood of the populace stabilized somewhat while the Demon Lord was absent.

The one thing we have not managed to improve is our shrinking population.

Our declining birth rate is connected in no small way to infants dying of malnourishment or being attacked by monsters.

Though we have recovered slightly, we still have a long way to go.

And yet...

As I sink into thought, we arrive at our destination.

I reach out to open the door to the room, pause just in time, and knock instead.

“Come in.”

A voice permits my presence, so this time I open the door and enter.

“Hey. How’s it going?”

A short-statured girl greets me with a casual wave.

The Demon Lord. By appearances alone, she would seem to be an ordinary child.

But the powerful energy that rolls off her, as if unable to be completely contained, serves as a reminder that she is anything but.

I have never encountered anyone but this Demon Lord who reveals such power even when thoroughly suppressing it.

Her presence is so overwhelmingly powerful that I could sense it even through the door.

“I am terribly sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Nah, it’s not your fault I showed up early.”

I had intended to enter the room first and await her presence, but instead I made the Demon Lord wait for me.

Yet she forgives this blunder with a smile.

Her actions may seem like those of a benevolent ruler, but I cannot be sure of the truth that lies behind her eyes.

“Well, no point in standing around, right? Have a seat.”

“Of course! Pardon me.”

I sit down on the sofa across from the Demon Lord, and my secretary and company stand behind me.

The Demon Lord, on the other hand, is alone.

She had several attendants with her yesterday when I greeted her, but they are not present now.

All of them save one were young women, but like the Demon Lord herself, their appearances were no doubt deceiving.

The Demon Lord has no need to take them along with her. She has little use for guards, after all.

What a truly terrifying person.

“As I stated yesterday, we are most pleased to celebrate your safe return.”

“Hmm. Are you, now?”

I was merely offering a polite greeting to begin the conversation, but the Demon Lord reacts strangely.

Her gaze passes over me to the attendants standing behind me.

“Just a moment, please.”

Sensing danger in that gaze, I call over my secretary, list a few names, and

have them removed from the room.

Within moments, the attendants the Demon Lord was eyeing are ushered out of the room.

“Pardon the interruption. I shall deal with them accordingly after our meeting.”

“Nice, nice. You’re quick on the uptake, huh?”

The Demon Lord nods in satisfaction. It appears that my actions were correct.

“It’d be a pain to have to deal with some stupid revolt. All I want are obedient soldiers, y’know? Soldiers who’ll fight for me, and die for me, at my command.”

Her voice is calm as she says the unspeakable.

Yes, it was certainly the right decision to dismiss those hot-blooded attendants ahead of time. If they had shown even the slightest resistance to her statement, she might very well have killed them to set an example.

“Give your subordinates a warning for me. They can either fight the humans or get killed at my hands. I recommend the former. In the latter case, there’s not even the slightest chance of survival.”

With these words, the Demon Lord is essentially declaring that she herself is stronger than the entirety of humanity.

If anyone else were to say such a thing, I would scoff at such nonsense.

But in her case, I cannot say that she is wrong.

“I need you to ramp up military preparations, please.”

Though it’s phrased as a request, I know it is an order.

“Understood.”

“Great. Thanks.”

I have no right to refuse.

After that, we discuss the finer details of our upcoming plans, and the meeting ends.

“Whew.”

“Good work, my lord.”

When I returned to my office and let slip a sigh, my secretary offered me words of praise.

“Thank you. I cannot remember when last I was so exhausted.”

The only reason I complain thus is that there is no one else in the room but my secretary, who has worked at my side for many years.

“However, this is no time to rest.”

I open the desk drawer and grasp the object inside.

A device known as a “mobile telephone,” small enough to be held in one hand.

The telephone has only one button, which I press now.

I am told that long ago, in an ancient culture, this device was used to speak with many faraway people. But now, it has no such features.

The device in my hand can contact only one person.

As I hold it to my ear, it makes a dull tone for a while, until finally a beep indicates that it has connected.

“It is I, Erguner. Can you hear me?”

“Yes, of course I can.”

The voice that comes through is that of a completely emotionless male.

Namely: Potimas Harrifenas.

The patriarch of the elves and a heretic who brings ancient secrets into the modern era.

“The Demon Lord has returned, just as you said she would.”

A few days ago, Potimas contacted me through the mobile telephone, informing me that the Demon Lord would soon return.

Thus, I informed the guards of the Demon Lord’s characteristics and instructed them to guide her politely to the castle should any such person appear.

So that this would not seem unnatural, I temporarily dispatched watchmen to the Mystic Mountains so that I could claim to have learned from them of the Demon Lord's return.

In truth, our domain has not the spare hands to send a guard to the Mystic Mountains.

But I suppose I will no longer be able to say that soon enough.

"And? Surely you have not called me simply to relay that fact."

As ever, Potimas is quick to guess my intentions.

"Indeed. I wish to know the state of the entrance to the Mystic Mountains on the human side. Has the boy with horns on his forehead appeared there these past few days?"

"Hmm."

Potimas falls silent, as if deep in thought.

During my conversation with the Demon Lord, she mentioned the boy.

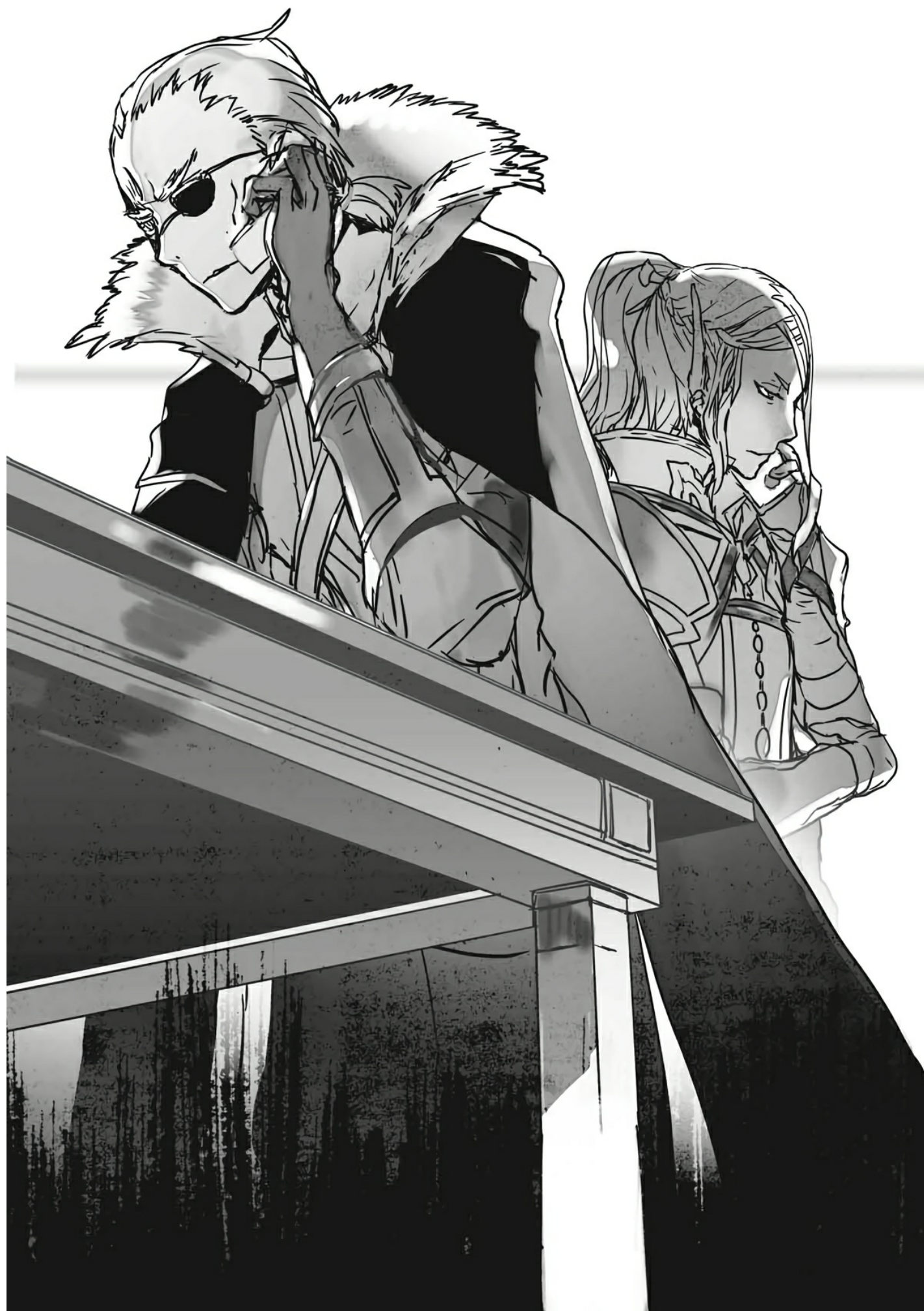
She said it was possible that he might cross the Mystic Mountains, breaking through the ice dragons' territory in the process, as unlikely as the scenario seemed.

If he did show up, the Demon Lord instructed me to avoid provoking him and contact her immediately.

That was the end of our conversation. She did not explain what connection she had to this boy with horns.

But since she made a point of bringing him up and warning me about him, I must assume that this situation is important to the Demon Lord.

I thought perhaps we might be able to take advantage of that somehow, but since the Demon Lord herself said it was unlikely, I doubt the boy will come our way.



But I cannot afford to worry that it is an unlikely chance, nor do I have any idea how I might use it against her.

“...It doesn’t appear that we have received any reports about a boy of that description. But I shall place the entrance to the mountains under watch, just to be safe.”

“Thank you.”

Even as I respond, calculations are racing through my mind.

Because his response showed that Potimas Harrifenas, too, has a vested interest in the horned boy.

If he has drawn not just the attention of the Demon Lord but also Potimas, then how can I discount this boy?

“Do you know anything about the boy?”

“Not a boy with horns, no. However, up until recently, there have been several reports of an unusual ogre taking down a great number of adventurers. It seems as though there might be some connection, does it not?”

“I see.”

An unusual ogre?

Ogres are indeed a humanoid race with horns.

And though it is incredibly rare, I have heard tell that it is possible for an ogre to ultimately evolve into a form that more closely resembles a human: an oni.

It is possible that this ogre evolved enough that it was able to become an oni.

However, that is all I can speculate.

The only information Potimas offered me is a morsel that I likely could have learned on my own with some investigation.

Oni are extremely rare, but I doubt that alone is enough in itself to garner attention from both the Demon Lord and Potimas.

There must be something else they’re not telling me.

But no doubt, Potimas will remain tight-lipped, even if I press the issue.

“Thank you for the information.”

“But of course. It is a trivial matter to share with a friend.”

Friend? Surely you mean *pawn*.

“I will contact you again if anything else happens.”

“Quite. I may need a favor from you in the future as well. If I do, I hope you’ll indulge me.”

“Indeed.”

I end the call.

Immediately, just like after my meeting with the Demon Lord, exhaustion assails me.

“Whew.”

“Good work, my lord.”

My secretary and I repeat the same exchange as when I first returned to the room.

“Work, indeed. The Demon Lord and Potimas alike are truly taxing to deal with, even in light conversation.”

Personally, I would prefer not to get involved with either of them.

But I have no choice in the matter.

The Demon Lord holds authority over all demons, and the elves have had a powerful influence on the demon race’s revival.

From supplying food to providing new technology, the help of the elves has been instrumental in getting the demon race back on its feet.

I knew that Potimas had motives of his own, but I was left with no other options.

And since I owe him such a debt, I cannot turn against him...or so Potimas undoubtedly believes.

“All of them assume I will do just as they please.”

I received an order from the Demon Lord, one that I did not relay to Potimas.

To get rid of every elf in our lands.

“And the Demon Lord makes the most unreasonable demands.”

The realm of demons was saved thanks to the aid of the elves—at least, this is the only part of the truth that most demons know. Many feel indebted to the elves as a result.

And now we are to drive them out of our territory, even if we must use force?

The citizens might very well revolt.

If I obey the Demon Lord, there will be chaos in our ranks, and soon we will be made to go to war against the humans.

Yet, if I defy her, she will simply take matters into her own hands.

Either choice will undoubtedly prove to be a thorny path.

The future of the demon race looks bleak.

And yet, I cannot give up. I must devise a way to survive, for the sake of my race.

I will use any means I can to find a path to salvation, no matter how minute that path might be.

Fortunately, the Demon Lord will leave this place in a matter of days.

Once she does, I can move a bit more freely.

The Demon Lord is heading to the heart of the demon realm: Phthalo. The land that generations of demon lords have called home, ruled by Balto Phthalo.

Balto is a capable man but perhaps a bit too obedient.

His intellect keeps him from opposing the Demon Lord, as he knows all too well what the result would be.

If only he were a bit more cunning, we might yet make better progress.

But that is fine for now.

Let him obey the Demon Lord and win her trust if he can.

I, on the other hand, am willing to get my hands dirty.

I will pretend to obey the Demon Lord's orders, while secretly maintaining a connection with the elves, seeking a path to the demon race's survival.

"I will survive and outwit the Demon Lord and the elves alike."

No matter how difficult that might be.



THE FORMER SWORD-KING REIGAR

I fought to the best of my ability.

Looking back on my life, over half of it has been spent on the battlefield, days dyed the silver of cold steel and the red of fresh blood.

I was proud.

The sword-king, leader of the Renxandt Empire, humanity's ultimate line of defense. I thought myself the guardian of humanity.

I had a dream.

Someday, I would defeat the demons once and for all and bring about eternal peace.

In my youth, I truly believed I could accomplish that.

But the world is not so easily swayed.

Death was a constant companion of mine.

Though the corpses of my enemies piled up endlessly, I saw as many of my comrades join the Word of God.

I myself had a close brush with death countless times.

And soon I grew tired...

...of these endless days of battle, this perpetual dance with death.

I began to doubt.

Why must we fight?

Humans and demons sacrificing their lives to prolong an endless war.

They all die the same way: bloody, screaming, and full of regret.

There is no room for hope or dreams on the battlefield. Only fighting.

I fought for my pride, for my dreams.

But soon, that all began to fade.

As I grew weary of spending my days at death's side, I began to question the point of the conflict.

And yet, I had no choice but to fight on.

For I was the sword-king.

The most powerful swordsman alive, leader of the Renxandt Empire.

Alongside my comrade, the most powerful mage alive, I was to lead mankind to victory.

And to that end, I was fated to stand on the battlefield for the rest of my days.

"My occult powers exist to protect the innocent."

Ever at my side, the peerless mage Ronandt spoke without a shadow of doubt.

He stayed true to his beliefs and would not hesitate to use his power for them.

I was envious of his simple, honest ways, the strength of his convictions and belief in himself.

His willingness to unwaveringly fight for his ideals even while surrounded by death.

Though he could occasionally be eccentric and unpredictable, the man called Ronandt was unmistakably a hero.

Which is why I believed that as long as humanity had Ronandt, they would be safe without me.

Although if I said as much to him, no doubt he would cry, *What foolishness are you spouting?!*

And so, when the Demon Lord was defeated, I took my leave from society.

The fact that the demon race was at its limit, and thus both sides were left

without the strength to fight, only spurred me onward.

Without a war, I had no role to play.

I had spent more than half my life on the battlefield, so I excelled at swinging my sword and commanding armies, but I have no gift for governing.

During battle, I can at least serve as a half-decent military leader.

But in an era without war, the people need a wise king who can keep the empire stable, not one whose only talents lie on the field of battle.

I withdrew from the throne of sword-king, declared my son as my successor, and left.

Perhaps I am being punished.

Or perhaps this is the reason I am here.

These past few days, I could tell that something was amiss in the mountains. It was also clear that the cause of the chaos was coming my way.

The dragons who live in the Mystic Mountains attempted to stop it, but their fight has been in vain, for the creature approaches ever closer, making no attempt to mask its hostility.

I know not what will happen once it reaches this place, though given how even the dragons could not stop it, I suppose what it'll do next is a foregone conclusion.

A savage devastation will befall these lands.

In these mountains, I alone have strength enough to oppose it.

That said, after long years away from the battlefield, I do not boast the power I once had.

Even if I did, I cannot say for certain how I might fare against a creature that even dragons could not hinder.

Still, I have no choice but to challenge this intruder.

I must repay the debt I owe this land for allowing me to live here quietly all these years.

“Urgh...”

I heave a loud sigh, hoping to expel the rust that has built up in my body during my long absence from the battlefield.

As if to cast off the warmth I have amassed during these times of peace.

Everyone else has already been evacuated.

Fortunately, as the village is at the base of the Mystic Mountains, its population is small.

It was a quick evacuation, so, at worst, even if the village is destroyed in the coming clash, the loss of life will not be significant.

Of course, I would prefer to avoid that, so I am waiting some distance away from the village.

I have already made preparations to intercept the enemy.

The armor I wore when I was sword-king is back in my homeland. It belongs to the throne and the empire, not to me.

As I have abdicated the throne, I no longer have any right to it.

Instead, I wear my spare armor made by my own means.

It may not compare to the sword-king armor I left behind, but it is still first-rate equipment: The entire set is made from rare dark-dragon remains.

Dark dragons, like light dragons, rarely show themselves to humans.

Dragons in general are seldom seen unless one enters their territory, but in the case of dark and light dragons, their territory is not so easily defined.

My armor is believed to have been made of materials from a dark dragon that a hero defeated by chance several generations past.

I left one other set of my own armor in the empire.

It has the ability to weaken the opponent.

All dragons can dampen the effects of magic, but dark dragons also have the Curse attribute.

If you cut an opponent with a sword made from dark-dragon materials, it will

weaken their strength, as well as their magic.

With its latent ability to dampen magic, the sword can cut off the opponent's access to almost any spell.

The armor, too, has powerful defense against magic.

It has suited me well, as I am more proficient in close combat.

It still falls slightly short of my sword-king armor, a treasure of the empire made of materials from a queen taratect that the former hero defeated at the cost of nearly his entire army. Nonetheless, it is a powerful sword and suit of armor undoubtedly coveted by many celebrated commanders.

Still, even if I had that armor with me now, I doubt it would bring me much comfort.

After all, real dragons were unable to stop this creature.

Forcing back my anxiety, I check the state of my preparations yet again.

I am as ready as I can be.

I brought all my recovery potions as well: a high-grade potion that can heal even a deadly wound in an instant, magic-and strength-recovery potions, and even status-condition potions, all in the small Spatial Storage pouch hanging from my waist.

The potions and the pouch itself are worth a small fortune, but as I am about to face death, I will not hesitate to use them.

I am most likely going to die.

If the dragons could not stop this creature, I see no way of winning.

All I can do is buy as much time as I can so that the other villagers can escape.

I do not even know whether this sacrifice will have meaning.

Is there any amount of distance that will stop an opponent this powerful from finding them?

My only fear now is not of my own death but of whether I will buy enough time for them to flee.

Whether my death will have meaning.

But surely it is better than doing nothing at all.

A death in battle is more fitting for me than simply aging and waiting to die.

Considering the countless lives taken by these hands, passing away peacefully in my sleep would be an unfitting end, to say the least.

But I have accepted this.

Though the means by which I depart from this world may prove pointless, one would be hard-pressed to find meaning in death or battle on the whole.

That is the conclusion I reached after escaping battle and knowing peace for a time.

Ultimately, war has no meaning.

In the grander scheme, it may be for the sake of one's land or people, but for an individual, there is no meaning to be found in death.

All that matters is whether or not the circumstances of death can be accepted.

And right now, I have accepted them.

That is good enough for me.

I have decided this will be the place where the man once known as the Master of Swordsmanship will die.

With my resolve ironclad, I wait for my time to come.

And soon, it comes.

"This is a surprise," I murmur without thinking.

From the imposing presence I felt, I expected any number of horrendous evil spirits, but the creature before me is humanoid and looks to be a young boy.

But in spite of his youthful appearance, he has the aura of a man-eating fiend.

Simply facing him is enough to make me sweat within my armor.

It is as if all the evil and atrocity in the world has manifested into this one boy.

“Graaaaaah!”

The devil howls.

At the same time, the dragon that was still fighting against him breathes its last.

Hrmmm? The devil’s body glowed for just a moment. What was that?

Its wounds are healing?

Their battle must have been unthinkably fierce, for the dragon and devil alike were covered in deep wounds, but the devil’s injuries have now disappeared in a flash of light.

Perhaps he has mastered some kind of highly advanced healing magic, although I have never heard of any so powerful as this.

At any rate, now that the injuries he sustained fighting the dragons have been healed, I suppose my chances of winning are lower than ever.

I harbored some small hope, but it appears even that was misplaced.

“Nothing goes right in this world, does it?”

Hearing my voice, the devil whirls around and bounds toward me with another fearsome howl.

“Graaaaaah!”

There will be no conversing with him, then.

Upon seeing his humanoid form, I thought there might be some chance we could communicate and resolve things with words, but he shows no sign that he understands speech at all.

Even if he did, there are some battles that one cannot avoid, like that against the demons.

If anything, knowing that my opponent is so beast-like that he cannot be reasoned with means that I can fight without hesitation.

“I am Reigar Baint Renxandt, Master of Swordsmanship, and I challenge thee.”

I doubt that my opponent understands my introduction, but as he is no doubt about to kill me, I wished for him to hear my name.

I suppose this is another way of accepting death in battle.

Sure enough, the devil ignores my words and swings his swords.

I dodge one and parry the other.

Yes, the devil wields a sword in each hand.

While this allows the wielder more options for attacking, it is difficult to maintain one's offensive and defensive power in both hands, so it is a rarely used style.

The devil's swords are of unfamiliar make, as well: slender blades, slightly curved.

They look far more oriented toward offense than defense, in accordance with his two-sword style.

In fact, it seems as if he has abandoned defense entirely.

Charging recklessly into battle, heedless of whether his own body is injured... I suppose that is how a devil should be.

If those two offense-oriented swords hit my own sword just right, they could likely break it.

That's how much power is behind his first attack.

In fact, any one of his attacks could easily end my life.

As if to prove it, the devil's parried blade glides right through solid ground without the least bit of resistance.

From the moment I first laid eyes on the beast, I knew he was stronger than I was, so I already had my guard up, but this goes far beyond anything I anticipated.

"Graaaaaah!"

The devil howls again.

Somehow, the sound itself impacts me like a heavy blow.

Pain rushes into my ears, causing me physical agony.

Even without using skills, a mere howl is enough to cause this?

The devil stomps forward and swings his blades again.

I leap backward, dodging almost excessively to one side.

But the devil crosses all that hard-earned distance in a single step, landing in the space I stood just moments ago.

Purple lightning springs forth in a line from the sword in his left hand.

I knew it. A magic sword.

And quite a powerful sort, at that.

Even after cutting through that dragon, his swords show not a hint of damage.



Despite their thinness, it's safe to say that these blades are quite sturdy.

So perhaps my assumption that they were not built for defense was false as well. If I attack without taking that into consideration, it may well be my undoing.

And though this devil may look to be swinging around on a reckless rampage, his fighting style is more than just brute strength. Otherwise, he would not be able to utilize the magic sword's power.

Though it seems as if he's lost his senses, the devil is making good use of highly advanced techniques.

His swordsmanship lacks polish, but he does seem to have a strong grasp of the basics.

No mindless beast could fight this way.

What a dangerous foe.

If he was simply going on a brute rampage, then he would be far easier to deal with.

I must stay on my guard.

For all I know, this madness may just be an act. Every possibility needs to be considered.

His stats are already far higher than mine.

No amount of caution would be too much.

The devil swings his swords.

A clumsy attack, like a child throwing a tantrum.

But if any one of those attacks was to land, that would be the end of me.

And even if his movements are amateurish, the speed of his swings is faster than any ordinary person could see.

Even I, once known as the world's greatest swordsman, can barely follow it with my eyes.

Only by watching the devil's movements and predicting the trajectory of his

blades can I parry or dodge his blows.

If I let my guard down even for an instant, my life will be forfeit.

“Graaaaaah!”

The devil howls angrily and swings the sword in his right hand.

Flames burst from the blade, covering the devil’s body.

So both of his swords are magic, not just the lightning sword in his left hand.

Still covered in flames, the devil raises his blades and charges.

But while a direct attack might be one thing, a radiant flame that does not even burn its wielder is mere fodder for my dark-dragon equipment!

As soon as my magic sword touches the flames, the cursed power of the dark dragon saps its energy, weakening the flames until they disappear.

Taking advantage of the devil’s surprise, I swing my blade and land a single slash on his body.

But my cut is shallow, and his skin is tough.

Instead of the feeling of blade biting through flesh, I only feel my sword being deflected by something hard. Far from flesh, my sword did not even pierce his skin.

However, the dark dragon’s power reached him nonetheless.

Though I cannot see the difference, the dark dragon’s curse has undoubtedly reduced his stats.

No matter how little the reduction, if I keep cutting him, I may eventually weaken him to the point where my blade can break through his skin.

I know very well how difficult that will be, of course.

And I have no way of knowing whether I would be able to wound him even if I could weaken him.

The dark dragon’s curse is powerful, but there is a limit to how much it can reduce the target’s stats.

If I make it to that point, will I be able to harm him?

And even if I can, I will still have to keep slashing until I manage to reduce his HP.

My odds of success are next to none.

While I would have to land hundreds or even thousands of attacks to defeat him, the devil needs to strike me only once.

My sole chance rests on carrying out a long battle in which I cannot let down my guard for a moment.

Even then, I do not know if I would win at all.

I have never fought such a difficult battle, even when I was sword-king.

But I knew that from the beginning.

The fact that I can see even the most miniscule chance of victory is better fortune than I expected.

I will buy time, just as I planned.

If my opponent had been an enormous creature like a dragon, I might not have even been able to do that much.

But the fiend is humanoid and lacking in skill.

If I can buy time against him despite being far inferior in stats, then perhaps that is the best I could have hoped for.

So I will continue to buy time, all while clinging to the faintest hope of victory.

Even if I have to use every last technique I mastered in my time as the Master of Swordsmanship.

How much time has gone by?

It feels as if an instant and an eternity have passed all at once.

This devil is by far the strongest opponent I have ever faced.

And this is likely the longest battle I have fought, besides.

How many times has the sun risen and fallen?

Since I have had to put aside all nonessential thoughts, I've long since lost track.

The more I focus, the more I feel as if my awareness is fading.

I forgot my purpose, all so that I might lend that much more focus to the fight.

My very identity has been sacrificed to the cause. I am but a body forged for battle.

I never imagined that, at this age, I would attain even greater heights of swordsmanship.

Cutting through lightning. It would have been nice to pass this experience down to an apprentice, though I doubt whether any would be able to imitate it.

Ah, but the end is near.

The fact that I am having these thoughts is proof enough of that.

I pushed myself to the limits and abandoned all thoughts to focus on the battle, but that state of mind is already fading.

For I am reaching the end of my stamina.

I've warded off every one of the devil's attacks: the slashing swords, the fearsome flames, the violent flashes of lightning, all of it.

But though I avoided any direct hits, I have still taken damage.

Parrying the devil's swords has worn on my bones.

The flames have singed my skin.

And the flash and crack of the lightning and thunder assail my senses.

My dark-dragon armor, which protected me countless times over the course of the battle, has gradually lost its shape and no longer has the strength to do so.

Fortunately, by sacrificing that armor, I have been able to wear out the devil's magic power.

Not long before the armor broke, the devil stopped using his magic swords' abilities. I assume that he ran out of magic and can no longer activate them.

By sacrificing my armor, I was also able to recover from my wounds in the precious few gaps between the devil's attacks to drink healing potions, as well

as magic and strength potions.

I had packed my Spatial Storage pouch with as many potions as it would hold—enough to fight continuously for two or three days.

And I am confident that I have fought to the best of my ability all this time.

In fact, I may even have shown more power over the course of this battle than I ever did in my heyday.

Though my sword grew rusty after so much time away from the battlefield, it is as if it has returned to its full power and more.

I have sharpened my skills beyond even their previous state, if only because nothing less would be enough to reach my opponent.

Yet even now, I cannot defeat him.

With every move, I feel my muscles tear and my bones splinter.

With every breath, I taste blood. I wince with pain.

That I am still on my feet is nothing short of a miracle.

Though it seems the miracle is at an end.

My armor has broken, and I've drained every last one of my stock of potions.

I even drank the status condition recovery potions, if only to slake my thirst and sate my hunger.

I cannot move another step.

Yet I will not lower my sword.

Even now that it is cracked beyond repair and will not bear another blow.

These are to be my last thoughts.

I fought to the best of my ability and beyond.

This must be what it means to truly fight to the death.

I came close to death on the battlefield many times, but this is the first time I have ever expended my strength to its very limits, both physically and mentally.

In training, I exhausted myself to the point of collapse.

I have been knocked unconscious by near-fatal wounds.

But none of them was as deadly as this fatigue.

My body is truly in tatters.

Yet my heart is strangely light.

Perhaps it is because, in this battle with the devil, I have cast aside the unnecessary.

No dreams, no pride, just the pure strength of the sword.

I swing the blade with all my might, feeling no sense of duty or fear of death.

Yes, this is a far more fitting end for me than any peaceful death in sleep.

For even after all my time away from the battlefield, I am still overjoyed at the chance to fight to the fullest.

In the end, I had no choice but to live by the sword and die by the sword.

And what could be more fortunate than to accept that fate in death?

Most who fall in battle die without meaning, without accepting their lot in life.

I do not know if there was any meaning in this sacrifice. But I can accept it.

Perhaps that is why, although I wagered my soul on this battle and am still about to suffer a total defeat, I do not feel resentment.

In fact, I feel happiness.

Yet, now that I can no longer take another step, the devil does not strike me down.

We simply stare at each other, face-to-face, neither moving an inch.

A strange silence engulfs us. Abruptly, the devil relaxes his stance and lowers his head.

Perhaps he has returned to his senses...or has he?

The devil's body still radiates a fearsome aura.

I know not where this fiend came from or what happened in his past.

But after crossing swords for so long, I have come to understand him.

He must have gone through some terrible tragedy in his past, judging by the silent wail I sensed in his throat, and his sword blows spoke of unbearable sadness and rage.

Though he had lost his senses and knew only battle, some part of him lamented his lack of control.

And during our battle, I could see that he was learning from my swordsmanship.

The devil's proficiency with a blade improved over the course of the battle so much that he is leagues above his initial amateurish skill.

To continue to strive for improvement in the midst of battle, even in the grips of madness, is nigh unthinkable.

His swordcraft sharpened with every strike, his movements became ever more efficient, and he became an infinitely more formidable opponent as time passed.

In the end, it was all I could do just to parry his strikes; counterattacking was no longer an option.

Simply parrying and dodging continues to become more difficult.

He must truly have a gift to be able to improve so greatly in such little time.

In that regard, I cannot help but feel regret.

If he had not been ruled by madness, if I could have taught him properly, he could have reached the very pinnacle of swordsmanship.

I doubt I ever would have thought such a thing about someone who was trying to kill me until now.

"The Divine Sword title, proof of mastery of the blade. I pass it on to you."

I open my mouth and speak to the devil.

He looks up and raises his swords again.

An instant later, my sword breaks, and the last of my strength leaves my body.

Only when I see the splash of blood do I realize I have been cut.

“Magnificent.”

I have no other words.

I cannot pass down all the techniques I honed in this life of mine.

But in this battle, I showed my opponent many of them.

If I can leave behind even a few of those, then I am happy.

I lived by the blade, and now I shall die by the blade.

Though I doubted the meaning of fighting for so long, I have finally come to terms with it.

Ronandt. My comrade. My friend.

If you bore witness to this death of mine, you would surely lecture me for being so irresponsible.

But I am satisfied.

Irresponsible though it may be, I leave the empire...and humanity...in your hands.



“Ahhh-choo!”

“The hell?! That’s disgusting, Master! You got your gross spit all over me!”

“Hngh. My apologies. Someone must have been talking about me.”

“All bad things, I’m sure.”

“What nonsense! If you bothered to listen more closely, no doubt the masses are praising my name!”

“Oh yeah, sure. Wait, Master, are you crying?”

“Hmm? How strange. Perhaps some dust got into my eye during that sneeze.”

“Must’ve been some big freaking piece of dust to make *you* cry.”

“Quiet, you. Here, have some extra homework.”

“What?! You demon! Maybe I’ll just kill you and escape from this hell!”

“Wah-ha-ha! There is no time for rest on the path to the heights of occultism!
You won’t see me dying until I reach the top!”



ARRIVAL AT THE DEMON LORD'S CASTLE

We stayed at the Colonel's place for a few days, then headed out.

We may have finally reached the demon realm, but it's a pretty big place, so we still have to find a place where we can actually settle down. The Colonel's lands border human territory, so it's not an ideal place for royalty like the Demon Lord to set up camp.

I was feeling pretty low about having to take another long journey in that stupid bouncy carriage, but it turned out I was wrong. Our destination was super-close to the border.

I mean, it took us several years to cross the span of humanity's domain, so wouldn't most people assume it would take just as long to cross the demon realm?

But apparently it takes only a week—just seven days. And that's going at a mellow pace, too.

Hmm. Yeah, I guess seven days by carriage is a bit of a distance, but since I was bracing myself for a year or more, this seems easy by comparison.

"The Demon Lord's not your average ruler, y'know? I gotta fight on the front lines. So obviously my castle has to be close to the border for that reason, among others."

That's straight from the Demon Lord's mouth.

Right. I guess in this world, the Demon Lord doesn't just wait around in a castle like the final boss of an RPG.

In fact, this one leaves her castle all the time!

Can you imagine what kind of impossible game would have a demon lord who

leaves the castle and chases you down on the overworld map?

Just stay in the castle, dammit!

Otherwise it's not a demon lord's castle at all!

Plus, this one didn't even leave the castle to kill a hero—she left to kill ME!

Remembering that kinda makes me mad, so I try to smack the Demon Lord on the head, but she dodges me easily.

Grrrr! If only I still had power! Then I could slap that smug little head of hers!

Power! Give me powerrr!

“And what exactly are you doing?”

As I reach out longingly for power, Vampy gives me a cold glare.

Stop! Don't look at me like that!

If a pretty little girl like you glares at me, it might awaken some new darkness within!

No, just kidding, it won't.

Anyway, while I was having that stupid exchange in my head, we arrived at the Demon Lord's castle.

In total defiance of the image that phrase evokes, it's actually super-gorgeous.

The place is so beautiful and magnificent that if it was on Earth, it'd probably be officially recognized as a World Heritage Site.

Magnificent is one thing, but why is it beautiful...?

Isn't a demon lord's castle supposed to be more, y'know, spooky?

“Some demon lord's castle that is.”

See? Vampy's not feeling it, either.

Incidentally, there's a lovely little castle town, too.

Although the atmosphere's a bit dampened by the giant wall around the outermost perimeter. It's like a fortress wall, really.

But can you blame them?

There are monsters and stuff in this world. It's dangerous not to have walls to keep them out. Besides, this is the Demon Lord's turf, so they might even get attacked by humans.

So it makes sense that they would need a nice, sturdy wall for defense.

Anyway, the castle town inside those walls is the biggest I've ever seen, I think.

The towns and cities in this world are pretty tiny, since they have to be walled in and all.

You gotta make the walls first, then the rest of the town.

So of course the size of every settlement is limited to the size of the walled area.

They can add on to the walls to expand, but that has its limits, too, so most towns and even cities in this world are pretty small.

From that perspective, the Demon Lord's castle town is actually so big, I don't even know what to make of it.

The biggest place I've seen so far in this world is the capital of Sariella. Being the capital of a major country and all, it was pretty darn big.

But this castle town puts it to shame.

I don't know exactly how big either of them is, so this is just an estimate, but I think the castle town must be at least twice the size of that capital.

And that's just my impression from going from the outer wall straight to the castle, so it might be even bigger for all I know.

It's times like these that I wish I could still look at the map with Panoptic Vision.

Back when I had my skills, I could use Panoptic Vision and other sense-enhancing skills to find out the measurements of distance around me without even really trying.

But now, no matter how hard I concentrate, I can see only as far as my average field of vision—until something blocks it, that is.

In a town like this, that means I can pretty much see only what's right in front of my face.

I feel pretty helpless, to be honest.

I know that's just how it is, but I can't help being frustrated that I can no longer do all the things I used to be able to do.

Gotta hurry up and master the use of my power so I can get my old abilities back.

While I'm busy being lost in thought, we arrive at our destination.

The Demon Lord's castle—no, a fancy house nearby.

It's not as impressive as the castle, but it's still a beautiful palace-like manor that would easily land on the cultural heritage list.

"So we're not even going to the castle?" Vampy grumbles, but her mood quickly recovers as she looks at the palace with sparkling eyes.

At times like these, Vampy actually reacts the way a little girl is supposed to. It's a lot more charming than the way she always sits around polishing her broadsword and grinning like a maniac.

What, me? Come on—I'm about function over fashion, that's all.

Anyway, we're being brought to a parlor room now.

It seems like we'll be staying in here, actually, so maybe it's more like a guest room?

From what I hear, we're staying in guest rooms because the master of the house is away and might not be back for a while.

The butler in charge of the palace didn't want to keep us waiting in the parlor forever, so he kindly prepared guest rooms for each of us.

Damn, this guy's good!

I wonder who's a better butler, him or Mera?

Well, he looks like he's around his forties, just like the Colonel, but since he's a demon, he's probably actually lived a really long life.

He might have the advantage over Mera in terms of experience.

“All righty. Well, let’s figure out our plans for the future before the master of the house gets back.”

We all got our own rooms, but for now, we’re gathering in the Demon Lord’s room to talk about what to do next.

Although we already discussed it a bit on the way here, so we’re mostly just reaffirming that.

“Firstly, once I meet with the master of the house, I’ll be moving to the castle. Ael and Merazophis, you’ll come with me.”

The Demon Lord is going to the Demon Lord’s castle.

The person who lives here is currently in charge of the Demon Lord’s castle, or in fact all of demonkind, since the Demon Lord has been away. Once they meet up, the Demon Lord will probably take over those duties again.

Makes sense. That is her job, after all.

The problem is that she’s bringing Ael, who’s normally the one in charge of reining in her crazy siblings.

Are the other three puppet spiders gonna be okay without her? I’m a little concerned.

On the other hand, Vampy doesn’t just look concerned. She looks outright furious.

That makes sense, too. Mera’s going to the Demon Lord’s castle without her.

Normally, as her servant, he’s supposed to be at Vampy’s side at all times.

But I think because of Vampy’s attitude, the Demon Lord’s decided that it would be best to keep Mera away from her for a while.

Her whole *yandere* thing has gotten pretty severe over the years.

I think the Demon Lord’s probably got the right idea of giving them a little cooling-off period, then trying to raise the baby bloodsucker to be a bit more levelheaded.

Yeah, it’s a logical decision.

But logic doesn't work on a crazy *yandere*, so I don't know how well this is gonna go.

"The rest of you will stay here. I'll assign a private tutor to Sophia and then have her start going to school once she's old enough."

At this, Vampy's scowl gets even darker.

Evidently, the demon realm has schools and stuff, too, and the academy here is where all the kids of noble families go.

Vampy will have to start attending soon, so for now she's going to be educated by a private tutor first.

She's a reincarnation and all, so she was able to learn some things on the way here. I'm sure she'll do fine in school, grades-wise.

But the main goal in sending Vampy to the academy isn't to get an education—it's to expand her circle of friends and cure her of her *yandere* ways!

Will it work? Probably not, but you never know!

But while I've already more or less given up, the Demon Lord seems pretty serious about her plan to rehabilitate Vampy.

Yeah, good luck with that. If anyone can do it, it's you, I'm sure.

"And then there's White, who's sitting there like this has nothing to do with her! I'm gonna give you work to do, too, so don't let me down!"

Wait...what?!

You're gonna put ME to work?!

Okay, I'm overreacting, but seriously. You want me to *work*?

You know what I'm like now, right? I hate to admit it, but I'm a totally useless piece of junk at the moment, okay?

Huh? That's weird. There's some sort of strange, salty liquid coming out of my eyes.

"If you don't work, you don't eat—that's how the rule goes! So obviously we gotta have you pay with your body, White."

The Demon Lord grins wickedly as she comes closer.

Uh, hang on a sec. Between that phrasing and that face, are you saying you're gonna sell me?

Am I gonna have to do a bunch of unspeakable things in some sketchy place?!

I get up to flee from the Demon Lord's evil hand, but in my fragile state, the difference between our speeds is laughable.

She grabs me from behind easily, then gropes my chest.

"Hey, these are pretty nice!"

EEEEEP! Stop it—let go of me! I didn't agree to this!

"That's enough."

"Oof!"

All at once, I'm released from the Demon Lord's grasp.

Turning around, I see her head, or rather her hair, being yanked back by Vampy.

I appreciate you saving me, but doesn't that seem a little harsh?

You're gonna do some serious damage to the Demon Lord's roots, there.

But she did rescue me, and she also looks super-pissed right now, so I'm not gonna say anything like that to her.

I'm a girl who knows how to read the room.

"Ow, owwww. Fine, that's enough joking. I was just gonna ask you to make thread for me, okay, White? Just make as much of it as you can. If you could craft some high-defense clothes out of it, that would be even better."

The Demon Lord rubs the back of her head as she reveals her true intentions.

...Come on—you've got Suffering Nullification. That probably didn't even hurt.

Thread, though, huh?

During the Mystic Mountains incident, I regained the ability to produce thread.

It kinda reawakened when we were in a life-and-death crisis. Pretty cliché, if I do say so myself.

Anyway, it was sorta like an emergency-induced feat of supernatural strength, but I tested some things out afterward and found that I can produce it whenever I want.

Unfortunately, though, none of my other abilities have come back, and producing the thread is all I can do with it.

Yeah, I can make it move a tiny bit, but I can't slice up an opponent or tie them up instantly like I used to be able to do.

And I can decide whether to make it sticky or not, but I can't fine-tune it the way I used to with my skills before.

Why would the Demon Lord have any use for such a limited ability?

"Take a look at this. It's thread that you made, White."

The Demon Lord produces a piece of thread and starts pulling it with both hands.

"Hnnngh!"

Given how high her stats are, the thread instantly...*doesn't* break?

"Rrrgh! Whew. So yeah, you see?"

After tugging red-faced on the thread for a little while, the Demon Lord gives up and wheezes.

I stare at her in shock.

"I can't break the thread you make, even if I use all my strength. And its Appraisal results just say 'Cannot be Appraised.' That means that your thread exists outside the system, White. You made it this strong without the benefit of the system. Which also means that it's resistant to any actions taken within the system. I don't know exactly how strong that resistance is just yet, but it's definitely really tough. Tougher than any thread I can make with my skills."

Say what?!

My thread is stronger than the Demon Lord's Divine Thread Weaving?

Now, that's unexpected.

When I was experimenting, I was more concerned with what I could do with the thread than the properties of the thread itself.

But I guess the Demon Lord focused on the thread instead.

I was so preoccupied with the things I couldn't do that I didn't even realize that the thread itself was stronger than what I used to make.

Enough that it'd make exceptionally good material for armor.

"To start, I'd like you to make enough thread for everyone in this room. I'll leave Riel and Fiel with you to help make the clothes themselves, so you can let them take care of that part. Also, it'd be great if you could make a little extra for research. Basically, I just want you to focus on making thread for a while, White."

Ooh, I see. So that's what she meant by *pay with your body*.

Well, that's fine by me.

I still haven't really done much research with it myself, since I figured I could make more thread later.

It's hard to do much when you're on the road, after all.

Now that I can settle down and do some experimenting, I might even make some new discoveries.

I used to do that kind of thing whenever I got new skills.

And this thread of mine is a completely new power, so the rules of skills don't even apply anymore.

Since it's not standardized like a skill would be, thinking of it in terms of what it can and can't do might be wrong in the first place. Skills have clear limitations to what they can accomplish, but those limits don't matter to me anymore.

Even if I can't do certain things now, I might be able to in the future.

The possibilities are endless. It all depends on my own effort and creativity.

I guess when I think about it that way, it is a little exciting.

Besides, if I keep producing lots of thread, I might figure out how to use some of my other abilities, too.

Producing thread is a function the human body doesn't have.

In other words, I'm using magic of some kind to create it.

Whether I'm aware of it or not, that means there's some mysterious power at work.

If I can get a better sense of this power, then I might be able to reproduce other abilities, too.

However, I'm now able to produce thread as naturally as moving my body, so it won't be easy to figure out how it works.

People don't normally need to put any thought into moving their hands and feet, and even if they did, it wouldn't help them better understand how it happened, exactly.

But if I give up just because it's hard, then I've already lost!

So from now on, I'll be a thread-making machine!

Once I nod my affirmation, the Demon Lord addresses the last unassigned person.

"Sael, you'll be Sophia's bodyguard."

Sael only does what she's told, so she has to be paired up with someone or she won't even move.

Since the role of bodyguard requires directions only in emergency situations, it's the perfect role for Sael, as usual.

That said, Vampy doesn't look thrilled being paired up with Sael.

Huh? Hey, wait a second.

Doesn't that mean I'm stuck looking after the other two problem children?

My eyes widening, I look at Riel and Fiel in horror.

Riel is a natural weirdo, and Fiel is violent and energetic.

Even right now, Riel is wearing a smile that makes it impossible to tell what

she's thinking, while Fiel is smiling like she's not thinking about anything at all.

I'm gonna be working with these two?

Will I really be able to get anything done?

...Hoo, boy.

The lord of the mansion wound up returning late at night.

He's a young man, or at least he appears to be.

But since demons live longer than humans, it's impossible to tell what his actual age is.

Since he seems very composed despite his young appearance, he might be a lot older than he looks.

"Always a pleasure to see you again, O Demon Lord."

The man kneels in front of the Demon Lord.

His expression is calm, but it looks to me like he's actually pretty nervous.

"Mm-hmm, good work." The Demon Lord smiles cheerfully. "You been keeping busy?"

"Yes, quite. But I felt it of the utmost importance to prioritize greeting you upon your return, O Demon Lord."

The man seems taken aback by the Demon Lord's attitude.

Oh, I get it. He probably knows her only from before she got mixed up with my former body brain.

I didn't exactly have any real conversations with the Demon Lord before then, but she definitely seemed a lot different.

If you were familiar with the old Demon Lord, then the difference probably seems a lot more drastic.

The fact that the Colonel didn't even blink at that makes me think it's likely he's up to no good after all.

Although if just saying *good work* was enough to surprise the man this much, how exactly did she act toward him before?

“Thanks. Since I brought some new folks, y’mind introducing yourself to them?”

The man stands obediently and bows his head toward us.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Balto Phthalo, in charge of the Phthalo region.”

“Balto’s basically the archduke who mediates among all the demons, so if you need anything, he’s your guy.”

Hmm.

So he’s the second-most-important demon after the Demon Lord, huh?

The Colonel seemed like he symbolized the military might of the borderlands, so maybe Balto is more about politics.

He totally acts like a government official, for one thing.

After we’ve all been introduced, they discuss the future for a bit. Sounds like the group moving to the Demon Lord’s castle should be able to do that without a problem.

However, Mera and Ael won’t be able to work directly under the Demon Lord.

There aren’t any positions for them that report to the Demon Lord herself, and it’ll take some time to reorganize things for them.

I guess that makes sense, since the Demon Lord’s been away for years.

So for now, Ael will be stationed at the Demon Lord’s side as her assistant, and Mera will temporarily be assigned to the Fourth Army.

Mera himself is the one who wanted to be part of the army. I guess he thought he’d be better off there than at the Demon Lord’s side.

It must still be bothering him that he wasn’t able to put up much of a fight against Mr. Oni in the Mystic Mountains.

Balto is personally in charge of the Fourth Army, which is usually assigned to defend this area, the Phthalo region.

The reason the capital city’s army isn’t number one is that number one is usually stationed at the border abutting human lands.

In other words, the Colonel's men are army number one.

Anyway, the rest of us leftovers get permission to live in this mansion. We even get to stay in the rooms we're using right now.

Vampy's personal tutor will be assigned in the next few days, too.

We're all taken care of.

The Demon Lord's got some serious pull.

Between her physical and political power, she might actually be the strongest person I know.

Thus, our journey came to an end.

From this point on, each of us will start working toward our own goals.

The Demon Lord will work to bring the demons together and start a war against the humans.

Vampy will work to grow up healthy, uh, both physically and mentally.

I'll work to regain the powers I lost.

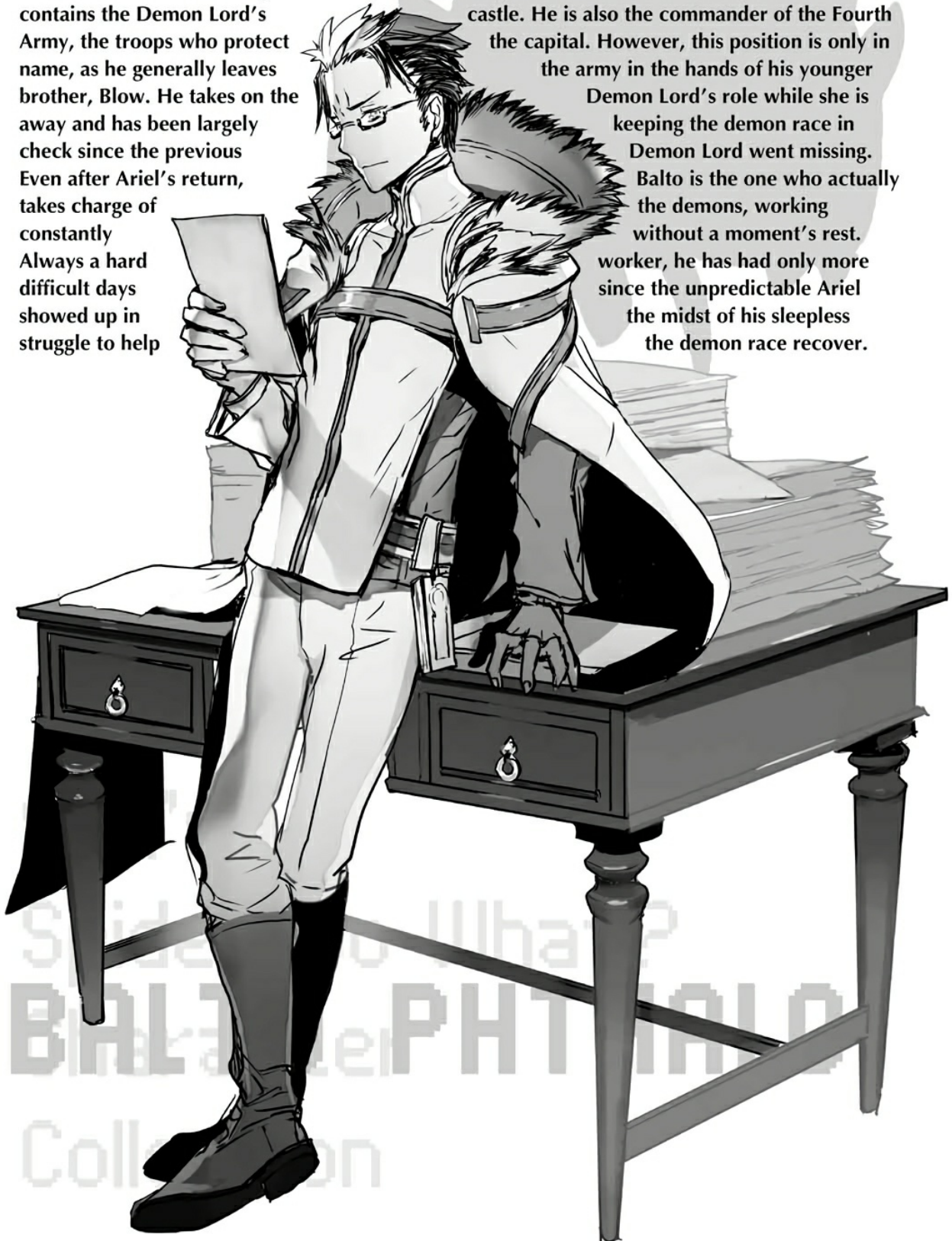
We each have a goal.

Our battle has only just begun!

BALTO PHTHALO

The duke of the Phthalo region of the demon territory, which lies at the territory's heart and contains the Demon Lord's castle. He is also the commander of the Fourth Army, the troops who protect the capital. However, this position is only in the hands of his younger brother, Blow. He takes on the away and has been largely check since the previous Even after Ariel's return, takes charge of constantly Always a hard difficult days showed up in struggle to help

castle. He is also the commander of the Fourth the capital. However, this position is only in the army in the hands of his younger Demon Lord's role while she is keeping the demon race in Demon Lord went missing. Balto is the one who actually the demons, working without a moment's rest. worker, he has had only more since the unpredictable Ariel the midst of his sleepless the demon race recover.





Interlude THE OLD BUTLER'S FRIGHTFUL

EXPERIENCE

I am the head butler of the house of Duke Phthalo.

Presumptuous though it may sound, I have served the duke for many years and earned the title of head butler, and I am confident that my work has been impeccable.

Both in my public job as butler and my private job of protecting the duke.

As he controls the land that contains the Demon Lord's castle, Duke Phthalo has many enemies: both his political opponents among fellow demons and the humans who often infiltrate our territory.

Among the ranks of humans are those known as the inquisitors of the Word of God religion, who root out and exterminate demons in human lands, but alas, we demons have no such profession.

Instead, each region must locate and remove human intruders on their own.

Thus, as protectors of our employers and their homes, we butlers must have the strength to execute such duties.

There are times when we must put our lives on the line and fight to protect our masters, as well.

I myself have routed many a foe since the previous duke's time.

While many of my comrades, my elders, and even my juniors have fallen in battle, I have managed to serve the house of the duke all the way into my old age.

Whether the assassins be demon or human, it takes no small amount of

ability to infiltrate the heart of the demon realm, so there have been many close calls.

But it may be that my time is nearly upon me.

I am the head butler of the house of Duke Phthalo.

Though all demons serve the Demon Lord by nature, my greatest loyalty lies with Duke Phthalo.

As such, it would be unthinkable for me not to investigate the backgrounds of those guests who are currently staying in the duke's home.

Even if they are the Demon Lord's companions.

But the results would send shivers down anyone's spine.

Though I take pride in my abilities, I fear I must prepare myself for death.

That is how exceptional these girls are.

Nighttime.

It is late enough that any normal person should be in bed, but I cannot sleep.

Since I gained the Exhaustion Nullification skill after extensive training, nighttime has become an important time for me to work.

The Exhaustion Resistance skill allows one to go without sleep much longer than the average person, but with the Exhaustion Nullification skill, one does not need any sleep whatsoever.

The last time I slept was... Goodness, how long has it been? So long that I cannot even remember.

Of course, it took a great deal of effort to obtain such a valuable skill.

My training, which involved fighting off sleepiness with all my might and clinging to consciousness by a thread, was quite difficult indeed.

It pains me that young Master Balto has gained the same Exhaustion Nullification at his age, without even training in order to do so.

The sight of him working so hard with nary an hour to sleep troubles my heart.

It is for his sake that I must ascertain whether our current guests mean any harm.

Carrying no lantern, I look around the familiar sights of the duke's mansion.

I have no need for a light source thanks to my Night Vision skill. Even without it, I know this place so well that I could undoubtedly navigate with my eyes closed.

In the dark of night, I search the house to ensure that nothing is amiss.

And soon enough, I reach the area that houses the guest rooms.

My throat growing dry with tension, I swallow nervously.

But I do not stop walking, following my usual rounds.

First, I pass by three of the guest rooms without stopping.

There are currently five guests staying in the duke's home, but three of them are generally to be found near the other two, rarely entering their own rooms.

Thus, these three rooms have gone virtually untouched. We have been cleaning them in the afternoon, but it appears that they have barely been used at all.

After passing these first three rooms, I arrive at the rooms that do contain guests.

With my Presence Perception skill, I can tell there are two guests within the first room.

One is sitting in a corner of the room, not moving an inch.

The other is sitting in a chair in the center of the room.

Not sleeping, despite the late hour.

When I realize this, I cannot help but feel disappointment, as usual.

Yes, as usual. This guest has not slept a wink since her arrival.

I am all but certain that she, too, must have the Exhaustion Nullification skill, though I cannot understand how she acquired it at such a young age.

But if she is awake, then I cannot sneak into her room and search her

belongings.

I would never do such a thing for any indecent purposes, of course!

I wish only to confirm whether she has brought anything dangerous or perhaps discover anything that might hint as to the true nature of these visitors.

Though of course, in the case of the former, she has already quite brazenly brought in a large broadsword, so I suppose I cannot do anything about that.

Truly, while I have witnessed many a high-quality weapon in my years of service to the duke, that broadsword is by far one of the finest I have ever seen. And I am quite well versed in this subject, so my eyes cannot be easily deceived.

A single swing of that sword could very well be worth as much as this mansion, could it not? For any weapon that powerful bears an extraordinary value.

And yet, this guest has placed it in her room with no effort to hide it, leaving me uneasy in many ways.

Normally, I would simply confirm that the guest is awake and move on, but at this rate, I will never uncover any information, so I decide to embark on a little adventure.

And so I walk up to the door and lightly knock.

“Oh? Do come in.”

The voice from within the room sounds curious and quickly grants me permission to enter.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

As I open the door as quietly as possible, the room is still dark, but my perception was correct: Lady Sophia is seated at the table in the center of the room, and Lady Sael is crouching in the corner.

“What prompted you to knock tonight? Usually you just walk on by.”

At her casual words, a part of me is more vindicated than surprised.

As I suspected, she aware of my nighttime rounds.

I was hiding my presence all along, but it seems that was not enough to keep

Lady Sophia from being aware of my activities.

Though Lady Sophia appears quite young, perhaps she is much older than she looks.

That is the only explanation I can conceive of for her Exhaustion Nullification and the fact that she sensed my presence. For how could someone that young ever gain such advanced skills?

But even if that is the case, I cannot begin to guess what exactly she might be.

We demons live longer than humans, but the rate of our growth is the same, so demon children's appearances match their age. Therefore, I doubt she is a demon.

If she were an elf or had any elf blood, her ears would inevitably be pointed to some degree, but Lady Sophia's ears are unremarkably round.

Which means that either she really is the age she appears, or else she is of some mythical race, like those spoken of in folklore.

I always assumed that races such as vampires and dragonkin were the stuff of stories and nothing more, but the Demon Lord is living proof that some of the stories are true.

She is the oldest of the Divine Beasts spoken of in legend.

A mythical being who has lived since ancient times.

From what I have heard, she is of a race closely related to spiders.

And since Lady Sophia came accompanying the Demon Lord, it is possible that she, too, belongs to some mythical race.

But realistically, it is hard to believe that such rare and legendary beings would exist in such numbers.

Which means one must assume that she really is the age that she appears.

And yet, if that is true, it calls into question how she could have such remarkable abilities.

I cannot tell what the truth might be.

It is my role to investigate, but since Lady Sophia is already well aware of my

movements, my only choice is to patiently try to draw out information over time instead of attempting anything foolish.

That is why I have entered this room tonight.

“My apologies, Lady Sophia. Whenever I go about making my nightly rounds, you always seem to be awake, so I was growing concerned.”

“Ah, yes. I do sleep when I feel so inclined, but the mood hasn’t struck me lately.”

Oh? So she does sleep when she wishes.

But this is hardly cause for celebration.

Even if Lady Sophia was to fall asleep, the other would likely stay awake.

I glance at the corner of the room, where Lady Sael stares at me without the slightest twitch.

She seems almost more like a doll than a human.

But I suppose that is because she really is a doll.

Though I have yet to learn the true natures of Lady Sophia and Lady White, I have uncovered the identities of the other three during these past few days of investigation.

Though I suppose I didn’t exactly “uncover” them so much as they were simply revealed to me...

Evidently, these three girls are monsters known as puppet taratects.

Their bodies are mere puppets, with their real forms being small spider monsters. The spiders sit inside the remarkably human-looking dolls, manipulating them from within.

As they are kin to the Demon Lord, it is only natural that they should be spider monsters, I suppose.

Now that I know their true identities, I find them a bit easier to deal with than Lady Sophia or Lady White.

...Although knowing that also makes them all the more frightening.

I must confess that even now, as Lady Sael stares at me, I do feel a bit of fear.

“Sorry about that. Her job is technically to be my bodyguard, so she won’t let her guard down around people she doesn’t trust.”

“It is I who should apologize. It was quite objectionable of me to enter a lady’s room at such a late hour.”

I’ve now been bluntly told that I am untrustworthy.

I suppose that was inevitable. If someone is sneaking around the house every night, it would be stranger not to be wary of them. Though for me, it is a simple matter of security, she must have found it strange if she sensed my presence.

“I patrol the mansion every night as a security measure, so I will continue to pass through the hallway around this hour. Please pay me no mind.”

“Of course. As long as you don’t try anything suspicious, that is.”

I suppose pressing the matter any further will only make her warier of me.

For now, since I at least gained the information that any careless moves will be counterproductive, I will consider this a win.

“Forgive my impertinence, but I do feel that it would be in your best interest to sleep at night if at all possible, if only for the sake of your health and growth. I bid you good night.”

Surely I can get away with giving that small piece of advice.

They do say that lack of sleep is bad for a child’s growth, so I have stated nothing but the truth.

I know not what Lady Sophia does at night, but if she really is the age she appears to be, surely it would be best for her to sleep.

At any rate, as long as she has Lady Sael at her side, I cannot make any reckless moves, regardless of whether Lady Sophia is awake or not.

If Lady Sophia ever displays ill will toward the duke’s household, then I shall have to be strong, but otherwise I will strive to keep my investigation from causing her to view me as an enemy.

Leaving Lady Sophia’s room, I move toward the next guest room.

However, when I probe inside, I sense one waking presence here as well.

Lady White appears to be asleep, but there is something awake next to her bed.

Something?

“?!”

I must commend myself for not screaming at this moment.

For just then, a black shadow suddenly lowers itself in front of me, stopping in midair directly in front of my face.

A single spider, small enough to fit in one’s palm.

The spider occupies most of my field of vision.

It is right before the tip of my nose, nearly close enough to be touching.

I reflexively take a step back.

As if in response, it smoothly moves back toward the ceiling.

It must have lowered itself from the ceiling with thread too thin for my eyes to see.

When I look up at the ceiling, there is Lady Riel, staring at me with vacant eyes.

Her mouth is wide open as she sticks to the ceiling.

No, I suppose what is sticking to the ceiling is only Lady Riel’s doll. The spider itself that is moving back toward the doll is Lady Riel’s real body.

The spider skitters into the open mouth and disappears.

Her mouth closes, her throat moves as if swallowing, and her head slowly turns at an angle no human could ever re-create.

It’s just a doll. It’s just a doll!

I must keep reminding myself of that, as the sight is simply too horrifying to bear.

Even though I know it is a doll, instinctive fear grips me all the same.

Studying me with a sidelong glance, Lady Riel turns her head again, this time returning to a normal position...except that her head is facing backward.

Her head still turned around, Lady Riel scuttles along the ceiling, then the wall until she reaches the floor.

Then, with her head staying in the same position, she twists the rest of her body around.

Only then does her head finally return to a normal angle.

With that, Lady Riel opens the guest-room door and goes inside, as if nothing strange had just transpired.

I watch her go, somehow resisting the desire to collapse on the floor, and instead walk forward.

I have no idea what Lady Riel was trying to do.

But every night, whenever I pass by this place, Lady Riel always appears.

And always with some unfathomable action, like what she did just now.

It was these very actions that allowed me to determine that Lady Riel is a puppet taratect. So are Lady Sael and Lady Fiel, but it is bad for my heart to be frightened thus each night.

Especially as she always manages to get close to me without my sensing her at all.

Is this meant as a warning?

Her behavior is so bizarre that I cannot begin to guess her intentions.

And so every night, at this hour, I feel as if my very life is at risk.

For all I know, she might someday kill me on a whim.

Sigh.

Well, it appears that I have survived this night.

I suppose I shall go and make my report to Master Balto about tonight's events.

"Hey, old-timer."

“What is it, Master Balto?”

“These reports of yours read like genuine horror stories...”

“What a coincidence. I was thinking the very same thing as I wrote them.”

“...I see.”

“At any rate, I must advise that it would be prudent to avoid turning against the Demon Lord, in my humble opinion.”

“...I see.”

Upon receiving my honest report, Master Balto heaves an exhausted sigh.

Personally, I felt as though my very life was at risk whilst gathering this information, so I must say I would have appreciated a slightly more favorable reaction.



ARRIVAL OF THE HOOLIGAN

We've been living in the duke's mansion for a few days now.

How is it so far? Freakin' awesome!

I mean, I guess that's no surprise. I've been living on the road for an eternity, only staying in camps or inns for a day or two at a time.

Obviously that's not gonna compare to living in a fancy mansion.

So allow me to describe my elegant lifestyle in the duke's mansion.

First, I wake up.

When? Well, that varies.

I can sleep in a comfy bed for as long as I want, and I can also stay up all night if I feel like it, so obviously my sleep schedule is all over the place.

You can't blame me for that!

Next, once I wake up, Riel and Fiel play dress up with me for a while.

Kind of ironic that a couple of dolls are using me as their plaything, isn't it?

Not that I mind.

Once they mess around with my clothes and hair and even put makeup on me and all that junk, it's time for breakfast.

The staff makes breakfast for me while Riel and Fiel have their fun with my look for the day.

My wake-up time is pretty random, so of course they have to remake breakfast for me most days.

Sure, it's probably inconvenient to the cooks, but just consider it a necessary

sacrifice for the luxurious lifestyle I so deserve.

I eat breakfast in my room with Riel and Fiel.

Being the mansion of a duke and all, the food is of course delicious. A little bit mass-produced-ish, maybe, but that's all right.

You can't expect the chefs to make their absolute finest dishes every day around the clock, right?

Let's just go with that.

I'm sure it's not that the chefs resent me or anything of the sort.

After breakfast, it's time for work. By which I just mean producing thread.

This is the one thing I actually take seriously.

To be honest, producing thread is easy in itself. It comes so naturally that I kinda have to wonder why I wasn't able to do it before that incident in the Mystic Mountains at this point.

On top of that, it doesn't take a lot of effort. I don't get tired no matter how much I produce, and it doesn't feel like the energy inside me has decreased.

So just producing thread on its own is easy, and I can make as much of it as I need.

But if I just sit around randomly making thread, I'm not gonna get anywhere.

My goal is to regain at least as much strength as I used to have, maybe even more.

When I had skills, just using them frequently would make my skill level go up, but it doesn't work like that anymore.

Practice makes perfect, so there's certainly no harm in doing just that, but if I want to master the use of my power, simply producing thread isn't enough.

The hope is that I might be able to use that sensation as a starting point for figuring out how to use my other powers, so I try to concentrate on that while I work.

...But so far, that hasn't produced any results.

The fact that I can produce thread so naturally actually makes it harder to pinpoint the feeling. Since I can produce it whenever I want, it means I can actually do it without thinking.

It's hard to be aware of what it feels like to not be aware of doing something, y'know?

Maybe it's like when a natural genius is trying to tutor someone else and can't understand why their pupil doesn't understand something.

So I'm trying different things while I produce thread, but the only result is... more thread.

Looks like it might be a while before I can reproduce any of my other skills.

But anyway, Riel and Fiel gather up the thread I make and turn it into clothes, make balls of yarn, send everything to the Demon Lord, and so on, so at least it's not a total waste of time.

Once I get hungry, I stop work for a bit and have some lunch.

Still seems kinda mass-produced, but yeah, that's no big deal!

On the rare occasion that I actually manage to eat lunch at the proper time, the difference in extravagance is obvious.

They're not cutting corners!

It's just that I'm a little too careless with my schedule, that's all!

The chefs are doing me a kindness by feeding me anyway!

Yeah, let's go with that.

Once I'm done eating lunch, I have free time, which I spend differently depending on the day.

In other words, I just do whatever I feel like.

Like reading books in the mansion library, or knitting with the thread I made that morning, or striking cool poses while trying to practice magic.

Hmm? What was that last one?

Beats me. Don't even worry about it.

I definitely don't remember Riel and Fiel staring at me like they'd just witnessed something truly pathetic.

Okay? Okay.

Anyway, the rest of the day is free time until dinner.

The one thing I have to be careful about is that if I request dinner at weird times, like in the middle of the night, the quality of the food takes a huge dip.

Makes sense. Even the chefs at a duke's mansion probably check out for the day once they've made dinner at the regular time.

If you ask for food after that, it makes sense that you'd just have to help yourself.

Well, we're not actually allowed in the kitchen, so a maid has to do it instead, but the maid can't cook, either, so it's always just bread or jerky or whatever.

In other words, food that doesn't take any actual prep.

I mean, it *is* tasty, y'know?

It's a duke's mansion, so everything they've got is the good stuff.

But if you just throw that on a plate and call it a day... Know what I mean?

Unreal.

Which is why I always try to eat dinner around the normal time.

In a way, that's an even more important mission than producing thread.

Anyway, after dinner, I relax for a while and then sleep.

That's how most of my days go.

Hmm? All I do is laze around, eat, and sleep, you say?

Well, I suppose you could put it that way.

My only real duty is to make thread like the Demon Lord asked, and that isn't even difficult.

I get to live a lazy life every single day.

Is this place heaven or what?!

“What the hell?!”

Just like that, my blissfully lazy lifestyle is rudely interrupted by a loud yell.

Riel and Fiel, who are playing hot potato with balls of thread or something, immediately assume combat stances.

I can't see the source of the voice I heard.

Probably because the door to my room is blocked by a wall of thread.

Yeaaah, I kinda covered the entire room they gave me in thread.

Look, I just wouldn't feel comfortable otherwise! It's, like, my spider instincts! And I have to block the sun from coming in through the window 'cause it's bad for my skin!

So you can understand why I had to make my room into a mess of spiderwebs.

That also means that no one can come into my room except Riel and Fiel. They can easily move the thread aside and enter, probably 'cause they're spiders like me. By that logic, I'm guessing Ael, Sael, and the Demon Lord could get inside, too.

But the maid obviously can't, so I have her leave my food and stuff outside the door.

So anyway, my room is off-limits to any non-spider visitors, and some intruder's trying to get in right now. A man, judging by the voice.

Why call him an intruder? Because he opened a maiden's bedroom door without so much as a knock, so he obviously has no manners.

“Hey, you! What the hell is this stuff?”

“Erm, I believe it was put there by the guest currently using this room, sir. I'm afraid we don't know the details, either.”

I can hear the intruder talking to what sounds like a maid as he tugs at the thread wall.

Judging by the maid's polite tone, it sounds like this guy must be someone important.

I guess if he really was an intruder, he wouldn't have gotten in past the mansion security. Someone must have let him in and probably even guided him here.

So maybe the Demon Lord sent him to fetch us or something?

"My dear boy, these rooms are currently occupied by the honored guests of your esteemed elder brother. Even as the younger brother of the master of the house, I am afraid you must not simply barge in on them without prior permission."

Oh-ho? Sounds like Mr. Head Butler has arrived.

And from what I can hear, he's telling off the intruder.

"Like I said before, stop calling me dear boy, dammit!"

"And as I believe I have stated, I shall be happy to stop just as soon as you have become an adult, my dear boy."

"Ugh!"

Sounds like the intruder is no match for the head butler.

Also, it sounds like he must be the younger brother of Balto, the head of the house.

So if he's connected to this place, the Demon Lord probably didn't send him here. Actually, I guess I should have known that the Demon Lord wouldn't entrust anything to someone so rough-and-tumble in the first place.

"Forget it! Just tell me what this stuff is, then!"

Oof. Sounds like the intruder realized the *dear boy* thing isn't going to end anytime soon, so he's going back to the original subject.

This is just a hunch, but I can kinda picture him pointing at the wall of thread from outside the room.

Y'know, for someone from a noble family like the duke's, he sounds an awful lot like a hooligan trying his best to look tough.

Instead of "intruder," let's call him "hooligan" from here on out.

"It is a material provided by our esteemed guest, as I believe this good woman

has just explained to you.”

“I got that part, dammit! I’m asking you why the hell you’re letting them do whatever they want with a room in our house!”

Ahhh. I guess I’m the reason Hooligan is so mad.

“And from what I hear, they’re just holing up in there doing some kinda fishy business! Why the hell would my brother let a buncha sketchy weirdos stay here?! Dammit!”

“I assure you, the master of the house has granted permission for all this. It is not for you to complain about, dear boy.”

“And I’m telling ya that ain’t a good enough reason!”

Maybe he and his brother don’t get along?

Based on what he just said, it sounds like the staff of the mansion doesn’t think super-highly of my activities, but what really seems to bother Hooligan here is that his brother has given us permission to do whatever we want.

“Listen up! This is my family’s mansion! You can’t just go around filling our rooms with whatever this crap is! Hey! You in there! I know you can hear me!”

“Please stop, my dear boy!”

“Shut up, old-timer!”

Pffft! *Old-timer* ! Hooligan just called the head butler *old-timer* !

It’s pretty hilarious to hear a phrase like that mixed in with all his cursing.

“Ke-ke-ke-ke-ke-ke!”

Suddenly, I hear a weird noise coming from beside me.

Turning to investigate, I see Riel’s shoulders shaking up and down as she emits the sound.

Um, what are you doing exactly?

Is that supposed to be laughter? What, did that hit your funny bone or something?

I gave the puppet spiders prototype voice mechanisms a while back, but since

I never got to develop them past the testing stage, they can't really talk very well. Usually they don't bother trying.

So if Riel is going out of her way to produce some kind of laughter, she must've found something seriously funny. It's kinda creepy, though, to be honest. Cut it out, will ya?

"What the hell are you laughing at?!"

See?! You made Hooligan even madder!

What's up with this chaotic situation?

"Please stop this at once!"

"No one's gonna make a fool outta me!"

The wall of thread shakes violently.

Hooligan must've flipped out and tried to punch it.

"What the hell?! I'm stuck?!"

Well, yeah. It's spider thread.

If you touch it, obviously you're gonna get stuck.

"Dammit!"

Cursing wildly, Hooligan moves on to his next course of action, which is.....
FIRE?!

The wall of thread's on fire!

What kind of moron sets a fire in his own house?!

Even after my deification, my thread has retained the same basic properties.

In other words, it's still weak to fire.

It can withstand a certain amount, but this dumbass hooligan must've really blown up big-time, because the flames are burning right through my thread's resistance.

He probably used some kind of fire skill, but I guess the skill level was pretty high. Ha-ha-ha.

Wait, there's nothing funny about this!

Quick! We have to put out this fire or I'm gonna be burned alive!

All four walls of the room are covered in thread, so if they all catch fire, I'll have nowhere to run!

It's only the area near the door that's burning right now, but if I don't act fast, it's gonna spread to the rest of the room for sure.

While I'm panicking on the inside, three other figures make their move.

Two of them are Riel and Fiel, so I immediately grab them by the scruffs of their necks to stop them.

Don't you dare!

I don't know what you were planning on doing exactly, but knowing you two, I'm sure it was nothing good!

Riel looked like she was about to use some kind of magic, and Fiel seemed like she was going to try to physically ram her way through.

Not only would that not put out the fire, you'd probably destroy this whole damn mansion!

And even if not, I'm sure Hooligan, the head butler, and the maid standing nearby would all be killed by the shock waves.

I don't really care about Hooligan, since this is his fault in the first place, but the other two would be innocent victims, so I'm gonna have to stop you right there.

Meanwhile, as I'm stopping these two idiots from destroying everything in sight, the head butler uses water magic to safely put out the fire.

Figures. That guy is one hell of a butler.

"My dear boy..."

But now, he's glaring at Hooligan with a vein popping on his forehead.

How do I know that, you ask?

'Cause the wall of thread in front of the doorway burned away, so there's

nothing blocking my view anymore.

Hooligan, perhaps detecting that he's gotten himself in over his head, looks away from the head butler's glare...

...and meets my eyes.

"Huh?!"

Hooligan catches his breath and freezes.

Um, excuse me, do you mind? Shut-ins don't like making direct eye contact, you know.

Also, my eyes are freakishly full of pupils right now, so I'd rather not have people see them.

Not because it's embarrassing—it's just more trouble than it's worth.

I immediately shut my eyes and turn my face away.

Maybe that's rude behavior toward the master of the house's brother, but I'm pretty sure the guy who tried to bust into a maiden's room and then set it on fire is in the wrong here.

Besides, I don't really care if I offend someone who dredges up my traumatic memories of having my home burned to the ground!

Oh boy, just thinking about it pisses me off.

Could you please just leave me alone already?

With my grip still on their collars, Riel and Fiel both take a step forward, as if picking up on my emotions.

At the same time, their tiny bodies start producing a ridiculously powerful aura.

"...! Please, young master! I must insist that you withdraw before things get any more out of hand!"

The head butler hurriedly grasps Hooligan's shoulder and drags him forcibly out of the room.

Should you really be doing that to a member of the family that employs you?

Then again, if he hadn't done something, Riel and Fiel might have slashed that hooligan to ribbons, so that was probably the right call.

"Um...right."

Hooligan nods dumbly, his violent energy drained away.

I can't tell for sure, since my eyes are closed, but...is it just me, or is Hooligan totally glaring at me?

"Show the young master away, please."

"O-of course. Right this way, please, Master Blow."

At the head butler's command, the maid leads Hooligan away.

Now I finally know Hooligan's name.

Apparently, it's Blow.

Not that I care. "Hooligan" is good enough for that jerk.

You'll never catch me calling that guy by his real name; I can promise you that for sure.

"Please accept my deepest apologies in my master's place for the young lord's terrible rudeness."

The head butler's talking to me now.

Opening my eyes a crack, I see that he's bowing deeply.

In his master's place, huh? Do nobles really apologize that easily? Like, should you be throwing his name around like that?

Maybe Balto just trusts this butler that much, or maybe it's the influence of the Demon Lord that's making him apologize to me like this. Otherwise, the butler's just doing this of his own accord.

If that's the case, couldn't that get him in trouble?

Hmm. Well, I guess that's not for me to worry about.

It was obviously Hooligan's fault.

"I have no doubt that the master of the house will wish to apologize to you personally quite soon. I shall do everything in my power to keep the young

master from approaching you and yours. I beg you to spare us of your fury if at all possible.”

The head butler speaks quickly, his head still lowered.

I know he’s just covering for his employer, so I feel bad having him apologize so much.

Letting go of Riel and Fiel, I pat them gently on the shoulders.

Picking up on my meaning, they relax and stop radiating all that violent energy.

“Again, I deeply apologize for the intrusion. Please return to your relaxation at your leisure.”

With that, the butler carefully pulls the door shut.

Well, that was a disaster, but supposedly I’ll never have to see that hooligan’s ugly mug again, so whatever.

Or so I thought. But wouldn’t you know it, Hooligan keeps coming to see us again and again after that.

It may have crossed my mind that we should just kill him, but let’s keep that our little secret.

BLOW PHTHALO



The younger brother of Duke Balto Pthalo and sub-commander of the Demon Lord's Fourth Army. As the main commander, Balto is always occupied with other duties, so Blow is the real leader of his army. Since he grew up watching his older brother, Balto, work tirelessly for the demon race, he wants to support him. Though he appears uncouth, he is diligent by nature. Because he cares more deeply for his brother than anyone else, love has never been as important to him as his work... That is, until he falls in love at first sight with a suspicious young woman staying as a guest in his family home. Though he attempts to win her over, he has no experience with women and has no idea what might please her, so his efforts at courtship have all failed spectacularly.

Spider, What?
Character
BLOW PHTHALO
Collection



Interlude THE DEMON DUKE'S DISTRESS

“Brother. Who is that woman?”

Those are the first words out of my younger brother's mouth when I see him again.

“Hello, Blow. No greeting for your older brother?”

At that, he grumbles a quick “I'm home,” so I respond with a “welcome back.”

Blow has been stationed up north for some time now, so it's been a long time since we last met in person. We've exchanged letters and such, but even that has fallen off in recent times, since Blow was traveling back home.

And yet, this is how he greets me.

“Now, who do you mean by *that woman*, exactly?”

Close though we may be, even I don't understand who he's referring to without context in this case.

Blow rarely brings up the subject of women, so the only possibilities who come to mind are our comrade Sanatoria or perhaps the Demon Lord...but Blow knows both their faces, so it wouldn't make sense for him to ask who they are.

A woman I know and Blow doesn't?

Then, at last, one person comes to mind.

“Blow, don't tell me you went to the mansion before coming here?”

“Yeah. I'm talking about the woman staying there.”

I resist the urge to bring my palm to my face. “Why in the world didn't you come straight here?”

“Hunh? Can’t a guy stop by his own damn house first?”

I suppose he’s right. And yet, his timing couldn’t be worse!

Now that the Demon Lord has returned, the situation has changed in all manner of ways.

Blow’s timing is so poor that one might suspect divine intervention.

When the Demon Lord returned, he happened to be traveling, making him out of contact.

Since her return was so sudden, I’ve been rushing around at my wits’ end dealing with it, so I wasn’t able to send out an emergency messenger.

Thus, Blow does not know that the Demon Lord has returned.

Normally, it would be no issue for him to stop off at our home before coming to meet with me, but in this case, since I needed to tell him of the Demon Lord’s return as soon as possible, I wish he had come straight here instead.

Especially because, on top of all that, there are several of the Demon Lord’s travel companions staying in our mansion right now. If he ran into them by chance without knowing who they are, it could easily cause unnecessary trouble.

And judging by his current line of questioning, it seems things have played out exactly as I feared.

“But you always come here first, don’t you?”

“Yeah, well, I just felt like doing things differently today.”

His unrepentant tone is starting to give me a headache.

Blow always comes here to the Demon Lord’s castle to give his report as soon as he returns, then goes to our mansion after that.

So I suppose I let my guard down. But why would he choose this of all times to go there first?

His timing is truly unbelievable.

“Fine, then. What’s done is done. So are you referring to the woman with the white hair?”

Most of the companions the Demon Lord brought are female, but there's only one who Blow would be likely to describe as a "woman."

"Yeah, her! Who is she?"

Blow leans forward intently.

This is unusual.

When has he ever taken such interest in any woman, except perhaps the Demon Lord? And of course, his interest in the Demon Lord is of a decidedly negative kind.

But judging by his expression, that isn't the case this time.

Though I must say, I don't have a very good feeling about this, either...

"Why are you so interested, exactly?"

"I-I'm not *interested*! It's just, y'know, if some chick starts living in our house all of a sudden while I'm away, it's totally normal to be curious. Right?"

His voice sped up a bit.

Very suspicious.

All the more so because of the faint redness in his cheeks.

"Have you fallen for her or something?"

"Y-y-y-y-yeah right! Don't say such weird things, dammit!"

Now his face is entirely bright red.

This is not good.

Why would this happen, of all things?

This time, I really do bring my palm to my face and sigh deeply.

Blow has fallen in love with a woman.

Perhaps I should be happy about that in itself.

He has never before shown interest in romance, always declaring that he wouldn't get involved with anyone until I got married. He never fraternized with women at all, even in passing.

Blow is actually quite diligent, even if his ordinary behavior makes people think otherwise.

Both in his professional duties and personal life, he's so upright and honest that it's almost old-fashioned.

But now a woman has caught his eye for the first time.

Yes, that would certainly be reason to celebrate...were it not a companion of the Demon Lord.

"Listen to me, Blow. She is connected to the Demon Lord."

Just like that, Blow stops blushing and freezes in place.

"The Demon Lord? That damn witch is back?"

Tension rises in his body, as if the last few moments of eagerness never happened.

I cannot help but sigh again.

Clearly, his hostility toward the Demon Lord has not faded in the slightest.

"That's right. You probably don't know this, since you were traveling, but the great Demon Lord has returned."

At that, Blow clicks his tongue in vexation, looking at me in anticipation of the rest.

"Now that she is back, the authority to make all final decisions regarding demonkind has of course returned to her, as I was only serving in her stead."

For some time now, I have been working here in the Demon Lord's castle to govern all demons myself. But in the end, that was only a stopgap until the real Demon Lord returned.

Now that she is back, she will naturally take over all decision-making.

Though of course, I cannot simply dump all of it on her at once.

There is much work to be done in the process of handing over control.

"And you're okay with that, brother?" Blow looks dissatisfied.

"That is irrelevant. This is the Demon Lord's decision, and I simply abide by

her wishes.”

All demons must obey the demon lord.

That has always been the nature of our relationship.

But with this particular Demon Lord, that isn't the only reason I obey.

“No matter how unreasonable her demands, I cannot defy the Demon Lord. She is simply on a different plane of power.”

That is all there is to it.

Unreasonable as she might be, defying her would promise a terrible fate.

“Yeah, but still! Us demons don't have the resources to start a war right now!”

“And yet, we must. If that is what she commands, then we must abide by her ruling.”

One of the Demon Lord's policies involves a massive war against the humans.

In fact, that is essentially her only policy.

And it is also the reason why so many demons cannot accept her.

The demon race is currently suffering great poverty and strife due to the harmful aftereffects of a lengthy war with the humans.

Blow's statement that we lack the resources to start another war is entirely correct.

That the Demon Lord is disregarding this and trying to force a war anyway will inevitably cause many to resent her.

But we must obey her nonetheless, because the Demon Lord's power is absolute.

“Blow. Even if all demonkind was to band together and revolt against the Demon Lord, all that would await is certain destruction. With the Demon Lord's power, she could single-handedly destroy our entire race with ease. But that is not so with war against the humans. We will undoubtedly incur great losses, but there is still a chance for survival. Either we rebel against the Demon Lord and face certain doom or fight against the humans and thus hang on to hope. I have

chosen the only path that leaves some hope, nothing more or less. I will not ask you to accept it, but I at least want you to understand.”

In the face of my earnest plea, Blow snorts and turns the other way with a scowl.

He does understand, I am sure.

But his emotions cannot be swayed by logic.

I must admit that my own emotions are not entirely content, either.

I sigh and mutter half to myself. “Still, to think that you would fall in love with a woman who is connected to the Demon Lord, of all people...”

“Huh?! L-love?! That ain’t it, dammit!”

With that, the heavy mood of our conversation disperses all at once.

Blow’s flustered response is easy to read. Does he really think he’s fooling me with that attitude?

But the person he’s fallen for is quite dangerous even in her own right.

“Just to warn you, I believe it would be best if you gave up on her, you know.”

“I dunno what the hell you’re talking about!”

My brother’s loud response makes me only more concerned for his future.

Lady White, the woman who has caught Blow’s eye, is a friend of the Demon Lord’s.

That in itself is enough to make my head ache, but she herself is still a mystery to me in many ways, so I cannot say she is the ideal romantic prospect for my brother.

All the companions the Demon Lord brought with her are outside the realm of normal comprehension.

And among them, Lady White is by far the most enigmatic.

Though the others may be beyond normal comprehension, they are not beyond all understanding.

But Lady White alone is one I cannot understand.

At a glance, she looks like an ordinary human.

Although I suppose her looks are extraordinary enough that I can understand why Blow might fall in love with her at first sight.

But the old-timer has told me that from what he's seen of her day-to-day conduct, she does not seem like she would be especially powerful.

I met her in person only once, on the day of their arrival.

She was the only member of the Demon Lord's traveling party who didn't give off a powerful aura of strength.

I meet all kinds of people due to my position, so I can generally sense these things without using Appraisal.

In that respect, Lady White seemed no different from a normal human.

But my other senses told me otherwise.

That it is strange that she *wouldn't* be powerful.

My instincts judge that she is not, yet they also tell me that something about this conclusion is horribly wrong.

I have never experienced this before, which was enough to make me conclude that Lady White is the most unusual of all of them.

Perhaps even more so than the Demon Lord herself...

"Well, I did try to warn you. If you insist on pursuing her anyway, that is your decision."

"I'm telling ya, you got it all wrong!"

Blow's blusteringly obvious response elicits another long sigh from me.

I felt I should warn him, but it would be strange as his older brother to press the subject of his first love any further.

Besides, there is still the question of whether he'll be able to catch Lady White's eye at all.

There would be no point in trying to dissuade him further at this stage.

"Well, for now, just try not to do anything to make her hate you."

“R-right.”

For some reason, my half-hearted advice makes Blow’s eyes turn shifty.

Later on, I learned that my brother’s first love was likely doomed when the old-timer told me what had happened at the mansion.

They say first impressions are everything, and I cannot imagine that anyone would think highly of a man who set fire to their room.

Why would he do such a thing?!

Sigh.

I am busy enough dealing with the Demon Lord’s endless demands.

My younger brother’s foolish first love will have to wait.



ADMINISTRATOR GÜLIEDISTODIEZ

Has any human ever lived a life truly free of regrets?

To us gods, a human life passes in the blink of an eye.

But within that tiny instant, humans always end up regretting some of their choices, big or small.

If only I had done this; if only I had chosen that instead.

In these hypothetical scenarios, they imagine that they might have reached a better future if they had made different choices.

But these are all purely hypothetical.

One cannot change the past, no matter how much one thinks about it.

Yet, still, one cannot help wondering: Did I make the right choices?

Even in the short life span of a human.

And since I have lived far longer than any human, surely it would come as no surprise if I, too, was to agonize over my past choices.

Even if I know that no amount of worrying can change the past, even if I know that it's too late, I cannot help thinking about it.

I know that if I have time to waste fretting over the past, I should spend it doing everything I can in the present instead.

And yet, sometimes it all seems in vain.

Did I make the right choices?

I have no answer.

It is never possible to tell whether you're making the right choice in the

moment.

That realization comes only much later, when you look back on the past.

That is why we look back so often.

To question whether our past choices were correct.

Because while we are living in the present, we have no way of knowing whether our immediate choices are right or not.

If anyone out there knows, I wish they would tell me.

Even if I know that no one will respond, I cannot help but wish for an answer all the more.

Am I making the right choices?

“Are you certain that was for the best?”

Ice Dragon Nia asks me now.

I do not have the answer, of course. I never know whether I am making the right choices or not.

“If I had interfered, it would have only tarnished Reigar’s pride.”

Instead, I give a vague but plausible-sounding response.

“That’s true. It was a splendid death, fitting for the man known as the world’s strongest swordsman.”

It appears that my words were not off the mark.

In front of us lies the former sword-king Reigar.

A man who will never rise again.

I am the one who brought him to this place after he chose to abdicate the throne of sword-king.

I wanted to see what he would think of this place, after fighting on the front lines against the demons for so long.

I do not regret that now.

But I do wonder about letting him die in battle after he so longed to be away

from the battlefield.

Should I really have invited Reigar to this place?

Of course, I had no idea at the time that this would be the end result, so there is no point in wondering now.

I may be a god, but that doesn't mean I can see the future.

Perhaps a powerful one like D would be able to do so, but I certainly cannot.

If I could, I might not have to agonize so over my past choices.

Although I might instead have to worry all the more about which future would be best.

If I had been able to see this future when I spoke to Reigar back then, what would I have done?

...I do not know.

In the end, whether one can see the future or not, I suppose the only option is to make your choice as best you can.

And this time, my choice has killed Reigar.

Reigar himself is the one who chose to challenge that reincarnation, and Reigar chose to keep fighting him until his death.

Those choices have nothing to do with me.

But still, I find myself thinking that if I had not brought him here, then this wouldn't have happened.

How prideful of me.

To assume that my choices determine the outcome of everything is to discard Reigar's own will and the decisions he made.

Prideful is the only way to describe this kind of thinking.

The more I contemplate that, the harder it becomes to make a decision.

More and more, I am becoming a mere bystander, going along with the situation while refusing to make any choices.

Until recently, that was acceptable.

But now that D has begun to act, no doubt I, too, will have to make some kind of choice.

Even if D is limiting my options.

“Ah, he moves.”

Following Nia’s gaze, I see the reincarnation.

The oni reincarnation who defeated Reigar is starting to walk toward the village.

Thanks to the special skill that D gave the reincarnations, he has already recovered all the strength he exhausted in his long fight with Reigar.

That skill, “ $n\% I = W$,” has several peculiar effects.

All of them are measures to help the reincarnations survive in this world, but the mechanism that supplies them with energy stored by the system when they level up in order to recover their health, MP, and SP is particular proof of how much D favors the reincarnations.

Extracting energy from the system, which exists purely to store up energy... It’s an effect that goes against the very purpose of the system.

It may be only a small amount, but as one who has worked endlessly to save up more energy, I still find it shameful.

And even without that skill, the reincarnations are an anomaly in this world.

All their actions have a massive effect on this world, for better or worse.

A single one of those reincarnations has already succeeded in stirring up chaos among many of us who know this world’s secrets, including Ariel, Dustin, and myself.

Aside from that culprit White, the other reincarnations are still too young to cause major incidents, and many have already fallen into Potimas’s hands, so their effect is small as of now.

But slowly, some of the others besides White are starting to expand their influence.

And the prime example is none other than the oni reincarnation currently

standing close by.

“Now, what should I do...?”

The oni reincarnation’s gait is steady.

But whether his mind is clear is another question entirely.

He has the Wrath skill and has already gone mad because of it.

The Wrath skill: one of the Ruler skills that serves as a key to limited access to the system.

In the end, it is only a key, and so it can be used only by those who know the location of the keyhole and how to open the door in order to access the system.

But it is the only means by which a non-administrator resident of this world can make contact with the system, even if that is limited.

I cannot fathom why D created such skills, but I have no doubt that it was with some predicted outcome in mind.

But the Wrath skill in particular seems all but meaningless as a key.

Activating the Wrath skill greatly increases the user’s stats, but it also causes rage to overpower their rational mind.

In the end, it can turn the user into a mindless being that kills anything it comes across, as is currently happening to this oni reincarnation.

Once that happens, the user certainly cannot open the door.

A beast that lacks intelligence does not know how to use a key, after all.

But from what I’ve seen thus far, that oni seems to be slightly different from the previous Wrath users I have seen.

Throughout history, every holder of the Wrath skill, save for the first, has been reduced to a beast.

They could no longer even use weapons, simply rampaging with brute strength.

With the stat increase granted by Wrath, that alone is enough to be a serious threat.

But once reduced to this berserk state, they could no longer take full advantage of the skill's power.

In some cases, those who did not use Wrath could be even more dangerous.

By comparison, that oni reincarnation uses swords and was even flexible enough to adopt some of Reigar's techniques in the midst of battle.

He seems to have lost all power of reasoning, but he retains his own mind in some form.

Still, that doesn't necessarily change anything.

If I leave him alone, he will likely venture deeper into this territory in search of new prey.

Which is why I had Nia and the other ice dragons of the Mystic Mountains attempt to lead him away so that he would not reach this place, but...

"I suppose trying to obstruct him did not go well."

"I'm terribly sorry."

Nia apologizes, but this is not her fault.

"No need to apologize. That creature was clearly aiming straight for this area. I do not know whether he was simply fleeing from you or whether he came here because he sensed the presence of humans, but attempting to block his path without killing him was a fool's errand. In fact, I should apologize to you for giving such an impossible order. Especially considering the sacrifices that arose as a result."

Turning around, I look upon the corpses of many dragons and wyrms, all Nia's subordinates.

This happened because Nia alerted me of the situation, and I instructed her to stop his advance without killing him.

If they had simply killed the oni, the losses would have been far fewer.

Even some dragons were killed because of my warning not to kill the creature.

"No, you mustn't trouble yourself over that, my lord. We exist to serve you. I would not mind if every last one of us perished so long as you willed it."

Nia responds quite evenly.

The first dragons are very loyal.

Even the likes of Nia and Hyuvan, who might normally seem unreliable, carry out any task I give them with the utmost devotion.

Will I be able to live up to that loyalty?

Are they not loyal to me simply because I am the first and truest dragon?

I know that having such doubts is an insult to the loyalty with which they have served me for so many years, yet I still lack sufficient self-confidence.

I do not know if I am worthy of the faith they put in me even at the cost of their own lives.

Perhaps the earth dragon Gakia, who was once my most loyal servant even of all the dragons, challenged Ariel without my permission because he sensed that cowardly side of me.

Ariel placed her faith in White but was fighting against her at that time, all in an effort to break open the clogged-up floodgates of change.

And Gakia attempted to stop her, even abandoning his all-important duty as guardian of the Great Elroe Labyrinth Bottom Stratum in order to do so.

While I am impressed by his independence, I have complicated feelings about the fact that he did so knowing he would die.

Everyone is leaving me behind.

Soon enough, I fear that even Sarel will, too...

That thought alone causes an indescribable pain in my heart.

If that happens, then what have I been living for all this time?

I truly have no idea anymore.

But no. Now is not the time to be thinking of the future.

For now, I must decide how to deal with the oni reincarnation.

“It would be a simple matter to dispose of him. But I’m sure you do not want me to lay a hand on him directly, do you?”

“Of course not.”

I was mostly thinking out loud, and yet, a voice answers me.

A small, flat device has appeared before my eyes.

I am told it is a communication device from their world known as a “smartphone.”

However, the identity of this device is not what’s important right now.

What really matters is the person on the other end of the line.

“D.”

“Yes, hello, it’s me. The evil god D.”

Part of me did speak out loud, thinking there might be a response, but I didn’t expect D to actually contact me like this.

D is the creator of this world’s system and the only individual ranked above me.

It’s because of D that this world continues to exist.

And it’s also because of D that I can’t make any careless moves.

Which includes indiscriminately laying a hand on any reincarnation in any way.

That is why I ordered Nia and the other dragons only to slow the oni down and not to kill him.

Otherwise, I would have promptly disposed of him myself without taking any of these roundabout approaches.

“It seems like you’ve finally figured out my tastes. Excellent.”

D’s *tastes*? That is one way to put it.

D restricts my actions because it would not be amusing if I solve everything myself.

As she herself just said, it’s a simple matter of taste, with no deeper meaning.

Because it is more amusing this way, because it suits D’s tastes—that is why I am forced to watch what happens in this world without acting upon it.

I have the power to solve things, yet I have no choice but to sit by and watch without helping.

These are the games gods play.

While I worry over whether my actions are prideful, D couldn't care less and simply uses whatever means available to satisfy her own desires.

She puts herself first, no matter how many casualties might arise in the process.

In any other case, I could never allow such a person to exist.

But D has the power to get away with such actions, and on top of that, she is the one who found a path toward salvation for this world and extended its life when it was on the brink of destruction.

In thanks for her reaching out a hand to this world when it was fit to be discarded, I cannot starkly oppose her, even disregarding our respective positions as gods.

Besides, the outcomes of D's actions are not necessarily all negative.

She brought the anomalies known as reincarnations into our world and has frequently interfered with them since, but most of that is trivial on a global scale.

Even last time, when a weapon from a bygone era ran wild, things ultimately ended without any major harm being caused, even if it was a very close call.

In fact, I suspect that D may have even forbidden me from acting in order to force White to undergo deification.

White has certainly wrought a lot of chaos, but none of it has actually hindered the operation of the system.

In fact, the appearance of the reincarnations has brought about major waves of change in the world, including motivating Potimas to take action after withdrawing for so long.

I do not yet know whether these waves will inspire positive change or become the prelude to destruction, but the developments have not been entirely negative.

Which is exactly why I cannot defy D's will, even in the face of danger.

And yet, in this particular case, I feel that I must take some kind of action.

"I know that I cannot directly interfere. But what about Nia here?"

"Hmm."

D pauses for effect, as if considering my proposal.

In truth, knowing D, I'm sure she reached her conclusion instantly.

Perhaps this, too, is a performance for D's own enjoyment?

"I'll allow it, under one condition."

To my surprise, D actually consents.

I had assumed that she would undoubtedly reject any idea of mine out of hand.

"Subdue him without killing him. As long as you can do that, you don't need to hold back."

This condition seems simple enough but is actually quite difficult indeed.

Knocking him out without killing him will not be easy.

Killing him would be easy—she would simply need to strike him down with all her power.

But if she has to defeat him without killing him, she will have to hold back to ensure that he survives.

Especially when the opponent in question has the Wrath skill, which makes it all the more difficult to knock him out, as the user will generally fight to the death.

She cannot fight him half-heartedly, but she must be careful not to take his life.

It calls for a delicate balance, requiring the perfect amount of restraint, in spite of D's claim that she *doesn't need to hold back*.

But we have no choice but to accept these terms.

Limited though it may be, I have received permission to interfere.

“Nia.”

“Yes?”

“If you could.”

“Leave it to me.”

With a dependable response, Nia languidly takes to the air and flies toward the oni reincarnation.

The oni is scouring the village, but the inhabitants have all long since evacuated under Reigar’s orders.

Their dwellings and belongings still remain, but since the “n% I = W” skill has already restored his SP, he likely has no need for food.

By killing some of Nia’s dragons and wyrms, as well as Reigar, the oni has leveled up.

With each level gained, the “n% I = W” skill restored him, or else he might otherwise have run out of strength and collapsed by now.

Which means that attempting to buy time by sending those forces after him only resulted in making him stronger.

In that case, perhaps I should have had Nia slow him down from the beginning, but I doubt D would have allowed that.

It’s safe to assume that she’s given her permission now only because the oni has raised his level enough that he might just barely stand a chance of surviving Nia.

If he had gotten strong enough to actually fight on her level, then maybe D would have given permission for Nia to go all-out.

D seems to enjoy unpredictable battles between evenly matched forces much more than an overwhelming victory for one side.

Which means that even with this condition, Nia stands a good chance of winning.

“I’m counting on you, Nia.”

“And I’m looking forward to a good fight.”

In contrast to my serious thoughts, D sounds quite carefree.

I turn to look at the communication device, trying not to reveal my displeasure by glaring at it, but the object is no longer there.

Just as when it appeared, I did not sense its movement or presence in the slightest.

That alone is enough to plainly remind me of the difference in our ranks as gods.

It is because she is so much more powerful that I have no choice but to obey.

And even though the device has disappeared, if I was to attempt anything now, my life would still be forfeit in an instant.

Unreasonable though it may be, that is the reality of the situation.

All I can do is watch and trust in Nia.

We cannot allow the oni reincarnation to rampage across this land any further.

There are two reasons for this, both connected to the uniqueness of this particular land.

Or rather, I suppose, the uniqueness of its residents.

This region is known as the Valley of Convenience.

A peninsula that protrudes from the continent, it is bordered by the Mystic Mountains, separating it from the inland territories.

The only way to reach this land is by traversing the Mystic Mountains or crossing the ocean.

But since the mountains are guarded by Nia and the other ice dragons, and the ocean guarded by the water dragons, it is virtually impossible to get here.

The only people who live in this isolated area are those who I bring here myself.

They are all people whose souls are reaching the end of their life span.

The system exploits the souls of those who live in this world, sapping their

energy.

That in itself is inevitable. It is, in part, atonement for the sins the people of this world committed, after all, and a necessary sacrifice to extend the life of said world that was on the brink of destruction.

But there was a miscalculation: Because of that exploitation, some people's souls began to reach their limits.

Perhaps D did not anticipate that restoring the world would take this long.

If the soul reaches its limits, all that awaits is destruction of the soul itself.

A nothingness that is a fate beyond death.

If that happens, then the soul can no longer be reincarnated.

In order to avoid that fate, the people whose souls have deteriorated too severely are sheltered here under my protection.

There are no monsters in this place.

It is because of the easily identifiable enemy known as monsters that people hone their skills to grow stronger.

But for the soul, skills are a heavy load.

The only way to guide souls to peace is to avoid acquiring or using skills as much as possible and live a peaceful life.

Most of the people here have only the bare minimum of skills.

Reigar, on the other hand, had far too many skills, so in his case, his soul deteriorated far too rapidly.

Because he developed a distaste for fighting, however, he was able to live his remaining years in peace, thus preventing any more strengthening of his skills and saving his soul from deteriorating any further.

It is not a fundamental solution, only a way of extending the soul's life span somewhat, but it is certainly better than doing nothing at all.

Since all the people here have been gathered for that purpose, I cannot allow them to be killed by the oni.

If they die, they will reincarnate.

And in this world, once they are reincarnated, they will begin to put a load upon their souls.

This is the first reason that I must stop the oni reincarnation here.

The second reason is more of a personal wish.

I simply do not want to let this place be spoiled.

The people who live here are all individuals whose souls have severely decayed—humans and demons alike.

These two races, normally thought to be fated enemies, live here together in peace.

There are no monsters and no fights between people.

It is a miniature paradise, isolated from the outside world.

This paradise is the ideal world that Sariel once wished for.

And here in this place, that ideal is a reality.

Even if it is a temporary paradise, possible only because of my own maneuvering.

I know that the people here are able to live in peace only because they are aware that to do otherwise would be dangerous to their own souls.

But transient though it may be, this place is still a small realization of Sariel's goal.

And I do not want it to be destroyed.

A terribly personal, foolish reason, to be sure.

But a part of me refuses to yield precisely because of that.

Perhaps I, too, am a prideful god who cares for my own wishes, if not to the same extent as D.

As that thought causes me to sink into a light spell of self-loathing, I oversee Nia's battle.



ARRIVAL IN HEAVEN

Sleep, wake up, eat, make thread, eat, laze around, sleep.

Is this place heaven?

'Cause it's everything I ever wanted!

"And what exactly have you been up to while I've been studying my fangs off?"

Ah. Vampy has come, a vein bulging on her forehead, to ruin my perfect paradise.

"Why don't you study etiquette and such with me, since you clearly have nothing better to do?"

Vampy smiles as she forcibly drags me out of the room.

Nooo!

I don't wanna go to school!

This is kinda sad, though. I'm not even strong enough to pull myself away from Vampy anymore.

Grrr! Will the loss of my stats ever stop ruining my life?!

Thus, I am forced to go along with Vampy.

By the way, if you're wondering why the baby bloodsucker was able to enter my room in the first place, it's because right after that hooligan attacked my room, she came and attacked me, too.

Yeah, I said it. She didn't comfort me. She attacked me.

Sure, she came running when she heard the commotion, but her first

response was to smile like an evil executive and say, “Oh, good. Now I can come in.”

Then she barged right into my room as if she’d been waiting for this moment, stared me down, and told me, “I hope you’ve learned your lesson. Don’t you dare block that door again.”

I guess this little girl wasn’t too happy about us holing up in my room.

I have to obey her, or she’ll kill me!

Riel and Fiel apparently feel the same way, since they’re clinging to my arms and trembling.

A little girl who paralyzes the other little girls with fear.

Talk about terrifying...

Wait, aren’t Riel and Fiel stronger than Vampy?!

Why are YOU guys scared?!

But in that moment, our terror made us give in to Vampy’s threat.

Dammit! This wasn’t supposed to happen!

And now that our room is open to visitors, Vampy has started coming to attack us whenever she has a chance.

Yeah, I said it. Not visit. Attack.

If she comes in the morning while we’re making thread, she interrupts our work and gets in the way, and if she comes during our elegant afternoon teatime, she steals all our snacks and cakes.

Without her guardian, Mera, around, she’s becoming a tyrant!

And now it’s come to this: forcibly abducting me.

Even my famously gentle personality can’t take much more of this, y’know?

But I’m keeping that to myself.

I’m sure Vampy is lonely, too.

She’s been separated from her beloved emotional support, Mera, not to mention her mentor figure, the Demon Lord.

Our life together on the road was pretty lively, so I'm sure the stark contrast of life here has made her lonely, which is why she's lashing out like this.

Yep, that's gotta be it.

But don't worry. Your big sister here is super-kind and super-patient.

I can go along with a child's selfish whims just fine!

Man, I'm so damn nice.

And thus, my and Vampy's study-buddy adventure begins.

...Um, excuse me. Can I quit now? What? I can't?

C'moon! This suuuucks!

The regular lessons are one thing. The Demon Lord told us all kinds of things on the journey, and sometimes we read books and studied and stuff, so I understand most of what's going on.

But the etiquette seminar? That's no good!

What do you mean, the proper way to walk and eat and stuff?

Um, this is super-hard!

This must use different muscles from walking normally, 'cause I'm sore all over the place!

And for table manners, you have to be careful about all kinds of crap while you eat, so you can't even enjoy the food properly! I don't get to stuff myself to my heart's content like I used to!

If I'm not gonna get to eat that much during the day, I wanna at least savor the flavors while I eat, but now I can't even do that!

How do you ruin EATING?!

And then comes the horrible cherry on top—dance lessons!

Do I look like I can handle this level of intense exercise?

Are you *trying* to kill me?!

So by the time Vampy drags me back to my room, I'm a shell of my former self.

If I had to do combat training and stuff on top of that, I might seriously die.

Luckily, Vampy's private tutor gives up on me before the combat stuff gets too far.

I wonder if I can convince the other teachers to give up on me, too?

Especially for the manners seminars.

By the way! If you ask me, manners are definitely what Vampy needs the most.

Like me, Vampy has learned a lot of stuff from the Demon Lord already, so she does all right with regular lessons, too.

There's also the matter of our bonus knowledge from our prior lives, which means Vampy's brain is leaps and bounds ahead of the other kiddos her age.

The teacher was even raving that she's a child prodigy.

But etiquette? Not so much.

We obviously never had to learn fancy-pants manners in our old world, and the Demon Lord never bothered teaching us, since she's not technically a noble, either.

Mera occasionally gave the baby bloodsucker simple lectures about it when he had the time, but that wasn't super-in-depth. If anything, that vampire duo was always more focused on combat training than etiquette.

Talk about violent.

So Vampy's manners are age appropriate, or maybe even a little higher.

Noble kids get etiquette drilled into them from birth, I guess. Is that scary or what?

Although I think it's impressive that Vampy's manners are almost as good as the real noble kids who grew up with this stuff.

Me?

Well, I already look like I'm high school age!

The etiquette teacher took one look at me and said "Oh, dear me!" all right?!

She must've been thinking that it would be a treat to teach a student who somehow hasn't learned manners at this age!

Um, 'scuse me? I know I don't look it, but I'm about the same age as Vampy, y'know?

Don't let my appearance fool you.

I'm just a cute little girl!

So go a little easier on me, please, and thank you.

But on top of these horrible daily etiquette lessons that leave me sore to the bone, there are two other things that have been driving me up the wall.

One is that I'm not getting anywhere with my efforts to restore my power.

The other... Well, I guess it's a person, not a thing.

"Yo."

"Go away."

It's our old pal Hooligan, who gets a cold reception from Vampy every time he arrives.

Yeah, that's right.

For some reason, this stupid pyromaniac who I thought I'd never have to see again has been showing up all the damn time.

Uh, Mr. Head Butler?

Didn't you say you wouldn't let this guy near me again?

But getting mad at the head butler would be barking up the wrong tree.

This damn hooligan is craftier than he looks, 'cause he's been making a point of showing up only whenever the head butler's not around.

Since the head butler serves the head of the house, Balto, he has to go to the Demon Lord's castle from time to time.

Between being Balto's assistant and running this place, the head butler is extremely busy.

Hooligan takes advantage of that to come attack when we're unprotected.

The rest of the staff doesn't seem to be able to stop him, since he's the master of the house's little brother and all, so the maids end up bringing him here with apologetic looks on their faces.

See, this is exactly why you can't give problem children any authority!

"Beat it. Brats should mind their own damn business."

"Then perhaps you should mind your own business, too. Since you clearly have the mind of a *brat* yourself."

A cold breeze blows through the room out of nowhere.

And I don't mean metaphorically. There's seriously wind blowing in this room.

The magic power seeping out of Vampy and Hooligan, who have Ice and Fire attributes respectively, clash against each other and form wind because of the drastic temperature difference.

Since it's so cold, that means Vampy's power is probably beating Hooligan's. Cool.

By the way, it's freezing in here, so could you cut it out?

Why has my precious teatime turned into a battlefield?

I don't get it. I just don't get it...

Well, if you don't understand something, best to just leave it alone, right?

With that in mind, I sip my tea, which has gotten a little cold thanks to the freezing air.

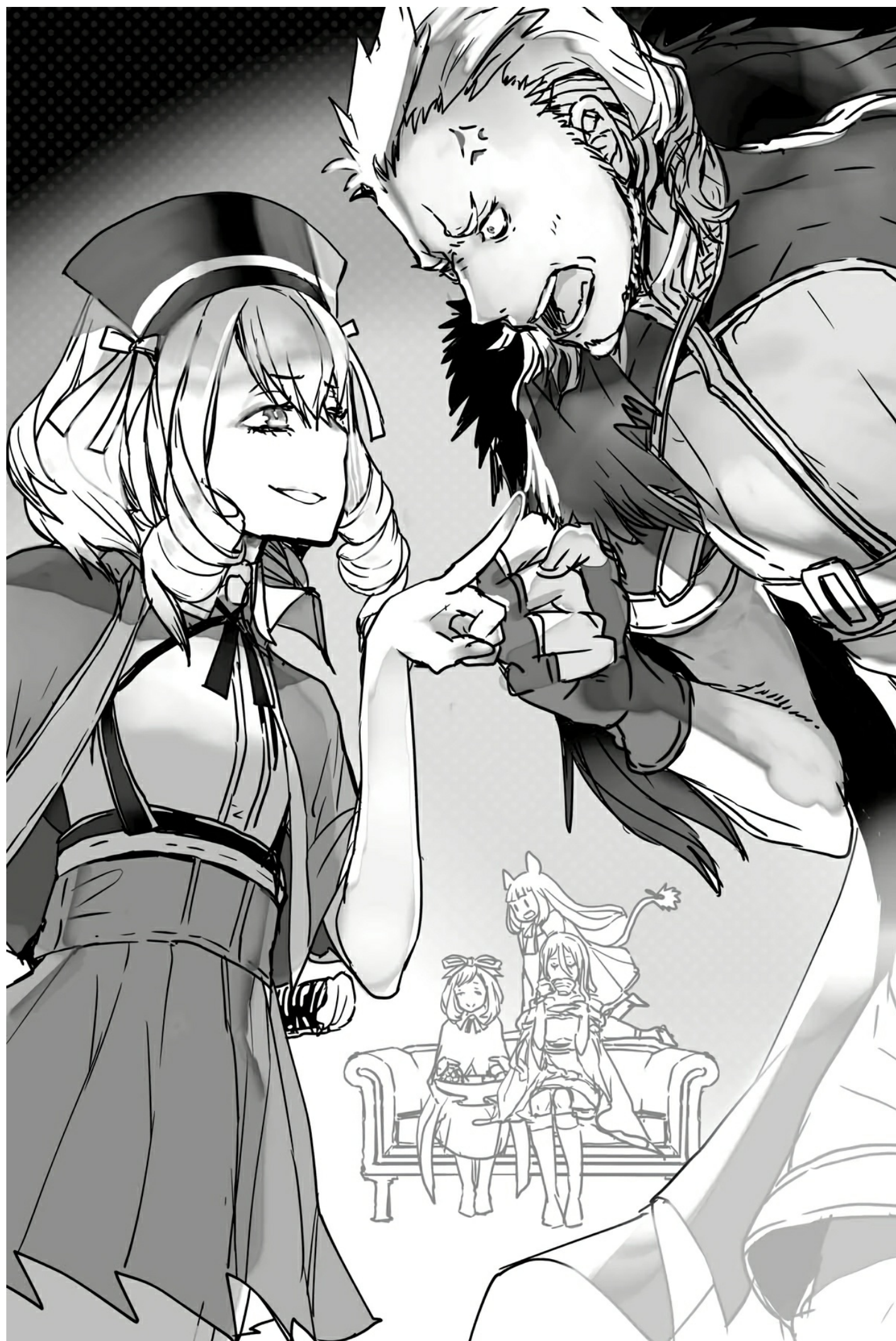
Riel and Fiel stuff their faces with tea cakes, ignoring Hooligan completely.

These guys are supposed to be my bodyguards, but Hooligan barges in so damn often that they don't even pay him any attention anymore.

Thanks a lot, guys.

And you, Hooligan. How does it feel to be glaring daggers at a little girl like Vampy?

She definitely seems to hate his guts.



But from a neutral perspective, the sight of this tough guy and a tiny girl staring each other down is pretty surreal.

Uh-oh. Now they're cursing each other out?

I'll leave the contents of their insults to your imagination.

Although frankly, it's only because they're being so juvenile, it doesn't seem worth relaying the details to you.

I guess they say fights break out only between people of around the same level...

"Sael." Getting heated, Vampy snaps Sael's name.

Sael, who's been sitting frozen with her cup in hand, stands up immediately.

Okay, stop! Time-out!

I order Sael to sit back down by way of a hand gesture.

Obediently, she sits back down.

Whew.

Listen, Vampy. I don't care how worked up you are; you can't use Sael for this.

She doesn't understand jokes, okay?

If you tell her to attack, she really will kill him on the spot.

Whatever insane orders you give her in the heat of the moment, Sael will act on them no matter what.

This is a handle-with-care warning, all right? You have to be super-careful when you give Sael orders or else!

...And no, I'm not secretly thinking that it wouldn't be so bad if she really did kill Hooligan, since he's super-annoying.

There is no part of me that thinks I could totally blame it on Vampy if it happened like that.

Nope. Not even a little.

"Seriously, what did you even come here for?! Just leave already!"

“Shut up, dammit! I ain’t here to talk to you, that’s for sure! Besides, this is my damn house!”

Ahhh, so peaceful.

Looking away from Vampy and Hooligan, I take a bite of a cake.

“And, you! Quit ignoring me, dammit!”

Geh! Now he’s turning on me?!

I don’t wanna deal with that, so I’ll just stare off into next week and pretend not to hear him.

“Pffft! She doesn’t even want to look at your face, you see? How sad.”

“Urgh!”

Vampy grins triumphantly, which just makes Hooligan even angrier.

Why would Vampy be triumphant about that anyway?

More importantly, can’t Hooligan just go away already?

Seriously, he’s such a pain.

“I just came today to drop this crap off! See ya!”

Hooligan practically slams some kind of bottle down on the table, then stomps away.

I guess he finally picked up on the fact that I really don’t want him here.

If he knows that, I wish he’d stop getting into it with Vampy every time.

Or more importantly, just don’t come here at all.

Unlike my private irritation, Vampy watches him go and huffs loudly.

Honestly, I wish you would stop picking fights with him, too.

It’s cold, literally.

“What is this anyway? Hmm? Liquor?”

Vampy’s attention quickly shifts from Hooligan to the bottle he left on the table. She picks it up and squints at it suspiciously.

“Doesn’t seem to be poisoned. It’s just regular liquor.”

She must have investigated with Appraisal.

Why liquor, though?

C'mon, Hooligan, my dude. What kind of gift for a lady is that?

Oh, maybe it's because my pal the Demon Lord is probably boozing it up all the time in the Demon Lord's castle?

Well, I don't know if that's true. But why else would he pick liquor as a gift?

He wouldn't...right?

An alcoholic might be happy about a gift like this, but I'm a healthy, wholesome child.

I'm healthy, okay? I just have a teeny bit of a weak constitution.

Well, I guess this probably just means that Hooligan is running out of gift ideas.

At first, he brought bouquets of flowers.

Although Vampy froze those in ice and smashed them on the floor right away.

He's brought a bunch of different presents after that, but it seems like all his research has led him to conclude that food and drink are our favorites.

I mean, he's not wrong.

Although I still think liquor is kind of a weird move.

"...Maybe just a little."

For some reason, Vampy takes the lid off the bottle and sniffs the contents.

"Oof!"

That alone is enough to send her reeling.

Ah, right. Vampy really can't handle her liquor.

During our travels, the Demon Lord bought alcohol by the barrel and drank it on the regular.

We joined her sometimes, but Vampy wasn't allowed to drink, since she was an infant and all.

Although she still stole a few sips on occasion when the Demon Lord was distracted.

But whenever she did manage to drink, she always passed out immediately.

I guess being extremely weak to alcohol might be in her genes.

According to Mera, Vampy's mom also fell asleep whenever she had even the smallest amount of alcohol, so she must have passed that down to her kid.

Judging by Vampy's current reaction, she can't even smell it safely.

Talk about wimpy.

Evidently realizing she can't drink it, Vampy looks dissatisfied as she puts it back on the table.

...Hmmmm.

Come to think of it, I guess I haven't had any alcohol since my deification.

When I was an arachne, I used to drink along with the Demon Lord from time to time, but after the deification stuff happened, she forbade me from drinking because of my feeble state.

I believe she said something like, *"Yeah, no, I don't think White should drink anymore."*

And yeah, I guess she wasn't wrong.

The only reason I was able to handle my liquor so well as an arachne is because I had those stats and resistance skills and stuff.

Without all that, my body is super-weak and unprotected.

So it makes sense to conclude that I shouldn't be drinking in a state like that.

To be honest, even I'm sure that drinking now would totally make me sick!

But wait!

Doesn't that mean I should rise to the challenge?!

If I live my life in fear forever, how will I ever move forward?!

Now is the time to take the first step!

In other words, what I'm saying is that I wanna drink alcohol again.

It's human nature to want to try something when you're told that you can't. Although I'm a spider, not a human.

My memories around drinking are kinda vague for some reason, but I do remember being pretty happy when I did it.

And since the Demon Lord isn't around to keep an eye on me, this is the perfect chance to recapture that happiness buried deep in memories past, right?

So c'mon—let's give it a try!

Since I've finished the tea in my cup, I pour some liquor into it instead.

"You're going to drink it? Take it slow, all right?"

Vampy stares at me reproachfully.

Those puppy-dog eyes aren't going to stop me, little girl!

Fortunately, it appears that Riel and Fiel aren't going to try, either.

In fact, they're holding out their cups like they're waiting for their turn.

All right, then. You guys can be my accomplices.

Yesss, come to the dark side. Heh-heh-heh.

I pour some liquor into Riel's and Fiel's cups.

Sael's, too, although I don't know if she's actually gonna drink it.

The liquid in our cups looks like a dark red wine.

The aroma is definitely pretty strong, too.

Oh yeah. You could almost get drunk off the smell alone.

If you're going to give a woman alcohol, shouldn't you at least pick something a little more drinkable?

That stupid Hooligan just doesn't get it.

Well, whatever. Bottoms up!

We clink our cups together, then gulp them down.

Whew! That's strong!

The taste and the alcohol content are both crazy intense!

Is it just me, or is this stuff meant for fancy connoisseurs?

My throat feels kinda weird, and my head is all spinny, and... Huh?

Hrmmm? Why's Vampy moving back and forth like a metronome?

Huh?

Now THAT's weird.

When did Vampy learn how to make the entire world wobble around like that?

I didn't even know that skill existed.

To cause a natural disaster like this, it must be some kinda super-advanced earth magic or something!

"Stooop! Quit shaking it! You're gonna break the world!"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Waaaah! Stop iiiit!"

"What do you mean?! H-hey, are you all right?"

Obviously not! That's why I'm telling you to stop!

I guess I have no choice but to stop you myself!

Hiyah!

"...?! I don't know what's going on, but this seems dangerous! Sael!"

For some reason, Sael comes flying at me.

I must admit, it's impressive that she can move so freely in this wobbly space.

But no! I won't let a tackle like that stop me!

Repulsion, activate!

"Huh?!"

My Repellent Evil Eye power blows Sael away as she tries to leap toward me.

At the same time, I stretch out my hands toward Riel and Fiel, who have been trying to sneak up on me from either side.

Eat my Black Wave Motion Gun!

Waves of darkness pulse out of my hands, slamming Riel and Fiel into the walls.

Bwa-ha-ha!

You're a hundred years too early to defeat me!

Now that the three puppet spiders are incapacitated, I tie them up in thread and hang them upside down from the ceiling.

While I'm at it, let's get Vampy up there, too, since this is all her fault in the first place!

"What the—?!"

Vampy dangles upside down in midair, her skirt flipped all the way upward.

She's trying to hold it in place, but I can totally see her cutesy undies.

"Put me down! Put me down!"

Bwa-ha-ha!

Don't even bother trying to freeze my thread with your magic.

My Antimagic Evil Eye will mess up your power before you can make a single spell.

So why hasn't the world stopped wobbling yet?

I can't believe she just casually used a spell so powerful that it doesn't stop even if the caster is incapacitated!

"Stay up there for a while and think about what you've done!" I yell.

"What do you mean?! Why are you doing this to me?!"

Vampy's shrieks of despair are music to my ears.

Something about her teary-eyed expression puts a grin on my face.

I kinda want to make her cry some more.

So I spin some thread around into a little feather-like shape.

“Huh? Wait! What are you going to do with that?! Stop! Nooo!”

Aaaand up the nose it goes.

“Eep! A-a-achoo! Achoo! Waaah...”

Okay, now it’s tickling time.

Coochie coochie coo.

“Eeeeeek! Nooooooo!”

Ah-ha-ha-ha-haaaa!

...Oof.

Ouch. Uuurgh...

Good morning.

Hoo, boy, my head hurts.

Water...

I make some thread to pull the pitcher of water over to my hand.

Ah, I don’t have a cup.

Oh well.

I pour some water out of the pitcher, then manipulate it in midair to carry it to my mouth.

Whew. Muuuch better.

...Huh?

Hmm? Hmm? HMMMM?!

Excuse me?! What did I just do?!

I pulled the pitcher over with thread and moved water around in midair?

I try to do it again but then realize there’s no more water in the pitcher.

But that’s not important right now.

I turn my hand over.

As I stare into my palm, I can see what I've been trying to see all this time but couldn't until now: the movement of energy.

I manipulate it and form a rune.

Like the kind my magic skills used to make.

Once it's fully formed, the rune summons a ball of darkness, just like I pictured.

A floating mass of energy, around the size of a tennis ball.

I close my hand and crush it in my fingers.

A tiny explosion occurs inside my clenched fist.

But when I open my hand again, there's not a single scratch.

Because I enhanced my defensive power and guarded against it.

"I'm back."

Without thinking, I mutter aloud.

I'm finally back.

I don't know what caused it exactly, but I can finally use my powers again!

I don't think I can do things as freely as I was able to at the height of my power, but it's still a whole lot better than not being able to do anything at all.

Aaaaah! I did it!

Woo-hoo! Woo-hoo-hoooo!

I'm back! I'm baaaack!

I can feel it. I can feel the energy overflowing inside me!

And I can see it. I can use my Evil Eyes again, and I can see what I wasn't able to...see...before?

As I'm doing all this seeing, I notice the unconscious bodies all around me.

Vampy is hanging upside down with a very unladylike expression, and Sael, Riel, and Fiel are dangling from the ceiling, too.

Huh? What the heck are you guys doing up there?



Interlude THE VAMPIRE PRINCESS'S MIDNIGHT

LESSON

“Aaaaargh! It just doesn’t make sense!”

I scream into my pillow in my guest room.

That alone isn’t enough to cure my irritation, so I grab the pillow and start smacking it violently against the bed.

“Why was it so impossible to fight back against her?! She was drunk! *Drunk!*”

As I continue to smack the pillow, the cloth tears open, sending the feathers inside scattering through the air.

Finding them annoying as they swirl around the room, I freeze all of them in an instant and shatter them to tiny pieces.

That’s become easy for me after all the sleepless nights I’ve spent training.

Ever since I lost to that horrid oni in the Mystic Mountains, I’ve been training in secret late at night. I haven’t been able to do anything too big lest I wake anyone, but thanks to that, I’ve gotten very good at precise manipulation.

At this point, my control is such that I can use even a fairly powerful spell indoors without causing any damage to the room around me.

It might not be flashy, but I definitely feel like I’ve been steadily gaining strength.

So why?!

I couldn’t even lay a hand on that lush!

Literally! She tied up my arms and legs with that damn thread!

It doesn't make sense!

I mean, yes, White has always been incredibly powerful, so it makes sense that she'd be stronger than I am if she got her powers back. I know that, all right?

But how could she get her powers back by going on a drunken rampage like that?!

It could've at least been something a little more dramatic!

Like when she managed to produce thread again to save me when my life was in danger—now *that* was a pretty good scenario!

I was actually a little moved by that, you know?!

Give me those feelings back!

Whew.

The glittering particles of ice on the floor are rather pretty in their own way, I suppose.

I feel a bit calmer now.

Sael looks flustered in her corner of the room, but that's her default state of being, so I'll just ignore her.

As difficult as it is to swallow, I have to recognize that this is the reality of things.

I should be happy that White got her powers back.

If she stayed that frail forever, she wouldn't be able to defend herself. And we don't know when the elves might attack, so it's best for all of us if she has power.

But if she's back to her full strength, that puts me lower on the power hierarchy again.

She's already proven that I'm powerless against her.

Remembering the ungainly way she hung me upside down and tormented me, I feel my face flush with humiliation and anger.

Aaargh!

What in the world is that thread made out of anyway?!

Why wouldn't it budge or freeze no matter what I did to it?! It's unbelievable!

I'm actually pretty strong myself, you know.

Of all the private combat instructors who work in the mansion, not one of them is stronger than I am.

And these are employees of a high-ranking royal demon family, so surely they're exceptional even for their race.

Frankly, they were so weak that they couldn't teach me a thing.

From a normal perspective, that means I'm quite strong, doesn't it?

So why couldn't I lay a finger on her?!

During our journey, I was never once able to beat Ael in a mock battle, either.

If I couldn't beat Ael, that probably means I can't beat Sael, Riel, or Fiel, either, doesn't it?

And of course, Miss Ariel goes without saying.

But now I couldn't even defend myself against White?

Why am I surrounded by such freakishly strong people?

I started to suspect this while we were traveling, but now I'm sure: It's not that I'm weak; it's just that the people around me are way too strong.

So it's not my fault I can never beat them!

Even if it is frustrating to lose all the time!

Is it just me, or have I spent my whole life losing?

I lost against that oni last time, too.

Aaaah! Just thinking about it again makes me so angry!

Next time I see him, I'm going to beat him to a pulp!

That's right. I'm not weak at all.

It's just bad luck that I'm never able to win in spite of that.

My specs are definitely high, so if I just keep honing myself like I have been, then I should get stronger. Maybe I'll start spending more time raising my skills, too.

...But is that really going to be good enough?

Not to brag, but I think I've been training quite intently all this time.

And yet, I still wasn't able to beat White.

If I keep going at this rate, I don't see how that's going to change.

I need some kind of weapon.

Next time I fight that oni, I do think I can win.

I was at a major disadvantage because I didn't have my weapon last time.

I glance over at my personal weapon, which I keep in my room: a huge broadsword that's currently taller than I am.

Miss Ariel picked it up at a secret auction, among other fine items.

I fell in love with it at first sight, and she agreed to give it to me as my personal weapon.

It's a sword made from the claw of a legendary-class monster, Fenrir. I'm sure it could fend off any attacks from that oni's katana.

I was able to hold my own pretty well against him even without a weapon, and I've gotten even stronger since then.

There's no reason I would lose.

But if I just stop there, then I'll never get anywhere.

For now, my present goal will be winning against Ael.

My stats should catch up to hers soon enough, and if I train the skills I already have, I think they'll serve me quite well.

From there, I can see myself attaining perfection.

Close combat with my broadsword, long-distance attacks with water and ice, plus some special tricks with my vampire abilities.

If I combine a solid magic-knight style with my vampire abilities like Kin

Summoning and Mist Form, I honestly think I could become quite a troublesome opponent, especially when encountering someone for the first time.

See? I am strong after all, no?

And yet, even if I was to achieve that perfect form, I seriously doubt I could beat White or Miss Ariel. Even against Ael, I think it would be a narrow victory.

It's hopeless.

Utterly hopeless.

Yes, I definitely need more weapons.

I think I already have quite a few good cards in my hand, but I can't just settle for that.

Appraising myself, I take a look over my skill list.

Are there any skills I could acquire that would synergize well with my fighting style?

Pacing around the room, I go back and forth between the list of my skills and of skills I haven't acquired over and over.

Fortunately, I still have plenty of skill points.

White's brutal training method prioritized acquiring skills naturally through training instead of spending skill points.

If I wanted to, I could acquire tons of skills all at once.

But a bunch of level-1 skills won't help me in the least.

Perhaps they would expand my options, but considering the time it would take to level up all those new skills, most of them would probably go to waste.

And even if I did have that many, I might not be able to use them all to their fullest potential in battle. Even Miss Ariel says that she has plenty of skills that she barely ever uses.

So the best approach would be to find one or two skills that suit my style well and focus on those.

I already have just about every close combat–related skill that could help me with my broadsword.

And as far as magic goes, I’ve been working hard at Water and Ice Magic, since I’m best suited to those, and I have Dark Magic as a fallback, so I don’t think I need any others.

Which means the ideal addition would be something to strengthen my vampire abilities.

Hmm.

Nothing really jumps out at me, though.

The special abilities of vampires can be broken down into three broad categories: bloodsucking, blood control, and kin.

Bloodsucking, as the name implies, allows me to suck someone’s blood and receive various boons.

For example, I can sap the victim’s stats and skills and temporarily make them my own.

The ability to turn the victim into a vampire, which makes them subservient to me, falls into this category.

Fang-related skills, like Poison Fang and Paralyzing Fang, would probably be the best pairing for that.

But it would probably be more effective to pick up the superior versions of those, like Paralysis Attack and Poison Attack.

Besides, it’s not like I actually bite people in battle all that often.

I did bite the oni when I fought him, but that was only because I had no other weapons.

Blood control is the ability to manipulate my own blood.

It has various uses, like improving my healing abilities or producing blood bullets, spears, and so on just like Water Magic.

In recent training, I’ve learned that I can combine it with Water Magic to improve its maneuverability and ease of use. If I mix some of my own blood into

water produced by Water Magic, I can manipulate it completely freely.

I think I'll be able to use that even better than regular blood control.

Kin abilities allow me to summon familiar-like creatures, separate from those who become my kin when I suck their blood.

The summoned kin exist only for a temporary amount of time, and I can control them to my will.

True to the traditional image of vampires, the kin I can summon are creatures like bats and wolves.

I can also transform myself into the shape of these creatures.

Skills like Cooperation and Leadership might work well with these kin-related abilities, improving my use of these summons.

But there's one problem: Those summons are pretty weak.

On average, each one has stats around 1,000.

If I train some more, they'll probably get stronger, but I'd like them to be closer to the 10,000 range.

Since they're only around a tenth of that strength, I don't think improving my skills in that department would be very helpful.

Whenever I tried summoning them against Ael, she crushed them immediately. If they're fighting anything stronger than themselves, I don't know if they would even be able to serve as a diversion.

In that case, Kin Summoning isn't very cost-effective.

It might be useful against a weaker opponent to overwhelm them with numbers, but if it doesn't work on any really strong opponents, that's not terribly enticing.

Still, there can't be any harm in gaining skills like Cooperation and Leadership, so I suppose I'll keep them on the list of possibilities.

So if bloodsucking and kin control aren't all that useful, I suppose that means enhancing blood control is my best bet.

But what new skills would improve my blood control?

I already have any skills that would help with Water Magic, which works in tandem with blood control.

Hmm. Blood...blood...

The first thought that comes to mind is Merazophis's blood.

The sensation of biting into his neck and drinking up his blood.

Immediately, my face grows hot.

Oh dear. Now is not the time to be imagining that kind of thing.

Don't I have any other memories related to blood?

Then something hits me—and unlike that memory of Merazophis, it's far less pleasant.

Ah, I don't want to think about that.

I believe that was when I was young in my previous life.

It was an old movie I saw on TV, with blood-related imagery that left an intense impression on me.

The movie was part of a famous series, in which alien monsters attack humanity...creepy monsters covered in sticky liquid, with a second set of jaws inside their mouths.

My father in that life loved those movies and often rented them to watch at home.

I was very young when I saw them, so they were a bit traumatic for me.

The monsters were terrifying, and most of the human characters were brutally murdered by them.

That definitely wasn't anything a little kid should've been watching.

I don't remember the details of the story, but I definitely couldn't forget those creepy monsters, no matter how much I tried.

And there was one particular feature of those monsters that had to do with blood.

If I remember correctly, their blood was highly acidic.

I distinctly recall being on the verge of tears when a character finally defeated a monster, only to be mortally wounded by the spray of its blood.

Acidic blood.

I don't want to have anything in common with those awful creatures, but it wouldn't be a terrible way to increase my offensive power, would it?

In fact, it doesn't even need to be blood. I specialize in Water Magic, so couldn't I just make that water acidic somehow?

Sure enough, when I look over the list of skills I haven't acquired, I find the Acid Attack skill.

It's only a mere 100 points to acquire it, so I do so without hesitation.

While I'm at it, I pick up Acid Enhancement for another 100 points, too.

To test it out, I produce a sphere of water with Water Magic, add acid to it, and throw the remains of the pillow inside.

Bit by bit, the pillow slowly melts inside the sphere.

Well, I suppose that's about all you can expect from a level-1 skill.

It seems like it'll combine well enough with Water Magic, though.

That means I can enhance my attack power without having to change my usual battle style.

Not a bad purchase, if I do say so myself.

Hmmmm.

Well, now that I've upped my offense a bit, what can I do about defense?

I suppose my defense is already pretty high to begin with, though.

Thanks to the Undying Body skill I was born with, I can survive my HP being reduced to 0, albeit only once a day. Undying Body also enhances my resistances, and I've already acquired every resistance skill available.

I haven't reached the nullification stage for any of them yet, of course, but it takes long and tireless training to level up a resistance skill, so that's one thing I can't really rush along.

I still remember the early days when I thought it was crazy to deliberately hurt yourself for that purpose.

So I won't be able to enhance my defense right away.

Other than that, I already have just about every buff skill available, though I suppose I could still work on debuffs—skills that weaken the enemy's abilities.

I already have two debuff methods so far: Cursed Evil Eye and Paralyzing Evil Eye.

Cursed Evil Eye lowers the stats and reduces the HP, MP, and SP of any target within view.

And as the name implies, Paralyzing Evil Eye paralyzes the target.

The Evil Eye skills are said to be quite rare, available only to certain races or those with a gift for that kind of technique. Merazophis and I can acquire them because we're vampires.

I'm told that White once had many advanced versions of the Evil Eye skills, which have even more powerful effects, but evidently she couldn't use them without Perseverance, one of the Seven Heavenly Virtues skills.

But even if the limited Evil Eye skills I could acquire are inferior versions, they're still quite powerful.

However, each eye can use only one Evil Eye skill at a time, so since I already have two different kinds, acquiring more wouldn't do me much good.

Although if I really wanted to strengthen them, I could always sink a bunch of skill points into the Evil Eye skills I already have.

In addition to acquiring new ones, skill points can also be used to raise the skill level of skills you already have.

However, since you can raise skill levels with training, it does seem like a bit of a waste.

Besides, if I was going to raise a skill level like that, I'd rather do it for a different skill.

I glance at the skill in question.

Jealousy LV 9.

The lesser form of the Seven Deadly Sins skill Envy, it's already quite high-level.

Miss Ariel and White told me in no uncertain terms that I should never raise that skill's level.

The Seven Deadly Sins skills are powerful, but they also have negative effects on your mind, they said. Their advantages are great, but the disadvantages are great as well.

The way the Wrath skill reduced that oni to little more than a rampaging beast is proof enough of that.

If my Jealousy skill evolves into Envy, then I might go on a rampage, too, albeit in a different way than that oni.

That frightens me.

But at the same time, I can't help thinking...since it's already level 9, I'm sure it will evolve into Envy eventually, even if I try to leave it alone.

If it's going to happen anyway, shouldn't I just get it out of the way sooner?

The Seven Deadly Sins all seem to be extremely strong, and if I'm going to acquire it whether I like it or not, maybe I should just do it right now.

It's a tempting thought.

Thus far, I've been able to hold myself back, constantly reminding myself that I mustn't do such a thing.

But now, the memory of being tormented by White overcomes that self-restraint.

<Proficiency has reached the required level.

Skill [Jealousy LV 9] has become [Jealousy LV 10].> <Condition satisfied.

Skill [Jealousy LV 10] has evolved into skill [Envy].> <Proficiency has reached the required level.

Acquired skill [Taboo LV 1].>

<Proficiency has reached the required level.

Skill [Taboo LV 1] has become [Taboo LV 2].> <Condition satisfied.

Acquired title [Ruler of Envy].>

<Acquired skills [Divine Scales LV 10] [Root of Evil] as a result of Title [Ruler of Envy].>

Hmm? How very strange.

For some reason, I've lost some skill points, and my Jealousy skill turned into Envy.

Oh dear. I suppose these things do happen.

...All right, I did it.

No, it's not like that! It was just a little whim, that's all!

I wonder what White and Miss Ariel would do if they knew I disobeyed their instructions...

No, it'll be fine.

Right now, I'm the only one who knows.

Then I remember that there's someone else in the room.

Whirling around, I see Sael still crouching in the corner, staring at me with a curious expression.

I-it's fine.

Sael doesn't know that I just acquired a skill, I'm sure.

It's fine. It'll be fine!

I don't feel any of the mind-corrupting effects just yet that Miss Ariel mentioned.

It might be the sort of thing that happens over time without one noticing, but as long as I don't overuse the Envy skill, I imagine nothing too terrible will happen.

The effect of Jealousy is to disable a target's skills.

And it can't be blocked by resistance skills, either.

In other words, if I use Envy, I can make it so that my opponent can't use their skills.

Jealousy did the same thing, but now it can't be resisted, and the limit on how many skills I can disable appears to have been lifted.

Yes, this could definitely be a good trump card against that oni.

Its only really threatening skill was Wrath, so if I disable that skill, I'll be able to win for sure.

Besides, by gaining the Ruler of Envy title, I've gained two more skills, and my stats have even increased a bit.

It doesn't look like I can activate the Root of Evil skill, but the Divine Scales skill is amazing!

When I try it out, it produces peculiar scales over my skin.

They're incredibly hard to the touch.

And on top of enhancing my pure defensive skill, they even dampen the effects of magic.

Now my physical and magical defense have both gone up at once.

Acid Attack for offense.

Divine Scales for defense.

Envy for debuffing.

They've all improved at once.

Heh-heh. Yes. This is perfect!

Now I can win!

The perfect form I imagined has become even more incredible in one fell swoop!

If I just keep training without resting on my laurels, perhaps I'll be able to beat Ael sooner than I expected!

Heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh!

Just you wait!

For now, I'll start by raising my Acid Attack skill level.

And I'll try to keep the fact that I've acquired Envy a secret, if at all possible.

I'm sure I still can't beat Miss Ariel or White, after all.

As I cackle to myself in the dead of night, Sael seems to look on in silence.



ARRIVAL AT THE GREAT ELROE LABYRINTH

Ever since the upside-down-girls incident, Vampy has been in a very bad mood.

Well, I guess I can't blame her. She gave me the whole story, and apparently, I caused that whole debacle while I was drunk.

She tried to calm me down when I went on a drunken rampage, and instead I went wild. If I were her, I'd get mad, too.

But I don't know why that means she has to invade my room every chance she gets.

Even now, while I'm testing out my abilities, she's sitting there having a tea party with Sael and company. Plus, since Vampy is the only one of them who talks, that means their little tea parties consist of sipping tea in silence and watching something.

Normally, their entertainment is Fiel goofing around when she gets bored of the stuffy silence or Riel suddenly doing some bizarre activity.

Otherwise, they have to actually just sit there in boredom, or Vampy has to start talking by herself.

But now, they have the exciting new option of observing ME.

And that's exactly what they've been doing lately.

Four pairs of eyes stare at me expectantly, making it difficult to get anything done.

But I do feel guilty for putting them through the upside-down incident, so I can't be rude to them about it.

So I just try to ignore them as best I can while I test out my abilities.

My powers finally returned to me when I got drunk.

...Yeah, I know that sounds pretty terrible, but I have to ignore it.

While my powers are back, that doesn't mean I can use them exactly the same way I did before.

I still don't have skills or stats, after all.

What I'm doing now is basically just imitating those.

What exactly *are* skills and stats, you ask? Well, they're part of a crazy-huge act of conjuring called the "system."

Most phenomena in this world that defy the laws of physics are actually brought about using energy that works by entirely separate rules.

Artificially manipulating this energy is the basis of magic.

In a broader sense, that means that skills and stats are a kind of conjuring, too.

The giant act of conjuring known as the system supports humans so that they can easily harness said conjuring, in the forms of skills and stats.

When I underwent deification, I became exempt from the system, so I don't get the support of skills and stats anymore. That's why I wasn't able to use my powers.

After all, that requires sensing and manipulating the energy that forms the basis of all this, and I no longer have the Magic Power Perception or Magic Power Operation skills that used to do that for me.

You have to use energy for conjuring, but I wasn't able to see or feel that energy, never mind know how to manipulate it, so I wasn't getting anywhere.

But I was able to do it before, even if the skills were helping me.

I thought I might be able to get a sense for how I did that if only I had some kind of chance.

Although I never thought that "chance" would consist of getting drunk.

If drinking was all I needed to do to get my powers back, then why did I suffer so miserably for almost two years...?

Unreal.

Well, whatever. They're back now, so there's no point dwelling on the past.

Anyway, skills and stats support the residents of this world so that they can perform conjuring more easily.

So if I can use conjuring now, that means I should be able to do all the same things I did before, even without the support of skills...in theory, at least. In practice, it's not so easy.

It's like the difference between riding a bike with training wheels and a bike without them. Obviously, it's gonna be hard at first.

I have to control the whole thing myself, without the support of skills.

For some reason, I can produce thread without really thinking about it, but for everything else, I have to consciously produce the runes and such.

It's not like using a skill, where you know how to do it right off the bat.

I have to figure out what the system's support was doing when I used each skill and control that part myself.

I guess it's kinda like the difference between automatic and manual.

It's pretty hard, though.

I mean, I can sorta remember the runes and stuff for skills I used relatively often. But it's more like I remember the feeling of using them than the detailed steps.

I have to rely on vague feelings like, *I dunno, was it kinda like this?* which actually seems to work more often than not.

I guess it's sorta like muscle memory...or maybe soul memory?

Well, as long as I can use those, that's fine with me.

The problem is the stuff I can't use yet.

I don't remember the skills I didn't use as often, so it's been tough to get

them to work.

There are some skills that I constantly had on by default in order to raise their skill levels, but there's plenty more that I never did that with.

At the moment, I have no idea how to re-create about half of those lesser-used skills.

I do have a vague sense for most of them, so I think if I keep practicing, I'll be able to do it eventually.

But there are a few others that I can't seem to use at all.

The biggest example being magic.

I can use Dark and Spatial Magic without a problem, but the rest of them are tougher.

I know what you're thinking. *C'mon, conjuring and magic are basically the same, so what's the problem?*

But listen, those are totally different.

In fact, magic is just one small part of the giant conjuring known as the system.

D added some gamelike elements and fancy effects to give the impression of "magic."

It's sort of like an illusion, except it actually affects reality.

Sure, that magic produces fire or water or whatever, but it's not quite the same as the regular kind of fire or water.

It has some stupid extra parts like attributes and resistances, for one thing.

In fact, most of it is superfluous stuff, to the point where the rune producing the all-important fire, water, *etc.* is more like a bonus than anything...

Skills have attributes, and there are resistances that oppose them.

This is embedded in the gamelike system, which also creates affinities.

That's why runes are so unnecessarily complicated.

So, since I know only the runes produced by my old skills, I don't know which

parts of them are actually necessary for pure conjuring that's not related to the system.

When I try to reproduce those same runes, they're inevitably connected to the system—and since I'm cut off from the system, I can't activate them.

Since all magic has these stupid "attributes" attached, that means I can't use most of it.

That goes for non-magic skills that have attributes, too.

Like Jinx Evil Eye, for instance. It has the Curse attribute, and it directly attacks HP and MP and stuff, all of which are directly connected to the system.

If I want to re-create Jinx Evil Eye, it might be better just to build a new rune from scratch.

Not that I have the know-how to do that!

On the other hand, there are two kinds of skills I can use even though they have attributes: Dark and Rot.

But wait just a minute.

Okay, Dark is one thing.

I don't know why I can use something that's so obviously attribute-based, but it's useful, so I'm not gonna worry about that.

But what is Rot doing here?!

The Rot attribute was always a last resort among my many strategies.

Of course, when I did use it, it was very reliable.

But that's only if I could use it properly.

'Cause the Rot attribute is a total double-edged sword!

It's so damn strong that it causes recoil damage to the user. And that's when I had it under the control of skills thanks to the system!

What's going to happen if I use it without any of those restraints?

I'm so scared that I don't even dare test it out.

My giant scythe still seems to have that kind of attribute, so I thought maybe

I'd be able to use it all right, but that was a failure.

It started to activate without a problem, so I panicked and shut it off.

I still got a little recoil, since I stopped it so abruptly, but I'm sure it's nothing compared to what would happen if I actually activated it.

But warning bells were going off in my head so loudly in that moment that I'm not sure I would've survived. Letting it activate all the way wouldn't have led to anything good.

It'd be one thing if it misfired and I lost an arm or something, but in the worst-case scenario, I could've actually died.

That nasty evil god told me that I would've died from using it if I didn't have the resistance, and that was when I had skills.

Now that I don't have that safety net, I have no idea what'll happen.

So I'm going to be super-careful when it comes to the Rot attribute. Yeah.

And Rot's not the only thing I have to be careful about.

I was able to handle everything easily with the help of skills, but now I have to keep it under perfect control without any help.

I've got to handle everything with care, not just Rot, or I could easily make something misfire at any moment.

So I'm keeping my practice relatively simple, not to mention sticking to stuff that wouldn't cause too much damage if it did go awry.

Right now, I'm working on seeing through stuff.

My eyes have a whole bunch of pupils, so I have to keep 'em closed when I'm in town and stuff so I don't freak out other people.

Obviously, I can't see with my eyes shut, so it's pretty damn inconvenient.

If I can learn to see through things like I used to with Clairvoyance, I can look right through my eyelids at the outside world, so I won't have to deal with all that nonsense.

Plus, it wouldn't do any real harm if I mess this up, so it's perfect for practicing in my room.

To an outside observer, it probably just looks like I'm sitting here with my eyes closed, but for some reason, the peanut gallery seems to find this interesting enough to keep watching me.

Even Fiel, who normally doesn't have the patience for this kind of thing, is staring at me.

It's starting to stress me out, so I turn away from my audience of little girls.

Then Fiel silently sneaks around my side and waves her hand in front of my face.

I can see you.

Even with my eyes closed, I can see you with Clairvoyance.

But if I react now, she'll probably get carried away and distract me even more, so I ignore her.

The speed of Fiel's hand waving steadily increases, and soon she starts moving the rest of her body, too, until finally she's demonstrating some bizarrely feverish dance in front of me.

Oh, come on! You got carried away anyway?!

It's getting annoying, so I open my eyes and use Inert Evil Eye.

Fiel freezes in a *shee!* pose.

Okay. I wasn't expecting the pose, but I guess it worked.

Inert Evil Eye originally evolved from Paralyzing Evil Eye. Since the latter has the Paralysis attribute, I normally wouldn't be able to use it, but Inert Evil Eye has a sort of time-stopping effect.

I guess that effect is unrelated to Paralysis, which is why I'm able to use it.

That's the only explanation I can think of anyway.

By the way, I can technically still use it even with my eyes closed.

If I combine it with the see-through effect of Clairvoyance, it still works, but it's less effective and harder to control.

I can activate several at the same time, too, but I don't want to push it too

hard while I'm still learning the ropes.

Although I'm hoping that eventually I'll be able to combine Evil Eyes with Clairvoyance and do super-long-distance Evil Eye attacks like I could before.

But first, I have to figure out what I can and can't do and practice hard to improve.

...So? How long is Fiel going to stay frozen?

Oh? It won't wear off until I stop it?

How exactly do I do that?

After that, I struggled for a while until I finally managed to release Fiel from her inert state.

Yep. It's important to understand how these powers work.

That was definitely a good reminder.

So I've been testing out my powers pretty successfully, and guess where I am now? The Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Why? Because I teleported here.

It's not like I actually *wanted* to come here even a little bit, but when I was trying to decide where to go to test out teleporting, it was the first place that came to mind.

And as soon as I thought about it, I found myself here.

I teleported so naturally, it's almost shocking, if I do say so myself.

Just like when I make thread, I don't even have to think about constructing runes or anything like that. What's up with that?

Isn't teleporting, like, a super-advanced skill?

Well, I guess I did use it all the time.

It was literally my lifeline, y'know?

But I didn't think it was going to be this easy to use it.

The Spatial Magic skill was always pretty hard, since you had to designate a destination and use it as a starting point while activating Teleport.

The farther away the destination, the longer it takes to designate it.

And it takes a pretty long time before you can actually teleport there, too.

Again, with an even longer waiting period for faraway places.

In other words, it always took a crazy-long amount of time to activate Teleport.

Even with my cheat skill Height of Occultism, Teleport took anywhere from seconds to even minutes to prepare, depending on the distance.

But when I teleported just now, all I had to do was think about a place, and I found myself there right away.

Seriously, what the hell?

I don't get it. Why would it be faster to do this without the support of skills?

Hmm? Did the skill actually kinda slow me down?

Skills are essentially a form of assistance that activate conjuring for you. They're a structure that makes it easy and safe to produce runes.

But it's trickier than it seems: It also means that the system itself is doing the dangerous part of the work in place of the user.

But what if the system was slower at constructing that part than the user?

Then it might actually be faster to do it without the assistance of the system.

But is such a thing even possible?

I can kind of understand it with the thread, since I've been using it nonstop since I was reborn here.

But why would I be able to use an advanced technique like Teleport faster than when I had the system's help?

Hrmmm.

I mean, it's obvious that I must be some kind of genius, but still.

I guess there's no point in dwelling on something I can do when I should really be focusing on the things I still can't.

I'll just try to be grateful that I was able to do it more easily than I expected.

So anyway.

Here I am in the Upper Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Specifically, I'm in that big space on the border with the Middle Stratum.

I called this area home for a long time, so it makes sense that it'd be deeply ingrained in my mind.

After all, this is the first place I thought of when I tried to teleport.

And now, a swarm of white spiders is clamoring around my former home.

So I'm surrounded, so what?

Sure, I might be screaming *EEEEEEK!* on the inside, but it doesn't look like these guys are going to attack me.

On the contrary, they actually seem happy to see me.

They're showing their joy by bouncing up and down, almost like they're dancing.

Huh.

Teleporting here to find myself surrounded by spiders dredged up some unpleasant memories, so I panicked at first, but I guess I don't mind as long as they don't attack me.

Being surrounded by spiders reminded me of the first thing I saw in this world, the bloodbath of my spider siblings. I wasn't exactly looking to relive my first traumatic experience here.

By the way, my second traumatic experience was seeing Mother right after that.

The third was when my home got destroyed, and the fourth was Mr. Araba.

What's this? When I look back on it, it kinda seems like I've had a lot of traumatic incidents in my life, no?

Oh, but I've conquered most of those fears by now.

Trauma's nothing to be scared of!

What? My legs are trembling?

Th-that's just because I'm so excited!

I'm definitely not shaking because this situation brought back traumatic memories!

I'm not, okay?!

...Fine, so what if I am?! Everyone shakes a little once in a while!

Besides, the moment I was reborn wasn't the only time I've been surrounded by spiders, remember?!

There was also the time I got chased around by Mother right after I escaped the labyrinth, barely managed to escape with my life via Teleport, and then found myself surrounded by an army of spiders and almost got squashed!

You can't blame me if I'm a little traumatized!

I really thought I was gonna die at the time!

But there's no reason to be afraid now.

'Cause it occurs to me that the white spiders around me are actually kind of my family.

Or family that was created by my Parallel Minds anyway.

These are the extra underlings my Parallel Minds made with the Egg-Laying skill while they were temporarily separated from me.

But when I got deified, I absorbed all my Parallel Minds, so they really are my family now, aren't they?

In fact, if my Parallel Minds laid these eggs, doesn't that mean I'm their mother by blood?

Hey, Demon Lord, you're a great-grandma nooow!

Once I dealt with those Parallel Minds, I just shoved these guys in here and left them to their own devices. They were simply obeying my Parallel Minds, so I couldn't bring myself to kill 'em.

But I wasn't gonna start looking after them, either.

Which is why I just teleported the lot of them into the Great Elroe Labyrinth

and left 'em here.

I didn't know what had happened to them after that, but from the looks of things, they've been getting on just fine.

Good, good.

Okay, your mom's going home now, so keep up the good woook.

Child neglect? No, that definitely doesn't apply in this situation.

But the white spiders seem to sense somehow that I'm getting ready to teleport away, because they suddenly freeze.

All that happiness dissipates at once, and suddenly they're looking like a bunch of abandoned puppies.

I guess in a way, that expression is accurate. Although they're spiders, not puppies.

Still, those eight eyes of theirs somehow look tearful to me.

Cut it out!

Don't look at me like that!

You're making it hard for me to leave!

In the end, I wound up staying over for the next several days...

It's all because of those cute little eyes!

But I guess it's fine, since I've managed to do some good experimenting in the process.

The Great Elroe Labyrinth works pretty well as a space where you can use dangerous techniques without inconveniencing anyone.

As a result, I've been able to figure out some things I couldn't do in the duke's mansion.

This has been a pretty productive span of time.

The white spiders keep presenting me with monster corpses, but...I guess that's sorta cute.

Although now that I'm a human, monster meat doesn't really suit my tastes

anymore.

Well. Y'know. Since they insist on offering them to me, I'm doing my best to eat them, but I've got a pretty small stomach these days, so I can't eat a whole monster in one sitting anymore.

But I don't like to waste food, so I'm doing my best...

I have occasionally been pretending to eat while storing it in subspace, but that's our little secret.

These guys just keep bringing me way more food than I can eat!

Since I've been away for so long, they seem excited to be able to serve me devotedly.

Who raised them like this anyway? It's a mystery.

In the end, I had to pull myself away from the white spiders as their eyes begged me not to go and return to the duke's mansion with Teleport.

The whole thing was a little painful for my heart, so I guess I'll check in on them from time to time.

"Where were you?"

Besides, there's a scary little girl here, glaring at me like a wife who's accusing her husband of cheating.

I can't spend all my time in a house with a scary girl like this!

I have another family who's actually happy to see me!

"Don't go wandering off on your own like that. Understood?"

...Yes, ma'am.

In the end, I couldn't stand up to the anger of Vampy.

From now on, I'll have to get her permission before spending the night elsewhere.



ICE DRAGON NIA

Oh, dear me.

As I dodge the blade that swoops toward me, I sense I've made a mistake.

A blunder.

And not just one—I have made several mistakes.

The first was allowing this whelp to live.

It was a mistake to obey my lord's orders and refrain from attacking it directly.

I thought that perhaps if I started a blizzard, the creature would die on its own, but the thing has stubbornly clung to life.

If I had known this would happen, I would have confirmed it breathed its last with my own eyes, even if it meant disobeying my lord's orders.

The second mistake was instructing my brethren to hinder the whelp's progress.

Many of them lost their lives as a result, which also led to the significant increase in the whelp's level.

If I had put it down in the beginning, surely things would not have turned out this way.

...The fact that I didn't do it because I had a hangover is a shameful truth indeed.

It's all because that blasted alcohol Ariel gave me was so delicious!

I put on a brave face for my lord, but even now, my stomach churns, both from stress and indigestion.

The third mistake was agreeing to fight this whelp now in order to smooth over the first two mistakes.

Alas, I have no fondness for battle.

Though I did not wish to let on as much in front of my lord, the truth is that I would prefer not to fight.

Why should I have to face such a fate?

I miss the days when I could simply loll about at the peak of the Mystic Mountains.

Yes, I am partially responsible for sowing these seeds, but half the blame also lies with the little brat for committing such heinous acts.

Even after I gave it a good scolding, it insisted upon rampaging about like a child throwing a tantrum.

And the fourth mistake is the action I took just now.

I dodged the brat's attack, but it was a feint.

The real attack from its other sword lands squarely on my body.

A keening noise echoes as the brat's blade clashes with my scales.

"That hurts, you fool!"

In truth, I do not feel pain because of my Suffering Nullification skill, but the spirit of the thing remains the same.

I whip around my tail to knock away the brat.

But much to my irritation, it easily dodges my attack.

Ah, enough already!

I do so hate fighting.

Damn this brat.

Precious little time has passed since our previous bout, yet it has grown almost unrecognizably in power.

Before, it couldn't even leave a scratch on my scales, try as it might.

But now? The place where its sword hit me is bleeding, the scale shattered.

It broke through the defenses of my Divine Scales.

My defense is second only to that of the earth dragon Gakia.

No, since Gakia has died, I suppose now I am first.

And yet, the whelp has injured me.

When was the last time I sustained a single wound?

I cannot even remember.

Even if I spend much of my time lazing about, I am still far more powerful than most, you know.

Just hearing my name would be enough to bring most warriors to their knees!

Not that I ever really run into anyone who would try to harm me, since I never leave the Mystic Mountains.

At any rate, what I wish to say is: *No thank you.*

I've been wounded!

If I get wounded enough, I'll die!

This is the first time I've seen my own blood in hundreds of years!

No, I don't like this one bit.

I may have acted cool in front of my lord, but the truth is I do not want to die.

Of course, if it truly comes down to it, I am willing to sacrifice my life for him.

But this?

This foolish squabble is not how I wish to die.

I do feel a degree of sympathy for the whelp's plight, but it has already exacted its revenge, so this violence is nothing more than taking out its anger on others.

Perhaps it has lost its senses due to Wrath, but that is no excuse.

At least, not to me.

No excuse would be sufficient for injuring me like this.

Oh dear. It's starting to go to my head, too.

My apologies to my lord, but I do not wish to hear complaints if I kill this whelp in the heat of the moment.

"Listen, cur. Don't blame me if you die, all right? If you must blame anything, blame your own ill fate."

A freezing cold wind whips up around me.

It is the pinnacle of Ice Magic, freezing anyone instantly at the lightest touch.

The houses around us freeze, then break and scatter on the increasingly violent winds.

Ice and wind.

And let us add a jinx, as well.

Even if the whelp withstands the ice, the jinx will eat away at it while its body loses its warmth, whittling down its health.

And my Indolence skill will expedite that even further.

Indolence, a skill that is linked to the Seven Deadly Sins skill Sloth, increases the rate of reduction of the target's HP, MP, and SP.

You see, brat, I may not look it, but the truth is that I am known to play dirtiest of all the dragons.

I use my powerful defense to endure lengthy battles, all while slowly wearing down my opponent with a field of cursed ice.

Since I have been warned not to kill the brat, I will refrain from finishing it off with a single blow.

But there is no need.

I shall simply keep fighting until the brat reaches its limits.

Just then, the brat's power receives an enormous boost.

Huh?

What's this?

Excuse me?!

Wait a minute!

Where did this power come from?!

I wasn't told about this!

"Grrraaaaaagh!"

The whelp howls and charges toward me.

So fast!

I can't dodge in time!

In my panic, I try to take to the skies, but too late—the whelp's sword cuts into my torso.

I feel the sword break through not just the scales but the hide and even the flesh beneath.

This is not good!

"Grrrr!"

Unleashing a roar of my own, I let loose with my Breath at full power.

In the blink of an eye, the village that was on the border freezes over, shatters, and is destroyed without a trace.

But the brat isn't there—no, I see in the corner of my eye that it's trying to get behind me.

I am not slow-footed by any means, but this creature is far faster than I.

How can it move like this in my cursed ice territory?!

What in the world is going on here?!

Oh dear!

All I know is that things are not looking good.

The wound it just inflicted is by no means shallow.

I must put some distance between us so that I can recover.

Spreading my wings, I decide to escape into the sky for now.

But just as I attempt to take off again, a sword slashes into one of my wings,

interrupting my actions.

Grrr! It's made a huge cut through my wing!

Unlike the rest of my body, the scales on my wings are thin.

No matter how high my defense might be, even I have my weak points.

The wound will not prevent me from flying, but it will certainly reduce my mobility.

If it attacks again while I'm taking off, I'll be in serious danger.

Giving up on fleeing into the air, I resolve to intercept the brat on the ground instead.

Honestly! Why should I have to go through such an awful experience?!

I have had no luck whatsoever in recent times!

I flap my uninjured wing with all my strength, whipping up a powerful wind.

Yet somehow, the whelp cuts through that wind and charges toward my neck.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, whelp!"

As the brat soars toward me, I lash out with a big bite.

My fangs clash against the brat's swords.

The taste of blood fills my mouth, but it's only a slight cut to my lip, not a major wound.

The brat fends off my bite with both swords.

Now that it is rendered immobile, I hit it with my Breath.

A point-blank attack.

It cannot possibly dodge this!

Surely, even the whelp will not survive a direct hit from my Breath attack.

But it is a sacrifice I am willing to make.

Apologies to my lord, but he will have come up with some excuse to that terrifying D for me.

...But it appears I am premature in thinking about what comes after this

battle.

The whelp's swords produce fire and lightning, clashing against my Breath.

My attack proves more powerful, but the flames and lightning on its blades have lessened its effect.

As the powers collide, they cause an explosion that sends the whelp flying backward.

Grrr! Insolent brat!

That was not enough to finish it off?

But this is the perfect chance. It's been blown off its feet.

Now is the time to finish it with another Breath attack!

To that end, I draw in another lungful.

At that moment, something slips from inside my mouth into my throat.

What did I just swallow?

My mouth was so full of blood that I didn't realize anything else was there.

The feeling of dread is immediate, but even then it is too late.

The thing that I swallowed causes a massive explosion in my stomach.

"Guh?!"

Instead of my Breath attack, flames spurt out of my mouth.

What just happened?

I swallowed something...and it exploded?

What was it?

The whelp wasn't holding anything except its two swords.

Its...swords?

Oh no!

Swords!

The whelp's power is to create magic swords.

It must have made a dagger-size exploding magic blade while I couldn't see it!
I've been had!

Like my wings, there are other parts of me that are not nearly as tough, in spite of my high defense.

And of course that goes for my innards as well.

An ordinary dragon might very well have died from this attack.

Even I have taken a great deal of damage.

This...does not bode well.

The damage is severe.

On top of that, the little brat is back on its feet—not only that, it's already charging at me while I am still reeling.

Its body is wreathed in fire and lightning.

That must be protecting it from my cursed ice.

The fearless creature's attack closes in on me without mercy.

I raise my front legs to try to ward off the attack, but its sword slices deep into my legs instead.

Then the other sword swings and creates another wound.

No.

It can't be!

I am truly going to die!

My lord!

Help me!

Pitifully, I look in the direction where my lord stood in order to plead for help, but he is no longer there.

What?!

My lord! Where have you gone?!

No, no, no!

I don't want to diie!

But my pleas are in vain, for the whelp's attacks only become fiercer.



ARRIVAL AT MR. ONI'S PLACE

Crime doesn't happen in a meeting room.

It happens somewhere far away from us, but somehow we get caught up in it anyway.

That is the truth I have come to realize.

Or something like that. I'm quoting some police show or detective show or whatever, although I don't really know what it means.

In other words, I'm in the middle of an escapist fantasy.

"Graaaah!"

Before me is a howling boy with bloodshot eyes.

He might look like a young boy at a glance, but that howl and his terrifying aura suggest otherwise. The howl shakes the very air as well as my eardrums, and his aura distorts the scenery around us.

In fact, the heat from one of the magic swords in his hands is literally making my vision wavy.

The other one is producing purple lightning that crackles all over his body.

He kinda looks like a supervillain who's awakened to his murderous rage...

Hey there, Mr. Oni.

You've gotten pretty wild-looking in the short time since we last saw each other.

I mean, you were pretty wild that time, too, but I guess you didn't stop there.

Wow, you really surpassed my expectations there, bud.

Ha-ha-ha!

...Now what?

Why am I in this situation?

In short, it's because of a guy named Güli-güli.

That's right. Güli-güli is the culprit!

If this really were a police or detective show, that'd be the end of that, but I guess things aren't gonna wrap up so easily, huh?

Let's rewind a bit to figure out how I got into this mess.

Güli-güli appeared out of nowhere.

"I have a favor to ask."

A mysterious figure clad all in black suddenly interrupted our afternoon teatime, which was becoming a daily ritual.

Normally I would complain about the security in the duke's mansion, but in this case, I can't really blame them.

This guy is a genuine god, after all.

No amount of security could stop him from teleporting right on in if he felt like it.

Since Güli-güli showed up so abruptly and announced that he had a request equally abruptly, of course I didn't know how to respond right away.

Besides, if I went around blurting out answers right off the bat whenever someone talked to me, I'd lose credibility as the strong, silent type, dammit!

Meanwhile, while I was frozen in a panic, Fiel brought Güli-güli a chair for some reason, so he joined our tea party.

Riel poured some tea into an extra cup and handed it to Güli-güli.

The man in black elegantly brought the cup to his lips.

A bunch of little girls and a grown man in black armor, sitting at a table together, having a tea party.

How surreal can you get?!

This is seriously unreal.

“This favor has to do with none other than the reincarnation you encountered in the Mystic Mountains. I want you to stop him.”

After a sip of tea, Güli-güli cut straight to the chase.

At that, Vampy’s eyes glittered dangerously.

“Would you care to give us the details?”

Uh, sure, go ahead and speak for all of us, I guess.

Güli-güli hesitated for a moment, looking away.

“...I suppose this is within the limits of acceptability,” he muttered.

Talk about an ominous statement. What exactly is he so worried about?

Well, I guess there’s only one person who could make Güli-güli sweat like that!

What in the world has that rotten evil god done this time...?

Actually, knowing her, isn’t said evil god probably listening right now?

Why would you mutter something like that?

Or did you want her to hear you on purpose?

“I suppose I owe you a show of good faith before I ask for your assistance.”

Güli-güli took another sip of tea.

Then he put down the cup and raised his hand.

With a light flick of the hand, he produced a rune.

The rune seemed to be some kind of visual conjuring, as it produced an image in midair.

It displayed what looked like a satellite photograph, an aerial view of the planet from outer space.

Specifically, it was a view of the Mystic Mountains, covered in white ice and snow.

Ooh. So that’s what the Mystic Mountains look like from above, huh?

I knew it was a bunch of really tall mountains next to each other, but wow, the mountain range is bigger than I thought.

Looking at it from above like that, I realized that the mountains I saw from ground level were just one small part of an enormous whole.

The route we took from human lands to demon lands was literally nothing more than a tiny corner of the icy mountains.

As I stared blankly at the image, I realized something.

There was a flat area of land beyond the mountain range.

It wasn't human *or* demon territory.

It was a different place entirely, separated from both by the mountains and the ocean.

Hmm?

What's this place? Unexplored land?

"After you fought him, he wandered the Mystic Mountains until he reached this place," Güli-güli began to explain. "This is a resting area for souls that I myself created."

I was sure I wasn't the only one who had a question mark floating over her head after that statement.

A resting area for souls?

Whaddaya mean?

"I suppose my description was insufficient. You are familiar with the system's method of energy collection, correct? It's certainly revolutionary if you only look at the numbers, but it isn't without its problems. Namely, the gradual deterioration of souls."

The grimace on Güli-güli's face made it clear that he thinks this is inhumane, even if he can't say it out loud.

Hrmmm. Soul degradation, huh?

Vampy and the puppet spiders still had those question marks, but I thought I kinda got it.

The system exploits the souls of people living in this world.

And if that goes on long enough, it's not surprising that it would damage people's souls.

So what would happen if it just kept using them without giving them any time to heal?

Ultimately, it'd mean those souls got destroyed.

A road that led to absolute nothingness, beyond even death.

Güli-güli must have made this little retirement spot to temporarily shelter people whose souls are overused in order to avoid that.

Hmm. I'm guessing that means he makes sure people in this place don't fight and has them refrain from acquiring skills as much as possible?

It's definitely not a permanent solution, but not bad as a stopgap measure.

"...You already understand based on that short explanation? That makes this easier."

Güli-güli didn't actually look happy, though.

If anything, he seemed to find this inconvenient.

See, he probably told me the details about this little rest stop, which he would normally keep secret as a show of good faith.

But still, having me fully understand its purpose probably isn't ideal for him.

'Cause it really just drives home what a severe situation this world is in.

So I guess even though he wanted to make a gesture, he was hoping I wouldn't actually understand his explanation.

"Most of the people here cannot fight. So if he reaches there, driven mad by the Wrath skill, you can imagine what would happen, yes?"

Hmm. Yeah, it'd be a bloodbath.

And if these guys all die, they'll go from enjoying a peaceful life in this rest stop right back to getting their souls worn down.

Although honestly, there is a part of me that's thinking, *So what?*

But this is clearly important to Güli-güli. Otherwise he wouldn't be here asking for our help.

"I cannot lay a hand on a reincarnation because of an agreement with D. But I also cannot simply allow this disaster to happen. So I am asking you to stop him in my place."

Ahhh, so D is stopping him. Figures.

Knowing Güli-güli's personality, he probably did try to stop Mr. Oni himself at some point.

But D must have gotten in his way.

Because it wouldn't be fun for her that way, I'm sure.

That's exactly the kind of stunt that rotten god would pull.

And now, since Güli-güli can't do anything about it himself, he's here to request our help.

He needs people who D would allow to interfere and who are also strong enough to stop that crazy Mr. Oni.

In other words, Vampy and me.

I'm sure Güli-güli already knows that I got my powers back, and while I hate to admit it, I seem to be a favorite of D's.

So D probably wouldn't scold one of her favorites for getting involved in this.

If anything, she'd probably be psyched.

Yep. Guess I'm the perfect choice!

"Will you accept my request?"

"Of course!"

Naturally, it was Vampy who responded so promptly, not me.

Seriously, is it really your place to make that decision for *both* of us?

But I guess it's fine, since I was going to agree anyway.

"Thank you. Then, if you don't mind, I'd like to head over right away. Are you ready?"

“Huh? Right now?”

Vampy sounded hysterical. She must not have expected that part.

“Yes. As soon as possible. I will take you there via teleportation and bring you back the same way, so no need to bring traveling necessities. Please take only what you need for the battle. We will leave as soon as you are ready.”

At that, Vampy flew out of the room, probably to get her beloved broadsword.

She didn’t have a weapon last time, which made the battle tougher than it needed to be.

“In addition, for this battle, I would prefer if only you reincarnations participate.”

I was planning on just lounging around until Vampy got back, but then Güli-güli went and dropped that bomb on me.

Say what?!

You mean only Vampy and I are supposed to fight that guy?

“If you bring Ariel’s kin, no doubt you would win easily. But that might spoil D’s fun. The fact that I am bringing you there, even if I’m not fighting directly, is already pushing the limits of what is acceptable to her. I understand that this is a big request, but please.”

Ugh! I guess he has a point.

I was definitely planning on bringing the three puppet spiders. Sael alone could fend off Mr. Oni, and if you added Riel and Fiel on top of that, I assumed it’d be in the bag.

But would D really permit such a guaranteed victory?

Yeah, of course she wouldn’t!

A battle that boring wouldn’t satisfy that jerky evil god.

As soon as Güli-güli brought us in, she’d use that as an excuse to get in our way by any means possible!

From that perspective, bringing the puppet spiders might make things even

more dangerous.

I wasn't sure whether Vampy and I could beat Mr. Oni alone, but it'd be waaay stupider to knowingly make D mad.

We had no choice, then.

The puppet spiders would have to sit this one out at home.

Immediately, three pairs of eyes fixated on me with a silent *You're gonna leave us behind?*

They somehow looked teary-eyed, even though that's not possible.

Cut it out!

Don't look at me like that!

You're making it hard for me to leave!

"I'm ready!"

As I desperately fended off the three girls' silent pleas to take them with us, Vampy came back fully armed and ready.

Although all that really meant was that she'd changed into a more flexible outfit and grabbed her broadsword.

Her clothes are made out of my thread, so they've got way more defensive power than your average armor. And the broadsword, which is longer than Vampy is tall, was made from the claw of the legendary-class monster Fenrir.

By the way, I'm told that Fenrir wasn't actually defeated, it just attacked a human fortress a long time ago and lost a claw in the process. I guess that must've hurt pretty badly, because it was enough to make Fenrir retreat.

A broadsword made out of such a rare and valuable claw is probably, like, national-treasure levels of important.

Apparently, it really was being kept under lock and key in some country's treasury, but then that place suffered catastrophic damage in some battle or other, so they were forced to reluctantly part with it to pay for repairs.

Apparently, the battle had to do with a bunch of white spiders going on a rampage or something. Sooo random, right? I wonder who was responsible for

that one...

Anyway, that's how this broadsword wound up on the market, and the Demon Lord bought it with her ridiculously vast assets.

Then Vampy took a liking to it and made it her personal weapon.

So she had my thread for defense and the Fenrir broadsword for offense.

Yeah. I don't think you can get any better equipped than that.

And yes, I was armed and ready, too. I always wear clothes made out of my thread, and I had my giant scythe fully equipped.

It's dangerous to go alone, so I'm taking this!

"Good. Let's go."

Güli-güli activated Teleport.

We slipped through space with ease, and Vampy and I found ourselves in an unknown land.

"Graaaah!"

I definitely recognized the angry Mr. Oni right in front of our eyes, though.

This is all happening a little too quickly, don't you think?

End flashback.

No, my life isn't flashing before my eyes just yet.

Which means I can still die!

So I quickly dodge Mr. Oni's attack as he charges me faster than the eye can follow.

Bwa-ha-ha! This isn't gonna be like last time! My powers are back!

Although, unlike when I used to have stats and stuff, I can't just keep my body perpetually enhanced.

Stats automatically strengthen your body and physique in accordance with the numbers, but with conjuring, you have to control that stuff manually.

I'm still not used to conjuring, so it's not easy to keep it all up at once.

Sometimes my attack power goes higher than I intended, and my defense implodes on itself trying to keep up.

The defense part is especially important. Whether I'm moving or attacking, I have to maintain defense high enough to withstand my enhanced speed and strength, or I'll take some serious recoil damage.

So keeping my defense high is my top priority.

Which means I'll probably be okay even if Mr. Oni does hit me, but if I can dodge him, I'd much rather do that.

There are still too many uncertainties when it comes to my conjuring.

"I'll be your opponent, thank you very much!"

Meanwhile, as I'm getting as far away from Mr. Oni's attack as possible, Vampy charges right in with her broadsword.

She seems pretty enthusiastic for someone who got beaten to a pulp last time.

And hey, wait a minute. You've been learning manners and stuff at the duke's mansion much more than battle training, so why exactly are you so confident about this?

Do you think you can beat Mr. Oni now, even though you've barely had enough time to train since our last fight?

Although Mr. Oni definitely seems to have gotten a lot stronger in that short period of time.

"Hmph!"

Vampy swings the broadsword down from overhead.

I mean, the sword's bigger than she is, so her only real options are swinging it down or sweeping it sideways.

Instead of dodging, Mr. Oni raises one of his katanas to block it.

Oh, come on. You can't really expect to block that with one hand, can you?

He must be seriously underestimating Vampy.

Vampy grins wickedly, as if she's having the same thought.

"Wha—?!"

But then her smile turns to shock.

Mr. Oni's katana easily parries Vampy's swing and knocks the broadsword aside.

Then, while her guard is completely down mid-swing, he attacks mercilessly with the blade in his other hand, aiming for Vampy's neck.

In theory, she should be able to react.

But when he parried the broadsword, his katana-style magic sword activated its power, sending lightning down Vampy's blade.

The electric shock paralyzed Vampy for a moment, so now she can't do anything to stop the fiery blade that's flying toward her.

Wait a minute, Mr. Oni!

Since when can a mindless berserker execute such a clever strategy?!

I immediately send out some thread to wrap around Mr. Oni's arm.

Heh-heh. Thread and Spatial Magic are the two things I can conjure and control freely without having to worry too much about the details!

Looks like I saved Vampy yet again. Am I cool or whaaaAAAAAAAAT?!

"Graaaaah!"

Mr. Oni just swung his sword with sheer brute strength, despite the fact that his arm's wrapped in thread!

And what do you think that means?

I get yanked along with the thread and go flying into the air!

Even if I use body strengthening to enhance my physique, that doesn't mean my weight actually changes.

And I was so focused on arm strength that I all but forgot about my feet.

So I lose my footing instantly and get sent flying.

Boy, at times like these, I sure do miss how my stats used to enhance my whole body equally!

But even if I had strengthened my feet, I doubt I would've been able to stay put. Considering this freakish strength, the ground probably would've gotten yanked right into the air with me.

If I had the Spatial Maneuvering skill, I might've been able to make a foothold and stop myself, but I'm not proficient enough to reproduce that on command yet!

While I panic in midair, I manage to regain control of myself and flip upright.

I cut the thread connecting me to Mr. Oni and land safely on the ground.

Whew. But just as I sigh in relief, I realize something major.

Oh shit. Vampy might be dead.

My interference didn't end up helping much, so if he managed to finish that sword swing, he might've just sliced Vampy's head right off.

"Ouch! Excuse you—that really hurt!"

But then an energetic shout from Vampy clears up my worries.

Um, what?

It looks like Mr. Oni landed a hit and sent Vampy flying just like me, but I don't see so much as a scratch on her neck.

Instead, something like scales have appeared.

What are those?

It doesn't look like they're stuck on there—more like she's grown scales or something.

Did the scales protect her from Mr. Oni's attack?

That's all well and good, but why scales?

Since when did Vampy evolve into some kind of scaly monster?

Meanwhile, Vampy charges at Mr. Oni again.

But since the broadsword can take only really big swings, Mr. Oni's quick-

moving katana prevents it from getting anywhere near him.

On the other hand, Mr. Oni's attacks keep hitting Vampy dead-on.



But between her clothes made out of my thread and those mysterious scales, she's not taking any serious damage.

It does knock her HP down a little, but Vampy has one of the more advanced HP-recovery skills, so I don't think her life is in any serious danger.

In other words, this could be a long battle.

Since Vampy's attacks can't even graze Mr. Oni and his are doing at least a little bit of damage, he has a leg up in this situation.

But still, I'm sure Vampy isn't just blindly attacking without a plan, so she must have a chance of winning.

"Argh! Enough already! Quit dodging around so much!"

...She *does* have a plan, right? ...Right?

I trust you, Vampy.

Besides, considering that she's got those crazy scales all of a sudden, I guess she's been getting stronger every day after all.

Yeah. I'm sure it'll be fine.

So I guess that means I have a little more leeway to take a look at our surroundings.

While Vampy and Mr. Oni exchange blows like crazy, a gigantic, bloodied creature is lying nearby.

It's a beautiful dragon with transparent, crystalline scales.

But right now, those scales are dyed red with blood. Appearing on the verge of death detracts from its beauty a little bit.

And Güli-güli is reaching out toward that dragon's injuries as if to nurse it back to health.

That bastard! So that's where he went after dumping us in front of Mr. Oni and disappearing!

I guess that dragon must've been fighting Mr. Oni not long ago, but it looks like things got pretty down to the wire. No wonder Güli-güli was in such a hurry.

He must've teleported us in front of Mr. Oni to draw his attention away from the dying dragon.

I've got a few choice words I'd like to say about that, but he probably had no other choice in that situation, so I guess I'll forgive him.

Wow, I'm sooo generous!

Hrmmm.

That dragon looks pretty strong at a glance, though.

I mean, it sorta looks exactly like how the Demon Lord was describing the dragon who's the head honcho of the Mystic Mountains, but...it can't be, right?

...But I guess since Güli-güli is here, even if he can't intervene directly, there's a good chance that the top dragon would be here, too.

From what the Demon Lord told me, the top dragon of the Mystic Mountains is in the same category as Hyuvan, the wind dragon who helped us out during the UFO incident. But this dragon still got beat up that badly?

Huh? Is Mr. Oni stronger than I realized?

Vampy's in danger!

"Come on! What happened to all that energy you had before?! Die! Just die already!"

Turning around, I see Vampy viciously attacking, while Mr. Oni has switched to defense only.

Oh. Okay.

I guess there was no point worrying, then.

Vampy is swinging her broadsword around every which way while also attacking Mr. Oni with Ice and Water Magic.

Plus, judging by the fact that the ice and water both contain a tinge of red, I'm guessing it's no ordinary magic. Since it's red, I'd bet it has to do with some kind of vampire blood-control ability, but I don't know what it does exactly.

Mr. Oni's skin is sort of inflamed in places, so maybe it's some kind of acid?

Yikes, Vampy. Such smol, very stronk.

Between those scales blocking Mr. Oni's attacks and that red ice and water, I guess Vampy's been advancing in lots of ways without my knowing.

When did she get so powerful?

I mean, I always knew she was strong, but she definitely seems to have gotten even more so in a short period of time.

Mr. Oni beat her and Mera into the ground last time, but now she's successfully fighting him on her own, so that proves how much she's grown.

In fact, it seems like Mr. Oni has gotten stronger, too, so that means Vampy's growth rate is even more impressive.

She must've been really mad that he beat her, huh...?

Using the bitterness of defeat as motivation to grow sounds like something a *shonen* manga hero would do.

"DIIIIIIIIIIEEEEEE!!"

A hero... Riiight...

Yeah, I'll just leave dealing with her mental growth to the Demon Lord. Good luck with that.

I want no part of it, thanks.

I try to ignore the warning signs of Vampy's developing inclinations as I watch over her fight.

What's that? Am I going to help her?

What, you want ME to cooperate with someone else?

Nah, I'm mostly kidding. I'm sure I could do it if I wanted to, okay?

I *could*, but for a battle this intense, supporting her would actually be pretty tough.

Vampy and Mr. Oni are moving all over the place, so they keep switching positions.

If I try to hop in there while I'm still struggling to control my powers, it could

easily lead to Vampy getting caught in some not-so-friendly fire.

Thread isn't a problem to control, but they're moving so fast right now that there aren't really any openings for me to intervene.

Cooperation is the kind of thing you can do only when you're at least as strong as the person you're trying to fight alongside, y'know?

And unfortunately, I don't think I can keep up with Vampy's and Mr. Oni's speed as I am now.

When Mr. Oni sent me flying earlier, I learned without a doubt that just strengthening my physique won't allow me to move around and fight as freely as I used to.

It's clear to me now that I was able to do that only with the support of my stats, plus skills like Dimensional Maneuvering.

Now I would have to enhance my movement, strengthen my defenses to withstand the recoil from that movement, and then anticipate the effects of external factors like the ground I'm standing on and include solutions for all that in advance.

Only then will I be able to actually attempt a high-speed battle.

Right now, just doing any one of those things alone is hard enough for me to handle, so I don't think I could do all of them at once anytime soon.

Man, stats and skills really were awesome.

Actually, I guess it seems kinda weird that the system applies those things to everyone who lives in this world.

I'm working my butt off trying to control my conjuring over here, while everyone else gets to just do whatever they want while the system takes care of it automatically for them! It's not fair!

I keep complaining to myself while I watch Vampy and Mr. Oni battle.

At a glance, Vampy seems to be taking the lead.

Yeah, Mr. Oni is deflecting her broadsword easily, so she's not even making a scratch with that.

But in the meantime, that red-tinted water is revolving around Vampy's body, and it goes after Mr. Oni whenever he tries to counterattack.

Wherever that water touches him, Mr. Oni's skin sizzles and burns.

And if he ignores it too long, it freezes over, too.

The freezing doesn't seem to stop the water from burning his skin, because whenever Mr. Oni uses his magic sword's flames to melt the ice, the flesh underneath is nastily exposed.

Vampy must be combining the Acid Attack skill with Water Magic and Ice Magic, I think.

Maybe she's even using Telekinesis or something, too.

Which means she's managing multiple skills at once now.

That seems pretty unfair, considering that I can barely even control one thing at a time.

Unlike the broadsword, the red water attacks are difficult to predict, so Mr. Oni can't quite dodge without getting hit.

Well, yeah. It's water. It can change shape freely, and if Vampy's moving it with Telekinesis, then she can use it to attack at will.

Pinpoint attacks, beam attacks, broad surface attacks—whatever she wants.

It'd be impossible to dodge all that.

Getting hit with a little spray of droplets doesn't do that much damage, but if he really gets drenched in the red water, the acid seriously burns large areas of skin.

And on top of that, the water freezes and makes it harder for him to move, causing him to get hit even more.

Talk about nasty.

And I don't just mean the appearance of skin being burned with acid. The strategy itself is nasty, too.

Of course, Mr. Oni isn't going to take all that lying down.

He's using the magic swords in his hands to try to scatter the red water with fire and lightning.

But unfortunately for him, it's not a good matchup.

Fire and lightning are great for killing and wounding, but not so much for intercepting attacks, since neither of them has physical mass.

If he wants to completely block the physical attack of the red water, he'd be better off with the defense of Earth Magic or something like that.

Even if the explosive power of the fire and lightning can scatter the spray of the red water, part of it's bound to land on Mr. Oni, and the rest of the water just gathers right back around Vampy.

Plus, while he's having a tough time defending himself, Vampy can easily produce more red water to replace what's been scattered.

I don't know how much MP it costs to use the powers of those magic swords, but it looks to me like Vampy's spending a lot less than he is.

He has to block her attacks or take major damage, but doing so costs him serious MP.

But it's not like he can just attack, either.

Vampy's red water can actually block Mr. Oni's fire and lightning.

Yeah. It's water. So it has mass.

Even the dumbest grade-school kid knows that water beats fire, and the electric currents of lightning can't pass through it very easily, either.

Perfect offense and defense. Her opponent can't block her attacks, but she can block his.

Yep, you gotta admit, it's pretty nasty.

It hasn't even been that long since our last fight with Mr. Oni.

I didn't think Vampy had enough time to raise her level in the duke's mansion, and I never saw her doing any intense training.

So her stats and skills probably haven't changed that much.

Which means her advantage now is because she reflected on her loss, reconsidered her strategies, and came up with new methods specifically to beat Mr. Oni.

It's like they say: If you know your enemy and know yourself, you can fight a hundred battles and never lose.

Analyze your enemy, polish your tactics and countermeasures, and hone your repertoire to its limits. If you do that, as long as there's not an insurmountable difference in strength, you'll stand a damn good chance of winning.

That's how I won many a battle against opponents who were stronger than I was.

Although most of them besides Araba were just surprise attacks, so I didn't have any real tactics or countermeasures to speak of!

I had Professor Appraisal to cover for that, though.

The red water keeps attacking Mr. Oni, and it's definitely damaging him.

He seems to have some kind of HP auto-recovery ability, so the wounds are gradually healing over time, but he gets more new injuries faster than the old ones can heal.

At this rate, Vampy will probably win sooner or later.

But I wonder if it'll really be that easy?

"Urgh! *Groooooaaahhh!*"

Mr. Oni unleashes an even scarier howl than usual.

At the same time, the aura around him grows exponentially in size.

Fire and lightning dance wildly around his body, until I can even feel the heat from where I'm standing some distance away.

Mr. Oni moves forward, closing the distance between him and Vampy in an instant. His charge alone is enough to disperse the defensive wall of red water, and his two blades slash down at Vampy's body at once.

Her eyes widening in surprise, Vampy has no time to dodge, and even those new scales of hers can't block an all-out attack from Mr. Oni's swords, so her

body is slashed to ribbons...almost.

In truth, Vampy is now standing next to me in shock.

Mr. Oni's big attack slashes through nothing but air.

As if letting off rage that has nowhere else to go, he sets off fire and lightning that explode on the ground where Vampy was standing just seconds ago.

Mr. Oni gets caught up in the blast as shock waves blow through the area with a massive boom.

Damn, that was close!

Even Vampy would've been blown to bits if she took a direct hit from something like that!

"Huh? What? How?"

Vampy looks back and forth between the site of the explosion and me, evidently confused as to what just happened.

What did I do, you ask? Nothing much, really.

I just got a feeling that things looked dicey, so I teleported Vampy over to me.

I couldn't teleport a far-off target closer to me back when I had the Teleport skill, but now I can do stuff like that easily.

Yep. When it comes to thread and teleporting, I can do even more than I could with skills, even if I mostly suck at everything else.

So while I couldn't jump into the battle, I can definitely save someone who needs saving.

That's why I've just been sitting around watching the battle from a safe distance.

Damn, though, Mr. Oni.

Who would've thought that you still had another power-up left? Scary.

Vampy's defense might be high, but I doubt it's higher than that dragon lying all beat-up on the ground.

Especially since I'm pretty sure those scales of Vampy's are some kind of

Dragon Scales skill.

I dunno how she got a skill like that, but I did find it suspicious that Mr. Oni couldn't penetrate Vampy's defense when he was able to beat a real live dragon.

So I thought he might have some kind of trump card up his sleeve, but I definitely never suspected it would be another power boost like that!

What is this? Your third form?

Does that mean eventually you're gonna turn blue and go into your fourth and final form or something?

Sorry, but I'm not some kind of battle maniac, so that doesn't really excite me.

Hmm?

But how exactly do Mr. Oni's power boosts work anyway?

What can you tell us about that with your precious Appraisal skill, Miss Vampy?

"Appraisal."

"Huh? ...Oh, right."

Vampy hesitates a second, then obeys.

Appraisal has saved our butts before, after all. At least this time she understands my request, even if it took her a second there.

"Battle Divinity Level Ten? That's one of the only really high-level skills. Maybe it's a benefit of the Ruler of Wrath title? At any rate, that must be what he activated just now. Wrath enhances the degree of strengthening granted by Battle Divinity, too."

Vampy analyzes Mr. Oni's Appraisal results.

Ooh, I see.

While active, Mr. Oni's anger-line skills spend MP, SP, and so on to increase his stats.

They seem to be pretty effective, and once they evolve to the final skill in the line, Wrath, the increase becomes almost exponential.

And the Battle Divinity skill reduces SP to raise stats, too.

Battle Divinity LV 10 adds about 1,000 to each stat, I think.

And then that number gets multiplied by Wrath, so of course his stats get crazy high.

I'm curious about exactly how high they can get.

"Stats?"

"...His physical attack is over twenty thousand."

Good god.

Maybe it really is for the best that we didn't bring along the puppet spiders.

Twenty thousand is even higher than their best stats.

Last time we fought Mr. Oni, Sael was able to hold her own against him in battle, so I guess that means he's done some serious leveling-up in this short amount of time.

If the three puppet spiders all fought together, I'm pretty sure they'd win, but someone might get hurt.

I don't know if I'd be able to teleport multiple targets out of harm's way at once.

Boom! An explosion sends dust flying through the air.

Mr. Oni appears from the center of the explosion, looking seriously injured but paying no mind to his injuries.

He doesn't even care if he blows himself up.

Maybe his mind is just too far gone.

As soon as those rage-filled eyes lock on to us, he charges straight in our direction.

"Nnngh! Buy me a little time! My Envy skill will be able to deactivate his Wrath soon!"

Hmm?

Did Vampy just casually drop several huge bombshells on me?

Wait a second.

Asking me to buy time is one thing, but Envy?

Did she just say Envy? Not Jealousy?

“Graaaah!”

Shut up for a second, Mr. Oni.

As he charges toward us, I send him flying away with Teleport.

Vampy blinks in confusion, looking around for the angry opponent who was about to reach us just seconds ago.

Don't bother, Vampy. He's nowhere in sight right now.

At the moment, the only techniques I have a strong command over are thread and teleportation, but frankly, that means I won't lose to anyone in this world.

How could I?

Teleport is a terrifying ability when it doesn't have limits, so it makes it very easy for me to flee.

And it's easy to send my opponent away somewhere, too.

Even if I have no way of winning against someone, I can just flee with Teleport or get rid of them the same way, and that'll be that.

I won't win, but I won't lose.

At this point, I doubt anyone within the limits of the system would stand a chance of beating me, except maybe the Demon Lord?

Although there are forces outside the system like Güli-güli and Potimas, so I'm not completely unbeatable.

Obviously, the only reason I accepted Güli-güli's request in this unstable situation is that I stand a chance of winning. Otherwise, I would've said no.

If Mr. Oni's ace in the hole is the Wrath plus Battle Divinity combo, then this is pretty much in the bag already.

Battle Divinity uses SP, for one thing.

Unlike MP, SP doesn't restore on its own. It restores only if you eat food. So if we just prevent him from restocking long enough, he'll eventually run out of SP and collapse.

And my Teleport skill is perfect for buying time.

I can't imagine us losing, y'know?

But more importantly.

"What do you mean, Envy?"

Before Mr. Oni gets back, there's something I need to clarify here.

As I look down at her, Vampy freezes.

"Oh, erm...right! It's, you know, a figure of speech!"

Uh-huh. Okay. Sure.

Presumably sensing my suppressed rage, Vampy takes a hurried step back.

But no amount of distance can stop me now that I have Teleport.

If you try to run now, I'll chase you to the depths of hell and make you confess everything!

"Nnngh..." In the face of my determination, Vampy gives up and spills the truth. "I-I'm sorry, all right?! I put skill points into my Jealousy skill and made it evolve into Envy!"

Ah... She really went and did it, huh?

The Jealousy skill, which Vampy's had for a while now, is the lesser form of one of the Seven Deadly Sins skills, like Mr. Oni's Wrath skill.

And now she's saying that she put skill points into it and turned it into the Seven Deadly Sins skill Envy.

Most of the Seven Deadly Sins skills have powerful benefits, but in exchange, just having one will affect your mind. So it's better not to pick them up if possible.

One look at the way Mr. Oni has completely lost his mind is proof enough of

that.

Even if it's not to that extreme, the fact that Vampy also has a Seven Deadly Sins skill now means it's probably having an effect on her mind.

The craziness she's been displaying during this battle might even be because of that.

Huh? Wasn't she always like that, you ask?

...No, I don't think she was. Probably.

Honestly. The Demon Lord and I warned her over and over not to acquire a Seven Deadly Sins skill, and now she's gone and done it anyway.

Admittedly, since Envy can disable a target's skills, it's a pretty good matchup against Mr. Oni.

Wrath is a huge part of why he's so strong. If she can disable that, he'll be significantly weakened, and we might even be able to bring him back to his senses.

On top of that, when you get a Seven Deadly Sins skill, you get the corresponding title.

The titles give enhancements of their own, as well as some powerful bonus skills.

When I got the Ruler of Pride title back in the day, it came with Abyss Magic, the ultimate form of Dark Magic.

Most of these Seven Deadly Sins titles come with similarly strong skills, too.

Vampy's guess that Mr. Oni's Battle Divinity skill came with the Ruler of Wrath title might be right on the mark.

I don't know what skills come with Ruler of Envy, but they're probably similarly powerful.

Hmm? Oh, was it those scales, maybe?

That's the biggest visible difference I've noticed in this battle.

I don't know why Vampy would have a Dragon-Scales-line skill, which are usually limited to dragons, but it might make sense if it came with Envy.

Hrmmm. In that case, Vampy's probably gotten a big power boost by acquiring Envy.

But still, I can't believe she actually put skill points into it to make it evolve.

She must've been *really* upset about her previous loss, enough to make her disobey the Demon Lord and me.

That's no excuse, though.

She's so going to be punished when we get home.

"Eeeek!"

I haven't even said anything yet, but Vampy shrieks like she can tell that something bad is coming.

Oh? What's this, now?

Where'd all that vim and vigor from the fight with Mr. Oni go, hmm? Hmmmm?

"I-I'm sorryyyy!"

...Uh, why does she look like she might actually cry?

Is she that scared of me? Since when am I scary enough to make little girls cry?

I don't get it.

"A-anyway! That's not the most pressing issue right now! Where did he go?"

Wow. She sure changed the subject fast.

But I guess her punishment can wait. For now, she wants to know where Mr. Oni went?

Silently, I point at the sky. Vampy follows my lead and looks up.

At that moment, something comes falling down from the air.

It hits the ground without slowing down, and a dull *thud* echoes.

"Huh?"

Vampy sounds stunned, but to be honest, I'm a little confused myself.

Um, helloooo?

Don't you have the Spatial Maneuvering skill, Mr. Oni?

If you're wondering where I teleported Mr. Oni, the answer is: the sky.

Specifically, about three miles up.

Güli-güli requested that we protect the people who live here from Mr. Oni, so I couldn't just teleport him far away and let him go.

I had to buy time but still make sure that he would come back here.

So I figured the fastest way was to just toss him straight up into the air, where obviously he'd land right back here.

Even if he got blown around a little, he wouldn't go so far that we couldn't catch up to him.

Besides, I figured Mr. Oni would try to come back after us anyway.

But it didn't occur to me that he might not have the Spatial Maneuvering skill and would just crash into the earth.

Hmm. I guess now that I think about it, if he didn't have Spatial Maneuvering or Flight or something, teleporting him high up in the air would just mean that he'd be helpless to stop himself from falling.

I guess that was a pretty dirty move on my part.

Oops. My bad.

"Yikes..."

As Vampy finally figures out what I did, she pulls away from me, looking disturbed.

Excuse me, where do you get off reacting that way? You were fighting pretty dirty yourself.

Besides, why in the world doesn't Mr. Oni have Spatial Maneuvering?

He was holding his own pretty well against Vampy, yet he didn't even have such a basic necessity? What's wrong with you, dude?

I assumed he had Spatial Maneuvering when I teleported him way up high, so

I was just trying to buy time, not actually deal any damage.

But now it seems like I just dealt the finishing blow!

...Wait, so, like, is he dead?

Why is he just lying there and not moving?

Hellooo? You alive over theeere?

As I cautiously get closer, I can see that he's very, veeeery faintly still breathing.

He's literally on his dying breath, but at least he's still alive.

Even if he's in berserker mode because of Wrath, he can't even lift a finger anymore.

Hrmmm.

I hesitate for a bit, then beckon to Vampy, who timidly approaches.

C'mon—I'm not gonna do anything to you.

"Envy."

"Huh?"

"Wrath."

"What?"

Oh, come on! Do I have to spell everything out for you?!

Get a clue already!

"Use Envy on Wrath."

"Ahhh."

Finally understanding, Vampy holds out her hand toward Mr. Oni.

I don't think she actually has to do that to use the skill, but it does help set the mood.

While she's working on deactivating Mr. Oni's Wrath with Envy, I use my thread to retrieve the magic swords from his hands, just in case he starts thrashing around again.

Why use thread, you ask?

I don't wanna let my guard down and get slashed to ribbons, thank you very much.

Once I've got the swords, I tie him up with thread just in case.

I doubt he has the energy to fight anymore, but it's better to be safe than sorry.

Out of a warrior's sense of compassion, I wrap extra thread around his waist, too.

It's just... You know?

Mr. Oni's flames and stuff were all flying around him before, so his clothes are kinda... Yeah.

I'll refrain from going into detail for the sake of Mr. Oni's honor.

"It's done."

While I'm finishing that up, Vampy announces that she's disabled the Wrath skill.

The scary aura slowly vanishes from around Mr. Oni.

Without it, he just looks like an ordinary young boy, lying there on the verge of death.

He might actually die if we just leave him like that, so I decide to heal him.

His broken limbs return to normal, the bones that were exposed from acid burns are covered by new flesh, and healthy skin begins to form.

Conjuring healing is probably pretty advanced, but since I had the highest level of Healing Magic before, the Miracle Magic skill, I can reproduce it to heal even mortal wounds like this with ease!

As his wounds fade, Mr. Oni's sleeping face becomes more peaceful...or not.

There's nothing peaceful about that anguished grimace, to be honest.

But, well, at least he's sleeping! Good job, me!

I don't know how he's going to react when he wakes up, but at least we've

knocked him out for now.

“So it is done.”

Now that things have settled for the time being, Güli-güli approaches with his dragon, who he appears to have fully healed from her beat-up state.

Güli-güli walks over to me and stands there in silence.

Is it just me, or have we been in this situation before?

Last time, I’m pretty sure we just stood there without talking until the Demon Lord showed up, but you know she’s not coming this time, right?

“Truly, you saved my life. Allow me to express appreciation in my lord’s place. Thank you.”

The dragon behind Güli-güli ends our awkward little standoff.

“I am the Ice Dragon Nia. Pleased to make your acquaintance. I spend most of my time idling away in the Mystic Mountains, so do come visit anytime. And bring gifts, of course.”

Which is it? Is she thanking us or demanding tribute?

“Nia.”

“I know, I know. Now stop being bashful and thank them, too, my lord.”

Bashful? Is that what this is?

As Güli-güli heaves a deep sigh, he looks more annoyed than bashful.

“Thank you. You were a great help.”

Wow, he actually thanked me.

But then he shuts up again.

What’s up with that?! The silence is killing me, dude!

Yes, being talked to is stressful, too, but I don’t exactly enjoy being stared at in silence, either!

“Still, I expected this to take at least a hundred years.”

Just as I thought the silence would last forever, Güli-güli mumbles something.

A hundred years? Whaddaya mean?

“It appears you’ve mastered conjuring quite well already. My presumption was that you would be powerless for a hundred years or more, but clearly I was mistaken.”

With that, he heaves a depressed sigh.

Uh. Okay.

I guess Güli-güli, my *senpai* in godliness, thought I wouldn’t get my powers back for another hundred years or so.

A hundred years? Are you kidding me?

And wait a second, does that mean I’ll still be alive in a hundred years?

I don’t know what happens to my life span now that I’ve been deified, so I guess that’s possible in theory...

“From what I’ve seen, you have an even greater grasp of spatial conjuring than I. With that power, you could easily leave this planet, I am sure.”

Say what?! You mean the space master Güli-güli is giving my spatial conjuring the stamp of approval?! Geez, I’m so talented, it’s scary even for me!

It’s no big surprise, though. I’ve always been a genius, after all!

Still, you’re saying I could leave this planet?

I didn’t see that one coming.

Huh. So if I use spatial conjuring, I could actually leave this whole planet.

I guess that makes sense. With Teleport, I could cross space and even go to another planet.

So I can leave this planet anytime I want.

“Personally, I would have no complaints whatsoever if you were to leave. In fact, it would be rather appreciated, since that would mean the removal of an unpredictable element.”

Uhhh. Okay.

Mr. Güli-güli, is that a roundabout way of telling me that you’d be better off if

I wasn't around?

I guess it wasn't really roundabout at all.

So you're basically telling me to GTFO?

"My lord, that seems a bit impolite..."

"Of course. Pardon me."

At Nia's prompt, Güli-güli apologizes.

Um, I guess it's fine.

It sure is painfully clear what Güli-güli really thinks of me now, though.

"I will let you deal with that reincarnation. As for your recompense..."

"Ow?!"

Güli-güli suddenly pulls off one of Nia's scales, then walks over to Vampy, who's hiding behind me.

"Let me see that."

Güli-güli indicates Vampy's broadsword.

Reluctantly, she holds the weapon out to him.

Güli-güli takes the sword and presses the scale against it. Then the scale vanishes into the sword.

"I have infused it with the power of Ice Dragon Nia. As you have a natural inclination toward the Ice attribute, it should serve you well."

Wowie.

He must've used his administrator powers or something to enhance Vampy's broadsword.

It was already a powerful weapon made out of material from the legendary-class monster Fenrir, and now it's got the materials of the powerful Ice Dragon Nia, too.

This thing's definitely gotta be mythical class now.

I can tell from Vampy's face as she takes the sword back that it must be crazy

strong now.

Her stupid eyes are sparkling like crazy.

“This is the most I can offer. Is there anything you wish for along those lines?”

Güli-güli looks at me.

Hmm. I dunno—that’s a tough question.

I didn’t end up using a weapon in this fight, but I do have my giant scythe.

And anything else I want, I could probably get my hands on without Güli-güli’s help.

“Perhaps I can offer a reward, then.”

All at once, my body shivers as if all the warmth has been drained out of it.

That voice is speaking directly inside my head.

The smartphone it normally comes out of is nowhere to be seen.

Like it or not, this difference makes me even more nervous than usual.

“I’d like to give you an extra-special reward for granting me such an entertaining show.”

Meanwhile, the voice keeps speaking.

Beautiful and calm, yet enough to fill anyone who hears it with anxiety.

“So hurry up and come see me, please.”

A horrible chill runs through me, as if an icicle has been stabbed into my spine.

“Is something wrong?”

Güli-güli gives me a puzzled look.

He’s a literal god, and I guess even he couldn’t hear that voice.

“No thanks.” I can’t even tell if I’m still standing or if my response is actually coming out of my mouth. “I don’t need a reward. We’ll take care of him, so I’d rather you didn’t interfere. Can you promise me that in place of a reward?”

“V-very well.”

I do my best to keep myself from shaking.

To be honest, I want to go straight home and hide in bed.

But I can't say that.

"Sophia. Don't stop suppressing his Wrath skill with Envy until he wakes up."

"R-right."

After giving a necessary command, I lift the unconscious oni over my shoulder.

"Okay if I tell the Demon Lord about this place?"

"...I would prefer that you didn't, but I will leave that decision up to you."

I guess I'm free to choose whether to tell the Demon Lord about this rest area for souls, then.

It seems like Güli-güli would personally prefer that I didn't, but since he told me about it as a show of good faith, he isn't going to restrict me from doing so.

"Okay. Then we'll go back now."

"All right. Thank you for your assistance."

Vampy, Mr. Oni, and I all teleport back to the duke's mansion.

The puppet spiders run up to greet us.

"Riel. Put him in your room. And keep watch. Tell me if anything happens."

The puppet spiders freeze in place as I give them orders.

Riel and Fiel have rooms of their own, but they always hang out in my room instead, so we might as well put one to good use now.

Riel stares at me in awe, then slowly picks up Mr. Oni and takes him to her room as instructed.

He's tied in my thread, so even if he wakes up in a violent mood, it should be fine.

The other little girls are looking at me, too, but I don't have time to indulge them right now.

“Going to sleep.”

With that, I collapse onto my bed.

Then I cover the whole bed with thread, shutting out the rest of the world.

I curl up in a ball, trying to rid myself of the voice echoing in my ears.

But the words won't leave my head.

Hurry up and come see me, please.

That sentence wraps around my mind like a curse.

I cover my ears with my hands.

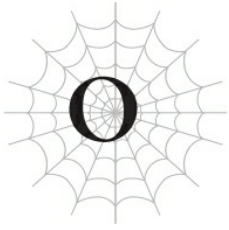
It won't help, but I just had to do it anyway.

I know I do.

I can't keep running away forever.

Soon I'll have to meet the person behind that voice.

I'll have to meet D.



WRATH

That old, familiar workshop.

This is my personal room in an online game.

The game I started playing when the new friends I made in high school, Shun and Kanata, invited me to join them.

Since they had already started the game, I chose the blacksmith job, a support role, to round out our party. It seemed like the best way to avoid getting in the way of Shun's and Kanata's characters, who were both pure battle types.

Although my intentions were rendered moot, since the two of them were always kind and helpful to me as a newbie.

That made me really happy.

When they fought alongside me and matched my pace instead of just power-leveling me, I knew I'd be able to forge a good friendship with these two.

We went farming for blacksmithing materials together and hunted monsters that dropped items needed to enhance our weapons.

When one of us couldn't come, the other two would play together, and on the rare occasion that we couldn't even do that, then I did blacksmithing by myself.

It was a pretty rewarding style of game play.

When the other two used weapons or armor that I made for them, that alone was enough to make me feel good.

Crafting jobs really aren't half-bad.

My father and grandfather ran a small factory.

When I was little, I didn't know what exactly they were making there, but I guess it was some kind of machinery parts.

"We make these things because people need 'em, but now that the big manufacturers make 'em, the bastards all go to the enemy side."

My grandfather often complained about this.

Evidently, a bigger factory had appeared that could mass-produce the parts, so companies that had been buying from my family's factory ended their contracts with us.

Even longtime customers of many years ended their allegiance, casting aside my grandfather to take their business elsewhere.

My grandfather took great offense to this and turned to drinking when the factory went under, succumbing to liver cancer just a few years later.

My father must have sensed early on that the factory's days were numbered; as soon as the contracts were broken, he resolved to sell the factory and got a job at another company.

Ironically enough, we lived better off his new salary than when he was running the factory.

Maybe that upset my grandfather, too.

But it's not as if my father didn't feel anything when he sold the factory.

Unlike my grandfather, he wasn't the type to talk very much, but I often saw him gazing at the site where the factory had been with a muddled expression.

That definitely wasn't the face of a man who had accepted what happened.

I think the reason I came to have such a strong sense of right and wrong is because I grew up watching my father and grandfather.

Both of them felt pride and attachment toward their factory.

But then it was crushed solely for the convenience of the companies who broke their contracts with them.

Yet those companies simply made new contracts with a bigger factory and improved their business as a result.

So unfair.

My father and grandfather silently devoted themselves to making mechanical parts, like warriors pledging their loyalty, yet in return, they were simply tossed aside.

Is there any justice in that?

No.

I'm sure those companies had their excuses, like costs and business practices.

But that was hard for me to accept when it put my father and grandfather through so much suffering, while the companies responsible got off blame-free.

That's why when I saw something wrong—even if it wasn't forbidden by law, even if other people looked the other way—I couldn't just let it slide.

Then again, I guess I was always a bit like that even before the factory went under, so maybe I would've been that kind of person even without my father's and grandfather's influence.

But that incident is definitely what encouraged me further down that path.

I always tried to do what was right.

And I always tried to correct the things that seemed wrong.

But the real world isn't so simple.

If doing the right thing was enough to make everything go well, then the factory wouldn't have closed.

By the same token, even if I did things I thought were right, it often made the situation worse or led to me being thought of as the bad guy.

Part of the problem was that I often tried to solve things with pure violence.

Maybe that's all right for fights between little kids, but in my case, my methods didn't change even as I got older.

That's why people called me the "little ogre" and got mad at me.

Violence isn't the answer.

Everyone knows that, but I always chose that answer anyway when I wanted

to do what I felt was right. I'll be the first to admit, I was full of contradictions.

It took longer for me to realize that than the other kids.

So in high school, I decided to be more docile.

As soon as I did that, my wild life changed drastically.

I was able to enjoy a peaceful everyday: life without violence.

Just by giving up violence and looking away from things I found unjust, I could have the same life as any ordinary high school kid.

I was even blessed with the friendship of Shun and Kanata and started to enjoy school.

But are you really all right with this? a voice asked me deep down.

I didn't have an answer for that.

Now, somehow, I'm in my room in the goblin village.

Well, not so much *my room* as the only room in the house, shared by the whole family.

Goblin architecture isn't exactly state of the art, and since they live in the scarce environment of the Mystic Mountains, a single one-room home for each family is the best they can do.

In the midst of this ramshackle room, I was making weapons.

A lot changed after I discovered my Weapon Creation skill.

The utensils I made with the skill, like forks and knives, were distributed throughout the village, and I was able to create farming tools as well, making our lives easier.

As the name implies, the Weapon Creation skill can make only things that can be used as weapons, but I was actually able to make a pretty wide variety of farming tools. Maybe it's because they've been historically used as weapons in uprisings and such.

And then there's the intended use of the skill: making actual weapons.

Once I learned to make good-quality weapons, our hunting efficiency became

much higher.

Thanks to that, the hunting goblins brought back more monster meat and lessened the state of starvation in the village, and the range that they could explore and hunt in expanded.

Still, that doesn't mean everything got better.

Goblins I knew around the same age as me still froze to death or got eaten by the vegetables in the field if they got the harvest time wrong.

You're probably thinking that doesn't make any sense, but the only vegetables strong enough to grow in the cold of the Mystic Mountains were man-eating monster plants...

The first time I saw that, I almost passed out from the shock.

And there were other goblins I looked up to like older brothers who never came back from hunting, and so on.

That being said, there were good times, too, like when my older brother luckily evolved into a hobgoblin.

My family consisted of my two parents, four older brothers, six older sisters, me, and one younger brother and sister each, for a total of fifteen people.

For humans, that would be a huge family, but for goblins, it's pretty standard.

Their pregnancies are fast and their fertility rate is high, so a lot of children can be born in a short span.

That being said, goblins' mortality rate is high, too.

From what I've heard, I used to have four more older siblings, and I had a younger brother who was stillborn.

That was a difficult time.

He was going to be my first little brother.

But he didn't make it.

Our whole family cried together, and I lost my appetite for a while.

The person who comforted me in that time was my eldest brother, Raza-Raza.

Although I guess I don't know if you could really call that "comforting."

What he actually did was punch me.

"You can't just sit around moping forever. Eat and live a healthy life. That's the duty of those of us who still live."

With that, he forced me to eat.

Literally—he pried my mouth open and shoved food down my throat.

From that point on, if I ever seemed depressed at mealtime, he would force-feed me again.

I thought it might actually kill me, but at least it pulled me out of my depression.

Raza-Raza's word was law, and more importantly, my mother was pregnant with a new child by then.

Goblins have an amazing will to live.

And soon, my little sister was born.

Right away, I swore I would protect her.

For the sake of my little brother who didn't get a chance to live, as well.

In actuality, I did get a little brother not long afterward, but I still doted on my little sister most of all. It's not that I didn't dote on my little brother, too, but because of the vow I made, I paid the most attention to her.

In exchange, she became attached to me, too, and we were always together.

When I was making things with Weapon Creation, my little sister would sit nearby and watch quietly.

And when the weapon was finished, she would clap and cheer as if nothing could make her prouder.

So of course I couldn't help adoring her.

That encouragement made me even more determined to keep forging things.

Just like when I did blacksmithing in that game, it was fun to create things that were helpful to others. It made it feel worthwhile.

There was nothing more satisfying than having something I made be needed and useful to others.

Maybe that was how my father and grandfather felt when they were running the factory.

The scene changes again.

“Run away!”

My older brother Raza-Raza was one of the best warriors in the village.

He was a high goblin, the evolution of a hobgoblin, so his stats were far higher than any ordinary goblin.

I was so proud of my big brother.

All my other brothers looked up to Raza-Raza.

But now, he was riddled with wounds and shouting for everyone to run.

So I obeyed, taking my sister's hand and fleeing.

Humans were attacking the village.

There had been warning signs of this. The hunting parties had been seeing humans more frequently lately.

Because of the weapons I made for them, the better-equipped hunters had expanded the range of their exploration.

And eventually, it expanded to the outskirts of a new human village created at the foot of the Mystic Mountains.

The humans were alarmed by that, so they decided to go on the offensive.

As a result of those attacks, most of the evolved goblin fighters, who were in the hunting parties, were killed in action.

And now, the humans were attacking the goblin base, our village.

With the very weapons I had created in their hands.

It was awful.

I had made those weapons for the hunting parties.

They were never meant to be used by humans to attack our own village!

They stole from the hands of the hunters the weapons I'd painstakingly made and turned them against the village, of all places.

That reality was incredibly upsetting for me.

And so was the fact that I was too weak to stop them.

I grew fast for a goblin, but I was still so young.

As an ordinary, unevolved goblin, my only use was creating weapons.

If even the hunters couldn't contend with these humans, then I wouldn't stand a chance.

So I ran.

It was humiliating, but my little sister's life was in my hands, too.

I swore on my own life that I would protect her.

But then one man blocked our path as if to laugh in the face of my resolve.

Without a moment's hesitation, I threw a weapon I'd made that day at the man and tried to flee in a different direction.

But the man dodged my throw easily and quickly darted around us to stand in my way again.

It was clear from his movements alone that the man's stats were far higher than mine.

"Hmm?"

I was out of options.

As I tried desperately to find a way out anyway, the man looked at me bemusedly.

Then he put his hand on a stone necklace around his neck and muttered something.

It was in a different language from the one goblins used, though, so I couldn't understand what he was saying.

Still, the chill that ran through my body as if gripping my very bones told me

that he was doing something to me.

The man narrowed his eyes.

I didn't know what he was doing, but this was my chance.

I tried to turn on my heels, but the man grabbed my head before I could move and pinned me to the ground.

"Nnngh?! Guh?!"

A shriek escaped my lips before I could stop it.

It wasn't just the pain of being pushed down but the strange feeling that was seeping into me from the man's hand.

What's going on?!

Pain and unease assailed me, like a foreign substance was flowing into my body.

At the same time, I felt an unfamiliar sensation, like my mind was being tainted by something.

I gnashed my teeth, trying to fight it off.

It was enough to keep a hold of my mind, but my body was starting to refuse to obey me.

I struggled to shake free of the man's grip, but my strength was quickly draining away.

In the corner of my eye, I saw my sister standing frozen in place.

Run, I wanted to say, but my mouth wouldn't move.

The man let go.

But my body still wouldn't do what I wanted.

I tried to stand up, but I couldn't even lift a finger.

It was like my body wasn't even my own.

In reality, that's exactly what was happening in that moment.

And then, and then...

The scene changes.

The inside of a house, far more solidly built than any in the goblin village.

This was the human village at the foot of the Mystic Mountains, the base of the men who had destroyed the goblin village.

There, I was being forced to make weapons.

My sister was no longer by my side.

Instead, I had two new titles: Ally Slayer and Kin Eater.

I had been enslaved by Buirimus, one of the men who had attacked the goblin village.

It was entirely against my will.

I was forced to obey and do whatever he asked.

So unfair.

Why did this have to happen?

As much as I thought about it, there was no answer.

When I finished creating a weapon, Buirimus would look at it with satisfaction and take it away.

The stone hanging from Buirimus's neck was a high-level Appraisal stone.

There was an Appraisal stone in the goblin village as well, which was how we had found out that I had the Weapon Creation skill, but Buirimus's was of a higher quality.

My skill is the reason he enslaved me instead of killing me.

It would've been better if he had.

My Weapon Creation skill doesn't exist to be used by the likes of you people.

But every day, I was forced to make weapons, and every single one of them went into those humans' hands.

I was frustrated.

And more than that, I was angry.

Though hatred welled up inside me, I couldn't escape from Buirimus's control, so I kept making weapons.

The scene changes again.

In the Mystic Mountains, Buirimus was forcing me to kill monsters he had enslaved.

It's called power-leveling.

Weapon Creation uses my MP to make weapons.

So if I raise my level and evolve, I get more MP, which means I can make more weapons of better quality.

As we repeated this process, I soon evolved into a hobgoblin.

This evolution has an important meaning to goblins.

Normal goblins have an incredibly short life span, often less than ten years.

But if a goblin evolves into a hobgoblin, they acquire a life span on par with that of humans.

So goblins will always join the hunting parties for a time in order to defeat monsters, raise their levels, and evolve into hobgoblins.

In a way, it's also a rite of passage into adulthood.

By overcoming this challenge, a goblin can be seen as an adult for the first time.

Of course, many goblins lose their lives in the process.

So hunting isn't just a means of acquiring food but a holy ritual of sorts.

And yet, I was forced to evolve into a hobgoblin without any kind of ceremony or emotions.

I had always aspired to someday join the hunting parties and fight monsters alongside my fellow hunters.

But that never happened.

It was an evolution devoid of any sense of accomplishment.

Instead of my sister being there to celebrate my evolution, it was Buirimus

who looked on and nodded with a look of triumph.

And by his side was my brother Raza-Raza, the light completely gone from his eyes.

I wasn't the only one who Buirimus had enslaved.

Raza-Raza was one of his victims, too.

Buirimus's control over Raza-Raza went far deeper than it did with me; the defiance he had at the beginning soon faded, and now he was following Buirimus like a puppet with no will of its own.

This was once the greatest warrior in the village, my big brother, admired by all.

What would the others say if they could see him now?

Would they find him pathetic?

Or would they grieve and mourn for him?

Would they be enraged at Buirimus for making him this way?

All I can do is wonder.

Because everyone else from the village is gone.

The thought that I might someday end up the same way as Raza-Raza fills me with fear.

But the feeling that occupies my heart most is my hatred of Buirimus and the other humans.

Even if he can control my body, I will never let him have my mind.

The scene changes.

This time, it's another scene that never should have existed.

I doubted my own eyes at the time.

I thought it must be some kind of joke, albeit one in terrible taste.

Either that or maybe some kind of act in order to throw the enemy off guard.

But it wasn't. I know that all too well.

My brother Raza-Raza was laughing.

With the monster tamer Buirimus. The enemy of our village.

He looked like he was genuinely having fun.

There was even real respect and affection in his eyes.

That in itself should already never have happened, but what made matters worse was the pressed flowers he held in his hand.

Those flowers are very important to goblin culture. When a goblin goes out hunting, they take one with them as a token of good luck.

To goblins, hunting is a sacred ritual.

So when goblins leave to hunt, the goblins who stay behind give them hand-pressed flowers for good luck.

It's difficult work to find blooming flowers in the harsh cold of the Mystic Mountains.

But they always give the hunters flower charms.

And now Raza-Raza was holding several of those precious flowers.

Only one flower charm is given to each hunter, so those couldn't possibly be Raza-Raza's. Besides, it had already been some time since our village had been destroyed.

Pressed or not, Raza-Raza's charm should have wilted by now.

Then whose good luck charms was my brother holding?

I didn't want to think about it, but there was only one possible answer.

The flowers Raza-Raza held must have belonged to the warriors of a different goblin village, not ours.

And the fact that Raza-Raza was holding them meant that he must have attacked that village and likely destroyed it.

My vision went dark red.

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

Why? Why? Why? Why?

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

Why? Why? Why?

He betrayed us.

He dirtied his own pride.

I can't allow this.

<Proficiency has reached the required level.

Skill [Rage LV 9] has become [Rage LV 10].> <Condition satisfied.

Skill [Rage LV 10] has evolved into skill [Wrath].> <Proficiency has reached the required level.

Skill [Taboo LV 3] has become [Taboo LV 5].> <Condition satisfied.

Acquired title [Ruler of Wrath].>

<Acquired skills [Battle Divinity LV 10] [Enma] as a result of Title [Ruler of Wrath].> When I think about it now, I can speculate that Raza-Raza was acting that way only because Buirimus's control over him had proceeded so far, and that surely he wouldn't have wanted to do that if he was still in his right mind.

But at the time, I was too enraged to think about things that deeply.

The anger that built up inside me like scorching red heat burned everything else away, threatening to singe even my own body.

At the same time, the monster tamer's binding spell that constricted me burned away, too.

Ahhh. I'm free.

Now he can't stop me any longer.

I used the entirety of my strength to create a weapon with as much sheer destructive power as I could muster.

It created a terrifying flame sword, as if shaped by the ugly thoughts within me.

Without a moment's hesitation, I brought it down hard on the shameless

traitor.

Unable to react in time, the one I had once called brother was slashed to pieces and swallowed by an explosion of flames.

I turned to cut down Buirimus next, but as I should have expected, he had already moved away from me.

The other men trampled over to surround me.

Buirimus began to summon a new monster.

As if it mattered.

I don't care if I die in the process.

These men will know my rage.

And soon...

"So this is the justice I have reaped..."

I looked down on Buirimus in his final moments of life.

He and I were the only two left alive in this place.

I had killed all the others.

The enemy had far more military strength on their side. But I made up for that with Wrath, Battle Divinity, and, most of all, my unique ability to completely heal when I level up.

And killing even a few of the enemy was enough to raise my level, probably because it was so low to start with.

I used my HP, MP, and SP to the brink of death, then recovered by leveling up.

Then I fought until I was near death again and repeated the process.

It helped that at first, they had been holding back so as not to kill me.

My Weapon Creation skill was very valuable to them.

They couldn't afford to just get rid of that.

Their intentions had been very clear as they attempted to incapacitate me in battle rather than try to kill me.

And I had used that to my full advantage.

“How humiliating.”

Buirimus, the final survivor, was strong.

Both as a summoner and as a warrior.

He was far superior to any of the others in pure strength alone.

But now he was lying on the ground weeping.

“Do you...hate me?”

I didn't answer Buirimus's question.

Not because I couldn't. I had picked up their language during my time as Buirimus's slave.

But there was no point in answering.

Instead, I simply brought down the sword that I'd held above my head.

“Forgive me.”

With that, Buirimus breathed his last.

His final words were heavy with tenacity, as if he still stubbornly clung to life.

He must have had something he desperately wanted to do, even if it meant eradicating us goblins in the process.

He got what he deserved.

And yet, my heart still weighed heavily on me.

I felt a terrible sense of loss and helplessness.

And a lingering rage that burned beneath it all.

I pulled the Appraisal Stone off Buirimus's body and used it to Appraise myself.

There, I read the words <Evolution Available>.

I had two options: <High Goblin> and <Oni>.

I made my choice.

At the same time, I used the Naming skill to change my own name to a new one: Wrath.

Goblins take great pride in their names.

I had mostly used my Naming skill to give names to the weapons I made with Weapon Creation, which increased the weapons' performance. But I could also use it to change a goblin's name, which would increase their stats.

However, no goblin ever accepted that.

That's how much importance goblins place on their names.

Goblins' names are always the same two syllables repeated, after the name of a legendary goblin who had fought and died bravely in battle.

Like Raza-Raza or Razu-Razu.

Razu-Razu was my old name.

But I no longer had any right to call myself a goblin.

My pride and my prayers had all been overwritten by this rage of mine.

So I couldn't be a goblin anymore.

Now, I would be an ogre.

A simple ogre, controlled by nothing but wrath.

I howled to the heavens until the evolution process made me lose consciousness.

The scene changes again.

I ceased to be a goblin, lost my friends and family, and now even the target of my revenge was gone.

To be honest, I had lost any reason to live.

But I kept living anyway.

I didn't want to stay in the village where Buirimus had enslaved me, but now that I was no longer a goblin, it didn't feel right to go back to a goblin village. So by process of elimination, I took the path that went away from the Mystic Mountains.

The path led to land controlled by humans, and now that I had evolved into an ogre, adventurers attacked me with no questions asked.

I kept turning the tables on them and winning, until eventually a large-scale group of adventurers attacked me all at once.

But I staved them off with traps and magic swords I had prepared in advance.

I had lost sight of the meaning of being alive, but I kept fighting and surviving anyway, driven by the anger and stubbornness incurred in me by Wrath.

Then, after I defeated the group of adventurers, my next challengers were what appeared to be an official army. The old knight and old mage who led the army got the upper hand over me, and I was forced to flee.

As I ran away, a mysterious man inflicted the status conditions Fear and Illusion on me, and I ran around driven half-mad.

Next thing I knew, I was right back in the village where Buirimus had kept me.

I obliterated the troops who were evidently waiting there to ambush me, and only then did the truth finally hit me.

I didn't want to fight anymore. There was no reason to.

Ridiculous, I know.

I had gone on fighting for so long, propelled by rage and stubbornness, without even realizing that.

Then, completely exhausted, I cast all sense of shame and honor aside and tried to go back to the old goblin village. It would be deserted now, with no one else left, but I thought I could try to live there alone in secret.

But on the way there, I lost sight of my goal again.

Wrath had eroded my mind so completely that my thoughts were pulled back toward fighting.

I attacked the monsters that lived in the Mystic Mountains and completely forgot that I was originally there to return to the goblin village.

Then an incredibly strong dragon showed pity on me.

Ah, but wasn't it actually telling me to die, in a roundabout way?

After that, I fought a little girl who had six limbs, and then a different girl who was small but ridiculously threatening, and a man who was powerful despite his pale-looking face.

And for some reason, Wakaba, my classmate from my previous life, was there, too.

Around this time, I started to find my own memories a little weird and suspicious.

In a world with things like stats, it isn't that unthinkable for a little girl to be strong.

And having six arms could probably be explained by some item or something.

But Wakaba showing up? That can't have been real.

It must have been a dream or a hallucination.

And after that, the reality of things got even less clear. The rest must have been a dream or something.

I fought the monsters of the Mystic Mountains.

And a very, very strong old swordsman.

And then the dragon who had pitied me before stood in my way.

Lastly, I faced the girl with two arms and Wakaba.

...Okay, I guess *girl with two arms* sounds normal enough.

Maybe all this dreaming has gotten my mind jumbled up.

Huh? A dream?

For some reason, I was flying through the sky.

Not soaring freely, like a bird.

No, it was more like I was falling, not flying.

The ground got closer to me by the second.

I felt the terror that I was about to hit bottom.

And sure enough, my body crashed into the ground with a dull *thud*.

It felt like my body had been battered and broken.

If this was really a dream, aren't you supposed to wake up right before you actually hit the ground?

Wait, what? A dream?

That's right.

This is all just a dream.

A long, long, terrible dream.

"Huh?!"

I wake up with a start.

Is it normal in a dream to hit the ground without waking up, realize that this must be a dream, and only then wake up for real?

I feel awful.

My entire body is drenched in sweat.

But I didn't sit up sharply when I awoke.

Or rather, I couldn't, really.

"Huh? What's going on?"

My body won't move, even if I put all my effort into sitting up.

Confused, I look around, trying to figure out what is going on.

Luckily, I'm at least able to turn my head, so I can take in my surroundings.

It looks like I'm lying in a bed.

I'm covered by a blanket, so I can't tell what state my body is in. But it definitely feels like I'm being restrained by something.

Next, I look around the room.

It's a big room, much more impressive than the tumble-down house in the goblin village or even the one in Buirimus's village.

Is this a royal palace or something?

My confusion only deepens as I try to figure out why I would be lying in a

room like this.

Then I lock eyes with a little girl sitting near my bed.

Her almost artificial-looking eyes seem to pierce right through me.

For some reason, she reminds me of the girl with six arms.

Wait a minute.

Girl with six arms?

No, that must have been a dream, right?

There couldn't possibly be a girl with six arms in reality.

I'm having trouble figuring out which parts of those memories are a dream and which parts are real.

As I think about it, I realize that I have absolutely no idea how in the world I wound up in this fancy room. My most recent memories are hazy, like the moments between dreams and reality, and no use to me at all.

What happened, and why, and how did I get here?

"Uhhh...good morning?"

In my confusion, the only words I manage to muster sound stupid even to me.

But what else am I supposed to say?

In response, the little girl nods silently.

Then she picks up a bell lying next to the bed and rings it rhythmically.

Is that supposed to call a butler or something?

I saw that kind of thing in foreign films in my old life, but I've never actually seen one used in reality before.

Still, the sound this girl is producing with the bell is so unsteady that just hearing it is kind of stress-inducing.

In a way, it's almost impressive that she can display her lack of a musical ear so clearly just by ringing a simple bell.

Maybe that's a talent in its own right.

Not that I want to keep hearing it, though.

“Riel! Quit making that disturbing noise before it drives us all completely mad!”

The door flies open without so much as a knock.

There stands the girl with the two arms.

...Seriously, why do I keep thinking of her that way?

Oh, whatever. More importantly, I guess this means that the girl who appeared in what I thought was a dream has now shown up in reality.

So does that mean it wasn't a dream?

“Oh? So you're awake.”

The girl has two other little girls behind her.

I recognize one of them as the girl with six arms.

Although as far as I can tell, she only has two arms now.

“My dear Sophia, it's not very polite to barge into a gentleman's room without knocking. What will society think of you as a lady if you do such things? We're going to have to double down on your manners lessons.”

Another damn girl...

Starting to get a little irritated, I look at the new arrival.

Immediately, an indescribable chill runs through me.

“Huh?! What the—?!”

She looks like an ordinary enough girl.

A little older than the others, maybe, but still only in her mid to late teens at best.

But for some reason, that girl has the presence of an absolute monster.

Just looking at her makes my pulse run wild.

“Oh-ho-ho. You've got some promise if you can tell how strong I am without Appraisal, kid!”

The girl's carefree smile somehow looks like that of a vicious predator.

My every instinct tells my body to run, but I seem to be tied down at the moment, so I can't escape.

"Hmph!"

"Guh?!"

Suddenly, I'm thrown to the floor.

"You've got some nerve to ignore me!"

As the blanket gets dragged along with me, the culprit who tossed me onto the floor stands haughtily above me.

Judging by the conversation they were having before, this girl must be Sophia.

She's pretty obnoxious compared to the other little girls, who are standing by quietly.

"Oh, Sophia..."

"Well, he ignored me, all right, Miss Ariel? *Me!* You think I'd let him get away with just staring at you the whole time without even a glance at me? Of course not. Never!"

"...Well, I guess Envy is already affecting you a little. Oof. Can you just calm down for a second? I'm trying to have a conversation here."

The girl Sophia called *Miss Ariel* glares at her blandly.

In response, Sophia twitches and obediently falls silent. This Ariel must be the strongest person here.

"Now then, let's chat. Can you talk?"

I can't exactly deny it now.

The pressure she's exerting on me makes it difficult to open my mouth, so I just nod silently.

"Oh yeah? Glad to hear it. Guess we've cleared the first hurdle, then. Congrats on regaining control of your senses, by the way. And since you seem to understand human language, I'd say we've cleared the second hurdle, too."

Miss Ariel smiles cheerfully.

I don't exactly follow everything she's saying, but it doesn't seem like it's anything bad for me.

"Well, it'd probably be tough to have a conversation like this, so let's just... Ah, White's not here, so we can't actually release you."

Ariel comes over to me on the floor and touches the thread tying me up. It seems extremely thin, but it's been wrapped around in many layers, so I'm like a caterpillar in a cocoon.

No wonder I can't move.

"Yep, no can do. Thread Control isn't working on it. I don't think I can pull it off, either, and burning it would be way too dangerous, so that's out, too. I'm sure White can undo it once she gets back. But she went off somewhere and hasn't returned yet, yeah?"

"Right. She just disappeared without a word, even though I've told her to let me know where she's going at times like these. How dare she leave me behind!"

Sophia's voice has a hysterical pitch to it.

"Uh-huh. Right. We're gonna have to do something about this soon, aren't we? Merazophis, could you hold Sophia's hand for now or something?"

"Of course, madam."

A man steps forward quietly, startling me immensely.

How long has he been in the room?! I didn't even notice him at all.

Maybe it's partly because the other people here have a very intense presence, but still, it's crazy that I didn't sense him even a little.

"Your hand, if you please, young miss."

The man called Merazophis holds out his hand, and Sophia obediently takes it.

Not only that, she wraps both her hands around his and even presses closer to rub her cheek against it.

It kind of reminds me of a cat rubbing up against its owner, but I'm just gonna keep that to myself, since I don't know what would happen if I said it out loud.

"Sorry, but unfortunately, it doesn't look like we can untie you right now. Hope you don't mind if we just talk like this for the time being."

As she speaks, Miss Ariel hefts me up off the floor and puts me back in the bed. She even pulls the blankets back over me.

"Thank you very much."

For some reason, when I thank her, her eyes widen in surprise.

"Erm, what is it?"

"Oh, uh, nothing. I just wasn't expecting you to be so polite, that's all." Clearing her throat with a cute little "ahem," Ariel continues. "Anyway, let's start with introductions. I'm Ariel. The one in lovey-dovey mode over there is Sophia, and the guy she's clinging to is Merazophis. From the left, these kids are Sael, Riel, and Fiel. There's also White and Ael, but they're not here at the moment, so hopefully you'll have a chance to meet them some other time. In fact, we need White to untie you, so we'll be in trouble if you don't meet her."

It's so many introductions at once that I'm worried about whether I'll be able to remember them all, but with a lineup this crazy, I'm pretty sure it'll stick with me.

Except maybe Sael, Riel, and Fiel, whose names are confusingly similar. Are they sisters, maybe? They certainly look alike, in that they all seem like dolls.

"My name is Wrath."

When people introduce themselves to you, it's only polite to introduce yourself in return.

My name now is Wrath.

I don't have the right to call myself Kyouya Sasajima or Razu-Razu anymore.

"Okay. So let me cut to the chase here. How much do you remember?"

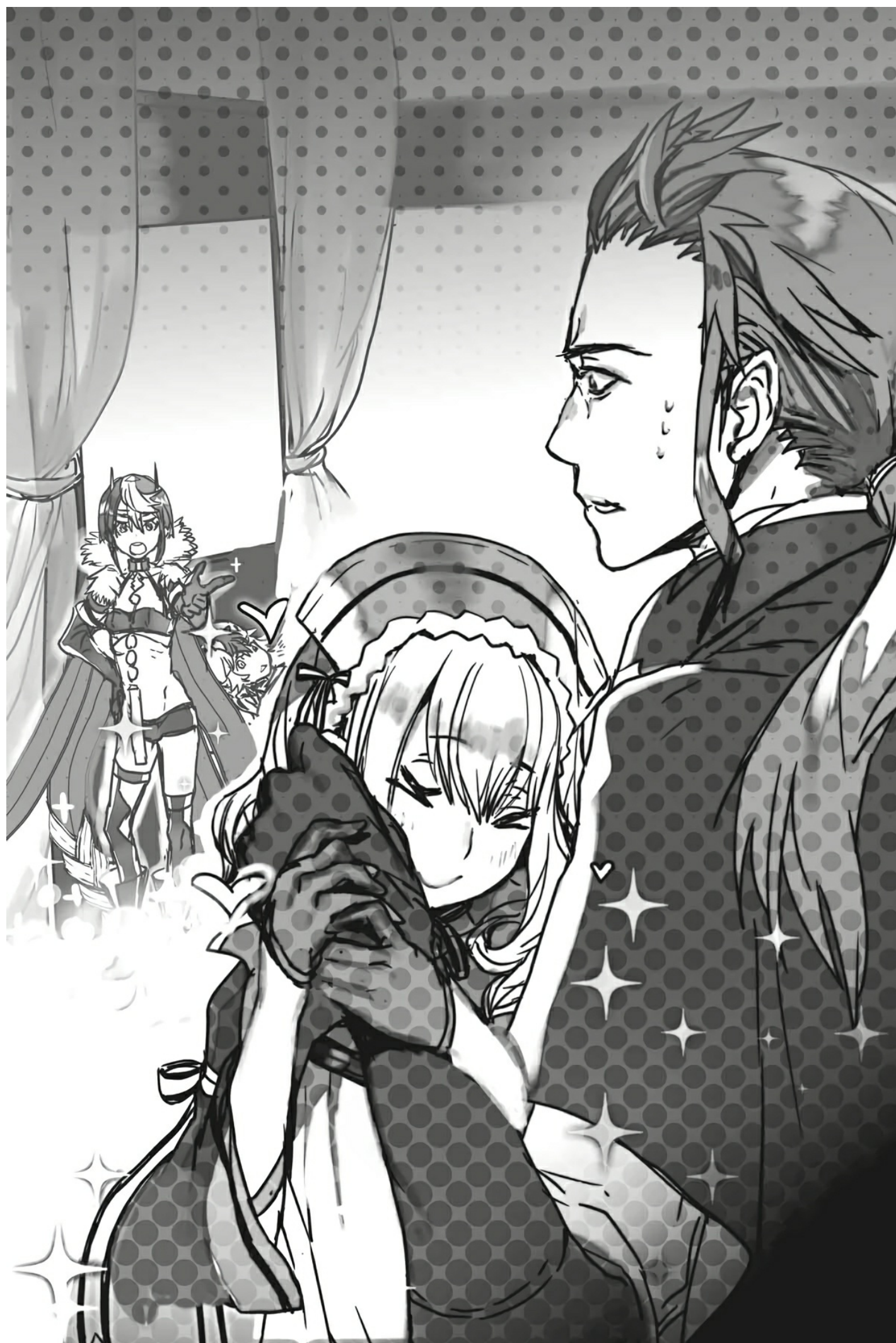
"How much...?"

I can't immediately come up with an answer.

As I've been realizing since I woke up, my memories take on a dreamlike, unreal quality at some point when I think back.

I don't know how much of it is real and how much is my imagination.

Then again, since Sophia and the other girls who I thought were a dream are standing right in front of me now, maybe all of it was actually real.



I don't know.

"I'm not sure."

When I respond honestly, Sophia glares at me menacingly.

"Sophia! Down, girl!"

Before Sophia can say anything, Ariel scolds her, so she promptly stops glaring at me and clings sulkily to Merazophis instead.

"Sorry we keep getting so rudely interrupted. So yeah, I'm sure you're already aware of this, but you've been on a rampage because you lost your sanity thanks to the Wrath skill. I can tell you what we observed of your actions in that time, so try to figure out which parts you remember."

Ariel goes on to tell me the history of my actions thus far.

I caused an uproar in a place called "the empire," where they referred to me as a "unique ogre."

I was chased out by the imperial army, ran into a troop of elves, and wiped them out.

I still remember all of that.

Although this is the first time I'm hearing that the troops I thought were waiting to ambush me after I fled from the old knight and mage were actually unrelated and were also elves.

After that, I fought Sophia and the others in the Mystic Mountains.

Then, after various twists and turns, I fought Sophia again, this time with a person called White, who's not currently present.

They soundly defeated me this time around, deactivated my Wrath skill to bring me back to my senses, and now I'm here...apparently.

It's all a little hazy, but I do remember it.

"Huh. So you haven't completely forgotten everything."

"In that case, you should let me punch you once! I haven't forgiven you for what you did to us, you know!"

Sophia sticks close to Merazophis as she yells at me.

I guess if all this is true, I did suddenly attack her and her friends without any provocation.

And on top of that, they nearly died because of it.

I would have no right to complain if she killed me, never mind just one punch.

“Down, Sophia!”

“It’s all right, Miss Ariel,” I say meekly. “I deserve it for everything I’ve done.”

But Ariel is still having none of it. “Yeah, no. If she punched you, you’d probably die.”

...I guess if what Miss Ariel said really did happen, then Sophia was holding her own against me while I had Wrath activated.

The stat boost from Wrath is probably the only reason I was able to fight her then, so now that it’s deactivated, I guess I might actually die if I took a direct hit from Sophia.

In fact, if Ariel is being so serious about it, I definitely would.

“So that’s a no on the punching, Sophia. Merazophis, go on and give her a hug.”

Sophia starts to protest until that last part of Ariel’s statement, which sets her face aglow.

On the other hand, now it’s Merazophis who looks like he wants to protest. But instead he gives up and leans down to silently give Sophia a stiff embrace.

...Seems like these guys have a pretty complicated relationship.

“Uh, so anyway, where were we? Oh, right! We were saying that you remember stuff at least a little. So does that mean you remember what White looks like?”

At that, it finally comes back to me.

The girl who was with Sophia during that fight.

But... Wait, what? Hang on a second.

If these memories are correct, does that mean it was real?

“Wakaba?” I ask hesitantly.

“Ding-ding-ding! We have a winner!”

Miss Ariel’s confirmation shocks me in all kinds of ways.

It’s so shocking that I don’t even know what I’m the most surprised about.

“So if White’s testimony is correct, does that mean you’re Kyouya Sasajima?”

I nod dumbly. At this point, I’m so shocked that it’s come back around to a sort of calm numbness.

“Great. Then you should probably know that all your former classmates have been reincarnated into this world. Although I haven’t actually seen all of them with my own eyes, so I guess this is technically just hearsay.”

Despite the disclaimer, Ariel seems confident that this information is true. It must have come from a pretty trustworthy source, then.

“And little Sophia here is—”

“Miss Ariel!”

“What? He’s gonna find out eventually, so better to just get it over with, right? Sophia is a reincarnation whose name in your world was Shouko Negishi.”

Despite Sophia’s protests, Ariel reveals her secret.

Shouko Negishi.

I remember her, of course.

But this person seems quite a bit different from the old Negishi.

“Waaah!”

Sophia latches on closer to Merazophis, glaring at me resentfully.

I’m not sure why she’s looking at me like that when it was Miss Ariel who revealed her identity, not me.

“But please don’t bother asking me about the other reincarnations besides Sophia and White. I don’t know anything. Oh, there is one thing about the elves we mentioned before, though. Seems like they’re real interested in the

reincarnations. They've even come after Sophia a few times. So they might have more information on the other reincarnations, but I can't say I recommend getting mixed up with them."

"Oh. I see." I was hoping she might know something about Shun or Kanata, but I guess it won't be that easy. "Um, may I ask one question?"

"Mm? What's up?"

"Do you know why we're in this world?"

It comes out like an abstract philosophical question, but luckily Miss Ariel seems to understand what I'm getting at.

"I guess you could say it was on the whim of a god."

We are alive.

There's never going to be a clear reason for that.

At least, that's what I got the feeling she was telling me.

After that, Miss Ariel tried to keep talking with me, but Sophia finally lost control and started raising a fuss, so Ariel wordlessly grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and dragged her out of the room. Flustered, Merazophis quickly followed them.

After a little while, Ariel comes back alone.

I decide it's better not to ask what happened.

"I'm sure you've got a lot of thoughts to sort out, so let's call it a day for now. You can stay here as long as you like, so give some thought to what you want to do next, too. Oh, and..." Ariel pauses. "If you want to know about this world, maybe you should ask Taboo."

With that, Ariel leaves the room.

The only other person who remains is Riel, who's been in the room from the beginning.

She's acting like I'm not here or something and keeps occasionally waving at an empty space in the room.

Is something there? I certainly don't see anything...

Anyway... Taboo, huh?

With all the leveling up and evolving I've been doing, my Taboo skill maxed out somewhere along the way.

Like Miss Ariel said, I can get an idea of what's going on with this world from Taboo.

I should probably take some time to look over its contents in detail.

...Although I get the feeling I don't necessarily want to know.

But still, I have to look anyway.

It's about the world that I'm living in now, after all.

Living... Hmm.

If I'm thinking about things like that, I guess that means I still have the will to live, huh?

Ever since I killed Buirimus, I've been living solely out of stubbornness.

And that stubbornness led me to kill many innocent people along the way.

Ariel told me about my actions from a neutral observer's perspective.

They certainly seemed like the actions of a monster.

Rampaging about in anger, disrupting the lives of innocent people and killing them.

It's unfair.

For the people I killed, nothing could be more unfair.

I committed the exact kind of injustice that I always hated more than anything else.

I'm horrible.

So do I really have any right to live?

Do I still *want* to live, bearing the weight of those sins, having lost sight of any purpose?

I don't know.

But I don't think I want to die, either.

"Hey, buddy. How ya feeling?"

The next day, Ariel comes to visit me again, alone this time.

Maybe she figured we wouldn't be able to get anywhere with Sophia around.

"Sorry. We still don't know where White is, so I guess you're gonna be stuck like that for a little longer. Hang in there, okay?"

Ariel looks deeply apologetic.

I tried a few things myself over the last day to see if I could get out, but nothing worked.

What in the world is this thread made out of? It's incredibly strong.

Still, while it's inconvenient to be stuck like this, it hasn't been that big of a problem thanks to Ariel kindly taking care of me.

As long as you don't count the embarrassment of being cared for by someone who looks like a little girl.

Or saying "Ahhh" and being spoon-fed by the same little girl.

...Okay, maybe this *is* a big problem.

"Hrmmm. I mean, it should be weak to fire, so I guess we might be able to burn it off somehow..."

"I'd appreciate that."

"But it'd still take a considerable amount of firepower, so you'll probably get burned, too."

"Still, I'd appreciate it, please."

Giving in to my insistent request, Ariel burns the thread away, releasing me.

I sustain some fairly severe burns in the process, but I have HP Auto-Recovery, so that'll heal eventually.

It's still better than being humiliated like that any longer.

"Thank you very much. I feel like I've finally been set free."

“No problem. I’m, uh, sorry about that.” Ariel must’ve been able to tell how relieved I was, though there was no need for her to apologize. “So now that you’re free and all, whatcha wanna do next?”

“What do I want...?”

“Sure. If it’s something I can help with, I don’t mind lending you a hand. You can also just stay here if you want. And if you’re not sure yet, you’re welcome to hang around until you figure it out. You don’t need to pay or anything.”

“Why would you do all this for me?”

Ariel is being far too kind to me.

Especially considering that I could’ve killed her friends.

“Oh, I dunno. Half out of sympathy, half out of self-interest, I guess,” she replies indifferently. “The first half’s because I’ve got an inkling of some of the stuff you’ve been through, so I feel for ya, enough to understand why you wound up with the Wrath skill. And the second half is because being nice to reincarnations won’t displease a certain god, I guess. Maybe I’ll even gain a little favor for it, although I’m not holding my breath.”

She knows what I’ve been through and feels sympathy for me?

I’m not sure how much Ariel knows about me, but I certainly never talked about what’s happened to me in the past. So it’s unclear how much of her information is true, but whatever it is, I guess it was enough to elicit some sympathy.

Huh. So I guess what I’ve been through warrants being pitied by others.

For some reason, I feel detached from this realization.

And then there’s the self-interest part.

If she’s good to reincarnations, then a god might be good to her.

When I asked her yesterday about why we wound up in this world, Ariel answered that it was the whim of a god.

I thought that might have some deeper meaning to it, but I guess it must have been literal.

Gods really do exist in this world, after all.

Literal, genuine gods who created this system.

So it makes perfect sense that we would be living in this world thanks to a whim of that god.

And evidently, that same god has taken a liking to us reincarnations.

Which is why Ariel says she's being kind to us.

I guess that logic is fairly self-serving.

"To be honest, I don't know what I want to do just yet."

I've already lost any meaning my life once had.

I don't have any desires or ambitions.

I'm an empty shell, filled with nothing but the sins I've committed.

"Miss Ariel..."

But I'm still living.

I still don't consider dying an option.

"Is there anything I can do for this world?"

So I think I'm going to keep on living.

In this world on the brink of destruction.

It's not anything so grandiose as atonement, but if I'm going to keep living, I've decided I want to live with purpose.



ARRIVAL IN JAPAN

Moonlight faintly illuminates the classroom.

With my Clairvoyance and Night Vision, I can see easily even in these dim conditions, but it might be too dark for any normal person to make anything out.

But there's nothing inside the classroom anyway.

No desks, no chairs, nothing.

The fact that what would normally be a place of learning for students is totally empty is proof enough in itself that something happened here.

I try pulling the handle, but the door stays firmly shut. Maybe it's locked. It's almost as if it's been sealed off from the outside so that nobody knows what happened in this classroom.

I thought for a moment about forcing it open, but I don't want to do anything too extreme, in case it attracts the attention of security.

Giving up on walking around the school, I use my x-ray vision to make sure nobody's on the path outside before teleporting there.

When I turn around, I see a perfectly ordinary school, the kind you might find anywhere.

Heishin High School.

The school us reincarnations all went to in our former lives.

I'm back, although it doesn't feel like much of a homecoming.

But I really am here right now.

On the planet called Earth, in the country called Japan.

When Güli-güli informed me that I could leave the planet and D told me immediately afterward to come see her, I had the idea of teleporting to Japan.

I can teleport anywhere I want to now just by thinking about a place, as I proved when I teleported to the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

I wasn't sure if I'd actually be able to teleport somewhere that I've never been in this life, but if what Güli-güli and D said was true, then it should be possible.

Otherwise, they wouldn't tell me to do it.

So all that was left was to test it out.

...To be honest, it's not like it had never occurred to me to leave that planet.

I knew that now, after undergoing deification and casting off the yoke of the system, I could probably do it if I tried.

Obviously, it would make more sense to get my butt to some other planet right away instead of hanging around on a planet that's about to die.

The Demon Lord's done a lot for me, but even then, I'd be better off leaving everything behind and escaping from that planet.

And I always put my own life first.

Why would I throw that away just to stay on that crummy old planet?

So really, as soon as I figured out that I could teleport, the best choice would have been to immediately leave the whole planet behind.

The reason I didn't do that is simple: I was afraid.

Even with teleportation, there's only one place I could possibly go to outside of that planet: here, in Japan, on planet Earth.

No matter how impressive my teleportation might be, there's no way it could take me somewhere I've never been or even seen before.

The only place I could go is the one that's connected to my old life.

And once I came here, I knew I would have to face the truth that I've been avoiding all this time.

I was afraid to do that.

So I pretended to have forgotten that I could teleport here, stretching out my time for as long as I could.

I still haven't mastered conjuring yet.

There's still so much I have to do.

Not yet, not yet, not yet...

I kept dragging it out, but I've finally run out of time.

I can't keep avoiding the truth forever.

Maybe it's for the best that D invited me here. She might have even done it with that in mind.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm down.

The air smells different here.

Compared to that other planet, full of the stink of blood and battle, this place just smells like school and a sort of relaxed freedom.

Most of all, it reeks of exhaust fumes.

I'm not particularly enhancing my senses, but since it's been so long since I smelled the stuff, I can't help but be extra sensitive to it now.

It's like a whole other world, as they say. And I guess in this case, that's true.

Overcome with emotion, I look up at the sky, where I see the stars and the one moon.

The stars are in different places, and the moon's different, too.

Everything is different.

Definitely feels like I'm away from home.

This is supposed to be the country I came from, but I'm tense, as if I'm in enemy territory.

In reality, I don't think that's far from the truth.

...All right, I can't just stand around like this forever.

No point in dragging things out any further.

Looking away from the sky, I face forward instead and start walking. Before long, there are more people around me than before.

Heishin High is fairly close to the train station, so you don't have to walk long before you come out on the busy station street.

Even at night, there are still a lot of pedestrians.

A few of the people walking by glance at me, but they don't try to talk to me or anything, so I ignore them.

I did put on clothes that wouldn't seem out of place in Japan, since I'd stand out if I wore my usual fantasy-as-hell getup. The fact that people are staring at me anyway is probably inevitable because of the way I look to begin with.

I'm basically here illegally right now, so it'd be a bit of a pain if someone called the police on me, but a little bit of attention is probably just something I'll have to bear.

I walk along the sidewalk in front of the station, have a thought, and stop in at a nearby convenience store. Once inside, I pick up a random magazine and look at the issue number.

The date surprises me, even though I had a feeling it might be something like that.

It's already been more than five years in that world, but here on Earth it hasn't even been six months. I guess the flow of time is different.

Is this the special theory of relativity at work?

Okay, I don't actually know what the special theory of relativity is, so I have no idea.

But in a world with magic power and all that junk, I guess the laws of physics don't matter that much anyway.

Still, half a year, huh?

Nothing looks any different as far as I can remember.

I did think it was a little weird that none of the buildings or anything would have changed at all over the course of five years. So I thought maybe it hadn't

been that long, and sure enough, I was right.

While I'm at it, I flip through some of the manga magazines, then leave the convenience store without buying anything.

What? I should've bought something?

So I'm broke, so what?

Besides, the cashier was giving me a really weird look, since I was reading manga with my eyes closed and all.

So I had to get out of there.

Yeah. I guess I can use my x-ray vision on Earth, too.

So my magic works here just fine.

Of course, if it didn't work, I wouldn't have been able to teleport here in the first place, so I guess we already knew that the moment I arrived safely.

In novels and stuff, there's sometimes a thing where magic doesn't work on Earth because there's no magic power here or whatever, but I guess that's not the case.

I dunno why we never developed conjuring here, but whatever.

Maybe someone was pulling the strings behind the scenes or something, but that's none of my business.

If I couldn't use my x-ray vision, though, I wouldn't be able to keep my eyes closed.

Back in the world I came here from, I might've been able to make some excuse, but here I'm sure it'd cause quite an uproar if anyone saw my eyes.

And I really don't want that.

Maybe it'd be all right if I had sunglasses or something, but I don't, so I'm just walking with my eyes closed.

Weird looks? I don't care, as long as they don't call the police!

I'm not planning on sticking around that long anyway.

And if I do end up having to stay awhile for some reason, well, I'll cross that

bridge when I come to it.

There are lots of people in front of the station, so it must be rush hour right now.

I try to avoid the throngs of people and head in a less-crowded direction, from the station to a residential area.

The crowds thin out, and there are less shops and such around, too.

I keep going, walking with heavy footsteps that nevertheless don't stop.

It's not that far of a walk.

If anything, it's pretty close, although I'm not happy about that right now.

I'll be there any second.

I arrive at a single house, nestled between two bigger buildings.

It's a perfectly ordinary house, probably no more than ten years old.

The name on the front entrance is Wakaba.

I open the gate and walk up to the front door.

There's a decorative potted plant next to the door, and I reach in between its branches with my fingertips to retrieve a key.

Then I use that key to open the front door.

It's totally silent inside the house.

There's a staircase to the second floor right by the entrance, just like I remember.

Next to that is a hallway that leads into the first floor.

I head up the stairs without hesitation.

Then I open the first door I come upon on the second floor.



I can hear the faint sounds of a computer inside.

There's a game on the computer screen, where a bald character is dodging enemy attacks with ease.

The clacking of a controller echoes with his every move.

"Welcome. Or should I say welcome *home*?"

The girl holding the controller greets me without turning around.

Unable to respond right away, I stand there staring at her back and the computer screen.

The old bald guy attacks the enemy monster and kills it with one hit, and the words *Quest Complete* appear in big letters on the screen.

Taking that as an opportunity, the girl puts down the controller and turns around.

"This is the first time I've ever been here in my life. So I guess *welcome* is probably more accurate."

My words come surprisingly smoothly.

But I guess I know why.

I don't need to be careful with my words when I talk to this particular girl.

"I guess I should say...nice to meet you, the real Hiroyuki Wakaba. Or should I just call you D?"

The face of the girl who's turned toward me looks exactly like my own.

She has black eyes and black hair that trails loosely down instead of being tied in a braid, but otherwise we look more or less identical.

And I guess our expressions are just a little bit different.

"Nice to meet you...substitute."

The original version of me responds without a hint of emotion.

I was afraid to know the truth.

The truth that I'm just an imitation...a fake.



Evil Gods Don't Laugh

""Let's eat.""

D and I sit across from each other in the dining room on the first floor of the Wakaba family house, eating cup noodles.

Since it was right around dinnertime, D asked if I wanted something to eat before I left, so here we are.

The menu for the evening is cup noodles because there's no proper food in this house.

Hmm. Yeah, I guess I do have memories of only ever eating cup noodles and convenience-store food and junk like that.

This is such irrefutable evidence of that, I don't even know what to say.

Ahhh, cup noodles are sooo good, though.

You can't get these complicated flavors in the other world. They don't have a lot of interesting spices and chemicals to cook with over there.

The array of different flavors and ingredients in these cup noodles is so nostalgic.

Or at least it feels that way, although those memories aren't actually mine.

We both slurp our cup noodles in silence.

D and I both eat very slowly, taking small bites.

It takes about twice as long for us to finish our noodles as it would an ordinary person.

Neither of us says a word the whole time.

But despite the long silence, it doesn't feel awkward at all.

I'm not sensitive enough to other people's emotions to feel awkward in situations like this, and I don't know if D even has emotions in the first place.

Since the moment we met, her expression hasn't changed in the slightest.

I know I'm hardly one to talk, but D's even worse than I am.

Her face is like a mask, without any trace of subtle emotions.

To the point where I'm starting to wonder if she really doesn't have them at all.

Maybe it's true. She's always been pretty mysterious, but now that I'm seeing her face-to-face, she only seems even more so.

Normally, no matter how much a person tries to keep up appearances, you can get hints of their true feelings through their words and actions.

The tone of their voice.

The movement of their eyes.

Their gestures.

If you keep track of little things like that, you'll eventually get an idea of that person's true nature.

That's the case even for powerful beings like the Demon Lord and Güli-güli.

It might seem like the Demon Lord's personality has changed since she fused with one of my Parallel Minds, but her actual nature hasn't changed at all.

Unlike me, she's still stupidly honest and kind.

The longer you know someone, the more you notice their little subtleties, but there are usually hints that you can see even in a short amount of time.

But D doesn't have those.

Her tone, her eye movements, her gestures.

They're all unfathomable. I can't read anything from them at all.

It's not like she's so robotic that she doesn't show any emotions.

In fact, it's the opposite.

Her movements are very refined in a flesh-and-blood kind of way, making her captivating to watch.

But I can't even begin to guess what thoughts or feelings are behind those actions.

It's like I can see them, but I can't understand what I'm looking at.

All it seems like is *something* disguised as a human, pretending to be a person.

At that point in my analysis, I give up entirely on understanding D.

This isn't the kind of thing you can figure out with logic.

If I keep trying to do so, I can tell it's going to be futile.

There are some things you just can't understand.

And for me, D is one of those things.

I have to approach her as such, or I won't be able to think straight.

This must be what it feels like to lose sanity points...

Leave it to an evil god to whittle away at your mind just by having a conversation.

""Thanks for the food.""

We finish our noodles and put our hands together in thanks at the same time.

"Leave your trash and chopsticks in the sink, please."

Obediently, I put the chopsticks and the empty noodle container in the sink, and the two of us go back upstairs.

D then turns on her gaming console and starts up a fighting game.

"Here."

She hands me an arcade controller.

Holding a similar controller, D sits down a little to the side of the screen.

I follow suit, sitting slightly to the other side of the screen opposite D.

Thus, our battle begins.

For a while, the only sound is the clicking and clacking of controllers.

The battle ends in...my crushing defeat! Dammit!

Look, it's not my fault!

I've never held an arcade-style controller in my life!

I might know how to use it from the memories I have, but that doesn't mean I have the requisite muscle memory!

I try to do a *shoryuken* and end up doing a *hadoken*!

And why is my character crouching when I'm trying to backstep?!

Ugh! Even I have to admit, I'm awful at this!

But as we continue round after round, the discrepancies between my memories and muscles begin to amend themselves, and I start to get the hang of things.

I'm making less input mistakes than before, and I can more or less move the character the way I want.

But I still can't win.

The difference in our experience levels with this game is just way too severe.

D can control her movements down to the frame and predict my movements with such accuracy that I have to wonder if she's using Future Sight or something.

I myself can't use Future Sight, by the way.

Or, at least, not very well.

The Future Sight skill is a product of the system doing a massive amount of operations to predict the future with high accuracy.

I don't have the processing power to do all that by myself.

It's technically not impossible, but it takes so much focus that I pretty much can't do anything else.

So I can't use Future Sight in the middle of our matches, but it doesn't seem like D is using it, either.

In fact, judging by the flow of energy, she's not using any kind of conjuring at

all.

In other words, she's flesh and blood.

Which means she's physically weak, just like me when I'm not using conjuring.

This body of mine was definitely made based on D's body.

So the fact that she's beating me so thoroughly without any kind of conjuring means that her advantage is just the sheer difference in experience.

How much time would you have to commit to this to get so strong despite having such a weak body?

I can't help shuddering with fear.

Although we're just talking about a fighting game!

We keep battling late into the night, and when we're both starting to get tired, D makes another proposal: "Want to sleep over?"

I'm mad that I've been losing this whole time, so I quickly agree.

I set up camp in the empty room that's supposedly the parents' room, making it my own by putting up a bunch of thread, then go to bed.

I'll definitely win tomorrow!

Or if not, I'll at least take a single round!

...Huh?

What did I come here to do again?

Right, right, I came to meet D.

Yep. And now we've met, so my mission is accomplished.

If I wanna play fighting games afterward, I'm totally allowed to do that. Yeah.

...I'm not actually as shocked as I expected to be.

I thought meeting D was going to be a huge shock.

Since it would be unshakable proof that I'm a fake and all.

But now that I've seen her, all I can do is accept it.

That I'm just an imitation of D, the real Hiroyuki Wakaba.

I first became aware of D's existence when I acquired the Wisdom skill.

It all began when the Divine Voice (temp.) said D's name.

Next was when I encountered Black for the first time.

A smartphone appeared out of nowhere, and from it came a voice that called itself "D."

That was my and D's first contact.

After that, she continued to meddle with me once in a while. I always thought she was creepy, since I felt an unsettling sensation whenever we spoke.

I didn't figure out why until after I became a god.

When I underwent deification, my soul was completely transformed.

In the process, I noticed something that was stuck to my soul.

It was in my divinity field, my foundation.

In fact, it had swallowed me up entirely and become my very existence.

It was Hiiro Wakaba's memories.

The existence that wrote over my original self and became my being.

And whether I wanted to or not, I realized what that meant.

That I'm some other being entirely who just happens to have Hiiro Wakaba's memories.

Once I realized that, a lot of things that I'd had doubts or concerns about all clicked into place at once.

Like how I was always "nameless."

How Vampy always had her old name and her current name displayed, but I still remained nameless for some reason.

I never had the name Hiiro Wakaba.

That would explain why I had so few skill points, too.

The old me was a pretty insignificant living thing. Since skill points are a part of your soul's power, of course mine were low.

But the last nail in the coffin was the discrepancies between D's existence and my own memories.

D once told me that there was an explosion in the classroom she was in, and the other students who got caught up in the explosion were reincarnated in the world I was born in.

And as far as I could remember, there wasn't anyone else in the classroom who could've been D.

Except for me, Hiroyo Wakaba.

When I thought about it, there were a lot of undeniable contradictions and inconsistencies in my memories.

I don't even remember my parents' faces.

I thought of myself as a loser, but I also knew that I had a beautiful face.

And there were all kinds of obvious personality differences in between my memories and my current self.

Eventually, I realized D's true identity and my own.

There was a spider that had made its nest in the classroom.

The boys were going to squash it, but Ms. Oka stopped them.

In fact, she said it could be a biology lesson and even tried to get the class to take care of it.

Although that last part didn't happen, since the chosen students cried their eyes out and refused to do it.

Nevertheless, that spider stayed in the classroom.

It was surrounded by humans much larger than itself.

It could've died at any moment.

Most humans shunned it and thought it was creepy.

But it still desperately clung to life.

The lowest-ranking creature in the classroom...

That was me.

““Let’s eat.””

The next morning.

Our breakfast table is adorned with burnt toast and microwaved side dishes.

Hooray for this incredible society in which you can eat a proper meal without having to actually cook at all!

My only regret is that I can’t fit all this food into the tiny stomach of this body!

D doesn’t care about taste or amount as long as it’s edible.

Maybe our contrasting levels of gluttony is the biggest difference between D and me.

Well, that would make sense, I guess.

I didn’t start living with a clear sense of self until I hatched from that egg in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

It all started when I witnessed the bloodbath of my siblings and the horror of my giant mother and told myself, *I refuse to die like this!*

I’m sure I had a survival instinct in my old life as a spider, too, but it was this beginning that made me as determined to stay alive as I am now.

And after that, when I was on the verge of starvation and had to eat the corpse of one of my siblings, the mentality of *I have to eat to survive!* is what made me into such a glutton.

Without that experience, maybe I wouldn’t be quite so preoccupied with food.

Then there was the incident where my home was burned down and I realized that just surviving wasn’t enough.

Everything I went through after that is what made me who I am now.

At first, I was just a substitute for the real Hiroyuki Wakaba.

But my experiences in that world turned me into *me*.

I might be a fake, but the history I’ve built up for myself is real.

That thought calms me right down.

Maybe I'm not that shocked about meeting D because I had already braced myself for it, but I think it's also because I have this firm belief that deep down, I'm still me.

""Thanks for the food.""

Feeling refreshed as I finish breakfast, I put my utensils in the sink.

Then we go back to the room on the second floor.

It's game time!

Just like yesterday, our battle begins again.

But this time, one thing is different.

"While we're doing this, please listen."

D starts talking to me.

"Since you've made it all this way, let me explain from the beginning."

I'm guessing she's not talking about the fighting game we're playing right now.

"As you know, this all started when the Dimensional Magic of the hero and the Demon Lord interfered with this world."

Right. I guess I did hear about that before.

If I remember right, a previous hero and Demon Lord tried to transcend space to do something with Dimensional Magic and failed.

The misfired spell exploded in the high school classroom where D, Hiiro Wakaba, was sitting, and the shock waves killed all the students and their teacher.

Then D had them all reborn in the other world as the reincarnations.

"The reincarnations got caught up in this because of me. They're just innocent people who were hurt because I was playing at having a fun high school life. So in order to take responsibility for that, I set them up to get reborn in that world with some extra advantages. You knew all this, yes?"

Wait a sec.

What do you mean, *a fun high school life*?

Is that stupid idea the whole reason this evil god was pretending to be a high school student?!

And the reincarnations got killed because D was hiding out in their high school for such a stupid reason...

Yeah, I would certainly hope she'd take responsibility for that!

Those poor reincarnations!

"At any rate, that was all well and good. It was an unfortunate accident, but I set them all up for a nice new life, so my responsibility ended there. Although I won't deny I thought it would be more entertaining this way."

Wait a sec.

Are you sure the main reason wasn't just because you thought it would be entertaining, and "taking responsibility" was just an excuse?

Leave it to an evil god. She's cruel in all kinds of ways.

"But there was just one problem. How was I to fill the box that was meant for me?"

Huh? D's box?

I don't really get it, but I'm guessing if I just stay quiet and listen, she'll explain things.

"I was attending that high school under the false name of Hiroyo Wakaba. My disguise was perfect. I had a family register and all that, and Hiroyo Wakaba was even listed as an existing human in soul administration."

Hrmmm?

I'm not sure what *soul administration* is, but if she's mentioning it in the same category as a family register, does that mean that souls are all recorded somewhere just like a family register?

We're all being managed by some unknown network of the gods!

S-say whaaat?!

...Jokes aside, the scary part is that this might actually be true.

Also, not that it matters, but now I know Hiroyo Wakaba is a false name.

I kinda figured as much, but honestly, who would give themselves a name with the kanji for *princess* in it? Isn't that a little obnoxious?

"My subordinates are exceptional, so they'd immediately notice even the slightest discrepancy in the flow of souls and come rushing to investigate. If that happened, then I'd lose the ordinary life I made for myself to play—I mean, for research—and be dragged back to work by force. I couldn't have that."

Wait a sec.

Were you about to say *play hooky*?

And what was the point in covering it up when the rest of what you just said made it clear that's what you're doing anyway?

Dragged back by force... What are you, a runaway kid?!

Ugh, I feel a headache coming on. So basically, D skipped out on work and escaped, pretended to be a human, and was going to school to have a *fun high school life* or whatever.

No waaay.

"There were twenty-six humans who died in that classroom. However, as you can see, I'm still alive and well. I couldn't just pop into that world myself, but if I didn't do something, I'd be found out and put back to work. The best way to settle things peacefully was to find a living creature to be reborn in that world in my place, filling the role of a human in the flow of souls. At this point, you know who I'm talking about, right?"

Ah. Yeah. It's me, right?

Uhhh, sooo...what?

Hmm. Ummm. I dunno.

What does this mean exactly?

Shall I skip over the confusing parts like *soul administration* and sum it up simply?

D was messing around and didn't want to be dragged back to work, so she decided to send in a double, and that wound up being a spider that just happened to be in the room—namely, me.

That's sooo stupid!

What a stupid reason for me to exist!

Is that seriously the whole reason why I was born?!

No way.

No waaay.

NO WAAAAY!

"It was actually quite difficult, you know. I had to come up with all kinds of schemes to disguise a mere spider's soul as a human's, and I even fabricated memories of Hiiro Wakaba's life and grafted them onto your soul, just in case. Although I suppose it's my own fault, since I decided it would be more fun to trick the system than just increasing the volume of the soul to match a human's. But I was careful not to cut corners, even if you would probably die right away, so you wound up surpassing my expectations and making for some splendid entertainment. So I guess it all worked out."

What exactly is this feeling welling up inside me as D proudly explains her process to me?

Oh, I know. I really, really want to slap her.

"Since you were a spider in the first place, I reincarnated you as a spider, which also gave you a connection to one of the major players in that world. I sent you to the Great Elroe Labyrinth for pretty arbitrary reasons—since it'd be a tough place to start out, you were a spider monster, and it was just around hatching time anyway—but it went better than I ever could have hoped. I deserve a pat on the back for making that call. Good job, me."

How can she say that with a straight face?

I really, really want to headbutt her in the gut.

The more she explains it, the more I realize just how awful the secret story of my birth really is.

She's puffing up her chest and acting like she did a great job, but the short version is that she just made me into a substitute because she didn't want to work, right?

Like a kid who swears to their mom that they've already finished their homework because they don't want to do it over the summer!

Doesn't she realize that she's only delaying the inevitable, and once they find out, her punishment is just gonna be even worse because of it?

Knowing her, I guess she probably does know that.

She just thinks it'll be more fun this way, I bet.

Ugh. In the end, it always comes back to that, doesn't it?

Maybe that really is the only motivation behind D's actions: whether it seems fun or not.

Honestly, I don't know. From my perspective, D is so incomprehensible that I never have any idea what she's thinking.

Maybe deep down, she has a different motivation entirely.

But her words and actions always imply that she does these things only because she thinks it'll be entertaining.

No matter what D really thinks on the inside, as long as it doesn't show on the surface, the only guess I can make for her motivation is entertainment.

I'll just have to assume that's true for now.

And if so, the only conclusion I can come up with is...she's still messing with me.

Even I didn't expect that the reason for my entire existence would be something so stupid.

But maybe it's true.

In fact, that kind of stupid, pointless reason might be exactly what sets me free.

Fine, see if I care!

If that's how it's gonna be, then I'll just do whatever I want, too.

See, I was thinking about this stuff on the way here.

I mean, I was made by the puppet master called D, who gave me part of her memories in the process. So why in the world was I created?

What's my purpose?

When I finally met D, would I find out that I had some incredibly important role that I didn't even know about?

And if so, what would happen to me after that?

Basically, I was a little freaked out about the possibility of this unknown future.

I thought there was no way a super-being like D would create me for no reason at all.

But guess what?

Turns out there really was no reason!

Well, I guess that's not entirely true.

There's the stupid reason of D wanting to get out of work.

But man, talk about anticlimactic. I was nervous there'd turn out to be some huge reason that I was created, so this is beyond a letdown.

Like, I was bracing myself for the possibility that she might even get rid of me on the spot. But this is so far in the other direction that all the energy has drained right out of me.

Although it did occur to me that, since D seems to consider me a favorite source of entertainment, she probably wouldn't just get rid of me.

But I did think something terrible might happen to me.

I should probably just be happy that I was wrong, buuut that's not where I'm at right now.

D is technically—just *technically*!—kinda like my parent, and in a way it's thanks to her that I'm like this now, so if she had asked me to do something, I

would've been fairly willing to help her out.

But now that I know I was made for such a stupid reason? Not so much.

If she was gonna force me to do something, I'd have to go along with her, since she's so powerful, but otherwise I'm just gonna do whatever I want.

"Exactly. That's for the best."

An emotionless voice interrupts my disillusioned thoughts.

It's completely level and unfeeling as usual, but for some reason, it has a certain ring of satisfaction to it at this particular moment.

"It's because you're free that you're able to shine so much. I have great respect for that."

Because it's more entertaining that way, right? I can almost hear the unspoken comment.

A cold shudder runs down my spine.

At the same time, my head heats up like it's boiling over.

She knew everything all along.

She knew that I wouldn't be able to refuse if she asked me to do something, knew about the fears I was feeling before I came here, all of it.

And she knew exactly how to give me my freedom when she told me the story of my creation.

D could easily use me if she wanted to, but instead she chose to let me keep doing as I please.

Because it's more fun that way.

Disillusioned? Yeah, right!

It doesn't change the fact that I was created for a stupid reason, but still, D clearly thought about what was best for me and guided me toward what she figured was the best conclusion.

No one could pull that off unless they understood me completely.

I can't understand the depths of D's thoughts, but evidently, I wasn't even

reading her surface emotions correctly.

I underestimated how far she would go to steer things in the direction that would entertain her most.

Scaaary.

She can do anything she wants, but she chooses to do nothing.

Except when she thinks her interference would make things more entertaining, in which case she won't hesitate.

Honestly, I think it's pretty amazing how she'll do whatever it takes to achieve her goal.

But at the same time, it's scary. Because D really would stop at nothing to get what she wants.

And I can't even imagine the scale of her machinations.

Because she's so insanely powerful that she could destroy a whole world and still have energy to spare.

She really is a god.

If she was to use all that power for her goals, what do you think would happen?

I can't imagine it, nor do I really want to.

And I *definitely* don't want to imagine what would happen if she turned that power on me.

That could only end in my complete and total destruction.

I've walked the line between life and death several times over by now.

But if D came after my life, none of those experiences would compare.

It'd be over for me, period. I would have zero chance of survival.

No amount of struggling or scheming would affect that outcome.

That's why she's scary.

I'm shivering like my spine's been turned into an icicle.

This is crazy.

And no, I'm not just talking about the fear.

It's the other thing that's the problem.

Even though my spine is cold, my head actually feels hot.

While the rest of my body is frozen in fear, my brain is actually boiling with delight.

I'm happy that D acknowledged my worth.

It's like someone pumped my brain full to bursting with endorphins.

Oh man. This is totally crazy.

I don't think I'm the kind of person who needs a lot of approval, but when it comes from D, that's another story.

D is special to me, whether I like it or not.

I mean, she's basically the original I'm based on.

Before I knew that, I always felt a certain aversion toward D. I could tell that she was blatantly playing with me like a toy.

But still, I was always very aware of D.

The more I felt avoidant of her, the more she occupied my thoughts.

And even though I was hostile toward her, I always looked up to her as a powerful being far beyond my reach.

I want to live freely and do as I please.

Which means I can't accept the existence of anyone who tries to control me.

So I always resisted any powerful beings who tried to restrict my freedom.

The many monsters who tried to kill me during my fight for survival in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Earth Dragon Araba.

My battle with Mother.

And then I met the Demon Lord.

Potimas, Güli-güli, and the state of the world itself.

I've always fought against all of that, even if some of those fights are still unresolved.

But among all of them, there was one being who I considered to be on another level completely, a special level that I would never reach.

D.

So how much would it mean for that same being to give her approval of me?

How important would it be for a fake like me to be acknowledged by the original?

Apparently even more than I thought.

So much so that part of me wouldn't even mind being restricted if D was the one to do it.

Oh man, this is so crazy.

Is this love?!

I mean, I'm pretty sure I don't swing that way.

Then again, if you asked me if I like men, my answer would be: *hmmmm?*

It seems as if I don't have much desire for that kinda thing, maybe even none at all.

Come on—I'm joking. Of course I'm not gonna fall in love with D.

But at the same time, I have to admit that I'm obviously pretty drawn to her.

I mean, the fact that I said I was *disillusioned* just means that I had high expectations of her in the first place.

What's up with that?

Maybe this is how it feels when you're about to have a marriage interview.

Okay, I don't even know what I'm saying anymore!

Whew. Calm down, me.

You're freaking out a little too much.

“Ah. Maybe it was rude of me to give you a name before.”

Suddenly, D brings her face close to mine.

So close that our lips are almost touching.

“Naming carries a heavy implication for us gods. The act of naming strengthens the connection between the namer and the one being named. You could even say that it binds their souls.”

Say whaaat?

So this indescribable something that I’m feeling right now might be the effect of naming?

I’ve been unknowingly bound to D ever since she gave me the name Shiraori, the White Weaver?!

“Freedom is what makes you shine. But I suppose I did want to keep you close at hand, even if it meant plucking the feathers from your wings. I know it is contradictory, but that’s just because of how deeply charming you are.”

Her whisper in my ear fills my mind with sweet dizziness.

Charming...charming... D’s words echo in my brain.

“You belong to me. I have no intention of letting go. But please fly as freely as you can within my grasp. As long as you do that, I will happily dote on you until the time comes for the world to end.”

Next thing I know, I’m back in my room in the duke’s mansion.

I do remember making my way back here, kinda.

After playing a bunch more games with D, none of which I came close to winning.

She even gave me some souvenirs as a sort of reward.

They’re all stored in the alternate dimension I made with my spatial conjuring for now. I guess I’ll check that out later.

For now, back in the duke’s mansion, I roll around on my bed.

It’s like I’ve just woken up from a dream.

That was crazy.

And bad.

I dunno, it was just...oof.

What was that, some kind of pickup line?

Oh man, oh man, oh man.

What if she really did steal my heart?!

And the scariest part is that I don't even think I would mind!

At this rate, I'm heading straight down the road of being a kept man.

Although I'm not a man. Or a human.

Yep. I gotta go on the run!

If I had stayed at D's any longer, I definitely would've wound up under her thumb.

I can't let that happen.

I gotta be strong and resist being tempted by D.

But I don't know if I can resist for long.

So I have to run away, somewhere that she can't reach me.

Although with D, I don't even know if it's possible to run away from her completely.

I certainly can't right now.

I have to get stronger and come up with some kind of getaway plan, or I'm in trouble.

Right now, the only place I can run to from here is Earth.

And if I go there, I'll fall right into D's hands!

So for now, I'll stay here and keep building my strength.

And at the same time, I'll start making a detailed getaway plan!

"Aah!" The door slams open, and Vampy barges right into the room. "Where have you been?! How dare you run off without a word again! How many times

have I told you to let me know where you're going first?!"

Crossing her arms, Vampy huffs intimidatingly to make her anger clear.

Oh right, I guess I might've agreed to something like that...maybe?

"Next time, for real, you absolutely have to tell me when you're going somewhere! Got it?!"

All right, all right.

I guess that's fair.

If I decide to go somewhere, I'd better tell these guys first.

Even if I'm running away.

There's still lots of stuff I have to do here, so I don't think that'll happen for a long while yet anyway.

But if the time comes, I'll tell them before I leave.

I promise.

HIIRO WAKABA

Real name unknown. A fictitious human who is really the temporary form of the god called D. According to D, she created this temporary name and body in order to escape work and to play at having a fun high school life. Her presence in that classroom in Heishin High School is the reason the explosion happened, and thus the reason the reincarnations ended up being reborn. She attached her memories as HiIRO Wakaba to the soul of a spider who was in the room at the time of the explosion, who is now known as Shiraori. Shiraori was created as fake proof that

the person called HiIRO soon as Shiraori transferred from that the person false identity gotten caught the other

Wakaba really existed. As a result, one could say that as was born, the existence of HiIRO Wakaba was D to Shiraori. At any rate, it doesn't change the fact called HiIRO Wakaba doesn't really exist and was only a for a god. This fictional person is assumed to have in the explosion on Earth and died with reincarnations.





Evil Elves Do Sneer

“So you intend to revolt against the Demon Lord, then?”

“Yeah. If we abide by her wishes, all of demonkind will be destroyed.”

A foolish declaration comes through the phone.

The man has a fair amount of influence among demons, but frankly, he is insignificant.

Especially compared to Erguner.

That man has some connection to the pontiff of the Word of God, so he cannot be taken lightly.

Surely, he is scheming up some way to outwit both Ariel and me even now.

No doubt he has some connection to this rebellion behind the scenes, too.

Irritatingly enough, he always takes care not to leave any proof of his actions instead of attacking us head-on.

On the other hand, I have no such concerns about the man I am speaking with right now.

That makes things simple.

“So I was hoping to request your help, too, Potimas.”

“Of course. It pains me to think of letting that woman destroy the relationship we elves have built up with the demons over so many years.”

There is truth behind this statement of mine. I have invested a great deal in convincing the demons to trust the elves.

Part of this was to prevent the demon race from weakening, lest their ongoing feud with the humans fall to the wayside. Because if that feud was to

fall apart, I have no doubt that the pontiff of the Word of God would manipulate public opinion in order to turn humanity against us elves next.

Even when the demon race was thriving, the pontiff tried many a time to spread the idea that the elves are evil.

And since demon invasions of the human realms have fallen off in recent times, I can no longer completely prevent his control over information.

The more spare power that falls into the hands of the humans, specifically the Word of God, the more inconvenient it is for me.

Which is why I need their long-standing enemies, the demons, to keep their hands full to a certain extent, even if I have to personally assist the demons myself.

Besides, the current demon lord is that accursed Ariel.

I doubt that she has the strength to cause me serious harm on her own, but it certainly does not amuse me to see someone who wishes me ill at the head of the demon race.

“Oh! Thanks a lot! With the elves on our side, we’ve got nothing to fear!”

Hrm. I suppose that would be true, if the elves were to go all out.

But of course, I have no intention of putting all my energy into helping this nobody.

I shall be most satisfied if my forces can simply whittle away her numbers to an appropriate degree.

An insignificant nobody like this man doesn’t stand a chance of defeating Ariel.

Of course, the fact that he doesn’t understand that is what makes him a nobody.

“I shall assist you as best I can.”

“Great! I owe you one!”

The genuine gratitude in the man’s voice nearly makes me laugh.

His pathetic rebellion doesn’t stand a chance of succeeding.

Yet here I am, supporting a rebellion that I know will fail.

I won't be going all out, but I suppose I ought to make preparations so that I can yield some results.

My attempts at interfering with Ariel and her little friends have all failed thus far because I held back my resources. The casualties incurred as a result do not trouble me overmuch, but it is irritating that I have not caused any damage to Ariel's side.

Now is as good a time as any to dispose of a few of her allies.

Of course, it is not her worthless demon subjects I will be targeting.

It is her irreplaceable so-called family, the reincarnations she harbors.

And then there's White.

If I wish to do something about that group, I suppose it would be foolish to send a half-baked assault.

Trying to fight them with sheer numbers would be nothing but a waste of resources.

Being stingy with resources because I fear to lose them will only guarantee the loss of whatever I do send.

...I have no choice, then.

I will accept a degree of risk and send in some real firepower.

"Now then, I must excuse myself to make preparations of my own."

"Of course. Please do."

Ending the call, I think about what to do next.

Then I stand up from my chair and begin to move.

My first stop is the area where the humanoid Glorias are lined up neatly.

Since the main parts have not yet been installed, they are not operational, but they are all equipped with Anti-Technique Barriers.

"Director."

"Yes, sir!"

“Prepare all these so that they can be deployed.”

The director in charge of this area pales at my request, but he cannot disregard a direct order.

“You will be in charge of selecting the main parts to be installed. I am expecting a job well done, you know.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Now, once my preparations are complete, I shall go on the attack.

They had best be ready to entertain me with the screams of their final hour.

AFTERWORD

YAHOO! Hello, this is Okina Baba, writing to you with a bizarre amount of excitement.

This series has now reached its ninth volume.

Next thing you know, we'll be in the double digits.

Ah, the number nine.

I think you can learn a lot about people from what they associate with it.

If you think of billiards, then you're a normie!

Imagine being social enough to have real-life friends to play billiards with.

If you thought of a certain ice fairy who's officially labeled as an idiot, then you're a nerd!

I don't know if you're casual or a hardcore nerd, but if you recognized that reference at all, then you're obviously one of us to some extent.

If you thought of a red machine coming to destroy all irregulars, then you're a From fan!

I'm sorry, but it's too late for you. The Kojima particles have taken over your brain.

Incidentally, these predictions are all based on my own personal biases and assumptions, so please don't take them too seriously.

By the way, the first thing I pictured was a red fairy quietly saying, *Those who wield too much power bring only chaos*. I guess I'm a nerd *and* a From fan.

Anyway, putting the number nine aside, this volume of the series contains a world full of as many problems as a billiard board has holes and a battle between a young girl who looks a bit like an ice fairy and a man who gets fired up like a red machine.

...What's scary is that none of that is inaccurate.

But that part's more like the continuation of Volume 8. I'm more excited about *that* character's appearance.

Who in the world am I talking about?! And what does that character want?!

You'll find out the truth by reading this volume.

So yeah. I don't know when this turned into a mystery series, but it's not *not* a mystery series, either.

Now, enough of the lead-in. Let's get into the meat of things here.

That's right. All of the above was just a lead-in.

Because I have more pages for the afterword than usual this time!

I can write as much as I want! And say whatever I want!

Wah-ha-ha! It's finally my time to shiiiine!

HOWEVER! That's not the reason I was so excited at the beginning.

It's because I have a huge announcement!

An anime adaptation of *So I'm a Spider, So What?* is now in development!

Dun-dun-duuuun!

That's right, this series is getting an anime!

Yaaaay! Clap, clap, clap!

This is totally serious. It's not a joke or a prank.

Finally, at long last, the time has come!

When the web novel became a printed series, it went from being only text to having Kiryuu-sensei's illustrations.

When it became a manga, Kakashi-sensei developed a lively version of the world.

Thanks to Kiryuu-sensei and Kakashi-sensei, things that were difficult to convey with text alone can now be beautifully portrayed with images.

And now, motion and sound will be added to the mix.

Kumoko's going to be moving on the screen!

And talking!

Well, she can't actually talk, so maybe you'll be hearing a lot of her inner thoughts.

At any rate, getting an anime adaptation means achieving a major goal for creators like me.

Wow. I guess everything is going my way!

Ah, you're right; I'm sorry. I got carried away there.

Anyway, they've already made a PV, so please go and check it out.

It'll be a while before it actually airs, but the PV is a good way to get an idea of what it might be like.

And you'll get to see Kumoko, who was only ever on the page before, moving around on a screen.

Now, allow me to give some words of thanks.

First, to Kiryuu-sensei, for always bringing the world of *So I'm a Spider, So What?* to life with beautiful illustrations.

I really think it's thanks to Kiryuu-sensei's art that the series managed to get an anime adaptation.

The cover for this volume is wonderful, too. Thank you so much.

And thank you to Kakashi-sensei, who draws the *So I'm a Spider, So What?* manga so well that it's as if it's really moving, even though it's not anime. Kakashi-sensei's style is so amazing that you can just imagine the action like it's unfolding right before your eyes.

Volume 5 of the always lively manga adaptation is on sale now as well.

To everyone involved in the creation of the anime, thank you so much for making such a wonderful PV.

To everyone who helped bring this book into the world, especially my editor, W.

And to everyone who picked up this book.

Thank you all so much.

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