

Am I Actually the STRONGEST?

1

Sai Sumimori

Art by Ai Takahashi



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'DESPITE
CAPTURING ME,
YOU'VE CHOSEN
TO SAVE MY LIFE.
WHAT'S MORE,
YOU HAVE BE-
STOWED UPON
ME A NEW NAME.
A CONTRACT HAS
BEEN SEALED.'

EH?
WHAT DO
YOU MEAN,
CONTRACT?

FLAY BOWS
DEEPLY AND
CONTINUES.

'MY
MASTER,
I SHALL
DEVOTE
MY WHOLE
BEING TO
SERVE
YOU.'

◆◆◆ FLAY ◆◆◆

A Flame Fenrir who sealed a
contract with Haruto.

◆◆◆ HARUTO ◆◆◆

Reincarnated as a prince, but
was almost killed for being only
level 02 (actually 1002).



"WE'LL
DESTROY
THEM TOO,
WHILE
WE'RE
AT IT.

ALL
OF
THEM."

◆◆◆ CHARLOTTE ◆◆◆
Haruto's little sister. Seems to
catch on to Haruto's true identity?

BANDITS
ARE NOTHING
BUT TROUBLE.
MAYBE THEY HAVE
THEIR REASONS,
LIKE THEY GREW
UP IN POVERTY
OR WHATEVER.
BUT IF I'M BEING
HONEST, I DON'T
CARE.

"SHALL
WE GO,"
I SAY.

"YES, SIR.
I SHALL
ACCOMPAN-
Y YOU!"

I
EXTINGUISH
MOST OF
THE TABULAR
BARRIERS
AND FLY
FORTH INTO
THE SKY.

PLEASE
PLAY
WITH ME,
BROTHER
HARUTO!

A TINY
BEING
FLINGS
OPEN MY
DOOR AND
CHARGES
INTO THE
ROOM. IT'S
CHARLOTTE.

"HEY, AT
LEAST
KNOCK
FIRST."

"BROTHER
HARUTO, YOU
SEEMED TO
ALREADY
KNOW I WAS
COMING. IS
KNOCKING
REALLY
NECESSARY?"

"IT'S ABOUT
MANNERS,
OKAY?"

"OKAY.
FROM NOW
ON, I PROM-
ISE TO
KNOCK."

BEEP!

BEEP!

BEEP!

BEEP!

The cover is decorated with several 3D cubes in dark gray and light gray, and several halftone circles of varying sizes, some containing a small cube. These elements are scattered across the white background.

AM I ACTUALLY THE STRONGEST? 1

By Sai Sumimori
Illustrations by Ai Takahashi

Translated by Camellia Nieh



KODANSHA

Am I Actually the Strongest? 1

A VERTICAL Book

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Design: **AFTERGLOW**
Illustrations: **Ai Takahashi**

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes. There are several 3D cubes in different shades of gray, some solid and some with halftone patterns. There are also circles with halftone patterns, some of which contain smaller circles or dots. These shapes are scattered across the page, creating a modern, abstract background.

CHAPTER ONE: **The Post-Rebirth Struggles**

I won't go into the details, but I'm being reborn in an alternate world.

According to a "goddess-like being," it's supposed to be a world where magical powers reign absolute. Her explanation was vague, so I'm kinda unsure, but apparently she's also granting me some kind of "overpowered skill."

In the fall of my third year of junior high, I became a shut-in to escape school bullying. I locked myself in my room and refused to come out. That was five years ago. Since then, I've been living with no goals and no hopes for the future.

And now they're telling me to "rejoice in a new incarnation"?

All I wanted was to be left in peace.

To get away from those heartless jerks.

The best way to live is to be a total slacker—losing myself in video games and anime all day until, at some point, I drift off to sleep.

I know what I'll do, I decide.

I'll spend my life as a shut-in in this new universe too! That's how I'll use my so-called overpowered skill, I think to myself, as I draw my first breath and utter my first cry.

Everything is blurry. I hear someone shouting but can't make out the words. Then, abruptly, the voice becomes clear.

"Your Majesty! It's a healthy baby boy!"

"So it is! Well done, Gizelotte!"

Someone picks me up.

I still can't see a thing. I can't tell who's who.

I strain to focus my eyes.

Then, suddenly, my vision clears.

Before me is a dapper, elegant older man. Blond with high cheekbones, he looks like a heartthrob Hollywood actor. He's dressed up all fancy, like a king in some fantasy-world anime.

Mr. Handsome takes me in his arms and starts to walk around.

"What say you, Gizelotte? He resembles us both—a beautiful boy. His hair and eyes are the same color as yours, but see here. He bears the royal insignia on the left side of his chest. He's my son, no doubt about it."

Gently, he holds me up to a woman of astonishing beauty. She has black hair, dark eyes, and alabaster skin. She looks young. Her face is so perfect, it's almost disturbing.

Well, wouldn't you know it? The handsome older king has a stunning young bride.

"Why, of course he's your son. Would you accuse me of infidelity, my lord?"

They're both smiling, but do I detect an undercurrent of tension?

In any case, I seem to have been reborn as some kind of prince.

Hopefully I'm, like, their eighth son. Then nobody will complain if I spend my life as a shut-in, I muse as the king carries me into a different room.

It looks like we're entering an eerie chamber.

The windows are shrouded by heavy curtains, and the shadows flicker in the glow of candelabras placed in every corner. The floor of the great room is inscribed with an enormous magic circle. In its center sits a wooden cradle.

“I have awaited your arrival, Your Majesty. The preparations are complete.”

An old man cloaked in black robes sneers ominously. Creepy.

“Very well. Proceed,” the king commands.

He passes me to the old man in the robes, who then places me in the cradle.

The robed old man takes out a crystal ball the size of his palm. After mumbling what sounds like a spell, he suddenly bulges his eyes wide open. Again, creepy.

The crystal ball emits a flash of light so intense it hurts my eyes.

The ball begins to shake so violently that it almost falls out of the old man’s hand. A sudden gust of wind swirls through the room—even though we’re indoors.

“Wh-What’s happening?” the man who is my father stammers, panicking.

Eventually, the strange phenomena subside.

“Hrrrrmmm?! What have we here...?” the old man exclaims.

“Yes? What is the prince’s ‘max mana level’?” my father demands.

They seem to be measuring my magic ability.

From what the goddess-like being has told me, everyone in this world is born with magical abilities, and those abilities are determined at birth.

Your max mana level is the highest level of magic you’ll ever achieve in your lifetime.

No matter how hard you work, there's no way to surpass it.

"This child is my son, and the son of Gizelotte, the Flash Princess. I wouldn't be surprised if his level is 40...or even 50, considering the phenomena we just witnessed!"

My father is extremely excited.

I've been told that the highest mana level in history was 77—an easy number to remember. That person was revered as a great sage. In general, a score of over 30 is impressive. A high mana level can even elevate your social class from peasant to nobility.

However...

"Er...2."

"Hmm? What did you just say?"

"The prince's maximum mana level seems to be a 2... Oh. On top of that, there is no element indicated! In other words, he will only be able to practice Barrier magic."

Again, from what the goddess-like being explained to me, people in this world are born with "elements." In addition to the four basic elements of fire, water, earth, and wind, there's also light and darkness. If you have one or more of these elements, you can use that type of magic.

You can't use magic from elements you have no affinity with.

The only exception is Barrier magic, but she didn't go into much detail about that.

The crystal ball reads 02/02. Nothing more.

"Oh, but his current mana level is already a 2. He's attained his max mana

level at birth. What a precocious prince!” Dripping with cold sweat, the old man tries desperately to look on the bright side.

“Idiot!” The king roars in fury. “There’s nothing unusual about being born with a mana level of 2! A 2? His max is 2?! And he’s non-elemental? You’re telling me that the child of my seed...of Gizelotte’s womb...is an imbecile?!”

The old man stumbles backwards, losing his footing and landing on his butt.

“But wait. Mija’s Crystal must be malfunctioning,” the king argues. “Yes, that must be it!”

Daddy’s getting desperate.

But I agree. Devices do malfunction. That’s a thing.

The goddess-like being wasn’t specific about the overpowered skill she granted me...but even if it had nothing to do with my max mana level, a 2 just doesn’t seem right. I mean...a 2?

“B-But Your Majesty, when I prepared for the ritual just moments ago, I tested the crystal ball on myself and everything seemed to be in order...”

“Bring me another crystal ball immediately!”

The old man scurries out of the room on all fours.

Soon, he returns with several other men dressed in robes. One of them is carrying a crystal ball the size of a basketball.

They perform the ritual again.

The result is the same.

I can see my pop’s eyes go dull.

Mine are too, probably.

“My son, Prince Reinhardt...died in childbirth.”

Huh?

“A stillbirth. Isn’t that right?”

My father glares at each of the men in turn.

The look in his eye is terrifying. *For realz? I was just reincarnated—and now they’re going to kill me? What about my overpowered skill? Didn’t she say she gave me one? I guess not. Okay, then...*

Less than an hour after being reincarnated, my dream of living a new life as a superpowered shut-in has been shattered.

I have no words to express my distress but with baah’s and goo’s.

“Odd, though...isn’t it?” mutters one of the men in robes. “Why does it say 02 and not just 2?”



In some sort of celestial world.

The goddess-y being who was responsible for the boy’s reincarnation is chatting with her other goddess-y colleagues.

“This doesn’t seem to be going well. Did you really grant him an overpowered skill?”

“Yeah...but I forgot to give him an element,” admits the goddess-y person bashfully.

“Uh... Isn’t that...bad?”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine. I kinda randomly gave him a super high max mana level.”

The spacey goddess did indeed “kinda randomly” give the boy a *very* high max mana level *and* current mana level.

His mana level isn’t 2.

The reason the crystal ball couldn’t accurately indicate his mana level is that it only displays two digits.

His real mana level is...

1002 / 1002

Yep. Way too random.



I am sneaked off to another room. There await five older men.

One of them is my father in this world. From what I gather, his name is King Jilq Orteus. The other men appear to be high-ranking henchmen, but they might as well be NPCs.

“My decision is made. If my kingdom were to find out that my son is an utter imbecile, I’ll be a laughingstock!”

“But Your Majesty, if we were to forge the boy’s death as a stillbirth, who among us could possibly do away with his life? It would be out of our place to...”

“Hmm... I suppose it *would* be problematic for a liege to execute a member of the royal family.”

What a bizarre sight, to lie there and watch a debate over my own execution. There was one man who begged for my life to be spared, but he got thrown out of the room just a moment ago.

My father is scummy enough, but my mother goes as far as to say, “To have this useless garbage for a son would be a shameful blemish in our royal records.”

My past life was full of jerks, but who would’ve thought I’d be subjected to the cruelty of man in my reincarnated life too?

Humans truly are the worst. They must be rotten to the core.

Still, I’m not about to sit around and patiently wait for my death—or lie around, in this case.

I have no emotional attachment to this world I was just born in, but I’m still afraid of death. Even if I’m peon-tier weak, there must be some way for me to thrive and enjoy my life as a shut-in.

In my past life, I was as fragile as glass. As fragile as paper, even. But for some reason, perhaps due to my reincarnation, I’m a lot more daring now.

I’m determined to survive!

So I begin to brainstorm, self-preservation my aim.

I stare up at the ceiling as I ponder.

To use magic, I will need mana.

The amount of magic any individual can wield is determined by their current mana level. That seems to be what the grownups are alluding to as they discuss

my circumstance.

Putting the pieces together, along with some guesswork, here's what I surmise:

The amount of magic a person can use is equal to their current mana level squared. For example, a mana level of 2 gives you four times the mana of a mana level of 1. So, hypothetically, a guy with a mana level of 1000 could use one million times the magic of someone with a mana level of 1. Incredible. But a four-digit mana level would be ridiculous.

Based on what they measured, I'm a total peon with a mana level of 2. What's more, I can only use Barrier magic because I have no elements.

Ms. Goddess-y whatever-you-are, you are so unreliable. "Granted with bonus powers" my ass. Do your job! But whining isn't going to get me anywhere. Now that I have a better grasp on the situation, I can try a new approach.

The first thing I need to do is figure out what this Barrier magic is. This is going to take a while.

When I think of a barrier, I picture a finite space enclosed by invisible walls. Something that you'd summon with amulets and charms.

And inside that space, magical things can happen. Like accessing great powers, causing an explosion, or detecting an invader.

Right now, the only chance I have at survival is figuring out how to use this magic.

Guess I'll give it a spin.

Just then, I am rudely interrupted.

"A mana level of 2, you say? I doubt the boy could even conjure up a single

fireball.”

“For starters, he possesses no elements so he can’t use anything but Barrier magic.”

“Barriers make a decent assist, at best. But without any element to accompany it, it is, frankly, useless.”

Great. Just when I was starting to feel motivated.

I’d like to give them a piece of my mind, but alas, I am but a wee baby. The most I can do is lie on my back and babble, “Gaga goo!”

“Yes...and a barrier requires a fair amount of mana. The prince probably wouldn’t even be able to summon a small-scale one.”

A transparent cube floats before my eyes.

I figured I’d try making one on a whim, but...*that was kinda really easy, you guys.*



The king and his lieges don't notice. It seems to be invisible to others. I can see it faintly.

"Even if the prince could make a small barrier, he would only be able to maintain it for a few minutes, given his mana level."

I stare intently at the transparent cube. It shows no sign of disappearing.

Is this even using up mana? When I conjured up the barrier, I did feel a soft swelling sensation of the mana being spent.

"If only he had some unique power, like the ability to move a barrier," someone suggests.

Let me give it a shot.

"Hah! Surely you jest. A barrier can only occupy a fixed area. It can't be applied to a sword or armor, and it certainly can't be moved about at will."

My cube zooms and surfs in the air as I please. *Guys, controlling it is a piece of cake too.*

I sense that moving the cube consumes a little bit of mana. But even with a mana level of 2, I can maneuver it with no effort at all. If you could even call it effort.

Maybe this cube isn't a barrier?

According to the rules of this world, I can only use Barrier magic. Also according to those rules, I shouldn't be able to move this so-called barrier. One of these factors doesn't align with the other. Hmm...

As I'm contemplating, I continue to make the barrier whirl round and round, until...

"Gah?"

Suddenly the cube slams into a wall.

...And shatters into dust. The wall, that is.

“Wh-What was that?!”

“The wall just suddenly...”

“Explosion magic?!”

“Bandits?! Or could it be the remnants of the demon clan?”

The group of men are panicking. Better behave for a while.

Unfortunately, this incident puts an end to the discussion of barriers. For now, I decide to go with the assumption that I’m using Barrier magic, and carry on with my experiments.

Making it vanish is easy too. All I have to do is command it to disappear. This also seems to consume almost no mana.

The cube could shapeshift as small as the eye of a needle, or as large as this entire room. I think it’s possible to make them even smaller or larger.

And the shape doesn’t have to be a cube. I’m able to make a perfectly-fitted barrier film around an irregularly-shaped vase with flowers.

I command this barrier to move, and the entire flower vase begins to hover in the air. Once again, the men in the room freak out over the odd phenomenon.

“What on earth is this? Could it be...?” the king gulps, leering at me.

Yikes.

He begins to tremble and sweat.

Now what? If he finds me out, he might kill me. Or should I go ahead and attack him first? Smash his head open with an invisible barrier so his brain will

splatter...

Wait. Since when am I this bloodthirsty?

I return to my senses.

I'm a mana level 2 dud who barely knows anything about Barrier magic. Even with the element of surprise to my advantage, they could easily subdue me.

Better to hold off. I'll do my best baby act and see how my father responds.

"Gah, goo!" (Gazes with starry, innocent eyes.)

"Hmph. It couldn't be. An imbecile with a mana level of 2. Besides, he's just an infant. It must have been some sort of error with the giant barrier that protects the castle," he mutters, and begins barking orders at his ministers.

The king leaves the room, and his mob henchmen follow.

I'm left to myself.

Ha-hah! Not too shabby with my baby act.

Crisis averted, I'm now free to experiment with my Barrier magic without interference.

Next is adding color to the cubes.

Red, blue, yellow. I can even use multiple colors to make gradients. Everything comes out just the way I imagine it.

I try picturing a bird.

The sketch in my mind is a sad excuse of a bird, but I'm able to give it color, flap its wings, and let it fly around just like the real thing.

Oh, to be free like that.

All I can do is lie here. A helpless newborn with no limb control and no ability

to talk. I wish I could grow up faster.

Hmm. Just a minute... If I can enclose things in a barrier and move them freely through space...

I create a barrier that fits around me like a bodysuit. I stand up. I can walk. I can run. I can even hover in the air. If anyone is watching right now, this would totally look weird.

Now that I'm able to move around, I climb up to a window and peer outside.

I seem to be in a tall building atop a big hill. At the foot of the hill is a town encircled by walls. The scenery reminds me of medieval Europe.

Beyond the wall stretches a thick forest, and beyond that, a mountain range.

The moment of my birth crosses my mind. That moment when I strained to focus my eyes and my blurry vision instantly became crystal clear.

I gaze firmly at the mountains in the distance.

How about that.

My vision magnifies like I'm looking through a telescope, defining the rocky face of the mountain as if it were right in front of me. The zoom on this lens is unreal.

I seem to have created a special film of barrier over my eyeballs. When I imagine it away, the colors dullen, and my vision becomes hazy.

I make a barrier film over my eyeballs again. All I do is wish vaguely, *I want to see better*, and just like before, my field of vision is crystal clear again.

Maybe all it takes is a vague wish?

Time to experiment.

While we're on the subject of vision, I might as well pursue every boy's dream.

That's right: X-ray vision barrier.

Maybe not the most appropriate use of my time right now, but it's bound to come in handy at some point, I convince myself. Let's find out.

I look at the wall. No matter how long I stare at it, the wall remains a wall.

Hmm. I guess there are limits after all.

Unable to give up on my dreams just yet, I fumble about.

And finally, I've made man's dream into reality.

I create a flat, square, tabular barrier in front of my face. Then I conjure another one the exact same size on the other side of the wall.

I "link" them together.

The barrier right in front of me displays the view from the other side of the wall, almost like a tablet computer. If I tilt it downwards, the slab on the outside tilts downwards too, allowing me to see the ground.

X-ray vision, check.

I get it. Barrier magic is all about creating multiple "spaces" and "linking" them.

At the ripe age of three hours, I have unlocked the divine truth of the universe.

I refine the technique by creating a super thin sheet of barrier film to cover my side of the wall, and a similar film sheet to cover the other side. The part of the wall covered in the film can display the view outside.

Now, if I put a film like this on someone's clothes... No, forget it. If I do that, everyone else will see the X-ray image too, and I'll be found out. Now, what if I put a film over part of my eyeballs...zzZ.

I conk out for the night.



Two years ago, the kingdom succeeded in the subjugation of the Demon King.

A battalion led by Gizelotte, the Flash Princess, infiltrated the Demon King's castle. Despite the loss of many lives in the fierce struggle, they annihilated their enemy.

The whole world celebrated with pride and glee. Amid the citizens' excitement, only King Jilq Orteus's heart was heavy with dread.

The nation's praise was aimed at Gizelotte.

The king had joined the troops on the front lines and spurred them to victory countless times. But it was Gizelotte, the Flash Princess, who had captured the hearts of the people.

In this world, magic holds more significance than anything. You might think that the man with the highest mana level of his generation would be king, but it's not that simple.

Bloodlines are also highly accounted for. A classless rookie with high mana couldn't come out of nowhere and ascend to the throne.

Despite Jilq's right to the throne, his max mana level was 34. Compared to past kings, this number was on the low end.

Even worse, his current mana level was 17. It had simply stopped rising in his youth—and had never gone any higher since. When your mana level becomes stagnant, people say your level “closed.”

That’s what everyone was saying.

The king was *closed*.

In contrast, the Flash Princess had a mana level of 41/46. Her talents were at the top of the ranks in modern times. By the tender age of seventeen, she had already reached a mana level of over 40.

Gizelotte’s family was of low-ranking nobility, and in recent years they had fallen so far that their title was rumored to be at risk of removal. However, thanks to Gizelotte’s achievements, the family name was regaining its stature.

The king stewed.

I cannot allow her ascent to continue.

When Gizelotte was asked what she wished to be rewarded with for defeating the Demon King, she gave an answer that astonished everyone.

“For years, I have been deeply enamored with His Majesty, King Jilq. I know full well that even to harbor such a sentiment is presumptuous and impudent, but have mercy on me; my heart’s desire is to be with His Majesty.”

The kingdom bubbled with excitement.

“Now the royal lineage will be secure,” they all said. Not only did no one denounce Gizelotte for her declaration, the entire realm supported their union.

Meanwhile, Jilq shuddered with trepidation.

Has she finally come to seize the throne?

The Flash Princess’s popularity was immense, the timing was perfect—the

previous queen had passed just the year before. Given the general vibe, the king could hardly refuse.

That year, Gizelotte became queen.

“Your Majesty! I beg you to reconsider!”

On a distant hill overlooking the city stands a seldomly used castle. A large, fierce-looking, bearded man bursts into the king’s private room. His name is Count Gold Zenfis, and he is slightly older than the king.

“There will be no further discussion. My decision is final,” the irritated king rebukes as he sits in his chair, pressing his fingers to his temples.

“I cannot condone the execution of an innocent infant merely because he lacks talent!”

Gold is the man who begged to spare Prince Reinhardt’s life.

“Enough! It matters not whether you condone it, Count Zenfis.”

“But Your Majesty!”

Jilq lets out a long sigh.

“Hear this, Gold. This is an opportunity. A perfect opportunity to discredit Gizelotte.”

Gold sinks down heavily on the floor and harshly replies, “Is that so? I hear that the queen, too, supports the infant’s execution. I doubt something of this order could weaken that woman.”

“If the child’s lack of magic ability is the issue, both the queen and I will be blamed. But if the child is stillborn, we can frame it as the mother’s incompetence.”

Jilq sneers and continues, “Had he been born with great talent, I would have pried him from the queen and raised him into a puppet whose loyalty is mine alone. But this would be much easier, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Have you sunk so low, Jilq?”

“Watch your tongue, Gold. I am king now. We’re not childhood playmates anymore.”

The two men are relatives, and close in age. Once upon a time, they were as close as brothers. Over the years, they have drifted to opposite sides.

Gold swallows his anger, softening his tone like an older brother mollifying a younger one.

“Have you considered entrusting the child to someone who’ll raise him in secret? Must you take his life?”

Jilq shakes his head.

“The child bears the royal insignia. No matter how well-hidden, it would only be a matter of time before his lineage is exposed.”

A unique spell is cast upon the royal family. When a new king is crowned, the insignia disappears from everyone but the king. When his child is born, the mark reappears on them.

“Could he not be hidden until the next king is crowned? Why, I could raise him myself,” Gold entreats.

“Enough! The mere existence of such a cretin infuriates me! This is a matter of great political significance. Count or not, if you continue to defy me, I’ll have you executed as well!

“These military types with their total lack of discernment...” the king grumbles

under his breath.

Gold's anger is soon replaced by a sense of defeat.

True, he thinks. I understand little of political matters. But is the King aware that the Flash Princess—another “military types lacking discernment”—is one conniving fox of a woman?

Gizelotte is a magic sword fighter, specializing in combat.

She's not just a master of close-range fighting who can fortify herself and her armor with magic—she can also pulverize her enemies with an array of magical attacks.

In addition, her talents and beauty have won the allegiance of many brilliant strategists. With their help and a healthy dose of craftiness, she has climbed to her current position.

The late queen who passed away due to illness—Gold suspects Gizelotte was behind it.

There must be a reason the queen also wants the prince dead. Gold is frustrated with his own inability to understand why.

“I have nothing more to say to you. Begone.”

Nothing can be said to change Jilq's mind. If Gold perseveres and further provokes the king's ire, he might wind up hastening the prince's death.

Still... Isn't there any way to save the child?

With a heavy heart, Gold rises to his feet and leaves the room.

He spends a sleepless night agonizing for an answer, but to no avail.

Meanwhile, deep in her annex, Queen Gizelotte gathers her strategists for a secret counsel.

“Are you certain about this, Your Majesty? If the prince is said to be a stillbirth, there are bound to be rumors that your health was at fault,” worries one of the knights.

Gizelotte laughs dismissively at the concerned soldier.

“That is of no matter. I have merely to prove them wrong with my *next* one. His Majesty simply was not a suitable mate for me. Let him have his satisfaction for the time being.”

She looks to an old wizard clad in robes. A gruesome smile spreads across his face.

“Yes. The Ancient Magic of the royal insignia imprint—its analysis is complete. If we cast the spell on you, Your Majesty, your next child will bear the insignia, no matter whose seed it is.”

“I will need an alibi, still. The thought of having to deal with the king any further is a bit distressing.”

In Gizelotte’s eyes, the royal family is already circling the drain. Over the generations, their max mana levels have been in steady decline. She has no high regard for them—other than the fact that they *are* the royal family.

“I’ll have to pick my next consort carefully. Maybe one of you could be the lucky man.”

She flashes them a bewitching smile, and the eyes of all the male advisers light up.

Gizelotte titters with pleasure at the sight of them swooning.

As for the prince whose life is in peril...

Phew. What a relief!

He hovers in the air with a look of saintly relief on his face, as if he'd just taken a huge dump.

And that he had.

He used Barrier magic to contain the urge to go to the bathroom, wrestling with the discomfort until late at night. Diapers haven't been invented, and even if they had, he wasn't about to soil himself.

With great restraint, he managed to wait for everyone to go to bed so he could bolt to the bathroom.

He snuggles back into his bed and thinks.

Sneaking away at night would be an option, but the idea of becoming a fugitive doesn't appeal.

If they're determined to kill me...I'll just have to turn the tables on them!

He still hasn't discovered any battle skills, so that would be step one. And to do that...

"Zzz..."

He decides he might as well get a good night's rest.



"What a strange order."

A soldier in light armor is grumbling as he carries me.

At this moment, I realize I am swaddled from the neck down in a white blanket, and have been placed in a basket.

“Maybe this baby is the child of a criminal?” the other soldier speculates.

Only I know the answer to that, of course. I wonder what they’d do if they learned I was a prince. I can say with utmost confidence they’d sell me off.

“Well, orders are orders. No hard feelings, kid.”

They must not have a prick of conscience in their minds. As soon as the two soldiers arrive at a clearing in the thick forest, they carelessly plunk the basket on the ground.

“This area is Hell Hound territory. Let’s get out of here.”

“Right.”

Without even glancing back, the soldiers take off and leave me.

So that’s it, huh. I’ve been abandoned.

My father, the king, was unwilling to do the dirty deed himself, nor could he permit any of his henchmen to kill a prince.

At last, he came to the cold-hearted decision to abandon a newborn in the woods.

Hardly anyone took my side. Well, one did. That guy with the fierce-looking face seemed oddly eager to spare me. Does he have some kind of ulterior motive?

At the end of the day, I don’t trust people. I just can’t.

In my previous life and in this one, people have always been rotten to the

core. Probably everyone. Even me.

But it's no use wallowing in self-pity.

I have no intention of being eaten by some wild animal. I'm determined to live!

At least I wasn't flat-out murdered. I still have time to think of ways to fake my death before some animal comes along.

Lying on my back in the clearing in the woods, I can see a patch of blue sky cutting through the foliage, and white clouds wafting by. It seems I was born in the royal palace of the kingdom's capital, but I'm somewhere far away now.

For starters, I should get up.

Just as I'm cloaking my baby skin in a barrier...

"A-Aaah!"

"Why does this forest have a fen... Aieeee!!"

I hear shouting from a distance. The voices belong to the soldiers who abandoned me.

They soon fall silent. Shortly thereafter, I hear the rustling of bushes and snapping of branches.

Instinctively, I look to my side, and from the bushes emerges the head of an enormous dog.

Now that's a big doggy.

With fluffy fur as red as fire and a sleek snout, it looks gallant.

But...doggies aren't usually thirty feet tall... Are they?

Alternate-world logic, of course. This must be some kind of demon beast.

Is this the Hell Hound the soldiers were talking about? But something tells me it's not.

The unidentified giant doggy stares down at me from a distance. I expect it to leap at me immediately, but it doesn't. *Maybe it's disappointed that I wouldn't make a very satisfying meal.*

The dog inches towards me with care, as if it's wary of land mines.

Then, it springs at me with its huge mouth gaping.

Bam!

'Wh-?!'

I think I heard someone gasp inside my head. In any case, I dodged being eaten, and the gingerly dog giant is lying unconscious on the ground with a big bump on its snout.

Looks like I managed.

I'd activated a barrier earlier.

Just as I'd pictured it—a finite space enclosed by transparent walls—I've constructed an invisible cage around the dog.

The dog quickly rises to its feet and examines its surroundings. It tries hurling its body in all directions, but the invisible walls and ceiling don't budge. It attempts to paw at the ground, but the soil doesn't stir.

The immediate danger has passed.

Might I say this pooch may be weaker than it looks? As proof, it's trapped in a barrier that I, a level 2 noob, constructed.

But there's no telling when it might bust out.

Now's the time to secure some attack moves.

I use Barrier magic to free myself from the white blanket and get up. I run, fly, and jump around as a warm-up. The wind breezes against my whole body. What a feeling!

‘What?!’

I think I hear another weird cry, but when I look around, there's no one in sight. Only the big red pup crouching with its eyes fixed on me.

Oh well. I ignore it and begin making small transparent barriers all around me. Aiming at a sizable tree trunk, I shoot all my tiny barriers as fast as I can imagine.

Brrrrrt!

The bottom of the tree disintegrates completely, and the rest of its trunk crashes to the ground.

‘Whaaaaat?!’

These auditory hallucinations are getting distracting.

I take another look around.

Still no one in sight. Just the jaw-dropped pup.

In any case, might I say that was pretty impressive. Maybe more powerful than a machine gun on full blast? Not that I would know.

Time to shoot the puppy up with these and save myself...is what a naïve fool would say.

This is a world where magic reigns supreme. There's a high chance this attack of mine is among the weakest. Each individual missile might be too soft. They might easily be blocked with any sort of defensive magic.

After all, I'm dealing with a demonic beast here. I wouldn't be surprised if it has magical powers.

I create a transparent, boulder-shaped barrier over the fallen tree trunk—big enough to crush the pooch—and thrust it down with all my might.

The trunk explodes into smithereens, leaving a big crater in the ground. The impact sends shock waves through the air, so I put up a barrier to protect myself.

How's that? Could this defeat the giant dog? Maybe, but...

'What on earth...? A huge tree stump suddenly disintegrates... And the ground... Was that magic? Explosion and gravity manipulation...? And this invisible wall is no ordinary magic wall! Is it actually immobilizing space? But it can't be...'

The voice in my head is mumbling to itself.

'Hey, is all of this your doing?' it demands.

Now it's asking a direct question. It's getting hard to ignore.

I do a triple take of my surroundings.

There is absolutely, unquestionably no one around. Just the big trembling dog.

I forgot to mention: I've constructed a radar barrier to monitor a hundred-yard radius of my area. I don't want another demon creature sneaking up on me.

An alarm is set to ring if as much as a single ant intrudes. In fact, bugs and birds have been coming and going all this time, and the alarms are getting maddening.

I create two more barriers to conduct a more detailed investigation.

One is an environmental screener.

With me as the center point, it spreads out slowly and reacts to any object that isn't a plant or a rock.

The other is an applied X-ray vision barrier.

Wherever the environmental screener responds to something, I send out a tabular barrier and connect it to one in front of my face that displays the image.

Any time something gets caught on radar, I send out a tabular barrier.

There goes a bunny. Oh! And there's a deer. Oh? And dogs? Quite large for dogs. They're smaller than this giant dog here, but I see a whole pack of black, wolf-like beasts. Tails tucked between their legs—are they frightened?

'What's that floating thing that looks like a window? Hey! Answer me!'

I ignore the voice in my head and continue to give my attention to what is triggering my radar.

Those are...the soldiers who just abandoned me. They don't seem to be breathing. In fact, it's a pretty gruesome sight of them covered in blood from head to toe.

I've always had an incredibly low tolerance for gore, but for some reason, it's not bothering me now. Setting that aside...

There is no sign of anyone who looks capable of speaking a human language.

My hypothesis:

A ghost?

'You're deliberately ignoring me, aren't you? The Flame Fenrir right before

your eyes is speaking to you!’ the irritated voice presses.

So animals can talk in this world? Wild.

I notice this dog is speaking in a resonant, womanly voice. Is it a female?

This reclusive slacker boy here has basically never interacted with a three-dimensional female, aside from his mom. Sudden anxiety sets in.



The animal can talk.

Given its size, it must be a demonic beast—and since we’re in an alternate world, nothing should come as a surprise.

The trouble is, I’m a socially awkward shut-in.

Then again, that’s not a human. I should be fine. I hope.

I like dogs and cats and hamsters and such. This might be manageable. Minus the one fundamental problem.

“Bah, goo.”

I am unable to communicate. I am a wee baby.

‘You can’t talk? From what I’ve seen, you seem quite capable of rational behavior...’

Doesn’t mean I’m going to give up. I’ve got my nifty Barrier magic.

I try to visualize a barrier in my mouth that would input my thoughts and convert the air vibration into voice-like sounds. *This can’t possibly work*, I think. *That would be just too convenient.*

“Pleased to meet you.”

Bingo. It sounds high-pitched and distorted, like a voice-changer, but I now have a voice.

‘Gross!’ the dog exclaims.

Not a hit with the audience.

‘Excuse me, my apologies,’ the dog says. ‘It’s just surprising to hear a weird voice coming out of a baby’s mouth. Then again, I just saw you running around and flying in the air. At this point, your voice shouldn’t be such a shock.’

The red-furred Fenrir bows its head.

‘Now, if you’re capable of conversation, answer me this. What... I mean, who...are you? You look like a newborn human, but...’

An introduction seems appropriate. My name is...Reinhardt or something? Too long. New name.

“My name is Haruto. I was born a prince of this country, but was abandoned at birth due to my laughably low mana level.”

I abbreviate my name to make it sound Japanese.

The red rover’s eyes widen.

‘A prince, you say. Son of the Flash Princess Gizelotte and Orteus? You do bear the royal insignia on your chest... But never mind that! You say your mana level is low? I can sense staggering mana from your body. As boundless as to surpass every man—no, the sum of every god in history.’

“According to the measuring instrument, my max mana level is a 2.”

‘That’s absurd!’

Say what you will but that's all I got. I have no further explanation to offer.

After a long pause, the dog starts mumbling to itself.

'Hm, I see. After trying to feast on you to replenish my mana, it's only natural for you to be vigilant towards me. There must be some reason they'd abandon a newborn baby deep in the woods. Oh?! Could you be...' she gasps.

The dog interrupts its melodramatic monologue, eyes widening.

'...the Demon King reincarnated?'

How? I was an antisocial Japanese shut-in in my past life.

Considering my circumstance, it probably isn't wise to admit that I'm a useless mob. *If that's what this dog wants to think, I might as well let it.*

"Why yes, I am the Demon King."

'I see. You've succeeded after all. So that's why you helped us escape, and stayed behind alone to...' The dog begins to tear up.

'Ingenious, though,' it continues. 'Reincarnating from the womb of the woman who took your life—the Flash Princess. I know not your ploy, but I am in awe.'

As soon as it perks up, it narrows its eyes suspiciously.

'Still, it is odd. If you are the Demon King, why do you not recognize me? Your manner of speech is different too.'

What a snoopy dog. Fine then. A diversion.

"Aah, my head... Who am I? I...I can't remember!"

How's that?

'Hmph. Perhaps the aftereffects of the reincarnation magic have muddled his

memory? Even on the Demon King, the mystical techniques of the ancients must have taken a heavy toll.'

Oh, good. The dog's buying it.

'I care not if you have forgotten me. If my fate is to die by your hand, it is my honor. Go on. Boil me, roast me, slaughter me—do as you will.'

The dog lolls on the ground, belly up.

I know this one! It's the submissive pose!

Huh?

This is when I finally notice something isn't right with her (?).

"You're...injured?"

One side of the dog's body is slathered with dark red liquid, darker than the fur.

'Oh, this. I was in a brawl with some demon-hunters. Right now, I am using almost all my mana to hold the wound closed, but I won't last for long. My strength lies in offense—I am no good at healing.'

The dog seems to laugh dryly.

So that's why. The reason I managed to imprison this magical creature with my measly level 2 magic is because she (?) is not at full capacity.

I peer at the dog's side. The gash is hidden by fur, but it sounds like it's a serious wound.

I wish I could heal it.

I wasn't treated kindly by humans in my previous life either, but I did find animals comforting. Especially furry ones.

But the moment I heal it, it could bust through the barrier and attack me.

It's a demon, and demons are evil, right? But this one seems nice, based on our conversation.

I don't know. I just don't know.

My people skills—including the skill to judge a person's character and their intentions—are abysmally poor. And this is a dog, for Christ's sake. Not a damn clue.

But I do like fluffy creatures!

After a moment of wrestling with myself, I decide to negotiate.

"Um, if I heal that wound, will you let me go?"

'Let you go?'

"Yeah. No. I mean... Anyway, would you... It would be nice if you could promise to keep your distance from me."

'As Demon King, you do have healing powers...'

Unfortunately, I can only use Barrier magic. With no medical knowledge, could I really come up with something so convenient like a healing barrier? A healing pod or something?

If what I'm healing is a physical wound, maybe there is a way to work with it.

The dog, still lying belly up, is contemplating.

'First and foremost, you're a human now. Do you trust a demon like me to keep my promise?'

"Are demons generally liars?"

'Some are malicious. Like the ones who betrayed you—or the Demon King,

rather. But I am a proud Flame Fenrir! I would sooner die than break a promise!’

After seeing the dog make this declaration in a submissive pose, I start to think that maybe it can be trusted.

‘Wh-What’s this?! My wound...has closed?!’

The first thing I do is take a closer look at the wound under its fur with a scanning barrier.

It’s pretty deep—all the way down to the organs. I’m amazed this dog’s still alive.

Then I prepare multiple barriers to connect the severed parts, pull them tightly together, and seal it shut.

But all this does is hold the wound together with a bunch of barriers.

Next, I stick tape-like barriers to the outside of the severed muscles and organs, and erase the first barriers. I do this with each individual capillary too.

Performing all these intricate operations simultaneously is pretty mentally exhausting. But I don’t feel my mana decreasing much. It’s weird, though—I do feel it being consumed.

Anyway, I bet there’s still a better way. But this’ll do for now. I make a mental note to investigate it later. In case I need it for my own injuries.

Come to think of it, there’s something I’ve been wondering about.

I ask the dumbfounded dog, “What’s your name?”

‘Never mind that. What did you just do?!’ she snaps. ‘I mean, my apologies. Given what you just did for me, I should express my gratitude first. Thank you. Now, permit me to ask... What did you just do?!’

“Um... Healed you?”

‘The fact that you said it with a question mark makes me very nervous, but my wound does seem to have closed. Although this feels different from healing magic...’

It feels like a hassle to go into detail, so I repeat my question instead. “What’s your name?”

‘You really want to know, don’t you? My name, huh. You ask so impetuously. You seem to have forgotten this too, but the name of each demon incarnate has special significance. You, in your human form, have no right to know...’

“Okay. Flay it is.”

‘Whaaaaa?!’

The dog freezes, still belly up.

“You don’t like it?”

It said so itself that it’s a Flame Fenrir. It would be weird to call it a dog. I figured I’d shorten its clan name...

‘No... Flay...’ it giggles. ‘It has a nice ring to it, sir.’

Glad it seems pleased, but why the sudden formality?

Flay rolls over, lies on its belly and utters the following:

‘Despite capturing me, you’ve chosen to save my life. What’s more, you have bestowed upon me a new name. A contract has been sealed.’

Eh? What do you mean, contract?

Flay bows deeply and continues.

‘My master, I shall devote my whole being to serve you. Even if you have no

memory, you are my sworn ally and master. I failed to fulfill my allegiance to you once, but I pledge, this time, to follow through!’

What are you, a samurai?

I sense I’ve gotten myself into something more bothersome than what I’d bargained for. But more importantly...

Right now, I’m plunging into a severely dangerous state.

“I’m hungry.”

‘Pardon?’

“I...need a titty.”

As a wee baby, I can only have breast milk.



Since my birth two days earlier, I haven’t had anything to eat. I did go to the bathroom that one time.

The feeling of hunger is bearable, but obtaining nutrition is rapidly becoming a priority.

The forest is plentiful with food.

But I am a wee baby.

Even if I blend up meat and vegetables into a gloppy soup—I could probably manage that with a barrier—I don’t know if my body will be able to digest it.

Breast milk, or something similar in liquid form, is my best bet, right?

On the other hand, to ask for breast milk from an animal of unconfirmed

gender with no way of knowing if it's currently nursing is likely a futile request.

I know this master-servant relationship is just something I fell into, but I'm a crap boss for making such unreasonable demands to my subordinate.

'Titty... You want breast milk? Yes, I can manage that...'

"For realz?!"

My distorted, high-pitched voice gets even higher. I'm genuinely shocked.

'My wound is... Yes, it seems to be fine. For you, sir, I will do this,' Flay says, as she closes her eyes.

Suddenly, her gigantic form glows with light. The light swells so brightly, it dazzles my eyes. Her body begins to shrink before me and...take on human form?!

Bright red hair, the same color as the dog's furry body, tumbles down to her waist. Atop her head are perky little doggy ears. From her butt flows her fluffy red tail.

A voluptuous chest. A slim waistline. Long, slender arms and legs. Well-proportioned and beautiful in every way.

A stark-naked, gorgeous girl is standing before me.

"Whew. All is in order. Transformation into human form is complete."

The melodious voice that echoed in my head is now audible through my ears. But never mind that.

"Put on some clothes!" I shout, just as I remember that I'm naked as well.

An animal wouldn't be an issue, but this is a human being, not to mention a young woman. I may be a baby, but I have some decorum. I cross my legs and arms to hide my crotch and chest.

It's only natural to conceal my privates, of course, but in my past life, I was embarrassed by the fact that there were several long hairs growing from each of my nipples. My reaction is a relic from that memory. In this life, the hair on my head is peach fuzz, and from the neck down I'm as smooth as an egg.

"P-Please forgive me for sullyng your eyes. However, this body is based on the characteristics of my original form, so I'm afraid I cannot alter it. It will take some time before I can return to my original form. I am terribly sorry."

"No, that's not what I mean. It's just that... I don't know where to look, so... Here!"

I create a barrier based on her silhouette, and give it color. It's the first thing that came to mind, but basically, it's a women's rider suit.

"Aah! That's surprisingly more erotic!"

The fact that I made it black makes her look like a sexy female raider.

"Apologies again! I am terribly sorry. You have been so kind as to present me with a garment, and I am not pulling it off."

No. That's not the problem... Never mind. It's hard to explain.

The sudden appearance of a buck-naked babe, and now a sexily-dressed babe, did fluster me. But I'm not aroused, perhaps due to my infancy. To put it bluntly, my little guy is still a little guy.

"Sir, you created this garment magically, did you not? The ability to create something from nothing truly surpasses the realm of the divine..."

How could I tell her it's only made of a barrier?

What would Flay think if she learned I'm non-elemental and only possess Barrier magic?

“Why, you useless noob! How dare you trick me!”

She’d probably berate me and devour me whole, headfirst.

Yep. I better keep my mouth shut.

But I want to know more about what Barrier magic is. Time to fact-check what I overheard from the king’s henchmen at the castle.

“May I ask you a question, Ms. Flay?”

“Oh, my master. There is no need for you to address me with such deference. We should make our master-servant relationship clear. From now on I will call you Sir Haruto. Please just call me Flay, and order me to do as you wish.”

She takes a knee and bows her head submissively. *That could get to my head, you know?*

“I’m practicing my Barrier magic. But I still don’t really know what it is.”

“Barrier magic? Sir Haruto, why would you bother with something so basic when you already command such high-level magic? Why not focus on greater heights? Since Fire magic is my specialty—”

“No! Barrier magic, please!”

Right now, I’m not looking to learn anything else.

“Ah. Very well... Ahem.”

For some reason, Flay sits on the ground Japanese-style, and begins to explain.

“Barrier magic is a means of establishing your territory. By creating a barrier, you form an environment that is advantageous to your offense/defense moves, or one that is disadvantageous to the enemy.”

“You don’t need an element to use it, right?”

“You wish to use Barrier magic without the confines of an element? I see.”

Flay begins to explain, using herself as an example.

She specializes in offensive Fire magic. If she uses it within a fire-designated barrier, it amplifies the power of Fire magic. On the other hand, within a water-designated barrier, her Fire magic loses power.

“Interesting. That sounds useful.”

But it’s probably pointless info for me, since I’m non-elemental.

“Actually, it is not very versatile.”

“Really?”

“It’s really just supplementary. Another major disadvantage is that once a barrier is established, it is anchored in place and cannot be moved.”

“Huh? I can move them fine.”

Just to show off, I create a colorful barrier and send it flying around. Flay stares, stunned.

“It... It is indeed moving. On its own, with nothing inside. I beg your pardon, but is that even a barrier?”

I make twenty more of them and play around for funsies.

“Sir Haruto, please don’t overdo it. When you create multiple barriers, the amount of mana it takes just to maintain them increases dramatically. The toll on the brain is tremendous!”

“But it doesn’t consume any mana to maintain them,” I reply.

Once again, Flay looks dumbfounded.

“It does consume a little bit to move them around, but it doesn’t feel like a heavy toll.”

I’ll admit that sticking together a bunch of individual cells was tiresome.

“Like I said before, barriers cannot be moved around...” Flay murmurs.

She seems disappointed in me.

“Are those really barriers? But...creation magic is a lost art... To put it bluntly, Sir Haruto, your Barrier magic defies common sense. Of course, Barrier magic can be used regardless of elements. And because it’s so basic, no one ever gives it much consideration...but... Huh?”

Judging by her short-circuit reaction, I suspect my Barrier magic is an oddity.

Which means no matter how many questions I pepper Flay with, she won’t have the answers.

Changing the subject...

“By the way, can I get that titty now?”

I want to fill my stomach while I can.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Of course. Err... How do I remove this garment?”

“There should be a tab up at the neck. Just pull that down.”

“This? Very well. Beg pardon.”

Flay pulls the zipper all the way down to her belly button, and wiggles out of the suit—*Is that really necessary? Why are you buck naked again?!*

“Just your chest! Just your chest is enough!”

I am aware this totally sounds like sexual harassment.

“Surely you jest, Sir Haruto. We cannot perform the act with only my chest

exposed.”

“The...act?”

Flay sits upright, fully nude, and with a big smug grin on her face, utters the most absurd proposition:

“The act of procreation, of course. I am not well-versed in human mechanisms, but the mother’s body must be impregnated to discharge breast milk, correct? Please, go ahead and sow your seed in me.”

Oh, I get it. A bit of a ditz, are we?

It seems my food problem is hitting yet another wall.



Why am I teaching human sex ed to a member of another species?

“So, to make a baby, first you have to ovulate, and then the egg has to get fertilized and implanted in the uterus. Even if the egg gets fertilized and implanted, it’ll take a long time for the mother to start lactating, and by then, I’ll be dead. Understand?”

Still sitting in full nudity, the red-haired beauty called Flay quivers.

“I...I beg your forgiveness. I have disappointed you by promising what I could not deliver.”

Tears well in her eyes.

At this rate, she’s bound to perform seppuku. Quickly, I intervene.

“Now, don’t take it so hard. I’m sure there’s some other way. For the time

being...”

I hastily wrap myself in the white cloth and hop into bed—my baby basket, that is.

“We have an intruder to deal with,” I announce.

The alarm from my security-system barrier is sounding frantically. This is no bird or small animal. It’s a human being with magic abilities.

“I’m picking it up too. It’s headed this way at an extremely high speed...and it stopped just now,” agrees Flay.

It did. It’s pausing at the site of the mangled soldiers who left me out here. Then, quickly, it resumes its approach.

We don’t have much time.

Flay fumbles to put her rider suit back on, leaving us both in plain sight.

“Keep quiet about the fact that I can stand up and fly around and stuff. First, let’s find out what they want.”

Just as I’m finishing my sentence, a large man clad in armor hacks through the bushes.

It’s that fierce-looking older guy. His name’s Gold Zenfis, if I recall. The military commander. He’s the man who begged to spare my life.

Still, I can’t let my guard down.

“Shall I kill him, sir?” Flay suggests.

“Wait... Let’s talk with him first. This man is...”

I create a sort of string-telephone barrier to explain what I know about Gold

Zenfis.



“He wanted to save me. But the royal family wants me dead. We’d better be careful.”

“Why not just kill him?”

The way she immediately suggests killing reminds me that Flay really is a demon.

“Let’s find out what he wants first.”

I’m a little uneasy entrusting this task to a naïve, delusional young woman, but I have no choice.

If this man has secretly come to my rescue, perhaps he can care for me until I’m old enough to be weaned.

Even if he was sent by the king to confirm my death, I could use him to fake my death and lead the king astray.

In either case, I need to be very careful here.

“Yes, sir,” Flay whispers.

In her resonant, commanding tone, she demands, “State your business, ‘Earth-Shattering Warhammer.’”

Earth-Shattering... What?

The man puts down his baggage and hoists a ridiculously large hammer.

“A demon, I see. So you’ve heard of me. But I might ask you the same question. What business have you with that infant?”

“I just happened across him. But it was a greatly fortuitous encounter, for I have gained a master worthy of life-long devotion!”

Hold it right there!

You can leave that part out! I scream-whisper to her. There's an advanced skill.

And now she won't stop looking at me with her "Oops. Was that wrong?" face.

"A master? A demon in service of a human child?" the fierce man probes.

"Well, you know. I care not what species he is. Or something to that effect. Even if he is the child of the Flash Princess."

"What say you? How could you know that this infant is a prince?"

"Huh? Oh...err... Right! The royal insignia. Sir Haruto bears it on his left breast."

Now she's giving me an "I did good!" expression paired with sparkly eyes and a wagging tail. Um, no. That was *not* good.

"Haruto? Did you name him that?"

Now the look on Flay's face says "Oops."

As her boss, it's my job to provide better management. Despite having no job experience.

I whisper my instructions to her.

Flay nods.

"There was a note in the basket. It said, 'Please take care of him. His name is Haruto.' Also, I accidentally incinerated the note," she adds, sending up a ball of fire with one hand.

I know it was my idea, but it still sounds pretty bogus.

"Highly suspicious. Even if the soldiers disobeyed their orders out of mercy for

the child, it is peculiar that his name sounds like a portion of the prince's real name. Or could it have been Princess Marianne? No... It couldn't be; she's only two. Although, she is advanced for her age..."

What's this? The bearded man is starting to waver. Now's our chance to seize control of the situation!

"Enough of your questions! Now you answer mine. What business has the Earth-Shattering Warhammer this deep in the woods?"

"I have come for the infant."

"And I refuse!"

You hush now, I tell her gently.

"I know not what a demon like you could want with that child. I have no intention of harming him. I wish only to save a life imperiled by human machinations," says the large man.

Flay remains quiet, as per my instructions. But this is the time to ask why, so I instruct her to do so.

"In defiance of the king? To what end?"

"My wife...was once with child. But the child lived not to draw its first breath. This infant here may lack in magical abilities, but still, he has been blessed with life. A life to be filled with joy. I act on behalf of my own selfishness."

I don't trust people. I just can't.

But what is it about this guy? Something tells me I can trust him. Still, in my past life, every time I had faith in someone and put myself out there, I've been betrayed.

A rush of coldness paralyzes my emotions.

In my previous life, all I did was cower in fear and hide away in darkness.

Ah, damn. When I let myself remember those horrible times...

I just want to make everything disappear.

I try not to think about it. I take some deep breaths and calm myself.

Meanwhile...

“Oooh, oo-oo-oo! Oh, the p-p-poor poor thing... Snrff!”

Tears are streaming from Flay’s eyes. A tad too sensitive, this girl. *Are you sure you’re a demon?*

The man seems to be thinking the same thing. His tone softens.

“You are a strange demon indeed. I thought demons cared not a whit for human life. Those corpses I saw on the way here—were they not of your doing?”

“Human soldiers are my enemy. When I encounter an enemy, I kill. But that is that, this is this. How sad it must have been for a mother to never cradle her child. How tragic for the child to pass never knowing its mother’s embrace. Human or demon, it matters not!”

Flay is spurting tears, snot, and saliva. Not the best look on a pretty face.

“I see. Still, there is something fishy about your relation to him, but for now... Here.”

The bearded man lowers his enormous hammer and extracts a leather pouch from his bag. He tosses the pouch to Flay.

“I managed to solicit this secretly from the child’s intended wet nurse. I

imagine he's had not a drop of sustenance since birth. Here, fill his belly."

It appears to be a canteen filled with the breast milk I've been yearning for.

Flay is suspicious, but obeys my whispered command. She opens the lid and brings it to my mouth.

I chug it down.

If this guy means to kill me, there's no reason for him to go to all this trouble. Right?

I gulp it down so fast that I honestly can't tell you what it tastes like. But for now, my hunger is satisfied.

"Now, demon! What will you do with the child if you take him? I cannot imagine you have the capacity to rear him."

Yes. I wholeheartedly agree with you, sir.

"Choosing to serve him is your prerogative, but we must also consider the child's needs. As his servant, it is your duty to ensure his safety at least until he comes of age, is it not?"

The old man debates with sound logic.

Flay has nothing to counter with.

"I see you have no argument. Then let us make a deal. I will care for the child. I pledge to raise him until he is of age. If you wish, I can hire you as his personal attendant so you may have peace of mind."

Now this is a surprise. I don't know much yet, but aren't humans and demons enemies in this world? I decide to probe deeper.

"You would hire a demon? I cannot imagine other humans would allow this," Flay inquires on my behalf.

“With your appearance, you can pass as a part-human, part-demon mix. In fact, are you not?”

“I am a pure-blooded Flame Fenrir.”

I make her respond with the straight truth. Now what’s his move?

“My word... You must be a mighty one, then. No wonder the Hell Hounds have kept their distance. Back to topic. Nobody will know that you are a pure-blooded demon if I keep my mouth shut and you play along. What say you?”

“I know not why you would trust me. Thus, I cannot trust you.”

“I do not trust you either. One false move and I’ll crush your skull with this hammer.”

“Hah! Bold words, human. If I deem you as a threat to my master, I will bite off your head and show no mercy.”

“For now, I will not probe why you serve this infant. Do we have a deal?”

That information seems like it should be crucial, but does that mean he cares more about keeping me alive?

I don’t know. But...

“Very well. I entrust Sir Haruto to your care. And I will accompany him for protection.”

The bearded man nods slightly, and mounts his hammer onto his back. He opens his bag and extracts a white cloth.

After tearing the cloth up, he cuts his own arm with his knife, then wipes the blood with the cloth.

“I need you to destroy the prince’s basket,” he instructs.

“You intend to make it look like he was attacked and eaten by an animal,” Flay observes.

She lifts me out of the basket and tramples it.

My death has been faked. Mission accomplished! And I’ve (probably) secured the means to survive my babyhood!

Phew! I’m exhausted...

Thanks to Flay acting as the middleman, my severely socially-awkward butt managed to pull through. I’m going to call that a job well done.

And thus...

With Gold Zenfis as my guardian, I survive the first nine years of my life...

Bonus Interlude:

My Observation Log of a Dog-Eared Maid (1)

This is my logbook on a half-savage, half-airhead, dog-eared maid.

Honestly, I was worried whether a she-demon with a tendency to draw wildly off-base conclusions could hack it in human society. I am secretly keeping this journal to record my observations.

“What say you of this garment?”

Flay appears before me, proudly puffing out her chest. She looks like a classic maid, sporting the traditional long skirt.

I’m slurping milk from the breast of my young wet nurse. It’s kind of embarrassing, but necessary if I want to live.

When breakfast is over and the wet nurse has left, I tell Flay, “I like it. It suits you.”

I still can’t talk, so I speak through my weird voice-simulator.

“If it pleases you, Sir Haruto, it pleases me. Now that I’m in my new battle armor, I may swiftly defend this castle from peril.”

“Just who exactly are you going to war with?”

“I shall fight stubborn dirt and dust in hard-to-reach places, of course.”

Okay, so at least she understands her job.

Gold Zenfis has employed her as my personal servant. However, Flay, who

poses as a “part-demon,” frightens everyone around whenever she wanders the castle. After all, until just recently, demons and humans were at war.

For that reason, Gold staves off suspicion by claiming, “She has scant powers, so I hired her as a maid.” To make the story more convincing, he has her performing maid’s work just in case.

“Try not to cause trouble, okay?”

“Fear not, Sir Haruto. Until you have grown, I will bear whatever insults are directed at me.”

Gosh. I feel kind of bad.

With that, Flay briskly leaves the room.

I’m still pretty worried, so I secretly observe her.

“Die, scum and filth!”

With tremendous strength, Flay attacks the floor with a wet mop. *Scrub, scrub, scrub...* She splinters the floorboards!

“Hmph. What a puny floor.”

No sign of remorse.

Next, she sets to work cleaning the stone wall with the other maids, scrubbing it with a brush. This seems to be going well at first, but...

“Um, Miss Flay? The bristles of your brush are getting shorter and shorter...”

Her aggressive scrubbing quickly wears the bristles down to nothing.

“Hmph. I am not a master of subtlety in human form,” she concludes.

Human form or not, she’s never a master of subtlety, I think to myself.

“Hi-ya! Take that, grime that sullies the stone wall!”

Flay reveals a savage set of claws from her fingers, and carves grooves into the stone. Everyone else recoils in horror.

The other maids soon grow wary of Flay. Even the castle guards begin to keep her under close watch.

At this rate, can she really adapt? I worry endlessly.

It’s break time. The maids are having tea in a backroom. At first, the vibe is as somber as a wake.

But the maids are determined to break the silence. Still cautious around Flay, they begin to chat hesitantly, one by one.

“Sooo...” begins one of the maids. “My boyfriend promised we’d get married after his next battle. But when his parents objected, he totally caved, and now he’s kept me waiting for two years.”

“Hmph. A man who can’t keep his word? Sever it (his head),” advises Flay.

“I...I suppose so. I guess I should sever it (our ties)!”

Looks like the ball is rolling. Their conversations probably aren’t meshing, so I added some footnotes. I think I’ve got it right.

Soon, the other maids start coming to Flay for advice.

“I think my husband’s cheating on me...”

“My mother-in-law is mean to me...”

“The geezer next door snores so loudly...”

Flay’s advice is always the same.

“Sever them!”

“You have a point. Standing my ground and giving them an ultimatum to sever ties is clearly what I should be doing,” the maids all conclude.

And that is the story of how Flay became their trusted counselor.

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes, including cubes and circles with halftone patterns, scattered across the background. Some cubes are dark gray, while others are light gray. The circles with halftone patterns are also in shades of gray.

CHAPTER TWO:

An Aspiring Shut-in Becomes a Superhero

Fast forward: I manage to survive the first nine years of my life.

Not that I can take credit. I'm basically just a parasite in someone else's home.

The man who took me in is Count Gold Zenfis. He's related to the king who abandoned me, which would also make him my blood relative in this world. Even so, raising me is a direct violation of the king's orders. If the king were to find out, we'd both face the death sentence. In spite of that, Zenfis chose to save me. He's a very good person.

For the first two years of my life, Gold (my dad) and his wife (my mom) raised me in secrecy, deep in their castle.

The shut-in life I always dreamed of.

I was satisfied with my lifestyle, but my dad lamented that it wasn't fair to keep me hidden away like this.

I accepted that it was time for me to let go of the shut-in life.

Only temporarily, that is. I intended this to be a sort of preparatory period to lay the groundwork for my future cushy shut-in life.

I created a thin, skin-colored barrier to hide my royal insignia. I named this move the "photoshop texture." I let my parents believe it's Flay's magic.

Soon after, my dad officially adopted me. He made up a story about rescuing me from a village that had been ravaged by bandits.

So begins the life of Haruto Zenfis, son of the count!

Born a prince and abandoned in the woods, only to rise again to aristocracy.

Not that I can take credit for any of it.

I do have one hang-up.

My original plan was to leave as soon as I was weaned, but I kept postponing it, and letting my adoptive family take care of me.

It was just that my dad and the others have been so kind to me...

Before I knew it, I'd lived at the count's home for nine years.



Spring mornings are still chilly in the count's region, which is located north of the kingdom. But I've encapsulated my room in a barrier that keeps it nice and toasty.

I can hear the soft chirping of birds. Not from outside—from a box-shaped barrier I've created to serve as an alarm clock. I erase it and sit up.

As I get out of bed, I notice a figure in the room.

Standing there is a dark-haired boy with very fine features, which he probably inherited from his parents. He seems totally lifeless as he stares into the void.

"Oh. It's just me."

The boy is a perfect reproduction of me. I made him from a barrier. As part of my shut-in preparation, I'd been working on a secret experiment to create a body double, in case of future public appearances. Unfortunately...

"Good morning."

"..."

No reply. He's not dead, but he doesn't respond or react.

"Too bad. His appearance and texture are perfect."

I poke his face with my finger. It has a nice spring to it.

"I'd like it if he was done already, but how the heck do I make an AI?"

I can control his motions remotely, and I can make him talk by transmitting my speech to him. But he's still very far from natural expressions and mannerisms.

Nine years.

I've spent nine years polishing my barrier skills—setting aside the question of whether they're actually barriers or not.

There's a lot I can do now.

And still a lot I don't know.

Since my near-death experience shortly after my rebirth, things have been going pretty well. All I have to do now is figure out how to become a shut-in again.

But I do have some concerns.

"Whoops. Look at the time."

Quickly, I get dressed.

For the most part, I stay in my room. After all, that's what a shut-in does. But I do have to leave it three times each day. This is one of those times. The others are lunch and dinner.

Mealtimes, as you'd call them. In this world too, meals are thrice a day. My dad's house rule is that we all eat together as a family. Even when my dad is

away doing his military work, the rest of us are to follow his rule.

Reluctantly, I step out of my room. As I'm pattering down the hallway...

"Oh, good morning, Haruto."

A beautiful woman awaits me outside the dining room, wearing a bright smile.

She has long, shimmering blonde hair, and there is an air of refined gentleness in her posture. Paired with her ample bosom, she gives off a sweet, comforting aura.

"Good morning, Mom."

Her name is Natalia Zenfis. Yep. She's my adoptive mother and the wife of Count Gold Zenfis. Not to be rude, but it's a real-life case of Beauty and the Beast. The age gap between them is a whopping twenty years. She's so young.

At first, I was impressed that my dad scored such a beautiful wife, but it turns out my mom's the one who threw herself at him. She's got a thing for older men. It's true; she said so herself.

"My... My, my, my. What's the matter? You look so defensive."

"Being hugged makes me defensive."

With her open hands itching to grab me, you bet I am.

"You're always so reserved. I'm your mother, you know. You can let me love you."

On the inside, I'm a grown man. If you count my years of age since my prior life, I'm almost thirty. If I let her be affectionate, even if it's only in a motherly way, I'd feel like I'm betraying my dad.

Seeing how defensive I'm getting, my mom's shoulders slump with

disappointment.

“Gosh... That makes me so sad... Ha! Caught you off guard!”

She lunges at me, but I dodge just in time.

“Aww. Not today either, huh?” she puckers.

This is our daily routine, basically. Soon after, we enter the dining room.

A ferocious-looking bearded man sits at the very end of a long table. It's my dad, the count of this castle. At the age of fifty-one, Gold Zenfis is still as robust as ever. It's been almost a decade since we first met, but he hasn't changed much. He looks terrifying at first glance, but he's a kind gentleman.

Just as I'm greeting my dad...

“A-hah!”

My mom leaps at me again.

Once again, I dodge her nimbly.

“Hmph!” My mom pouts as my dad smiles warmly at her.

She takes her seat opposite mine at the table.

Yep. Business as usual.

And as per usual, sitting next to my mom is a little girl *cowering in fear*.

She's inherited her mother's fine blonde hair. Her big doe eyes and endearing face also resemble her mother's. It's clear she'll be quite the beauty when she grows up.

Her name is Charlotte; she's my adoptive sister. Four years my junior. And she absolutely avoids looking at me. Downright terrified. A kitten cowering in the

face of a big scary dog.

“Dad, I’d like to eat in my room after all,” I tell him.

“You will not. If not for mealtimes, you would never come out of your room,” my dad proclaims as he gives Charlotte a quick glance.

Neither of my parents have any idea why Charlotte’s so frightened of me. Until recently, they made various attempts to get her to warm up.

But to no avail.

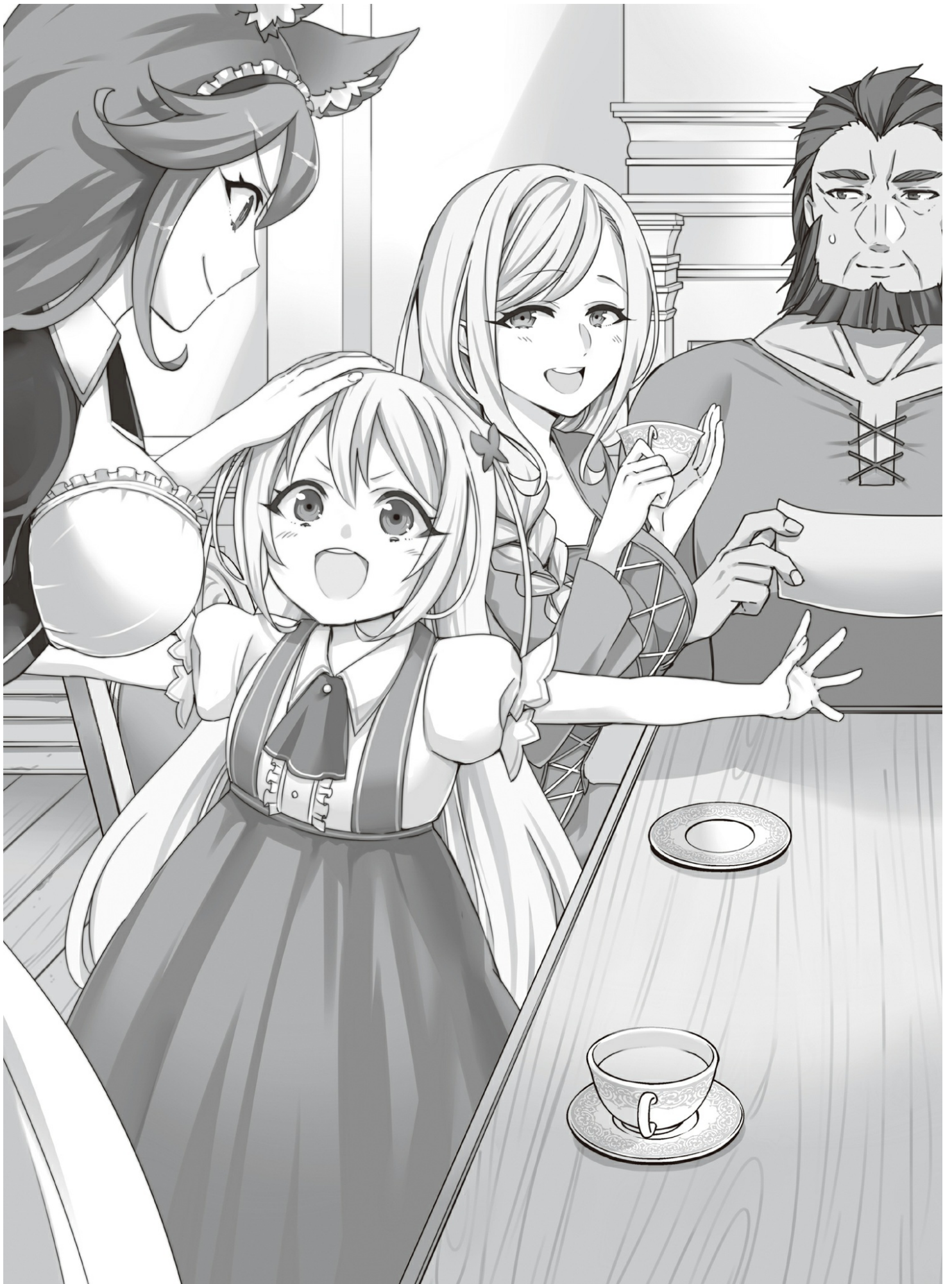
Which is why, as usual, a heavy atmosphere is hanging over the dining table. But not for long.

“As dull as ever, I see. Can’t any of you be more entertaining for Sir Haruto?”

The energy changes dramatically when the red-haired maid enters.

Originally a giant dog—or as she asserts, a “great wolf.” For unknown reasons, she believes me to be the reincarnation of some Demon King. Anyway, she is Flay the she-demon. I accidentally made her into my servant when I gave her that name.

Flay looks exactly like she did when we first met. According to her, she “can live to be a thousand,” and her current age is around one hundred and seventy. She doesn’t know exactly.



She enters the room pushing a clattering cart laden with food.

“Rejoice and delight in the toothsome fare prepared by our devoted chef!” she commands.

Despite her out-of-turn remarks, my parents’ faces soften at the sight of her. And most of all...

“Good morning, Flay!” Charlotte lights up, a huge smile blossoming on her face.

“You sure are full of spirit, little one. As children should be. I approve,” Flay intones.

“Thank you very much. Um, um, Flay! Would you please play with me again today?” Charlotte begs.

“I decline. My duty is to serve Sir Haruto.”

“Please play with her, Flay,” I interject quickly.

“Very well. I have been granted permission. I may do my master the favor of playing with you, but the parents’ permission is also necessary before nannying a child. Gold and Natalia, what say you?”

For an employee, she really has a cocky tone with her bosses.

“Please do,” my dad replies.

“Yes, please,” my mom affirms.

Charlotte joyfully throws both hands into the air.

I look on, smiling, but as soon as Charlotte’s eyes meet mine, she flinches and looks away. *Ouch*.

After I finish eating, I head back towards my room, but my mom stops me.

Before she can say anything, I cut her off. "It doesn't bother me."

"That's not true... Then again, perhaps it is. Right now, you don't seem bothered," my mom replies.

Conversations with her are always like this. If a random person overheard, it would probably make no sense.

"I don't know why Charlotte is frightened of you, Haruto. She's still little, so she's not able to properly explain herself. But deep down in her heart, I believe she wants to be close to you."

"Does she, really?"

"I'm certain. She's quite friendly with Flay, and Flay's a demon," my mom reassures me.

Or maybe she just likes furry animals? In that sense, I guess we're alike.

My mom furrows her brow as she comes towards me.

She doesn't leap at me or tackle me this time. Instead, she simply envelopes me in a soft embrace.

"You won't go, will you?" she entreats.

The question comes out of nowhere, but I know what she means.

"Not for now," I tell her.

With a little sigh, my mom lets me loose.

"I don't care what anyone says. You're my child. I love you just as much as Charlotte."

"Thank you," I tell her.

It hurts that I can't say, *Me too*. I guess I'm just a cold-hearted guy.

I return to my room and fall back on the bed. Staring at the ceiling, I begin to ponder.

I never intended to stay this long. I figured I'd leave as soon as I was weaned.

My dad and mom, the people in the castle—they're all so kind to me. Before I knew it, nine years went by.

But maybe my time has come.

The count's heir will be either Charlotte or the man she marries. Rather than find out why my sister is afraid of me, relieving her of those fears as soon as possible seems like the best thing I can do for her.

"Still, though..."

I make a tabular barrier in front of my eyes. I can see the image from the other barrier I've connected it to.

"Hahaha! Slowpoke. You're too slow, child," Flay teases. "Do you really think you'll catch me at that speed?"

"Wait up! I will, Flay. I have not given up yet," Charlotte squeals.

The red-haired maid and the little girl are playing tag.

Charlotte runs like the wind, closing in on Flay. But Flay slips away, evading the girl effortlessly.

Hang on. Charlotte's movements seem way too fast. That's no speed for a five-year-old. If I play tag with her, I'm sure to lose.

The people of this world have astonishing physical abilities. Sometimes, I gaze

outside through my barrier to pass the time. All the soldiers move more skillfully than top-tier athletes. A ten-foot leap is nothing new in this world. The stuff of fantasy abounds.

Setting that aside, I see my mom watching from the sidelines, smiling.

They all seem truly happy together.

If I were to leave, Flay would certainly follow me. Even if I commanded her to stay, she'd probably say, "If I can no longer serve you, sir, my life is of no value" and perform seppuku or something.

And if Flay leaves, Charlotte will be heartbroken. Maybe she'll resent me more than ever.

What do I do? There's no easy answer.

Every day at this hour, I agonize over the same questions.

Well, at least for now, I only have to see her at mealtimes.

What will be, will be. I continue experimenting on my Barrier magic so that one day, I'll be able to realize my fantasy life as a shut-in.



One sunny day.

My dad calls me into his office, which is unusual for him. I enter his room. There's a set of reception furniture, a wall lined with bookshelves, and an office desk. My dad is sitting behind his desk, facing me.

"There you are. Come with me."

With that, my dad exits the room. I don't know what's going on, but I follow.

Striding swiftly, my dad leads me outside.

I squint at the glaring sunlight. Much too bright for a shut-in.

We're in the castle's courtyard. Charlotte is usually seen playing out here but right now, she's nowhere to be found. Instead, I see a young soldier holding two swords. Only one of them is wooden.

When my dad takes the swords, the young soldier leaves. From the way he cheerily says, "Good luck, Young Master!" as he exits, I know this can't be good.

"Haruto, starting today, I intend to teach you swordsmanship," my dad tells me.

I knew it!

"Don't give me that sour look."

My dad's expression is just as sour.

Outdoor physical exercise is basically a recluse's worst nightmare. I would like to firmly decline.

"Your mana level is extremely low. Thus far, we haven't publicized that you are non-elemental. Given that you are unlikely to attain status through magic, it is essential that we cultivate your abilities in another area," my dad explains.

"But does it have to be sword fighting?"

"Is there something else you want to pursue?" my dad offers.

"Well, I'd rather be a shut...*cough cough*! Um... Magic researcher?"

"Why the question mark? Hm. A researcher, huh? I was worried about you being holed up in your room doing god knows what, but it seems you've

actually given this some thought.”

My dad looks pleased.

“But you will have difficulty as a researcher without magical powers of your own. Barrier magic isn’t good for much without an element. What field are you majoring in?”

“Um... Ancient Magic.”

My dad’s eyes widen in surprise.

In addition to the contemporary magic people in this world use today, there’s also Ancient Magic, the lost magical arts of the mythical ages. There’s no one who practices it, so researchers in that field are rare.

I figure that if I feign an interest in this obscure, hazy field, it would both sound impressive and allow me to evade further questioning.

“I understand. So you see an opportunity in that field. Forgive me,” my dad says. “I misjudged you. I see now that you’ve been giving proper consideration to your future.”

A supportive reaction, to my surprise. Maybe now I can escape sword fight training...

“Still, there’s no reason not to try out your talent for the sword. Let us find out. Come at me.”

My dad tosses me the real sword, and brandishes the wooden one himself.

Looks like I’m not getting out of this.

But even a wooden sword is a blunt weapon. I don’t like pain.

I have no choice. I shield myself with a barrier. I know he’ll go easy on me, but I’m still up against a veteran soldier known as the Earth-Shattering

Warhammer. There's no way I could score a single point against him.

I make the barrier as impervious as I can. Now all I have to do is pilot it so as to cover for my pathetic physical abilities. I basically make a puppet of myself. An exoskeleton power suit, if you will.

"Whenever you're ready," my dad says.

We stand face-to-face, thirty feet apart.

I bolt into him and swing my sword down with all my might.

"Wha?!"

My dad dodges with ease. As you'd expect. My sword misses its target and hits the ground.

Vwam! Klang!

The ground gouges and my sword breaks.

Shoot. I forgot to protect the sword with a barrier. It's a training sword, so hopefully my dad won't be mad. Timidly, I look up at him...

"What did you just do?" he demands.

"Huh?"

What did I just do? I attacked him like he told me to. He's upset that I broke his sword, isn't he?

After staring at me for a moment, he commands, "I will stop short. But I still want you to dodge."

His eyes gleam as he leaps at me in a single bound.

Terrified, I fly into the air. I sweep over my dad's head and land silently. Whirling around, I clench my broken sword.

For some reason, my dad is gaping at me in astonishment.

“Is something...wrong?” I ask.

“Did you just...fly?”

“You did instruct me to dodge.”

“You read my attack?” he inquires.

“No. I just knew you were going to come at me, so the moment you moved, I jumped out of the way,” I explain.

“So...you did read my movement...”

Why does he look so intense? Did I screw up somehow?

“Haruto... So you *can* use magic?”

It’s not a question. More like he’s reconfirming.

Come to think of it, everyone is under the assumption that I have little to no magic abilities. But if I tell him it’s Barrier magic, I don’t know if he’ll believe me. From what I understand, my Barrier magic is different than normal.

I freeze, unable to answer.

“Your movements are beyond those of a child... Beyond those of a master swordsman, in fact. Except for those who use self-enhancing magic,” he says.

Oh, is that how it works? So the crazy-athletic soldiers in this world are enhancing themselves with magic? Does that mean Charlotte is too?

“Moreover, you could only have evaded my attack with flight magic. Equivalent to Rank B... A highly sophisticated magic, requiring a mana level of at least 30.”

Flying felt pretty easy to me. But come to think of it, I’ve never seen anyone

else flying around.

“You are non-elemental. There is little potential for self-enhancement with just Barrier magic. What did you use?”

Um, said Barrier magic?

I can't explain. I know my Barrier magic is kinda different, but...I can't explain what I don't understand myself.

“I don't know,” I answer honestly.

“Not at all?” he presses.

“Um, I guess I did internally pray to ‘make me stronger’?”

Now I'm just rambling.

“You've awakened powers that not even you yourself can understand. In that case...”

My dad seems to have figured something out, but he doesn't finish his sentence. Come on, that intense stare is only making me nervous.

“Very well. I suppose you must have *that* kind of talent.”

What kind?

“Now, let us continue our training,” he says.

“What, there's more?!”

“Your physical technique is that of an amateur. With improvement, you could be a first-class swordsman.”

Once again, I openly grimace at his suggestion.

“Why, without a doubt you will surpass me in no time,” my dad proclaims.

I find that hard to believe. After all, this guy was on the unit that defeated the

Demon King.

But my dad's all about it. He enthusiastically keeps me hostage until sundown.



Later that evening...

Gold is handling paperwork at his desk.

Sitting on the sofa is his wife, Natalia. When Gold sighs, she breaks the silence.

"You've been busy lately."

"There have been a lot of bandit attacks," he explains.

"That again," Natalia says. "Yet just last week you subdued an attack."

"Unless we annihilate them completely, the bandits will quickly find new members and regain their strength. It seems they are formed by degenerate imperial soldiers. The bandits who escaped from us are quickly recruiting others of their kind."

The count's territory shares a border with the empire up north. After the Demon King's defeat, the empire rapidly grew in power, becoming the most potent threat to the kingdom.

"Perhaps the empire is secretly using them as puppets?" Natalia wonders.

"It is possible. Next time, we must not allow any to escape."

Gold glares into empty space as Natalia gently consoles him.

"Shall I put on some tea?"

“No. I’ll do it myself. If you move, you’ll wake Charlotte,” Gold replies.

Charlotte is drifting off in Natalia’s lap. Until moments ago, Natalia was reading her a story, but sleep has gotten hold of the child.

Gold casts Fire magic on a metal pitcher atop a serving cart. When the water reaches a boil, he pours tea into two cups. He places the teacups and saucers on the low table in front of the sofa, and sits down next to Natalia. The sofa creaks.

“I began swordsmanship training with Haruto today,” he tells her.

“My, how cheeky of you to keep it from me all this time. How did it go?”

Natalia gazes down at the wavering liquid in low light. The next words out of her husband’s mouth paralyze her.

“He may be a ‘returned demon.’”

“Darling, how could you...”

Gold puts a finger to her lips, and Natalia swallows her voice. The little girl in her lap stirs.

A returned demon—a child who is born with the rare genetic traits of a demon, passed down from an ancestor who’s had relations with one. A returned demon might have superhuman strength even without the power of magic. They may also possess magical capabilities equivalent to the highest-ranking nobility.

The phenomenon is so rare that most people consider it the stuff of fairy tales. However, according to the kingdom’s secret archive, cases have been reported, albeit very, very rarely. It was even reported to have occurred in the royal family.

“Why would you think that?” Natalia asks, her voice tremulous.

Often, a returned demon is the target of oppression. Natalia couldn’t bear the thought.

Gold recounts the events of the afternoon’s swordplay training in detail.

Natalia is flabbergasted. Dodging the Earth-Shattering Warhammer’s full-on attack is not the feat of a child. It was truly unthinkable.

“But Haruto doesn’t have horns or a tail,” she protests.

“True. But perhaps that could be the influence of the royal insignia? The mark doesn’t just distinguish rightful heirs to the throne. It’s said to also possess mysterious powers that are not yet understood. Perhaps therein also resides the secret to why Flay reveres Haruto as her master.”

Even so...

“No. No! Haruto is a normal human being. He cannot be of demon heritage!”

Charlotte’s head twitches slightly.

“Oh, dear. I’m sorry, Charlotte. Did I startle you?”

Charlotte rubs her eyes. Her breath grows long and deep once again.

Natalia looks relieved, but her eyes well with tears.

“Why must all these cruel fates fall upon that child?”

Gently, Gold pulls his wife close in a soft embrace.

“I feel the same way. But one thing is clear—a child who was branded as useless and discarded is, in fact, endowed with astounding powers. I do want to help him develop them.”

“Yes...”

“Fortunately, his outward appearance reveals nothing. Our only recourse is to do everything in our power to foster our children’s happiness. For both Haruto and Charlotte.”

“Yes. For our dear children.”

Comforted, Natalia relaxes in her husband’s arms.

She didn’t mean to pretend-sleep. She didn’t mean to eavesdrop.

In fact, the child overhears very little of her parents’ conversation. The only two words that settle in her ears are “Haruto” and “demon.”

A demon. In the small world the child inhabits, the word signifies only the beloved, fluffy-tailed older girl who always plays with her.

It doesn’t connect.

It’s implausible.

Brother Haruto couldn’t possibly be a demon.

At the same time, another thought surfaces—

But he’s not human either.

Charlotte Zenfis is a child prodigy. Her talents surpass even those of the Flash Princess, savior of the kingdom.

Despite her young age—or because of it, in fact—her latent powers heighten her instincts.

In terms of power, Charlotte sees that Flay is number one. Her father, Gold, is

number two. Compared to them, what her older brother possesses is immeasurably horrifying.

Too young to interpret her magic ability, the child is only able to sense an instinctive fear.



Today, like yesterday, I have swordplay training. *Have I begun to get the hang of it over the past few days?*

“Y...You win, Young Master.”

While my dad is away, I spar with a young soldier. Unable to parry my attack, he falls on his butt and surrenders.

“Incredible. Your skills have improved by another order of magnitude, just as they did yesterday.”

“You think so?”

“You’ve already mastered the contents of the swordplay manual that I lent you the other day. I am genuinely astounded.”

It’s true that I read the book he lent me cover to cover. Yet I can hardly claim to have mastered the skills.

After all, I’m only using my imagination to control myself like a puppet. I’m not physically moving my body. I’m simply operating the barrier enveloping it.

I could never learn those moves physically. It’s more like controlling a video game character with my mind. Under the same circumstances, anyone could probably do it. If such a video game exists, I’d love to play it.

“I’m afraid I’m no match for you at this point. Forgive me.”

The soldier looks shot down.

I wish I could offer him some words of encouragement, but I don’t know what to say. I barely know him. My communication skills haven’t leveled up at all in these nine years.

“I shall dedicate myself to doing everything I can to come close to your level, Young Master.”

He pledges with renewed determination. No help was needed to recover his good cheer.

“Still though, it’s a mystery,” he muses. “Is your mana level really only a 2, Young Master?”

“Yes. It’s true.”

I’m not lying.

It always struck me as odd too.

Maybe the problem was the crystal ball only displayed two digits?

What if my level was actually over 100? Or 200, even?!

My wishful thinking motivated me to analyze the mechanics of the mana-measuring crystal ball, so I created my own with Barrier magic.

The result:

002/002. Same as before.

It couldn’t be four digits, right? Not when the top score is 77 in the whole

history of humankind.

It was hard enough to make a three-digit crystal ball. At this point, I don't have the focus to make a four-digit one. I'm better off using my time to research Barrier magic.

Thus, my mana level of 2 is official. Paired with the fact that I am, in fact, non-elemental.

Still, it's a mystery.

With a mana level this low, I should have pretty limited mana. But at this point, I can make as many barriers as I want (hundreds of millions). And I can feel the amount of mana they consume proportionate to their size and function, but I've never experienced a feeling of running out.

In conclusion: I must be super-efficient at managing my Barrier magic. It probably comes from being non-elemental.

Is this the bonus power the goddess-y being gave me? I don't know for sure, but it's possible.

"My mana level is pretty low too, so I want to learn to use it efficiently and get stronger," the soldier tells me. "Ah. Forgive me. It was rude of me to say 'too.'"

His mana level is low too?

Let's see. I affix a special lens-shaped barrier over my eyeballs. My DIY new-and-improved version of Mija's Crystal.

Uh huh. It's 7/16. Pretty high compared to mine. It's on par with most of the foot soldiers in this world. Two digits would get you an officer's title. For commoners (like the maids at the castle), an adult with a mana level of 3 or 4 is average.

“I became a soldier because I look up to Gold.”

Oh, is it story time?

“Gold has been my hero since childhood. I’ve fantasized about fighting alongside the Earth-Shattering Warhammer.”

I have zero interest in his tale, but I don’t mind blowing off swordplay practice.

“But reality is tough. I’ve yet to experience my first battle. Oh, but I am planning on signing up to join the next bandit conquest,” the soldier continues.

Bandit conquest, huh. As if I would ever. Can this guy really hack it, anyway? Lately, it feels more like I’m the one training him in our drills.

“Even if I do get to go, I’ll probably just be a porter, way in the back,” he muses.

That would still have its risks.

“Be careful, okay?”

“I will. I promise to come back alive.”

That better not be an omen.

“Oh no. There I go, yammering on and on. Shall we resume training?” he suggests.

Rats. He noticed.

I try to hide my reluctance as we go back to swinging our swords.

Several days later.

My dad is away today. He left yesterday to wage war on the bandits. The

young soldier who always trains with me went too, so I'm chilling out in my room.

Just past noon, cries break out in the castle.

I do something I rarely do—I leave my room and step outside, through the castle's front entrance.

"How wretched," Flay grunts as she joins me on my way out.

It's utter chaos.

"Gather quickly, all who practice healing magic!"

"Another, over here!"

"The most critically wounded first!"

Almost every soldier is wounded to some degree. Those who can't walk are piled onto horse-drawn carts. Some are already gone.

"How pathetic. What's wrong with Gold? Letting mere bandits get the better of his men..."

"Flay. Silence."

"?!"

Flay shuts her mouth, just as I've ordered. I leave her behind and walk into the bloody mess.

I approach one of the carts.

"Y-Young Master..."

The young soldier who's been training me is lying there.

"F-Forgive me. I am ashamed...for you...to see me thus..."

"Don't try to talk," I tell him.

“My... My promise... I swore...to return alive...and now...”

He doesn't seem to hear. I realize...he can't hear. His eyes no longer see me either. Their focus is drifting elsewhere.

A huge gash runs across his back, deep into his spine. Several arrows are stuck pierced in his stomach. It's a wonder he's still breathing.

“You did come back alive,” I say.

Again, my voice doesn't reach him. He continues to apologize to me, almost as if he's talking to himself.

“F-Forgive me...”

Soon he loses consciousness.

“Utterly disgraceful,” a voice says from behind.

My dad approaches in great strides, armor scraped.

“We were vigilant. We were prepared. We were determined not to let a single one of them escape. Yet this...”

He spews with a mask of rage, “I am...ashamed of myself!”

Even the most invincible warrior can lose if his team is outmatched. My dad knows this, and it devastates him more than anything.

“What happened?” I ask.

“We got a tip on the location of their stronghold. But by the time we arrived, it had been abandoned. Before we could turn around, they took us by surprise from the rear. Yes... They were too... For mere bandits... The empire must have...”

I was the one who'd asked, but midway through, I lose track.

It takes a lot of focus to do...*this*.

“...to! Haruto!”

“Huh? Yes, Dad?”

I feel slightly dizzy.

“A child of your age should not be exposed to such horror. Retire to your room and get some rest,” he suggests.

“Oh, yeah. I will.”

I really am super sleepy, so I decide to take him up on his advice. Just as I turn on my heels...

“Wh-What’s this?!”

“My wounds are healed?!”

“My leg is attached again?!”

All at once, there is a torrent of shouts.

I hurry back to Flay’s side.

“...”

Flay is silent, her head bowed. She’s still following my order to be silent.

“Sorry about that. I was a little on edge. You can talk again.”

“Not at all. It is I who’d spoken out of line in some way. I am the one who should apologize,” Flay replies.

She doesn’t get it. Well, whatever.

“Can you come with me somewhere tonight?” I ask.

“Of course. I will accompany you anywhere, Sir Haruto.”

I nod and enter the castle. As soon as I return to my room and collapse on my bed, I plunge into slumber. Healing wounds is intricate work, and it's exhausting. And yet I can still feel that I have plenty of mana left. How strange...

It's late at night, and the castle has settled into a quiet rest.

Flay and I stand on a turret atop the castle. The stars are beautiful.

"Is it to your liking, Sir Haruto?"

"Yes. This sandwich is delicious."

Flay is surprisingly good at everything. I fell asleep without supper, so I appreciate the food.

While I was sound asleep, the castle was in a state of panic. It's understandable. After all, a group of wounded soldiers suddenly became perfectly well. Nobody seems to suspect I was behind it, but I wonder if I should cover my tracks somehow. Could I play it off as a divine miracle or something? Is that too far-fetched?

I ponder the matter as I wolf down the sandwich, surveying my surroundings with a hundred of my tabular barriers.

One of the barriers shows the image I'm looking for. It's night, so it's on night vision mode.

"That's them," Flay points out.

A mob of men celebrating raucously in an old fort are caught on cam.

"Yep. But isn't this where Dad and his army went?"

"It appears that this is their base after all. Which means they must have gotten wind of the attack somehow, with enough time to prepare their own

ambush.”

“So they have spies,” I conclude.

How will I find them? I guess I can just ask.

“I am spotting several other bandit camping grounds. What about those?”
Flay asks.

“We’ll destroy them too, while we’re at it. All of them.”

Bandits are nothing but trouble. Maybe they have their reasons, like they grew up in poverty or whatever. But if I’m being honest, I don’t care.

If understanding them better makes me indecisive, I’d rather not know.

My dad is tormented. My dad, who has done so much for me.

The castle’s soldiers have also been kind to an orphan like myself. Maybe there are some who find me troublesome, but nobody has ever been foul to me.

Regardless of all that, the lack of safety in the region is bound to affect my dream shut-in life.

Therefore, I plan to wipe them out. Completely.

A veil of cold-bloodedness cloaks my heart. It’s not a bad feeling.

“Shall we go,” I say.

“Yes, sir. I shall accompany you.”

I extinguish most of the tabular barriers and fly forth into the sky.



In a fort near the border of the empire.

There are three men in one of the smaller rooms: the leader of the bandit gang and his two henchmen. One of them wears the armor of the count's army.

"Excellent work today, Lieutenant."

"I told you to call me Cap'n here."

"Hahaha! Most of the men here are rebels from the imperial army. I'm sure they all know by now that we're the imperial soldiers."

"Even so. We can't have the count and his men figuring it out."

These three are, in fact, imperial soldiers. They were ordered to organize bandit gangs and infiltrate the border to incite chaos within the kingdom.

"Well then, Cap'n. Shall we drink and feast in celebration too? As we reminisce on the laughable sight of the Earth-Shattering Warhammer floundering helplessly."

"This is no time for festivities. We missed a perfect opportunity to annihilate Gold Zenfis today."

"A shame indeed. I just want to get rid of him so we can finally go home."

"This is proving to be more difficult than we expected."

Nonetheless, there is a sense of accomplishment. As an individual, Gold commands unrivaled strength. But he is not a master of military strategy. He is too honest of a man to employ devious tactics. If the bandits use trickery to entrap him, his head is assured to be their trophy.

Just when the captain's face twists into a crooked smirk, he notices something strange.

The hooting and hollering in the distance has gone quiet. The bandit minions

have been rowdily celebrating the day's victory, but it is still too early for the party to end.

Moments later, shouts begin to pierce the silence. But these sound more like...

"Screaming...?"

The captain listens closely. The voices sound like they're wailing for help or pleading for mercy.

Something is wrong. This isn't a bar fight—the cries are too desperate. Before long, the voices subside into stillness.

"You. Go see what is afoot in the great hall."

Just as the captain commands, he hears a childlike voice behind him.

"Oh, the spies are in this one," it says.

The voice of a girl, or possibly a boy who hasn't reached puberty yet.

"The search is over. Get ready to be grilled," the voice looms.

The captain tries to turn, but finds himself frozen stiff.

A few minutes earlier...

The bandit minions have been drinking and celebrating their victory in the main hall.

It's been a while since they had meat and alcohol. "Now, if only there were women," one of them hollers. That's when he sees *her*.

"What an awful stench. It makes me want to vomit."

A young, fiery-haired maid stands in the doorway. An unusual sight for a place

like this.

“What’s this? Who called for a maid?”

“Who cares? Hey you, come over here and pour us a drink.”

“And later we’ll have all sorts of fun.”

The minions snicker lewdly. One of them approaches her.

“Hm? What’s up with those ears? And that tail...”

“You reek. Back off,” she says contemptuously.

In a blink of an eye, the man is engulfed in flames. He lurches about the room as he’s incinerated alive, until finally he collapses motionless on the floor.

“You demon!”

“Come to think of it, I heard there’s a part-demon wench at the count’s castle!”

“She’s come for revenge!”

Suddenly sober, the bandits draw their weapons and assume a battle stance.

“Revenge? Hah, I owe no one revenge. I’ve come to punish. Any man to cause my master even a twinge of displeasure deserves to die a thousand deaths.”

Her red eyes gleam enigmatically. Long, hooked claws peer out from both hands.

“Get her!”

“Absurd. Don’t flatter yourselves, you specks of filth.”

The girl lunges forward. As she sprints past a bandit, his throat bursts with blood.

The rest is a single-handed massacre.

She slashes anyone who turns their backs, and incinerates those who attempt to cast spells from a distance. One-hit kills. Not a single man she attacks is left breathing.

One lucky soul who has yet to be targeted scrambles for the exit. But...

“Augh?!”

The bandit falls to the floor. For some reason, the leg he stepped forward to run with has missed the ground. A second before that, there was sharp pain. He looks down and realizes his leg has been sliced off.

“What’s going on?!”

Bizarrely enough, there is no blood from his open wound. His severed leg, however, lies in a puddle of raw red.

He’s not the only one. All the remaining bandits flocking towards the exit are finding one or both of their legs severed. Some arms, even.

“Flay, don’t kill so many. We need to interrogate them about the spy,” says a child’s voice.

Its owner is nowhere to be seen.

“I apologize. And well done. How did you stop their bleeding?”

“Just a patch on their wounds. It’s much easier than fully healing them.”

At the sight of the maid girl conversing casually with an invisible collaborator, the remaining men stare in horrified silence.

Even as the conversation progresses, the legs keep dropping from anyone who tries to stand.

The silence does not last long.

“Eek!”

“Help!”

“I’ll tell you anything! Anything I know!”

Cries of terror and rage explode from the great hall as it plunges into pandemonium.

“That’s all of them. There should be three more in another room. I’ll go check. You interrogate these ones, Flay.”

“Yes, sir.” Then the red-haired maiden inquires in a soft voice, “What shall I do with them afterwards?”

The voice whispers in her ear so that only she can catch the answer.

“You may burn them. Burn everything so no evidence remains.”

“Yes, sir,” Flay responds without a trace of emotion. She approaches one of the bandits on the floor. “Answer my questions honestly. And don’t stutter. I am neither as kind nor as patient as my master.”

She raises a claw to his throat.

The captain and his two cohorts find themselves unable to move.

Paralyzed by fear? Frozen in surprise? No. It’s neither.

“What have you done? Why can’t I move?!”

It’s as if they’re buried in the ground from the neck down. They can’t flinch a muscle.

“All I did was enclose you in barriers. And fixed them in place so you can’t move.”

“Barriers? What do you mean?”

“Lieutenant...” calls out the henchman dressed like a bandit. “Who are you talking to?” His face is clenched.

“...Huh?”

The captain can’t make sense of this question.

“There’s a child behind me, is there not?”

The other bandit is facing him at an angle. He should be able to see over the captain’s shoulder.

“No. There’s nobody there. And I hear no voice.”

The incomprehensible response causes the captain’s head to fill with question marks.

The voice is only a whisper, so it’s possible the henchman cannot hear. But how could he not see the speaker? Even a child couldn’t conceal oneself so completely.

The next thing that happens only plunges the captain into deeper confusion.

His other henchman—the one who served as a spy in the count’s castle—appears to be wailing. But his words are inaudible. Moreover, he is gasping at empty space. As if there is someone there.

“Hey, what’s going on? Why are you wailing? Who are you trying to talk to?”



No answer. The henchman seems to be pleading desperately, tears welling in his eyes. Still, not the slightest sound emerges from his throat.

Then, finally...

Whud. The man's head falls heavily to the floor, followed by his body.

Then the comrade's head begins to levitate in front of the two speechless men. No—it isn't levitating. It is being hair-grabbed by a young boy who is slowly emerging out of thin air.

"I get the general idea. So this one was the spy."

The boy looks to be about ten years old. He is finely dressed, like a member of the nobility.

"Who are you?" the captain demands.

"I don't answer to you."

"Where did you come from? And how?"

The boy shrugs and replies with a peculiar question. "Have you heard of optical camouflage?"

The captain fumbles for an answer.

"So you haven't, I see. I guess that kind of magic doesn't exist in this world. Hmm. That's useful."

The boy seems satisfied.

"My business here is done. You two stay here and think about your misdeeds."

He disappears, taking the head with him.

Once more, the room falls silent. The half-dazed captain notices that

something is wrong.

“What’s this? The smell of something burning...”

Black smoke begins to flood the room.

“Wait... Fire? Fire! The fort is burning!”

“N-No! Help! Someone!”

Despite the stone walls, the fire spreads aggressively. The flames invade before the black smoke even fills the room.

“Aaaaah! Yeeoooooww!!”

“I’m burning!! Buuuurning!!”

The two men squirm in desperation from neck up, but soon their bodies are swallowed by the inferno.



The old fort blazes behind me. In my hand is the fresh-killed head of the spy. If a bystander saw me right now, I’d probably look like the bad guy.

“Well done, Sir Haruto.”

“You too, Flay.”

I couldn’t have done it without her. After all, this is my first battle ever. I do have my quirky Barrier magic, but I had doubts of holding my own against combat-versed bandits.

But with Flay drawing their attention, I managed to conceal myself and ambush them left and right.

Devious? Puh-lease.

My mana level is insanely low. The only way I'd stand a chance would be to sneak-attack.

"What is that?"

Flay glances at the head I'm holding. I bring it up closer. Now that I'm looking at it eye-to-eye, it's pretty disgusting.

"The spy himself. You know what? I recognize his face. Apparently, there are three more still in the castle. They're the ones who've been leaking information to the bandits."

They also claimed to be members of the imperial army.

I don't know much about political conflicts, but if they messed with us first, there's no need for mercy, right?

"For now, I'll send this head to Dad anonymously."

I've gotten the names of the other three embedded spies. I figure I'll reveal them in a letter to my dad and let him take care of the rest. Better to avoid unexplained murders or disappearances in our army.

"On to the next..."

I summon three tabular barriers in front of me. Each displays a gang of bandits. I can't tell if these guys are imperial soldiers or not.

"Let's finish them off tonight."

In order to ensure my future peaceful shut-in life, I'll work hard, just for tonight. What a hassle.



Gold is in his office, receiving the incident report from a unit commander.

Gold's beloved daughter sits on his lap. Just moments ago, they were playing together. He tried to hand her off to Natalia or Flay, but to no avail. She clings to him and refuses to leave.

"We checked the locations in the letter, sir," reports the stern-faced commander who investigated the incident. "At each one, we found a bandit camp, completely annihilated."

"All burnt to the ground?" Gold reiterates.

"Yes. I cannot say how many could've escaped. But a tremendous number were found burnt to d... Er, that is, we found the figures of...what seemed to be the bandits lying down," the commander reports awkwardly, in deference to the young child.

"And what of the three men reported to be spies?"

"When we tortu...*ehem*, questioned them carefully, they all confessed to being members of the imperial army. And the severed h...the item that was delivered to us anonymously was confirmed as a member of our army."

"To think we allowed them to penetrate our forces so easily."

"I'm terribly sorry, sir."

"You are not to blame. It is my responsibility. I have been negligent."

"No, sir. You..."

"Mere bandits wouldn't have been capable of this. The empire must be involved. Tighten our border security. We will have to perform a more careful

background check for new recruits. Still, I know not if that will fully screen them out.”

“Yes, sir. Please excuse me.”

As the commander leaves the room, Gold leans back in his chair and sighs.

“Are you tired, Father?”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m fine. In fact, I am relieved.”

Charlotte looks up at her father, wide-eyed.

“Who punished the bad guys, Father?”

“Yes, who indeed? Three nights ago... That makes it the evening I returned home. I know of only one who could exercise such efficiency, such mercilessness, and such command of hellfire...”

The she-demon Flay, who—for some reason—serves a human master.

“Flay’s abilities surpass my own. She patrols the region and keeps the other demons under control. Perhaps she saw this as an extension of her work.”

But when he questioned Flay, she answered bluntly, “I know not.”

“Three nights ago...” Charlotte mouths. She seems lost in thought.

“I just remembered something I need to do,” she announces, hopping down from her father’s lap.

“If you are going to play outside, have someone go with you,” Gold instructs.

“Yes, Father!” Charlotte answers sweetly, flying out the door.

Three nights earlier, Charlotte was having trouble falling asleep.

Goosebumps prickled her skin and uneasiness welled in her stomach.

This happens to her occasionally. The child still has no way of understanding that it's caused by someone nearby using extraordinary magical powers.

Charlotte climbed out of bed and gazed out the window.

The moon and stars were beautiful.

It was a short while later when she saw the shadow fly like a spear across the night sky.

Followed by the silhouette of a human descending from the roof of the castle. From the long, fluttering skirt, Charlotte recognized the form as the fluffy older girl who always plays with her.

Her father's suspicions were correct. It was Flay who attacked the bandits.

But it wasn't just her. Of that, Charlotte was sure.

The shadow that flew across the night sky. It was a boy's silhouette, and one that she knew well.

She was terrified. Nonetheless, spurred by an uneasiness she could not identify, the little one pitter-pattered alone through the dark castle and entered her older brother's room.

He was there. Her brother Haruto was definitely there.

She could hear his breathing—the slow, even breath of sleep. Yet the sight of him lying so still was chilling.

Her heart was pounding. Her legs trembled and refused to move. Summoning all the courage she could gather, she drew closer.

Poot.

She poked his cheek. *Poot, poot-poot.* He showed no sign of waking.

Spak, spak! She slapped at his head. He didn't move a muscle.

Now she was determined. With her tiny fingers, Charlotte pulled one of his eyelids open. The pupil swiveled to look at her.

"Huah!"

She leaped back in fright and fell on her butt. Her brother continued to lay there as if nothing had happened.

"Something is...strange."

She was also mystified by her own bold behavior.

All at once, she realized why.

The overwhelming pressure she always felt from her brother was completely absent from this sleeping sibling.

She took a long, hard look at the face of the boy lying in the dark.

"Who is this?"

On the surface, he looked exactly like her brother, but...

"This person...is not my brother," she concluded.

With that, Charlotte left the room.

After that night, Charlotte begins following her brother. Stealthily, because she's still afraid of him. But he hardly ever leaves his room, so all she can really do is hang out in the hallway.

She decides to change her tactic. Perhaps she can extract some information from the maid who seems to know her brother well.

"Are there two of my brother?" she inquires.

“What kind of question is that, child? Is your head all right? Do you have a fever?”

The maid shows much concern for the girl’s wellbeing.

Charlotte’s little mind spins its gears at full power. She can see only one option: to spill the honest truth.

“Well, the other day, I snuck into my brother’s room.”

“Why, what impudence! But it was the act of a small child. I will be tolerant,” the maid scolds and quickly forgives.

“Brother Haruto was with you that night, was he not?” Charlotte asks.

“You are persistent, aren’t you. But... Hm. Since you saw us, I suppose there is no use in hiding it. If you promise not to tell a soul, I will tell you the truth.”

Charlotte nods her head earnestly.

“Sir Haruto was with me that night. But I was the actor. Sir Haruto merely observed,” confirms Flay.

“Why did you lie to Father?” Charlotte asks.

“I judged it would be best. Do not ask why. Sometimes, adults must do these things.”

“Is it okay for adults to lie?”

“In some cases.”

“Did my brother command you to lie?”

“You are quite astute. But I deny it.”

“Then, why were there two of my brother?” Charlotte pressed.

“That again? Enough. No more questions. But two Sir Harutos, you say...?”

Hmm..."

At this point in time, Flay doesn't know yet that Haruto made a duplicate of himself with Barrier magic.

So the red-haired maid goes to ask him directly.

"Don't worry about it," Haruto tells her.

When the maid passes on this reply to Charlotte, the child grows more curious than ever.

"Bother not with trifling matters, or you will never grow big," the maid advises.

Charlotte eyes the maid's generous bosom. *Interesting*, she thinks. But the child has no intention of abandoning her investigation.



I'm being watched.

By whom? That part I know. But I don't know why, and that gives me the creeps.

Fortunately, Flay has some useful information.

"...thus, Charlotte seems to believe there are two of you, Sir Haruto. Why were there two of you?"

"Don't worry about it," I tell her.

"Very well. I will tell her that."

I meant you, but Flay has already left the room.

So...she saw me leave in the middle of the night. And she figured out immediately that my doppelganger was a fake. I see... I see...

Well, that's understandable since the only function it's capable of is pretending to sleep.

But why the sudden curiosity? I doubt her interest in me is for any positive reason. What now?

Even during sword fighting practice with my dad.

"Now, to what do we owe this change of attitude?" my father asks cheerily.

"Beats me," I shrug.

Charlotte is hiding behind a tree, observing us.

"Well, I believe it's a turn for the better," my dad says.

"I guess."

As we spar, the sharp metallic clangs of the swords mingle with our conversation.

Curious of her intentions, I create a barrier to spy on Charlotte spying on me.

"Huaa! Incredible. His skills exceed those of Father!" Charlotte says, awestruck.

Not true. Dad's just going easy on me. I think.

The cunning little agent turns her attention to Flay, the person closest to me.

"Basically, Sir Haruto is extraordinary," Flay tells her.

"I know that. Can you be more specific?"

"Well. Sir Haruto's abilities cannot be measured by normal standards. At the very least, he is more powerful than I. Far, far more powerful."

Can you not?

Charlotte shudders in bewilderment.

“Do you know Brother Haruto’s true identity, Flay?”

“Of course. But I cannot reveal it.”

Like I said, can you please not?

“Is he testing me?” the little girl asks.

“Do not flatter yourself, child. Sir Haruto has greater quandaries than to take heed of the likes of you.”

“I do not understand what that means.”

As such, Charlotte’s curiosity continues to grow, and now I have to deal with being followed all the time.

Until one day...I finally have a chance to be free from my little stalker.

“Mom and Charlotte are going on a trip?”

At the breakfast table, I learn that the two of them are leaving to visit a town in the north.

“There is an annual festival this time of year. Usually, I am the one who attends, but this year I’ve asked them to go,” Gold replies.

“How come?”

My mom answers. “Well, all that hullabaloo with the bandits has settled down. Now we have reinforcements from the midlands strengthening the border. Flay keeps the demons in the region at bay. It seems like a good opportunity to travel while we can.”

Since she was born, Charlotte has hardly ever set foot outside the castle. They want to show her the region a bit while things are safe.

“I am guessing you will not come with us, Haruto?”

No traveling for the shut-in, please and thank you.

“Why not take Flay with you?” I suggest.

As I’m saying it, I realize I haven’t seen her around lately.

“I thought you were the one who sent her on an errand, Haruto,” Gold says.

“Come to think of it, about three days ago, I think she said something about leaving to mediate some territorial disputes among the demons.”

Flay menaces the demons in the area to keep them from attacking the towns and villages. Thanks to her, the ecosystem is stable, the demons and humans are kept apart, and we can all live safely. She’s surprisingly adept. Although sometimes clueless.

For the first time in a while, I can relax without being watched. But before long, that peace will be shattered...



Based on the circumstances, it might seem like what happened was caused by a series of unlucky coincidences.

But upon closer scrutiny, could anyone really say that’s all it was?

In a single night, four gangs of bandits were annihilated. But there was one more gang with the same agenda lurking just outside *his* detection zone. That

last remaining gang turned to their home country for instructions. Their country sent reinforcements. Not long after those reinforcements' arrival, a festival was just beginning in a nearby town—the festival the wife and daughter of the count were planning to attend.

In terms of timing and geography, it seems like a coincidence. But there is one key factor that proves it was by design.

An escape route had been built into the region's supposedly reinforced border security.

And thus, the perfect scenario to ambush the count's wife and daughter had been arranged.

What happened to the defensive troops? How many casualties would the town suffer?

The woman is the youngest daughter of a count herself, and her mana level is far higher than that of an ordinary soldier. But with a young child in tow, all she can do is flee from the imperial soldiers.

Natalia races through the forest, her daughter in her arms.

How much time has passed? Her remaining mana is low, and she has only the moonlight to guide her path. The enemies almost cornered her, but there's only one reason she was able to evade them.

"This way, Mother!"

That only reason being Charlotte's directions.

Natalia can feel the girl quivering, but at the same time, the child's eyes shine with determination and confidence.

This is more than just strong intuition, Natalia thinks.

She is intrigued, but right now, finding a means of escape is more important. The mother tears through the woods, obeying the small child's instructions.

Just then...

"Get them! They must not escape!"

Just as Natalia hears the enemy in pursuit, the forest clears and they find themselves before a ravine. The cliff is too steep and too dark to see how far below the river is. The gap is too great to leap across.

"Below us, Mother!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Natalia jumps. It isn't as far down as she'd feared, and she uses the last dregs of her mana to soften their landing.

"That way. They say there's a hiding place!"

The child's words affirm Natalia's hunch.

Someone is directing this child.

She doesn't know how, nor why only Charlotte can hear them. Whoever it is, they seem to be using an uncommon magical tool.

Why don't they show themselves?

They don't want me to know who they are, Natalia realizes. That could be part of it. But also, perhaps they're still too far away.

It's too soon to get optimistic. She hurries along the bank of the stream.

There it is. She spots a small cave and ducks in. She clicks her tongue in disappointment—it's too bright inside. There must be an overgrowth of luminescent moss.

She shrinks into one of the cave's nooks to catch her breath.

"It's all right, Charlotte. I promise I'll protect you."

Still gasping for breath, Natalia hugs the child tightly.

The cave is too plainly in sight to hide them. If they stay here, it'll only be a matter of time before they're found out. Not to mention the brightness. Pressing themselves into this nook can only do so much.

Natalia reaches a decision.

"They're nearby, aren't they? I don't know who it is, but they must be an ally of justice," she reassures the child.

"An...ally of justice?"

"Mhmm." Natalia smiles warmly as she nods. "A person who battles evil. Mommy will go find them. You stay here, and do not move. Do not make a peep. Wait here until it is time."

She gives the frightened child her brightest smile, and runs out of the cave.

Should she conceal the entrance somehow? Uncertain, Natalia looks back. She is dumbstruck.

The cave entrance is gone. The wall of the cliff just extends.

"How..."

She approaches the wall and reaches out. Her forearm vanishes. The entrance is there. But the void is covered by a projection of a cliff wall.

"Illusion magic... But who could be performing such a high-level trick?"

Is it the same person who had directed Charlotte? If so, they must be nearby.

Yet they choose not to reveal themselves.

Perhaps this person does not wield battle magic?

She decides to return to the cave. If they can hide there for a few days, a rescue party from the castle is sure to arrive. But her decision is just an instant too late.

“There she is!”

Her pursuers have sighted her.

“Just the mother! She must have hidden the child nearby. Find her!”

Five men surround Natalia. The others spread out.

It's all right. They haven't spotted the cave.

In which case, there is only one option.

“Eh? The wench has drawn a dagger! Does she really think she can resist us?!”

Natalia points the dagger's tip to her own throat.

If they take her hostage, it will mean trouble for her husband. It is clear these are no ordinary bandits. They must be soldiers of the imperial army. She cannot allow an enemy nation to use her as leverage.

Most of all, she must protect her child.

She has no intention of talking...but she is the only person who knows where the cave is.

Forgive me, Gold, Charlotte...Haruto!

Just as she draws a breath to plunge the dagger into her throat...

Ka-ting!

Huh?

The dagger disintegrates. A sharp pain pierces her hip. Numbness floods her body whole, and she falls unconscious...

“Gah, shit! Dammit! I’m so pissed.”

Catching Natalia in one arm, the boy growls quietly in frustration.

“I didn’t make it. I got here as fast as I could, but I ended up having to use a stun gun on my mom. I suck! I’m so pissed at myself.”

His palm gives off sparks of purple electricity.

The flabbergasted soldiers soon return to their senses after what just happened.

“Who are you? Where did you come from?” demands one of them.

“Shut the hell up,” orders the boy.

“?!” “!!” “Gehk!” “Hrk?!” “...”

The five men find themselves unable to breathe. Not out of surprise or fear. They simply can’t breathe. As if they’ve been plunged into water. All while their bodies are paralyzed, as if frozen in stone.

“Just letting you know, part of this is just me taking out my anger on you. But I have no reason to take mercy on scum who attacked a defenseless mother and child, don’t you think?”

The boy glares at one of the men.

“Feeling out of air? Fine. I’ll give you plenty.”

Air quickly pressurizes into one soldier’s body through every orifice. It shoots in with such force that there’s nowhere for it to escape, and it quickly fills his

lungs, stomach, and intestines...

Blam!

The man's body explodes. One by one, the four others begin inflating grotesquely. They too, explode, sending guts flying in every direction.

Without lifting an eyebrow, the boy holds Natalia and enters the cave through its camouflage barrier.

Charlotte hears footsteps approaching.

She hides in the nook, her trembling hands pressed to her mouth.

Do not move. Do not make a peep...

She desperately follows her mother's instructions.

When the footsteps finally stop, the strange voice she was hearing deep in her head echoes across the cave.

"Charlotte, your mother is safe. She just fainted. You keep hiding in here a little bit longer."

It's an odd voice, as if it's made of layers of multiple voices. She can't tell who it belongs to, or if it's male or female.

"It was frightening, wasn't it? You're probably still scared. Just hang in there a little longer. Flay should be here soon."

Yes. She's scared, all right. It's the same feeling she experiences every day at the castle.

But... But, but...

Charlotte leaps forward.

She isn't disobeying her mother. Her mother is back, and she's brought *him* with her.

She finds her mother lying on the ground, with nobody else in sight. But someone is there. She can't see his figure, but he is certainly there, right next to her mother.

"Brother Haruto!"

"How'd you know?!"

Now in his usual, familiar voice, her brother Haruto materializes into view. He's scratching his cheek awkwardly.



The terrifying energy her brother exudes. Before, the child had no way of understanding that she was sensing the overwhelming magical power he holds within.

But now she understands. It has a name. Today, she learned that name.

He's the one who defeated the bad guys and saved Mother. He has powers greater than Father's, far beyond even Flay's.

"Brother Haruto! You're an ally of justice!"

The moment she says it, she feels lighter. A warm, sunny feeling wells up inside.

There is nothing to fear.

"Yes...?"

"I knew it!" exclaims Charlotte.

"No, I meant that as a question... Um, yeah, sure. I'm an ally of justice. But it's a secret, okay?"

"Why?"

"Because allies of justice have to hide their identities."

"They do?"

"You don't get it, huh? Well, just believe me, okay?"

Charlotte nods enthusiastically.

"Keep all of what just happened a secret, okay? Me giving you directions, the fact that I showed up here, and all the rest of it too."

"I see. That's why Flay was keeping it a secret too?"

“Huh? Oh, uh, yeah... Mm-hmm,” Haruto fumbles to answer.

“I understand. I am just a child, but I will lie to Mother and Father.”

“My heart aches to ask that of you... But, yeah. I’ve gotta go outside and clean up the rest of those guys.”

“Clean up?”

Haruto pauses for a moment, and grins.

Yes. Annihilate them clean.



My dad calls me into his office. What’s up? Is he on to me? He’s got me anxious, but all he’s making me do so far is sit on the sofa and listen to the soldier’s report.

“Both Countess Natalia and Lady Charlotte are in good health. Ms. Flay has reached them and will escort them back to the castle.”

“And the casualties?”

“Countess Natalia recognized that she was the enemy’s target and acted swiftly—so there were very few casualties in the town. There were quite a few deaths among the defensive troops. Only—” the soldier pauses for a moment, “—once again, the injuries of the wounded healed instantly.”

“Interesting... It is safe to conclude that the mysterious actor who rescued Natalia and Charlotte was also behind the strange phenomena the other day.”

“All those affected maintain that this was no ordinary healing magic.”

“Setting aside the unexplained magic—I wish to reward this admirable person. But it seems this distinguished figure has no intention of coming forward.”

“Who could they be? I, too, am grateful, and heartened by their support. But to be honest, it is, well...” The soldier trails off.

My dad finishes his sentence. “It’s also unsettling. This sorcerer wields great power. Yet they lurk in the region, hiding their identity.”

“Yes. At the very least, if we knew their objective...” adds the soldier.

“Charlotte called him ‘an ally of justice.’”

The two men fall silent. Unexpectedly, my dad turns to me.

“Haruto, what do you think?”

“Huh? Oh, uh... Well, if they’re an ally of justice, I guess they won’t turn on us so long as we don’t do anything bad, right?”

Might I say that was a flawless child’s opinion. And the verdict is...

“Hmm. Yes. I don’t know what their criterion for justice is, but we shall continue to devote ourselves to upstanding governance,” my dad responds.

Cool. He doesn’t seem to suspect me.

Reassured, I continue to blab, “Totally. And if more imperial soldiers disguised as bandits mess with us, I’m sure he’ll take care of them again.”

The two men stare at me in surprise. What? Did I say something funny?

“How did you know they were imperial soldiers?”

Oh, that part? Come to think of it, the soldier hadn’t made that clear in his report.

“Ah, well... Um, bandits attack towns, right? But these guys were after Mom

and Charlotte, so I figured...”

It’s a desperate attempt, but I think it was a good save.

“Quite astute, Sir Haruto.”

“Yes. Sometimes it is hard to believe you are a mere nine-year-old.”

As a matter of fact, I have direct intel. When I dealt with the rest of those rogues, I picked out one of the leaders and got him to confess a bunch of stuff.

Meaning I have information that my dad and his men don’t.

I haven’t written an anonymous letter this time. I can’t reveal what I know directly—but I want them to figure it out somehow. This’ll be a real test of my communication skills!

“Waaait a sec... Something’s fishy here. There was a whole bunch of bad guys this time too, right? I thought we beefed up border security. So, how on earth did they get in?”

Well spoken, I’d say. Like a true kiddo on the outside, grown-up on the inside.

“Perhaps the gang was made up of elements already in the region before the security increase?”

No. Not that way.

“That is a possibility, but there may have been an oversight in our security management that needs to be refined,” the count suggests.

Yes, getting hotter.

“Or perhaps our forces were negligent? Or exhausted? Come to think of it... the security forces in that area were troops dispatched from the kingdom. Perhaps they were worn out from the journey, or from the change in surroundings...”

Even hotter. Keep going.

“Troops from the kingdom...”

My dad’s expression hardens.

The soldier’s too. They seem to have figured it out.

“No. Don’t tell me our soldiers colluded with the enemy.”

“That’s it!” I cry out without thinking. How embarrassing.

From what I’ve heard, there were traitors among our border security troops. They colluded with the imperial soldiers and allowed them to infiltrate our region. I didn’t get their individual names, though.

“That she-fox! Has she no shame?”

“Then, it’s as we feared...”

“Investigate the relevant troops without them catching on,” Gold commands.

The soldier nods obediently and leaves the room.

What did he mean by “she-fox”? The two men seem to have an idea of who the mastermind behind this is. Is it one of those “the true enemy (in this case, the kingdom) was among us all along” type of situations?

My dad leans back in his chair and lets out a deep sigh.

I don’t really want to learn more...but should I ask for the sake of it? On the other hand, he seems tired...

As I mull over this, I hear the pitter-patter of little feet racing down the hallway.

The door slams open.

“I am home, Father! And I am just fine!”

Indeed, the child who appears in the doorway looks quite well. They got home fast.

“I’m so glad you’re home safe!”

Our father’s face breaks into a doting smile. Smitten, in fact.

“Ah?!”

Charlotte shrieks as soon as she sees me. Dad looks perplexed, expecting her to cower in fear like she always does. But instead...

“Brother Haruto!”

“Whaaa?!”

She dives at me. Dodging a child’s hug would be inhumane, so I have no choice but to catch her.

“I missed you, Brother Haruto!”

She nuzzles her soft cheeks into my chest.

My dad blinks in wonder at his daughter’s sudden transformation.

“Good heavens, when did you two becomes so close?” my mother says happily, entering the room.

They won’t suspect me, will they?

“Why the sudden change of heart?” my dad questions.

“I have come to love Brother Haruto.”

A dramatic change of heart, indeed. I guess that’s what happens when you save someone’s life?

“Did something happen?” Dad directs the question at Mom, but it’s Charlotte who answers.

“No! Nothing happened! There is a time and place for these things and I am just a child, but all is well!”

Look, if you’re going to lie, don’t be suspicious, okay?

Even when I let go, the little girl clings to me, so I softly pat her head. Her hair is so soft.

“Tee-hee-hee!”

This is all new to me, but it seems to make her happy, so I pet her hair more. *This isn’t so bad*, I think to myself, as I bask in this new and wonderful feeling.



“Ugh, what a pack of useless fools!”

A cold voice echoes through a room of the detached annex, some distance away from the main palace.

A piece of paper flung into the air ignites, disintegrating to ashes before it falls to the floor.

“Passing themselves off as bandits to sow chaos in the region... What a roundabout approach. I’d set them up to pass through the borders. Why not send their best wind mages to assassinate that man?”

The soldier who brought the report shudders under her icy glare.

It is Queen Gizelotte Orteus, Flash Princess, savior of the realm.

Her beauty is unchanged, and her command and influence are as strong as ever. In recent years, her power over the nation has been rapidly increasing.

Since the defeat of the Demon King eleven years earlier, the queen has overcome the tragedy of bearing a stillborn nine years ago, and gave birth to a healthy prince the following year. The prince is sufficiently talented, although he falls short of his mother's extraordinary abilities. This achievement has only contributed to the queen's rising popularity.

Meanwhile, the influence of King Jilq Orteus has steadily declined.

He has committed no glaring mistakes, but he hasn't accomplished anything significant either. As Gizelotte's popularity rises, so does the citizens' contempt for the king.

But despite her rapid ascent, Gizelotte's influence is not yet rock-solid.

There is one person in the realm who stands to threaten her rule.

Count Gold Zenfis.

He, too, earned a strong reputation as a member of the team that defeated the Demon King, and is popular among the people for his just leadership and his promotion of employees based on skill and not social standing. Moreover, he is related to the king. Before Jilq's crowning, the two men had a brotherly bond.

And he is the only member of the declining royal family that Gizelotte sees as a threat.

She cannot allow that threat to persist.

"Due to the many failed attempts, the empire has refused to offer further assistance," reports the soldier.

"That's no surprise."

Gizelotte has been secretly colluding with the empire, a rival nation. She is the one who arranged for the imperial soldiers to infiltrate the territory of Count

Zenfis.

Even for the Flash Princess, directly attacking an ally would be an unwise move. But if a foreign nation attacks the kingdom and eliminates the nuisance, she can then fight them off and use the victory to consolidate her power. The plot is an embodiment of Gizelotte's confidence.

Meanwhile, the empire is fixated on expanding its holdings, and has its eyes set on the kingdom, which lies south of their territory. They intend to take advantage of the kingdom's king vs. queen rivalry to invade the count's region.

"Naturally, they would think I colluded with the count to deceive them," Gizelotte remarks. "We will not be able to use them again for some time."

"What now, Your Majesty?"

"It's your job to answer that question," the queen snaps.

It isn't just her magic skills that have fueled Gizelotte's rise. It is also the support of her brilliant strategists.

"We need to find his weakness and strike there. Isn't there something? Something that makes the count vulnerable?" The queen begins to devise.

"Come to think of it, I have heard that Zenfis employs a demon as a servant."

"So? I already know that. A part-demon, from what I understand. But he employs her as a maid, does he not?"

In which case, she must be lacking significantly in combat strength. If the count is employing a demon as a soldier, it could be grounds to denounce him for "intention to rebel." But complaining about a mere maid could easily be settled by the count firing her. Quibbling over such a petty matter is more likely to damage her own reputation.

“Perhaps we should just assassinate him and get it over with,” the queen suggests bluntly.

Fearing there may be candor in her words, the man replies, “But Your Majesty, if a rumor starts that you may be involved, it will be a scandal. And I know not of a man in the realm capable of killing Zenfis...”

Zenfis’s defensive abilities are the strongest in the kingdom. Given his position, there is little chance of catching a moment when he’s alone.

“Then find someone outside the kingdom. Hire some bounty hunter from the empire.”

The odds are still slim.

Gizelotte continues, “If we could take one of his children hostage, that might give us some leverage. I understand he has a son and daughter.”

“His son is not a blood relative, but was adopted as an orphan. And his daughter is still quite young...”

“So?”

The adviser gulps.

“Oh. Come to think of it, the daughter’s mana level has not been made public,” the queen recalls.

Often, the mana level of a child of nobility is kept secret until they reach a certain age. Regardless of whether the number is high, low, or average, the family must avoid offering potential ammunition to political rivals.

“I do wonder... They are obligated to disclose the number to the king. Look into it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“The count’s assassination as well. I expect it will take some time to prepare, but make sure it gets done.”

The man bows deeply and leaves the room.

Gizelotte allows herself a chuckle.

“Hah. Adopting an orphan as his son. What pleasure does he derive from harboring such scum?”

She has no idea. She couldn’t possibly know.

The child is none other than her own son, the infant she deemed worthless and discarded nine years ago.

Bonus Interlude:

My Observation Log of a Dog-Eared Maid (2)

Flay's duties as a maid do not include childcare. Despite that, she's always willing to play with my little sister.

"Flay, how come you cannot fly?"

The question is cruel, but Charlotte's eyes are innocent.

"I am Lord of the earth. No, wait. If I proclaim myself Lord, I insult my master. Of the beings who roam the earth, I am the second most powerful after Sir Haruto. I have no need to fly in the sky," Flay brags.

"But my brother flies," replies Charlotte.

"My role is to purge the land of all who regard my master with disrespect. Indeed, look at it that way."

"I want to learn to fly."

"Well...it's not that I cannot fly. I am merely...somewhat unaccustomed to flight."

Uh-oh... Not the wisest thing to say. Look, now Charlotte's eyes are sparkling with expectation.

"Please, teach me!" Charlotte begs.

"Wait, what I meant was..."

"Please! Please, show me!"

If it were me, I'd have a hard time refusing.

“Hng, urr... Well... Just a little bit, then.” Flay gives in. What else could she do?

“Here I go.”

With grim determination, Flay stretches both arms skyward.

Voosh! She rockets straight up into the air. Wow, she really can fly. I’ve heard that controlling flight magic is extremely difficult, and even just hovering in the air is a challenge.

“Nnnoooo!” Flay whizzes through the air in chaotic swirls like a balloon expelling its air.

“How wonderful! You are flying!” Charlotte chirps excitedly.

She’s flying, all right, but she has no control.

Eventually, she crashes into a stand of trees.

Ka-krash krakka krash!

Snapping branches and sending leaves flying, Flay falls straight through the treetops and lands in the shrubs beneath.

“Hmph. You see what I can do when I put my mind to it.”

Flay emerges from the bushes looking like a wreck. Twigs poke out of her hair. Mud and leaves decorate her clothes.

“What are you two doing?”

Just then, Mom appears. She glances at Flay and her eyes go, *Uh-oh...*

“Flay is teaching me to fly.”

“Oh, flight magic? You are too young for it, my child. Do not trouble Flay.”

Charlotte’s face washes over with despair, her eyes filling with tears. But she seems to understand that she’s making difficult demands, so the disheartened

little girl presses her lips together tightly and does not argue.

How righteous! And how tragic!

I feel a tenderness welling in my heart, something I have never felt before.

Flay seems to feel the same.

“Ngghhh... Wait just a minute!” she commands.

She sprints to my room at top speed, howling, “Sir Haruto!”

Leaping into my room, she slides into a groveling pose at my feet. She sticks the landing so beautifully.

“Say no more. Take this.”

I hold out the item I’ve quickly fashioned. It’s a child-sized vehicle. Not the kind you straddle, but the kind you sit inside of. It’s not like a car—more like an airplane—and I made it with Barrier magic.

Flay nods without a word, and returns to the child with it.

“Hooray, hooray! I am flying!”

From the toy airplane, Charlotte shouts with delight.

Safety comes first. I’ve made it so that it only glides gently, up to ten feet above ground. It can turn left and right when she tilts the handle.

My rushed creation doesn’t have an actual steering mechanism. I’m secretly controlling it.

“What...is that?” my mom asks Flay, puzzled.

“Secret demon magic. Do not question it. It’s perfectly safe.”

Naturally, my mom isn’t reassured by Flay’s explanation. She’s casting self-

enhancement spells, preparing to dive headfirst to catch any accidental fall. A remarkable mother.

In the end, the little girl's dream has come true.

That's good enough for me, I tell myself.

At that very moment—

“Thank you, Brother Haruto,” Charlotte sighs softly into the wind.

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes. There are several 3D cubes in different shades of gray, some solid and some with a halftone pattern. There are also several circles with a halftone pattern, some of which are partially cut off by the edges of the page. The shapes are scattered across the page, creating a modern, abstract background.

CHAPTER THREE:

The Sudden Emergence of the Harbinger of Justice

Peace reigns over the land, and all under the sun is well.

I'm ready to believe it and settle back to holing up in my room, but reality has other plans for me.

My alarm bell clangs loudly.

I have barriers set up all around my room to alert me of intruders. To put it another way, someone's coming.

"Please play with me, Brother Haruto!"

A tiny being flings open my door and charges into the room. It's Charlotte.

"Hey, at least knock first."

"Brother Haruto, you seemed to already know I was coming. Is knocking really necessary?"

"It's about manners, okay?"

"Okay. From now on, I promise to knock."

I'd rather she didn't bust into my room at all. These days, it's been happening every day. I'm getting sick of the clanging alarms. Above all, I've never been great at communicating with people, so I'm hesitant on how to interact with her.

I didn't like it when she was afraid of me. But the fact that she adores me now comes with its own challenges. I don't know how to handle it.

I mean, I can't complain too much.

In fact, it's kind of comforting. Like being around a small furry animal.

I've known her since she was born, but until recently, she avoided me like the plague. Now I suddenly have an adorable little sister who's always looking up to me and calling me "Brother Haruto." It's heartwarming to live out this anime trope!

Playing it cool, I erase the tabular barrier I was looking at. Charlotte's already on to a lot of my tricks; I've been getting lazy about hiding them from her.

"What was the thing that was floating in the air?"

"Huh? Oh. It's magic for surveillance. It shows me when someone's approaching my room."

Charlotte's expression says, *Wowie!*

"I have never heard of that magic! What is it called?"

"Um... Surveillance magic?"

I'm too lazy to explain how my Barrier magic is a custom spec (or whatever it is).

Charlotte's expression shows her to be in deep thought. Then, a light bulb flicks on.

"Ancient Magic, then."

What's that? Oh, wait—I know this one. It's a system of magic that flourished in the mythical ages, and is theorized to be fundamentally different from modern magic. But it's dissipated as a lost art. Come to think of it, I think I told my dad I was researching Ancient Magic. But what I have is Barrier magic, the most basic of basics. Nothing fancy.

Again, I'm too lazy to explain, so I just go with it.

"Sure."

Low effort reply, geez! I berate myself.

“Are you researching Ancient Magic, Brother Haruto?”

“Yeah.”

It’s not easy talking with a small child. Well, not just with a small child. With anyone.

“But there are no books about Ancient Magic here. Why is that?” Charlotte asks.

You come on strong, don’t you?

“Well, uh, it’s an obsolete magic, right? So there aren’t any books about it.”

“Yes there are.”

What? There are?

“I saw some in the castle’s library,” continues Charlotte.

“What were you doing in the library?”

“Reading books is a lot of fun!”

I’m pretty sure all the books in the castle’s library are super dense and arcane. I can’t imagine a five-year-old being able to read them. Is there a picture book section or something?

“I will show you.”

Charlotte pulls me by the hand.

I couldn’t possibly ask her to bring them here. Reluctantly, I leave my room...

The library is huge.

It's deep in the castle where the air is musty, but it's as large as the neighborhood library from my previous life. The bookshelves cover the entire wall, ten feet from floor to ceiling. Each shelf is crammed with books of all sizes.

Charlotte grabs a step-stool and carries it around, here and there, pulling books off the shelves. She seems to know exactly where everything is.

"Here you go, Brother Haruto!"

She's collected a stack of five books. They all look fairly new. She picks up a super thick one. It looks the newest.

The cover reads: *Regarding the Probability of Reviving Ancient Magic*. The author's name is super long, so I skip it.

The book's foreword goes on and on about "So what is Ancient Magic, anyway?"

"Interesting."

And I honestly think it is. Even though it's a reference manual, it's written like a story. Based on myths and speculation about ancient times, it presents Ancient Magic as the solutions to problems faced by the characters in the stories.

All these gods and goddesses have magnificent powers, but they also have relatable human qualities. I never thought I'd be reading a light novel in an alternate world.

Another surprise is that Ancient Magic is kinda like Barrier magic, in some ways.

One factor that stands out is that Ancient Magic is non-elemental. Incorporating complementary elements like Fire or Water makes Barrier magic what it is today.

“There are many interpretations of Ancient Magic. But this book is the most interesting one,” Charlotte says.

“Did you read this already? It’s full of difficult words.”

“Yes. I asked Mother and Flay for help.”

Even so, that’s impressive.

“Brother Haruto, please read it to me.”

Charlotte snuggles up against me.

“But you already read it, right?”

“A good book is a good book no matter how many times I read it.”

Come to think of it, little kids read the same picture books over and over. I watch my favorite anime again and again too. Anime... I miss those. They’re the only thing I really miss in this alternate world. And rice. And soy sauce. Okay, so there’s a few.

I do as Charlotte asks and read her the book. Reading aloud is supposed to be good for memorization, and it helps me to understand. It’s also way easier than the back-and-forth of conversation.

“Hey, I recognize this storyline.”

The “turning the tables” plot, in which the hero of the story uses an enemy’s strategy against them, reminds me of a certain anime.

“What sort of story?”

“Well, see...” I start to recount my knowledge of anime and manga, going off on tangents here and there.

I’m actually pretty good at spouting long monologues. Otakus are notorious

for our one-sided, passionate rambling. It's one reason why nobody likes us.

"Wowie! And then what? What happens next?!"

Against all expectations, Charlotte seems fascinated. I guess she and I have similar tastes.

Now I'm not just going off on tangents. I get into it, splicing together bits from various anime and manga to create my own story. Derivative storytelling is fun. Making up original characters seems risky, but I go for it anyway.

"You're so knowledgeable, Brother Haruto!"

Charlotte seems genuinely impressed.

This is—this is really fun!

I pull ideas from the Ancient Magic book and expand the story even further.

"Wow. I didn't know there are gods who can travel to and from other worlds. Amazing," I exclaim.

I mean, they *are* divine beings, after all. I'm pretty sure I saw some sort of goddess-like being when I was reincarnated, even though I can't remember her face exactly.

"Other worlds..."

I used to think of this world as the alternate world. But from the standpoint of this world, my old world is the alternate one. I don't miss that world. But still...

"If I could connect them somehow, could I watch anime?" I mumble.

"What's anime, Brother Haruto?"

Whoops. I was just talking to myself, but nothing gets by Charlotte.

"So there are these pictures that move. And speak."

“Pictures that move?!” Charlotte is intrigued. “What a strange kind of magic.”

Advanced scientific technology isn’t all that different from magic. Maybe it is magic, if you look at it that way.

“I want to see this anime too.”

A longing request from my dear baby sister. What kind of brother wouldn’t try to make it come true? Or rather, I want to watch anime!

“Okay. Leave it to your big brother!”

Thus begins my project to connect this world with modern-day Japan and watch anime.



I’ll spare you the details, but my “connect to modern-day Japan and watch anime” project has succeeded.

Yeah, I don’t know how either...

For two weeks, I tried various tactics. Eventually, I managed to access the internet environment of modern Japan. I sort of stumbled upon it—I don’t even really understand the mechanism. But I can reproduce it. *How did this even happen?* I decide not to question it.

Strangely enough, the point in time I connected to was the moment immediately after my death. The personal account I’d set up for a video streaming service was still active, and so was my secret online bank account.

My parents in my prior life were clueless about my internet activity. After my death, I guess they never discovered the accounts. There’s still a fair bit of

money left in the bank. Enough to buy about ten more years of the video service in that world. In theory, anyway.

For now, it's a relief that I can legitimately access the service without having to do anything criminal.

Immediately, I start watching anime.

There was a fantasy series I'd started before my sudden death. I decide to rewatch it, starting from episode one. By now, I've forgotten the plot.

"A...Amazing! Pictures that move! And talk!"

Yeah, you said that already.

Charlotte watches with me. I've made her swear a solemn oath to keep this all a secret.

"But Brother Haruto, what are these people saying?"

"Oh, right. It's in Japanese."

I was born into this world understanding the language—maybe this is another bonus power or something. But as you might expect, Charlotte doesn't understand Japanese.

"You know the language of this foreign world, Brother Haruto?"

I get bashful when she looks up at me with those bright, sparkling eyes. As far as I'm concerned, Japanese is my mother tongue.

"Please teach me."

I knew she'd ask. I don't mind teaching her, but learning a new language is no mean feat. My English is terrible, but I've picked up random foreign phrases used in anime and manga. German is cool.

Charlotte's five years old. She'll probably learn fast, but still, I wonder how many years it'll take.

However...

"It is so wonderful that each character has a meaning. I am interested in how they developed."

After two hours of studying, Charlotte hasn't just mastered hiragana and katakana, she's also started learning kanji that Japanese kids learn in the early years of grade school.

And on top of that...

"Let's see... *Justice... Meaning...* Magnifying glass, click!"

She's getting good at using search engines. Of course, when a new site comes up, I have to translate for her. But every time, she learns a few new words.

I've also fabricated a keyboard from Barrier magic, and a monitor too. I have no idea how or why they're connected to each other, but they are.

Anywayz!

Before I know it, two weeks have gone by.

Bam! As usual, my door bursts open.

"Brother Haruto! May I please watch the next episode of *Tamazomb*?"

By now, Charlotte has the ability to watch and understand ani-me.

"You really like *Tamazomb*, huh?"

"Yes! Zombies taking over the giant metropolis of Saitama. And a superhero fighting to save the people. It is exhilarating."

Formulaic, but classic. It's a genuinely good anime, full of action scenes and god-tier animation. Its full name is *Saitama Zombies—Tamazomb* for short. The second season was just announced. But it's set in contemporary Japan.

"I bet a lot of stuff makes no sense to you. Like electricity and cars and stuff."

"It is a very strange world. But I just accept it as it is, and I am okay with that."

She's a highly adaptable child.

As we watch, Charlotte asks me to explain the hard words. Sometimes she leaps to her feet to imitate the poses of the hero when he delivers a special attack. Do little kids have to move their whole bodies when they watch anime?

"Whew. That was another good episode. Next one, please."

"Wait."

Charlotte looks at me with her doe eyes. But this I have to say.

"You can't just binge five episodes in a row."

Her face freezes as though the world is ending. I get it. It's hard for me too. But she's still a child. Screen time should be limited to about three hours a day, with breaks in between.

Sure enough, Charlotte looks tired out from too much TV.

That evening, at the dinner table...

"Charlotte? Are you sleepy?" our mother asks, concerned.

Charlotte's head tilts forward as she starts to doze...and then jerks up again.

"Haruto, Charlotte's been spending a lot of time in your room lately... What are you two doing in there?"

"Researching Ancient Magic!" Charlotte perks up, answering for me. She

immediately droops again.

Our mother holds Charlotte steady and smiles.

“Ancient Magic? Do you want to be a researcher, Haruto?”

“Um, well, uh huh...” I answer vaguely.

“I think that’s wonderful. It’s a perfect fit for you.”

It’s not clear why she thinks it’s “perfect.”

“If Charlotte enjoys helping you, I am happy with that. But she’s still little. I trust you to look after her, and make sure she doesn’t overdo herself.”

“Yeah, I know.”

After all, in addition to learning a new language, Charlotte’s also learning a lot about modern technology by watching anime. Information overload could explode her brain.

My mom pumps a fist and whispers softly, *Yes!*

What was that about?

That evening, I prohibit Charlotte from watching more anime. I decide to share her pain, and go to bed early myself.

My alarm bell clangs loudly.

Charlotte sneaks into my bed and snuggles up to me. She falls fast asleep, breathing quietly.

Now she’s infiltrated my bed.

My alarm sounds again. Who could it be this time? I create a tabular barrier to show who’s outside my room.

“Tee-hee-hee! Look at Charlotte. She’s really taken to Haruto.”

It’s my mom, peeking into my room. What’s up with her?

“I don’t know how it happened, but this is going in a good direction. I’d almost given up on that dream, but now it looks like it’s coming true. Good luck, Charlotte. You two aren’t blood relatives!” my mom whispers to herself.

Dear Mother, what gives?

I get the sense she’s plotting something, but for now, I just want to sleep...



One month passes.

By now, Charlotte’s watched several anime series and I have a pretty good sense of her taste. She mainly goes for shows targeted at little girls, where magical girls transform and use superpowers to battle evil. She doesn’t seem to care whether they take place in modern Japan or some alternate world.

“Take that! Emotional Shower!”

After dinner, Charlotte watches more anime. As usual, she exercises her whole body as she watches, performing the characters’ special attack poses along with them.

“Whew. Another emotional episode. Evil will never prevail,” she proclaims.

“It’s not that simple. Evil has its own belief system.”

“I see. There’s a lot of depth to it,” she replies.

It’s kinda fun being able to talk about anime. In my prior life, I’d sometimes

read the discussions on social media or forums, but I couldn't be bothered to chime in with my own opinions.

It's even more nerve-wracking to have a conversation with someone you can't see.

But it's fun teaching and chatting with a little kid. It's a new kind of fun for me, one that I hadn't discovered before.

"Brother Haruto, can I ask a question? If a bad guy is sorry for what they did, would you forgive them?"

"Sure... Uh..."

"I am in awe! You're so kind-hearted, Brother Haruto."

Um, that wasn't my answer. I was saying "sure" to the first question. Well, whatever.

I glance at the clock. Time for good children to go to bed.

"It's about time you take a bath and get some rest."

I decide to take a bath too. After that, I have grown-up time. I'm an adult on the inside, so it's okay for me to stay up late and watch anime.

I pat Charlotte's head and then open the bathroom door.

Charlotte flings off her clothes in the changing room, then charges buck naked towards the washing area. *Scrubba-scrubba!* First, she washes her hair. *Splloosh!* I hear her plunge into the tub.

"Ahh, that hits the spot."

She happily starts singing an anime theme song.

"What are you doing, Charlotte?"

“You instructed me to take a bath.”

That I did. But...

“You’re supposed to wash your body first,” I tell her.

“But of course.”

Charlotte hops out of the tub. She plops down next to me in the washing area and lathers up.

Hold on. What is this situation?

I mean, we’re both children, at least physically. We’re siblings, even if we’re not blood relatives. It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong, but...

Suddenly, Charlotte freezes. She’s staring at me. Not at my face, or at my boys-only private zone, but at my chest. The left side... Oh no!

That’s right. I’m a former prince.

But that’s top secret. Only my parents and Flay know what the insignia means. My dad hasn’t ever confronted me about it, so as far as my parents are concerned, I’m not supposed to know.

Children of the king bear the “royal insignia” somewhere on their body as proof of lineage.

Normally, I have mine hidden under a barrier sticker I call “photoshop texture.” I take it off when I bathe. It would be kinda gross if I just never washed that spot, right?

“What is that, Brother Haruto?”

“Um, this is... Um...” I fuffer, unable to think of a good excuse.

“I have seen it before.”

She's related to the royal family. Of course she knows the insignia. What now? I'm screwed!

"It is an emblem, right? The symbol of justice!"

Oh... Anime talk again. Come to think of it, in one show, there's a superhero who has an emblem on his forehead that lights up when he transforms. Mine does look similar.

"You can't tell anyone, okay?"

"Even Mother and Father?"

"Right. Heroes have to hide their identity."

My little sister nods decisively. The secrets just keep piling up.

But what else can I do? Mom and Dad both know I'm a prince, but they don't know that I know. And they can't know that I know. It's complicated.

"When is your next mission? I wish to accompany you."

The whole reason we're close now is because of that time I saved Charlotte from the imperial soldiers disguised as bandits. I haven't gone on any "missions" since.

But when she looks up at me with those sparkling eyes, I have no choice but to say, "You're still too young."

"That is too bad. I want to be able to help you soon, Brother Haruto."

Just as I'm thinking to myself what a good, understanding kid she is, she adds, "At least let me see you off the next time you go on a mission, Brother Haruto!"

For the moment, I have no such plans. But...



One day, a group of soldiers clad in armor gather at the front gate of the castle.

My dad, too, hoists his giant hammer and mounts his biggest horse.

“Natalia and Haruto, I entrust our home to your care.”

“Yes, my darling. Be safe, now,” Natalia says.

Charlotte and I see our dad off, waving goodbye as he heads south with his troops.

Once again, bandit gangs have been setting up bases and causing conflict throughout the region.

There hasn't been any more trouble with the empire since last time. Flay's been doing a good job of keeping the demons in the region under control. But power struggles within the kingdom have left its citizens in poverty, and many have resorted to banditry.

When honest folk get driven out of the kingdom and other lands, many of them seek refuge in the relatively stable region of Count Zenfis's fief. Which means all the more burden for us.

My dad is heading out to fight off a gang of bandits who attacked a village last week.

I head back towards my room. For some reason, Charlotte and Flay follow. I'm getting a bad vibe.

“Time for your next mission, Brother Haruto!”

I knew it.

“There’s no need for Sir Haruto to sully his hands dealing with the likes of bandits. But if he wanted to, he could defeat those ruffians as easily as brushing off dust. A cakewalk.”

The nonsense that comes out of this girl’s mouth. She should’ve stopped at the first half. Now look at Charlotte, getting all glow-y and bubbly with excitement.

Fine then. Besides, I don’t want my dad and his men getting injured or anything.

“All right, off I go.”

“Aren’t you going to transform?”

“Hahaha! I almost forgot.”

Transform into what?!

I rack my brain searching for Charlotte’s taste in superhero wardrobe. One thing’s for sure, it’s not the magical girl in a frilly pink outfit. Nope. Definitely not it.

Lately, she’s been hyped about watching a near-future sci-fi battle series. The hero’s metallic form entrances her. She’s always shouting, “Sooooo cool!”

Okay. I’ll go with that.

“Trans! Form!”

I strike a superhero pose and cover my body with a barrier I fashion: an adult-man-sized body with long arms and legs. My child’s body easily fits inside. It’s kind of hard to move, but I’m sure I’ll get used to it.

A black metallic bodysuit. Head concealed by a futuristic-looking streamlined helmet. One of my eyes blazes red.

“S...So cool! You look awesome!”

Oh, good. I check myself in the mirror. I feel totally embarrassed, but whatever makes Charlotte happy. I decide not to think about it.

“Okay. Now really, here I go.”

“Yes! May you return safely!” Charlotte shouts enthusiastically, but I detect a note of sadness in her voice.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her.

“All I can do is see you off, Brother Haruto. I wish I could watch you in action,” she says wistfully.

But she doesn’t dare ask me to take her along. How righteous of her. And how endearing!

I make a surveillance barrier.

“You can watch over my exploits on this,” I tell her.

Since she’s a little kid, I design it so a mysterious light will censor any gruesome or inappropriate scenes.

“Thank you, Brother Haruto!”

Finally, I’m all set.

My little sister watches and waves as I leap through the window. *Oh and by the way, where’s the village in question?*

Stealthily, I join my dad’s troop and follow them to our destination. I’m hiding behind an optical camouflage barrier, so nobody notices me.

The bandit gang is hiding in a cave between two hills not far from the village.

The bandits detect the arrival of the count's troop, and frantically start setting traps.

From the looks of it, they're just a bunch of rogues from the capital region. They seem to have no intention of battling actual soldiers; they're strategizing an escape.

If we let them get away, they'll just attack more villages.

The first thing I do is block their escape route with an invisible barrier. The cave has another opening, so I close that up too.

"What is this?!"

"An invisible wall?"

"What's going on here?!"

"Hurry up, you moron!"

"You do something, then!"

"Whoa! Don't you wave your torch at me!"

Judging from their pitiful equipment, these are the kind of guys who turned to banditry on a whim. There's no organized leadership. Some are even taking out their pent-up rage on peers.

Now, normally, I would make a devious move like staying hidden and knocking them out with a blow to the head with an invisible barrier. But this time, I wasn't willing to use cowardly tactics just to make my life easier.

Why, you ask? Because I didn't want to destroy the dreams of an innocent little girl.

"Prepare for justice, agents of evil!"

I threaten them using my usual electronic voice that sounds like a layered chorus. You know, for anonymity purposes.

Using a luminous barrier, I shine a spotlight over myself and strike a pose I stole from some random anime.

“Wh-Who is that?!”

“Where’d he come from?!”

“What’s with the ridiculous getup?!”

Hmph. Some people just don’t understand fashion. But honestly, I’m not fond of it either.

“I advise you to surrender peacefully. If you resist, I’m afraid the consequences will be unpleasant.”

I’ve never acted out a character like this before, and it’s making me nervous. Am I pulling it off?

“Why, you...”

“Don’t be messing around!”

“Get him!”

A moment ago, the gang was on the verge of breaking up. Now, thanks to my arrival, they’re a solidified unit.

From what I can gauge, their mana levels are all pretty low. They move a lot less skillfully than our soldiers. I could probably take them with my physical combat magic.

So when one of them slashes at me with his sword, I dodge it effortlessly, and deliver a karate chop to his neck. You know, the kind you see in anime that makes the bad guys pass out.

Krak!

“Yeowch!”

Oh. I must’ve aimed wrong and broken his collarbone instead. Whoopsie doodles.

I proceed to mow them down one by one as they attack me. But...

“Aauugh!”

“Gah!”

“Oog! Ghak!”

Making someone pass out is not that easy. I can’t kill them in front of a child, and I’m hesitant to make them squirt blood everywhere. There’s a lot to focus on.

By now, they’ve lost the will to fight and are scrambling to escape. I chase them around, striking their joints hard to put them out of commission. I end up snapping some of their arms and legs backwards, but my mysterious band of light should be censoring all of that from my young viewer.

When I’ve wiped most of them out, I grab the haughtiest one and drag him out of the cave.

Once outside, a row of soldiers greets us with astonishment. My dad’s troop had just arrived. Side note: I destroyed the bandits’ traps beforehand.

“Who are you?!” roars one of the soldiers, brandishing his spear. The other soldiers point their weapons at me too.

“Wait!” shouts my dad, dismounting his horse. He approaches me, eyeing the guy I’d dragged out of the cave.

“You don’t look like one of the bandits. Have you been fighting them inside?”

“Yes.”

My voice should be unrecognizable, but I’m still nervous. There goes my character. I’m glad they didn’t immediately take me for an enemy, but there’s still a chance they’ll see me as a threat if I play my cards wrong.

“What’s the status inside the cave?” he demands.

“I’ve defeated them all,” I reply. “I don’t think any of them escaped. I also didn’t kill any.”

My dad turns around and signals his men with a glance. About ten of them disappear into the cave, lighting their torches.

We wait about ten minutes. With each passing minute, the silence grows heavier, as does my urge to flee.

Finally, a few of them return. One of them whispers something in my dad’s ear.

His face changes to an expression of surprise. Then he turns to me with a stern look.

“I am called Gold Zenfis. I am entrusted by His Royal Majesty to preside over this region. As the land’s ruler, I first wish to express my gratitude to you.”

He bows his head in a gesture of vulnerability, his face still grave.

“May I ask your name?” he inquires.

What should I do? I haven’t come up with one. I decide to give him an honest answer.

“I don’t have a name yet!”

I drop the bandit I was carrying and strike a pose.

The awkward silence is unbearable.

“Was it also you who destroyed the four bandit camps, and rescued my wife and child?”

“That may have happened,” I answer vaguely. I don’t want him to feel indebted to me.

“I see. That was a tremendous deed. For this, too, I am grateful.”

My dad’s expression finally softens. But in no time, his forehead furrows in puzzlement.

“I see you wish to conceal your identity. Would you at least be so kind as to reveal your motive?”

My motive... Motive? I can’t exactly tell him I’m only doing this to make Charlotte happy.

I rack my brain in full throttle, and blurt out an answer to his question.

“Justice. Yes, that’s it. Justice. I’m the harbinger of justice. I protect justice, speak justice, and deliver justice!”

Yeesh. I’ve said the word “justice” so much, it starts to sound trippy.

I’m afraid I might slip up if I stick around, so I shout, “Hyaa!” and fly up into the air. “Farewell!” I call out, beating a swift retreat.

I fly back to the castle and in through the window of my room.

“Brother Haruto, you were so amazing!”

It’s already midnight, but Charlotte was waiting for me. She’s so excited, she’s reenacting all of my moves.

I'm glad you're happy, but your big brother is tired. My body and mana are fine, but mentally, I'm exhausted.

"When is your next mission?"

Wait, you want more?

She looks at me with her sleepy, yet sparkly eyes. I don't have it in me to disappoint her.

I call it a night for now. In the days to come, I "deliver justice" in my black costume a few more times.

Eventually, people begin to call me by a name.

The Black Knight.

Straightforward and simple.



There are several roads that connect the empire and the kingdom. The two countries are rivals now, but they were once allies during the war against the Demon King. Checkpoints stand along the borders. Traffic between the two countries is extremely limited, but not nonexistent.

At the checkpoint closest to the count's castle, three travelers appear.

One is a swordswoman, carrying two rapiers on her belt. Another is a slim man clad in robes. The third is a giant.

When the guard asks them for their identities and travel purpose, the trio declare that they are bounty hunters who made a living hunting demons in the

empire. Their intent is to offer their services to the count.

The short-haired female warrior announces, "Most of the demons have been culled, right? Rather than clinging to a career with no future, we figured we'd be better off finding some proper work."

"But why not become vassals of the empire, the land you're familiar with?" inquires the guard.

"Nah. No way. Only the upper class get anywhere in the empire. But we hear that the count here values skill over status. Even the lower class like us have a chance at getting promoted."

"It is true that Master Zenfis rewards those who work hard, regardless of social class. But you have labored quite a long time in the empire. That could be an issue."

The guard continues to look at each of the bounty hunters in turn.

"Two of you appear to have a mana level of around 25. I cannot allow fighters of your abilities to simply cross the border. We've had some trouble with the empire recently, so we're on high alert."

"We're bounty hunters. We're loyal to any master who pays us right."

"Well, true as that may be...and reliable as it is, in its own way... But rules are rules. I cannot let you pass."

"Come on, now, please?" the female warrior wheedles, pressing her body against the guard's. Under all the armor, her breasts are quite voluptuous.

"Rules are rules," the guard repeats firmly.

The female warrior's energy turns cold and menacing, but a hand clasps onto her shoulder.

“Please excuse my companion’s impudence,” the man in robes breaks in. “Now, rules are rules, but there must be some way.”

He seems like the classic wizard type, the kind who plays support or casts long-range magic.

“We fully intend to comply with the proper procedures. If you have concerns, perhaps you could send some soldiers to monitor us.”

“That is possible. But we are short-handed. You will have to wait here for several days.”

The man in robes nods. As the three travelers are made to wait in an interrogation room, the security officer consults with his superior.

“Gah, what a hassle!”

“Quit whining. If we cross the border following protocol, it’ll be easier for us later on.”

“Yeah, I guess using force to bust through would be a hassle too. Especially when one of us sticks out like a sore thumb.”

The swordswoman glares at the giant, who stands as still as a tree. He’s not only tall, but wide as well. His armor is simple, and he carries no weapon.

“We’re not really gonna offer ourselves in service, are we? And wait around months for the perfect moment? If so, I’ll pass.”

“All we need to do is infiltrate the count’s realm. Then we’ll ditch the soldiers, and the two of us will cause a stir to lure away the count’s guards.”

Lastly, the giant will assassinate the count. That’s their plan.

The three travelers are assassins from the empire. Their target is Gold Zenfis. It is unclear who hired them, but if they succeed, they will be promised

protection by a certain family of the aristocracy.

“We’ll make good money. I guess it’s worth putting up with a bit of hassle,” the woman admits.

“Exactly,” smirks the man in robes.

Finally, the guard returns, along with his commanding officer.

Five days later, the assassins succeed in crossing the border.



The Black Knight is the harbinger of justice. Which is why I’m flying through the sky with an elderly granny on my back. In one hand, I’m carrying a big sack.

“Good gracious! I never expected to fly in the air at this age,” she marvels.

I fly carefully, trying not to speed.

“So you’re the famous Mr. Black Knight, eh? I’ll have a good story to tell ol’ Gramps when I see him in heaven.”

How did it come to this? The answer is plain and simple.

When I sent out some surveillance barriers for a quick investigation, I happened to spy an old woman hobbling along under the weight of a huge bundle. Charlotte saw her too. She looked up at me, tears welling in her big eyes. “Poor elderly lady.”

No big deal. It’s on my way.

I drop off the granny at her granddaughter’s home, and fly off, with an armful of yams they gave me in thanks.

I'm on my way to the main road that runs from the northern border into the castle town.

There's a group of three travelers about, and they've raised suspicion.

Why do they seem suspicious, you ask? *Bloop-bloop-bloop...* (Sudden flashback scene.)

Dad's office had been semi-taken over as a playroom for Charlotte.

My sister had dragged me in there to read her the Ancient Magic book. That's when a soldier came in with news for our dad.

My dad's brow furrowed as he listened to the report.

"Hmm... Bounty hunters seeking to offer their services, you say?"

"Two of them are well known. They're skilled fighters, but the rumors are not in their favor."

"What sort of rumors?"

"Well, they've been mostly involved in demon-hunting, but recently they were also hired as mercenaries to put down a rebellion. They were known for using inhumane tactics, such as the merciless slaughter of non-combatants," the soldier explained.

"And they want to cross the border to become my servants? It seems plain enough that they must have some other agenda."

"Yes. It's so blatant, it's suspicious. They must anticipate that we'll be on guard to monitor them closely."

My dad crossed his arms.

“In that case, the third member—the man no one’s heard of—must hold the key.”

“His stature is immense, sir, even greater than yours. While the trio was held at the border, he reportedly uttered not a single word.”

“Did they measure him with Mija’s Crystal?”

“His current mana level is 18. Powerful enough to match a troop commander, but much lower than that of the other two,” the soldier said. “A mana level of 18 poses no call for alarm. Even with his tremendous physique, he would be no match for a sorcerer of high mana level.”

The other two were said to have mana levels of around 25, but even a small troop led by my dad would have no trouble defeating them. I took vicarious pride in that.

My dad glanced my way, and mumbled something under his breath. I sharpened my hearing to the max (augmented with a barrier) and listened.

“There is certainly a good chance they are after my life. But they may only be after information. If so, their target could be...”

He finished the rest of his sentence lividly, but very, very softly.

I overheard it. And I wasn’t about to ignore it.

Following that, my dad immediately declared, “We must be ever vigilant. We cannot allow them to enter the castle zone. We’ll stop them just before they arrive, and question them again regarding their aim. I shall go too.”

The soldier’s face hardened.

Charlotte was growing fidgety in my lap, so I gently stroked her hair.

“Don’t worry. Leave it to me,” I said to her.

“Yes, Brother Haruto.”

Charlotte turned to look at me and beamed.

I smiled back at her, remembering what my dad whispered.

“...Charlotte.”

I don't know their reason, and I don't care. If they so much as come near my little sister, I will have to make an appearance. That's for certain.

(End of flashback.)

So I got a little sidetracked, but hey, at least we'll have a steamed yam party when I get home.

There they are. The suspicious threesome. Two soldiers are escorting them.

I wait for my chance overhead. Eventually, the party of five sits down for a short break by a stream near the main road.

The trio moves a slight distance from the soldiers and starts a campfire. Wait... What's this?

I study the three travelers through my handmade Mija's Crystal lens. I can gauge not just their mana level, but all of their abilities. But...something doesn't make sense.

For now, I eavesdrop. The woman and the thin man are conferring in hushed tones.

“What a bonehead, that geezer. He's saving us trouble by coming to us. I hear he was one of the war heroes who defeated the Demon King...but I didn't expect a total meathead.”

“It’s a sign that they’re being extra cautious of us. We cannot let our guard down.”

“Yeah, yeah. But it doesn’t matter how many men they send. We only have to kill the count. It’ll be a piece of cake,” the nasty woman cackles.

Aaand you’re out. From that conversation, I conclude that they’re bad guys plotting to assassinate my dad. Charlotte doesn’t appear to be part of the plan, but they’ve got some nerve targeting the man I owe everything to.

Isn’t it a little too easy to uncover their ploy? *Nah. They’re the stupid ones,* I gloat as I hover a thousand feet above.

The woman and the thin man have high mana levels, but I’ve got no data on the giant. I can’t surprise-attack them, or else the escort soldiers could get caught in the crossfire.

After a moment’s thought, I descend to face them.

Whenever I appear out of nowhere, the reaction I get is usually the same.

“Huh?! Who’re you?!” the woman demands, drawing one of her two rapiers.

The man in robes dips smoothly behind her. He’s chanting softly. It sounds like a spell to strengthen himself and his party. The woman’s armor and weapon seem to harden.

This is the first time I’m ever facing such practiced combatants head-on. Is this a bad idea? After all, my mana level’s only 2.

“I mean you no harm. Gold Zenfis, the count of this region, has sent me to greet you,” I lie.

“I will escort these travelers from here. You two can return to your posts,” I say, glancing towards the escort soldiers.

Kliiing!

At that precise moment, the woman launches her rapier in my direction. Of course, I have a barrier protecting me, so it bounces off. Still though, what a dangerous thing to do.

“Hmph! You’re a pretty tough guy, despite your ridiculous outfit. I see you are no ordinary enemy.”

She leaps away, hopping spryly this way and that, barely moving her feet.

I can’t get a bead on her.

I want to use an immobilizing barrier to seize her, but it’s tricky when the target is moving around quickly. It’d be great to capture her alive so I can do some questioning. Hmm...

As I puzzle over this, the thin man seems to have finished casting his spell.

“Don’t move. That includes using magic,” he menaces.

Three magic circles hover in the air. It must be some kind of attack magic.

One of the soldiers panics and takes a step.

“Wait! This man is likely the Black Knight. I told you about him on our way.”

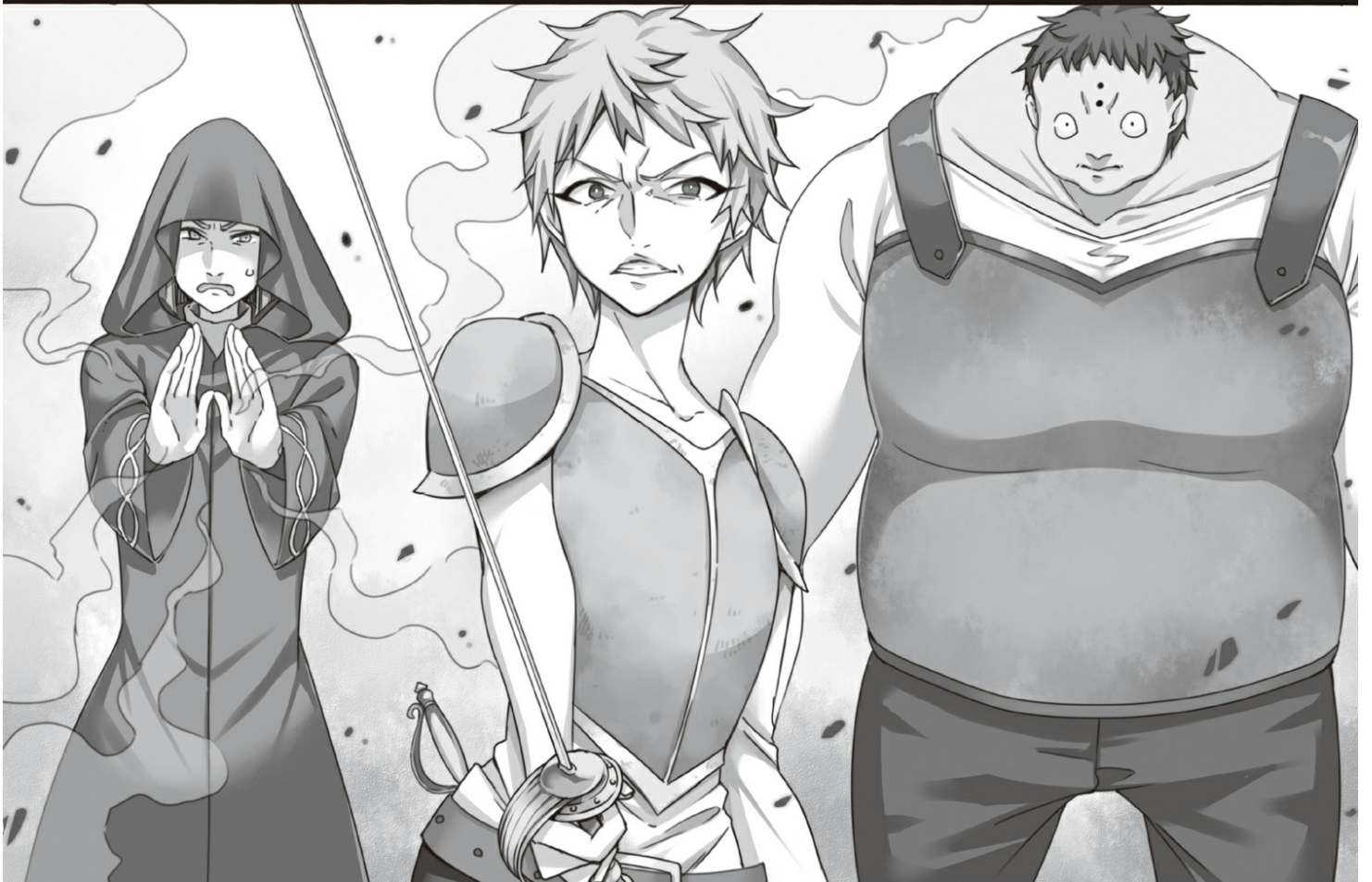
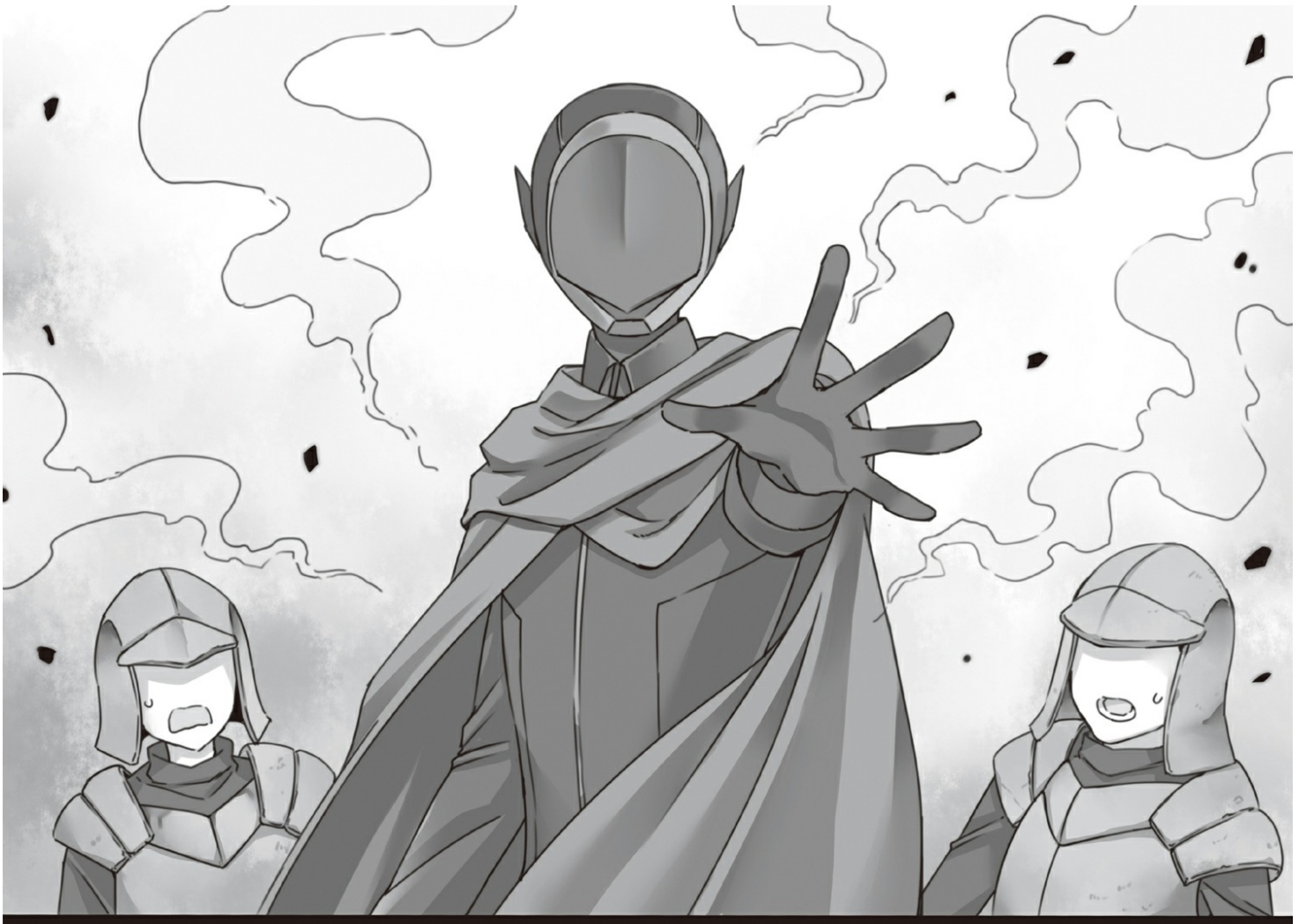
The soldier takes another step forward.

“Didn’t I tell you not to move?” scowls the man in robes.

One of the circles glows, and a streak of lightning flashes. It shreds through the air, followed by a booming explosion.

An ordinary man would stand no chance against this kind of force.

“If Gold Zenfis is headed this way, we have no further need for these escorts. Let us dispose of them, along with this Black Knight while we... Eh?”



The thin man lets out an odd gasp and stares in surprise.

“Wh-What?!” The soldier who almost got fried has fallen on his butt, and looks bewildered. Don’t worry; he’s uninjured.

“You two must run. I’ll take it from here,” I tell them.

“Th-Thank you,” says one of the soldiers. “But what on earth is...”

“These guys are after the count’s life,” I inform them.

Both soldiers’ faces morph into looks of anger. Slight shame, too.

“Forgive us. We were nothing but a burden.”

The soldier on the ground scrambles to his feet, and they both flee towards the road.

“You won’t escape.” The woman draws her other rapier.

As she does, the slim blade darts through the air towards both of the men’s throats like an arrow—no, as if it’s controlled by a guided missile system.

Kling!

“Again?!” she squeals.

Yes, again. Do you really think I’m going to allow you to hurt one of us?

Meanwhile, the thin man in robes is trembling furiously.

“Unbelievable... Once again, there was no spell. Did he really make a protective wall to defend against my lightning attack without a spell? And instantly deploy it?”

He glares at me sharply and shouts, “Who are you?!”

This is getting old real fast.

“We’ll gang up on him then. The two of you close in on him from both sides. Stay focused! He must have a mana level of over 30—”

Stay focused? Speak for yourself.

The confused man gets swooped into the air, and then hits the ground, face first.

“Bwahaha! What are you doing? You moron,” the woman shrieks.

Hey, lady. That was uncalled for. I thought these guys were your friends. Just as I think that to myself...

“I’m not sticking around to fight this freak. He’s your problem now. See ya!” yelps the robed man.

He takes off, ditching them—

“Glrk!”

—and runs face first into an invisible barrier I made. What a dork.

“Dammit! Well, don’t just stand there! Do something!” the woman screeches. Is it just me, or is she slightly smiling?

The giant, meanwhile, hasn’t moved a muscle.

“Hey! What are you, frozen? Hurry up and get him. Give him a taste of terror.”

The giant remains motionless. If anything, he’s shaking a little.

Realizing something strange is going on, the woman looks at me.

“What did you do to him?” she asks.

“Huh? Oh, I just immobilized him with an invisible barrier.”

“What?!”

The woman looks perplexed. Was the giant guy their trump card or something? No, nonono... That couldn't be it. After all, that giant man...

"That's just *two little men inside a giant suit*, right?" I point out.

Jumping out of the guy's belly would be too weak of an ambush move, I figure. A tad surprising, at best.

"How...did you know?"

"Have you heard of a CT scan?"

Of course she hasn't.

I couldn't get a reading of the giant's mana level with my homemade Mija's Crystal, so I knew something was suspicious. Using surveillance barriers, I could view horizontal slices of his insides.

Whatever the external puppet is made of, it's very detailed and realistic down to the guts. The fatty part of its abdomen was replaced by the two petite-sized men. But how were they piloting the giant puppet?

The whole deal kinda creeped me out, so I immobilized the giant's body with a barrier, entrapping the two guys inside. I did all this right around when the robed man ordered, "Don't move!"

It'd be best if the two little men could be bound up individually, but unfortunately, I need to be able to see my target directly for a lot of the barriers I make.

On the other hand, simple barriers like the camouflage over the cave entrance can be done remotely through a surveillance barrier.

"Hey! Wha...? What is this?! I can't move!"

I restrain the woman too, while she's standing still in disbelief.

“Now, I have some questions.”

“Okay. I’ll talk. You won’t kill me if I talk, right?” she pleads.

“If you tell the truth. What is your objective?” I demand.

“To assassinate Gold Zenfis.”

“Why target the count?”

“We were hired for the job through the Imperial Bounty Hunter’s Guild,” she explains.

“Hired by who?”

“We don’t know. Ask the guild. But if they were using an alias, you’ll have a hard time tracking them down. You’re better off giving up! Bwahaha!” the woman cackles.

I don’t see what’s so funny.

I turn on my heel and head for the giant.

I split open his torso and two men of small stature spill out. I immediately restrain them with barriers.

“Tell me who hired you. The woman has confessed. Your answers better match hers.”

The swordswoman stares this way dubiously. She can’t hear my voice. I’ve enclosed her in a big invisible barrier that’s soundproof.

The two little men seem resigned. They both begin to talk.

“A noble family of the kingdom. We received an advance from the guild.”

“They promised we’d receive the rest of the money after we finished the job.”

“And that we’d have protection within the kingdom.”

One of them confesses the noble's name. I don't know him, but I bet my dad does.

They seem to be telling the truth, but it's best to double check.

I erase the invisible barrier around the woman.

"You lied," I call out.

When I say the name of the noble, her face turns pale.

"What were you two thinking?!" she yells at the two small men. "Why did you go blabbing like utter numbskulls?"

"You were the one who said you'll talk. You're the numbskull!" they snap back.

I conjure up countless little barriers in the air, making them colorful so they're easy to see.

"Wh...What are those? W-Wait! Please, w-w-wait. I'm sorry! I won't lie again! Please—"

I fire the swarm of barriers amok. Not a shred of the woman's flesh remains. That's what she gets for lying.

Still, I did get the evidence I needed. The mastermind was a member of the kingdom's nobility. Does someone have a grudge against my dad? There's no use interrogating the little men any further. They were just hired guns. I doubt they'd know the motive.

"What is this thing, anyway?" I ask, pointing at the giant body with its torso gaping.

"We... We're puppeteers."

I ask what they mean by that.

The two men take turns talking.

“Human-shaped puppets based on homunculus technology. They’re capable of autonomous action,” starts the first.

“A lost technology, now. May as well be a soulless chunk of flesh,” continues the other.

“We control its movements with thin wires that we engineered.”

“Enhanced magically, of course.”

Interesting. I had no idea such a thing was possible. Could I use this information to improve my doppelganger? Probably not. What I want is an autonomous clone who’s capable of thinking and acting for himself.

Then again, this giant doll is “based on” puppets capable of autonomous action. If that kind of technology existed in the past, maybe there’s still hope. Well, setting that aside for now...

“Why were you hiding in a puppet? Did you plan to jump out and surprise your target?”

I still have my doubts that could’ve ever worked.

“That was part of it. But the main reason was to hide our presence,” says one of the men.

Hide? A gargantuan body like that?

“What do you mean?”

“Our original plan was to defeat the guards once we entered the castle town, then the two of us would get out of the puppet.”

“We’d stage the puppet to look like a dead body.”

“Then the two of us, who no one suspects even the existence of, would execute the murder.”

Even if someone figured out that the giant was a puppet, they’d be likely to assume there was only one operator.

It was a clever plan. But all for naught.

“So while the woman and thin man were fighting the count, you two planned to sneak up from behind, huh?”

Devious. I wish I could use it for future reference...but I’m a loner, so I can’t. Sad.

“Well, that’s one way to go,” one of them replies.

“But we were planning a different approach this time,” adds the other.

“While those two raised a commotion, leaving the castle vulnerable...”

“The two of us would infiltrate its defenseless walls.”

I cock my head sidewise. The two men grin nastily and speak in unison.

“And we would take his son or daughter hostage...”

Thwok, thwok!

Both of their heads fly off.

Whoops. I killed them.

These guys were after my dad’s life. I knew they’d be capable of treacherous acts on some level. I managed to stay pretty rational for the most part, but the moment they uttered the words “daughter” and “hostage,” my blood boiled instantly.

Still dressed up as the Black Knight, I go to my dad and explain the situation.

He is familiar with the noble who hired the bounty hunters.

“It’s a name that has been in decline. I have very little contact with them. I cannot imagine them going to the trouble of hiring bounty hunters from the empire at great cost to achieve an end like this. There must be another mastermind behind this.”

I apologize for wiping out our lead, and offer to find out who the mastermind is from the noble.

“I doubt we can trace them.”

It’s unlikely that the conspirator would reveal their intentions to some noble family. My dad suspects the true culprit intended to reveal their plan only when the plot succeeded.

“But I do have my suspicions on one.”

I inquire who but all he would tell me is:

“A vastly powerful enemy. One even you might struggle to contend with. Not to mention, the circumstances are complex. For now, our only option is to keep our defenses high, and anticipate their next move.”

Sounds too passive, I can’t help thinking. Well, then. It’s up to me to tend to this properly.

I return to my room and un-transform.

“Welcome back, Brother Haruto!” My little sister greets me with an enormous smile.

“I’m back. We’re having a yam party tonight.”

I hand her one of the yams I earned.



No matter how long she waits, there is no report of Gold Zenfis's assassination.

Alone in her room, Gizelotte grinds her teeth.

Did those bounty hunters simply make off with their advance?

Or perhaps Gold fought them off, and concealed the news of the attempted assassination?

If so, she can't send her men to investigate. They may leave tracks.

One thing is clear. The plan failed, and there is no use trying the same approach twice. She hadn't placed a great deal of hope in it, but with one failure after the next, she needed some outlet for her pent-up anxiety.

"Isn't there a dragon or something I could hunt? I haven't had a chance to really cut loose in a while."

She knows it would be inappropriate, considering her social standing. But she cannot contain her frustration.

Gizelotte approaches the hearth.

A scabbard and an unsheathed sword hang criss-crossed above the mantelpiece.

It is the Divine Blade of Light—one of the "seven sublime weapons" that defeated the Demon King.

Its blade is slightly thinner than the average one-handed sword, but its

strength and sharpness are the greatest in the kingdom. The grip and guard are embedded with intricate jewels, and a faint glow seeps off them from the magic within.

Just as Gizelotte picks up the sword, she hears a soft knock at the door. She beckons.

Her personal butler bows and enters the room.

He seems to bear a report for the queen.

He hands an envelope to her, bows again deeply, and leaves the room.

Gizelotte returns the sword to its place over the hearth, sits on a sofa, and opens the seal.

“Oh, it’s the investigation result I ordered on that girl.”

The magic abilities of Gold Zenfis’s daughter have been kept secret. This itself is not rare, but given that the mana level and (lack of) element of the count’s son had been publicly announced, it does raise a flag.

As she reads the document, Gizelotte’s expression hardens. She reads it again, then stands up and screams.

“What is this?!”

She cannot believe it. She refuses to believe it.

Gizelotte is still the strongest sorcerer in the country, with a level of 44/46. But according to this report, the max mana level of Gold Zenfis’s daughter is...

The girl possesses potential far greater than that of the Flash Princess.

Bonus Interlude:

My Observation Log of a Dog-Eared Maid (3)

Every now and then, Flay slips away from the castle. Aside from her maid duties, she also has a self-appointed task.

She calls it “building an environment in which Sir Haruto can live a peaceful life.” What she actually does is wildlife rescue for demons.

Demons often wander into human territory, attack their villages, and end up being hunted. Other times, they may fall victim to fellow demons in a territorial fight.

Flay prevents these clashes by teaching lost demons the rules of the streets, and being a mediator when conflict arises.

Today, too, she’s charged off into the forest in her usual maid’s outfit.

“Gnrrawwl!”

“Snrk snrk!”

On one side, a giant bear strikes a menacing pose, both arms stretched wide in the air. On the other side, an enormous wild boar snorts rabidly, its tusks gleaming.

Behind both creatures hide their babies. Neither parent shows any sign of yielding. The situation is like a tinderbox ready to burst.

Flay jauntily appears on the scene.

“Calm your balls!”

Ka-vwam! Ka-blunk!

She delivers a bitch-slap to the giant bear, and a roundhouse kick to the enormous boar. Not exactly the wildlife rescue you'd imagine.

"How dare you fight in the vicinity of Sir Haruto's residence. The audacity!"

Shing! She shows her claws. Ms. Bear and Ms. Boar are terrified.

How can she know when fights break out if she's in the castle all the time? Apparently, she's tamed the messenger birds across the region with food. But I digress.

"What is the cause of this fight? ...I see. This one encroached on your territory and gobbled up all the yams, did she?"

The bear, who was living here first, protests that she wants to drive the boar away. (...is what I think they're saying but I can't actually understand.)

"Hmph. It's true, this territory is already at max capacity. But after coming all this way with her youngling, another long journey would be a tremendous hardship. You must yield."

"Gnrwl?!"

Of course, Ms. Bear isn't agreeable to this.

"Hear me. I expected this might happen, so I've scouted out an abundant food source for you."

At the words "food source," the mother and baby bears' eyes grow round and shiny.

"But first—you there! I want you to learn the rules in this territory. If you ever violate them, be prepared for direct punishment by me."

Flay explains the rules thoroughly. They're really nothing radical. Kind of like a

town committee's rules for residential trash collection.

After all, wildlife is all about survival of the fittest. You can't expect a predator to empathize with the circumstances of its prey. But if a predator overhunts and runs out of food, it will only hurt its own situation, and eventually be forced to encroach on other demons' territories.

Territorial disputes among wild animals are inconsequential. But demon battles, especially battles between larger demons, have a big impact on the environment. If they get out of hand and destroy the ecosystem, all of our habitats will be reduced.

For all of these reasons, Flay takes on the job of mediating conflicts between demons.

Flay parts with the boars, and leads the bear and her cub through the forest.

The woods thin out and reveal a river valley.

The rushing water plays a soothing melody, and the whispering wind rustles the trees. Plump, fully grown fish jump in the water.

There's a reason no other demons are at this sumptuous cornucopia.

"Across this river and through the woods beyond, there is a human village."

"Grrf?"

"I've ordered the other demons not to set foot here. And you are not permitted to cross this river."

I wondered if this encroaches on the humans' fishery zone, but Flay explained that humans only fish here for pleasure.

Flay has pleaded, *with great sincerity*, for the humans not to come near it.

Despite her part-demon status, Flay commands with the authority of a count, ruler of this region. I'm suspicious of how sincere her plea really was.

The giant bear leaps joyously into the river. Her cub joins in and frolics.

When the mother bear catches a big fish, the cub devours it on the riverbank.

"Sniff... Hmrr..." Flay gets emotional as she watches the bear family bond.

But Ms. Bear is still anxious.

"Grrwll..."

If a human approaches, I will have to fight them to protect my baby. At least, I assume that's what she's expressing.

Flay grins.

"I have warned them. We have a pact. If they break it and approach, show no mercy. You may devour them."

Even the bears seem put off by this.

The background of the page is decorated with several floating 3D cubes in dark gray and light gray. Interspersed among the cubes are circular halftone patterns of varying sizes, some of which contain a small white dot. These elements are scattered across the page, creating a modern, geometric aesthetic.

CHAPTER FOUR: ISnap

One early spring morning, just before sunrise...

“Mwahahaha! I did it! I finally did it!” I shout in my room.

Just FYI, the room is fully soundproofed, as well as encased in a sensor barrier that alerts me of any intruders. I can be loud without disturbing anyone.

In this region, which lies north of the kingdom, early spring mornings are still chilly. But thanks to another barrier I created, my room is cozy and warm.

So what did I finally do?

A boy with black hair stands in front of me. When I prompt him, he introduces himself.

“My name is Haruto Zenfis. I just turned ten years old.”

That’s right. It’s me. More precisely, it’s a perfect copy of me, made from a barrier.

A lot has happened in ten years. The last year has been especially eventful. Like becoming a superhero known as the Black Knight.

Up until now, I’ve succeeded in creating a perfect physical copy of myself. But this is on another level.

“How are you?” I ask.

“Okay. Not bad,” my doppelganger replies.

Amazing! Incredible! Dare I say, perfect.

This one is capable of generating its own responses. It can even make basic behavioral decisions. In other words, it’s an AI-equipped barrier. I don’t even

have to prompt it with a “Hey Haruto” or an “OK Haruto.”

Based on my research about homunculus technology, it is a forgotten art, with very little material available in the castle’s library. Using what scant information I could find, I experimented with barriers until I finally stumbled upon something that worked. I don’t even know how. Not a problem, though. Not getting hung up on minor details is the best approach.

It’s based on a version of my own mind, so it doesn’t willingly initiate conversation. It’s better this way—less likely someone will catch on.

Heh heh heh. More... More, I say. I must advance my perfect creation even more!

“How’s the weather today?” I ask.

“Can’t you see for yourself? It’s sunny,” the doppelganger says.

“Are you hungry?”

“You didn’t program me with that. But fine. I can pretend to eat if you insist, I guess.”

What a smartass! But he’s me. Am I this big of a jerk?

Wow, calm down, Haruto. It’s still just a prototype.

My “copy android,” as I’ve dubbed it, isn’t just able to function autonomously.

I pick up what looks to be a pair of night-vision goggles.

I call them “me-VR goggles.”

They’re connected to the copy android. When I put them on, I can control him remotely. It’s like real-life virtual reality. Quite an oxymoron.

Now I can see through the copy android’s view.

On my command, the copy walks to the desk in the corner and looks at a pen. Right hand out. I see my copy reach out its right hand too. Carefully, I move my hand to pick up the pen. I can feel the physical contact.

“Yes! It works!” I scream, and the copy screams along with me.

If trouble arises, I can pilot the copy and navigate the situation.

Amazing. I’m amazing. There’s nobody here to praise me, so I praise myself.

My copy does a little dance.

I see myself wearing the VR goggles. Behind me on the bed, I see a little girl under the quilt looking this way.

“*Nani?!’*”

I’m so startled that I react in Japanese.

An alarm system is set up in my room to detect intruders. How did Char get in here?

My dear little sister rubs her eyes sleepily. As she looks from me to my copy and back again, her eyes widen.

“Brother Haruto! There are two Brother Harutos!” she shouts.

Next come the questions.

“Which of you belongs to me? Both of you?”

Um, neither of us belongs to you, Charlotte.

Come to think of it, she’s seen my copy before. Back then, it was only capable of pretending to sleep, so she caught on rather quickly.

Now I remember. Charlotte has a habit of wandering into my room half-asleep in the middle of the night. It’s frequent and unpredictable. It got

annoying to be woken up each time by the alarm, so I removed her from the sensor alerts.

My room is warm and cozy, so I can't really blame her.

I take off the remote-control goggles. My copy stops moving, and like a marionette that had its strings cut, it crumples to the floor.

"Oh, no! One of my Brother Harutos has passed away!"

"Calm down. That's not me. It's just a big doll that looks like me."

"It is a little different from the one I saw before. Did you make it with magic, Brother Haruto?"

"Well, uh, yeah."

"Amazing! It looks just like you. What kind of magic, Brother Haruto?"

"Um... That's a secret for now. It's classified research."

Charlotte (AKA Char) nods her head, satisfied with my answer.

"But why did you make it? Is it for me?"

She really insists on it being hers, huh?

But geez, I'm not sure how to answer.

Why did I create the copy android? Because I was planning to leave the castle and live on my own. Originally, I'd intended to leave as soon as I was past infancy. I kept postponing it and mooching off my family.

But at this point, I have no desire to leave home. I like it here.

Nonetheless, there have been some obstacles in the way as I pursued my ideal shut-in life.

My dad makes me come out for swordplay training, and my mom barges in to

tutor me. Char shows up often, always wanting to play.

I'm still studying how to use my Barrier magic.

In this world, Barrier magic is considered to be a very basic, supplementary magic with limited capabilities. But I'm finding it to be an inexplicable source of limitless possibilities. I can even use it to connect to present-day Japan and watch anime.

In order to achieve my dream shut-in life, I'm trying to learn everything I can about Barrier magic.

My plan is to leave the copy android at the castle, and live out in the woods so I could focus on my research.

I'm silent for a moment. Suddenly, Char gasps.

"Are the bad guys on the move again?"

'Scuse?

"Brother Haruto, you are an ally of justice. You must hide your identity. That is why you made a copy of yourself, right?"

Char is such a sweet, good girl. Sharp, as well.

She's also a small child who takes superpower battle anime literally. She believes steadfastly that if there's a superhero, there must also be a clear enemy somewhere. She seems to have concluded that I, the superhero Black Knight, made this copy of myself to serve as a body double while I'm out battling evil.

Never underestimate a child's imagination. I guess it's my fault for putting weird ideas in her head, though.

"Right. But it's a secret, got it?"

I can't bring myself to shatter the child's illusions.

"I want to help too."

"No. You're still little. Maybe when you're bigger, okay?"

My heart aches as I watch her wilt.

By the way, this girl has crazy potential. Her max mana level is 61. It's higher than the Flash Princess's.

"Don't take it so hard. The bad guys are powerful. Your job right now is to prepare yourself and become strong, so you'll be ready when the time comes."

I tell her this in a dramatic voice. I'm not wearing a cape, but I strike a pose like my cape's blowing in the wind anyway.

Char hangs her head low in frustration.

"I want to grow up faster..."

Her words seem to harbor something.

So—"bad guys," huh? In the past year, we'd had a lot of trouble, like the empire plotting against us, and assassins coming after my dad. But since then, things have been calm and peaceful.

The only issues to contend with are miscellaneous tasks like mediating petty fights or overseeing large shipments of goods.

Sorry, Char. Your fantasies are going to have to remain fantasies...



In the last year, the popularity of Gizelotte Orteus, the Flash Princess, has

remained unshaken.

Meanwhile, King Jilq Orteus seems to be fading into the shadows.

As of late, the citizens have been casting their hopes on the queen's full leadership, while gossiping about how long it'll be before the king steps down.

The doomed king clings to a single hope. Ten years after Prince Reinhardt had been abandoned in the forest...

"You called for me, Your Majesty?"

A beautiful young girl with blonde hair and blue eyes appears at the king's chamber.

She has an innocent air befitting a twelve-year-old, yet at the same time, a bewitching womanly aura.

"Yes, Marianne. Thank you for coming. This way, now. Come closer."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

She curtsies and enters the room, her stride both delicate and elegant.

"No need to be so formal. This is my chamber. And you are my daughter," dotes the king, who has aged significantly in the past ten years.

The girl—Marianne—smiles as she draws near the king, and tucks her blonde hair behind her ear.

On the back of her left hand is the royal insignia. She is the daughter of the former queen—Haruto's half-sister from another mother.

"Yes, Father. Why have you summoned me here so late at night?" Marianne asks, sitting down next to the king on the long sofa.

“Right. I want to speak to you about the upcoming regional inspection tour.”

“The one that shall be my first public service. Worry not, Father. I will perform my duties with diligence.”

“Yes, well... Prince Laius has requested to go along.”

“Prince Laius? But he’s only nine. It would be a danger should he fall ill from the long journey. After all...he is to be the next king.”

As Marianne speaks the last part, the king’s face reddens and he leaps to his feet.

“I will not tolerate him assuming the throne!” he shouts.

Marianne recoils at his booming voice.

“The next ruler is you, Marianne. It will not be Laius.”

“But Father, I am...a girl. The kingdom has no previous record of rulership under a queen.”

“Then you will bear a son, and he will be the next king. My decision is made.”

“Why do you despise Laius so? True, he is a tad selfish, but his potential is greater than mine.”

Marianne’s potential is not far behind. At the age of twelve, the usual level of a child of nobility would be in the mid-single-digits, but Marianne’s current mana level is already a remarkable 15.

Nonetheless, Prince Laius, son of the Flash Princess, has an even higher potential, and his current mana level is rising rapidly.

“Never mind that. Be very wary of that boy’s behavior. We know not what he may be plotting.”

“But Father...”

“Hush, child. Your guards are all under my direct command. I will have them watch Laius closely. His guards are under the command of Queen Gizelotte. Trust them not.”

I see. Marianne’s shoulders slump in acquiescence.

It isn’t Laius that Father despises. It is my stepmother...

Marianne’s grandmother, the queen dowager of the previous king, has warned her in secret: *there are whispers that the king is jealous of the queen’s popularity, and is paranoid that she will usurp the throne.*

Marianne has only admiration for the current queen.

To Marianne, the queen is the Flash Princess, savior of the realm. Although they are not blood-related, the queen has never treated her coldly. On the contrary, she’s always shown Marianne kindness, teaching her and training her in sword and magic skills.

If the queen intended to kill Marianne, she would have done so long ago.

The king’s only hope is his beloved daughter. If he is to prevent Gizelotte’s undertaking to usurp the throne, his only recourse is to raise Marianne as a rival candidate to Laius.

But this secret conversation with his daughter has the opposite effect.

Harboring family conflicts will only cause a civil war. For the kingdom, and for our citizens, I must work to foster harmony between the two sides.

Contrary to her father’s intentions, Marianne decides to befriend her younger brother during their travels.

The next day at the royal annex.

A knight, who is a close adviser to the king, visits Gizelotte. He's been assigned to protect Marianne in the upcoming inspection tour. His visit with the queen is top secret.

"Ah, yes. I see the king is as idiotic as ever," Gizelotte snickers, lounging on a large sofa in her nightgown.

She continues, "He's right to be wary. But focusing all his energy in the wrong direction is not only a waste of time, he'll stand no chance fending off even a direct attack. Men with scant battle experience are such fools..."

"Our words no longer reach the king's ears. He turns his attention solely to Her Highness, ignoring his governing duties," the knight reports.

"Yes, I imagine so," Gizelotte muses. "No wonder a knight under his direct command like you would come into my allegiance."

"Of course, that is not the only reason. I believe that Your Majesty is the most suited leader of our nation. I must say, *that* is the greatest reason." The knight grins smarmily.

These men claim to act in the best interest of the kingdom, but their priority is to align themselves with the winning team.

A knight, who should honor loyalty more than anything, is betraying his master to serve his own interests. Ten years after the battle against the Demon King, the kingdom's core has degenerated during the long period of peace.

"After all, the prince is first in line to inherit the throne. Even if Princess Marianne achieves her max mana level one day, that fact will not change. The future rulers of the kingdom are your lineage, Your Majesty."

"Naturally. Killing that measly girl would be of no benefit to me. More

importantly...”

Gizelotte rises languidly and picks up a wine glass. She takes a sip of the red liquid. Her eyes grow fierce—as if she is on the battlefield—and the Flash Princess radiates with a bloodthirsty energy.

“The thorn in my side is Charlotte Zenfis, the child of royal blood, born with potential greater than mine. I must eliminate that pesky girl as soon as possible.”

A shiver runs down the knight’s spine. He swallows.

“Th-There are no hindrances to the plan. However, we anticipate the princess’s attention will turn strongly towards Prince Laius. This may necessitate a degree of care.”



“Hmm. So His Majesty’s cowardice could unexpectedly turn into an obstacle? Oh, then how about this?” Gizelotte’s face blossoms with the innocence of a young girl. “What if we pin the crime on Princess Marianne?”

The plan was to use Laius to invite Charlotte on an outing, as the two were of similar age. Her death would be forged as a roadside accident. Laius could be endangered as well, but his entourage would have strict orders to protect only him.

With Marianne’s attention focused on Laius, she might tag along. In that case, Gizelotte could leverage the situation to pin Charlotte’s accidental death on Marianne.

If all goes well, it would cause a rift between the king and Count Zenfis, the king’s strongest ally.

The king would lose his last vestige of power, and be forced to step down.

There’s still time before the delegation sets out. The next step is to summon her strategists and devise this new plan.

As the queen gloats, the knight asks hesitantly, “On that note, I understand Count Zenfis also has a son. What shall we do about him?”

“Ah yes, he does, come to think of it. But the boy is said to be an imbecile with a max mana level of 2. Adopted, as well. You may ignore him. If he dies in the process, I care not.”

A mana level of 2.

That number triggers a dark memory for Gizelotte. Her brow furrows.

It does seem unusual that two such dolts would be born so close in age...

The boy’s level is the same as that of the prince abandoned in the forest. It’s

possible that this knowledge spurred Count Zenfis to adopt a child of common birth. He was a man of stern features, but he had a soft heart.

Well. Mulling over garbage like that will only make me sick.

The queen decides not to think about it. She has no idea...

...that the boy is the very same child she bore and abandoned. And that he will become her biggest hindrance...



I sit cross-legged on the floor. Around me, numerous tabular barriers hover, displaying various scenes.

“Hey, this place looks good. There’s something soothing about lakeshores.”

What am I doing, you ask? I’m scouting out the best place to be a shut-in.

Waterside locations are great. A quiet and calm environment is key. As for demons in the area... Flay would take care of that. I’m guessing.

I’m trying to concentrate and weigh my choices. But...

“Your tail! Today shall be the day I finally pet your fluffy tail!”

“Enough, child! I serve only Sir Haruto! I serve not the likes of you!”

“Fluffy fluffy!”

“I tell you, my entire being is devoted to Sir... Hey! Don’t jump at me. Hmph. I won’t be caught by the likes of you.”

“Hnng...gah!”

“Hah! You’ll never catch me. Your persistence is applaudable. But keep it up

and you'll hit a wall—Oh! What did I tell you?! Hey, Charlotte. Are you all right? Are you hurt? Did you... Aaah!!”

“Gotcha!”

“Why, you sneaky little thing. To think a child could conspire to... Yeeek! Aaah! Not so tightly...ohh... Mmmm-mmm! Not there, oh-ooooh!” Flay moans helplessly.

What are these two doing in *my* room? How am I supposed to concentrate with all this noise?

I glance over to see the red-headed, dog-eared maid stumble to the floor. A little girl is hugging her tail, nuzzling relentlessly into the fluffy fur.

Oh, Char. At the tender age of six, she's managed to pull a fast one on Flay. Not bad.

“Can you guys leave already?”

“My master... I'm...so sorry... I...I cannot...” Flay sighs weakly.

I had no idea her tail was her weakness. Well, if she ever screws up, I know how to punish her now. Plus, I'll get to enjoy some of that fluff.

“What are you doing, Brother Haruto?”

“I'm looking for a place to do magic research.”

Char has figured out a lot of things, so to some extent, she knows about my plans. Of course, she doesn't know the part about wanting to be a shut-in forever.

The only people who know I'm a former prince are my parents and Flay. Technically, this information wasn't disclosed to me either.

My mana level of 2 is public information, but being non-elemental is a secret

between my parents and me. Having no element is extremely rare. On paper, I'm listed as earth. I worry I'll eventually be found out.

Anyway, nobody but me knows that I can only use Barrier magic.

Except...

"A secret lair? So you can fight the bad guys?"

Char is convinced that I'm a "secret superhero battling an evil organization." It's embarrassing, but as her big brother, I have to play along.

"Right. This is a secret too, okay?"

"Yes. We shall not let the enemy find out."

The determination on her little face is adorable and endearing. *But I beg you, please grow out of your fantasies soon.*

"I cannot wait until I can help you, Brother Haruto!"

"It won't take long. You're much more talented than me, Char."

No-no-no, Char shakes her head violently in denial. The little face rubbing against Flay's tail makes her ticklish.

"I could never be like you, Brother Haruto. Your Ancient Magic is amazing."

My magic is only Barrier, not Ancient.

It is way different from what's considered normal in this world, so I cover it up with a wild excuse by saying, "I'm experimenting with Ancient Magic that only non-elementals can use." Flay buys it too.

I should release Flay from captivity soon. Her butt's sticking up and twitching now.

"Flay, did you come in here for something?"

As soon as Flay showed up, Char pounced, and I missed the opportunity to hear her business.

I tell Char to let her go. Finally liberated, Flay assumes a more dignified posture. She kneels on the floor Japanese-style—one of her favorite poses. Hard to believe she was rolling around and twitching just a moment ago.

“That insolent Gold. He has the impudence to summon you, Sir Haruto.”

“Dad? I wonder what he wants.”

Not another swordplay training, I hope. I hate going outside.

Flay tilts her head sideways, cluelessly. She’s no help. Charlotte answers instead.

“Today we are expecting guests.”

“Guests...? Oh!”

I completely forgot. Some delegation is coming from the capital on an official inspection tour, and I’m supposed to go with my dad to meet them. After all, I’m his eldest son. And Charlotte’s still a little kid.

I rush into formal attire and sprint out of my room.



A delegation from the kingdom’s capital is arriving today on an official tour.

Panicked that I completely forgot, I get ready as fast as I could and somehow make it just in time.

“Hmph. What a dusty place. And smelly too. So this is what they call the

backwoods?”

A young boy with brown hair complains as he steps down from a luxurious carriage.

From the way he’s dressed, he’s obviously a rich kid from an aristocratic family. He’s got fine features, but there’s a mean look in his eyes. His attitude and his manners suck, too. My least favorite type.

“Laius, don’t be rude. You’re the one who insisted on coming along, remember?”

A dazzlingly beautiful blonde girl emerges.

She looks slightly older than me, but seems much more mature.

She’s dressed in trousers, appropriate for traveling the road, but the quality of the fabric looks expensive. No doubt she is of the aristocracy too.

“What? I’m just being honest,” the boy says.

What’s with this brat? I stare a bit too long and our gazes meet. He glares at me.

A huge figure steps in between us.

“Welcome. Thank you for coming all this way, Princess Marianne and Prince Laius.”

It’s my dad. He’s not just any noble—he’s of royal blood, and he commands a region that stretches between two nations at risk of war. He’s a man of great stature.

Guests to whom my dad would show this level of formality can only mean one thing. It should’ve been clear to me when he invited me out.

These two are my birth siblings.

The snotty little brat (Laius, I think) glares at my dad now.

“Princess Marianne and Prince Laius? Did you just announce me second?”

“I beg your pardon for my rudeness. I was told that Her Royal Highness was the leader of this delegation.”

“So what? I’m the prince! I’m the next king!”

I hate this kind of squawking, arrogant jerk, so I just gray-rock it.

“You! What are you looking at? You got a problem with me?”

He thinks I’m glaring at him. Is he trying to stir up a fight?

My dad interjects. “Please excuse my son’s lack of decorum. I am responsible for his poor manners. My apologies on his behalf—”

“Well, well. So this is the numbnuts with the mana level of 2,” Laius interrupts with a sneer.

The veins in my dad’s brow are twitching. He’s about five seconds from losing it.

But my dad is a dignified warrior. He’s not about to flip his shit over some snot-nosed kid. Unlike a certain red-haired someone. If Flay were here, she’d have attacked this turkey by now. You’re lucky you’re alive, kiddo.

“Laius, that’s enough! Royal blood is no excuse for rudeness. In fact, your royal status is all the more reason to display proper manners.”

At least someone has a sense of decency. Princess Marianne is my half-sister from another mother. She’s beautiful. Her mother probably wasn’t a witch, unlike a certain someone who’s all looks and magic with no redeeming qualities.

Laius responds to her rebuke with a click of his tongue.

“Look, will you quit the big sister act? You and I are in different leagues, okay? You’re just a political tool, and that’s all you’re good for. Get it? Different leagues.”

“Laius, of all the...”

Big Sister Marianne is shaking with indignation.

Laius regards her with pleasure. Then, for some reason, he turns back to me.

“*He’s* the one who needs to learn some manners,” he says as he points to me. “I’ll teach him a lesson myself. I need a little exercise anyway, after being cooped up in that carriage for so long. Hey, jerk. I challenge you to a duel.”

How does this kid’s brain work, anyway? I’m honestly curious at this point.

“But Prince Laius, I’m afraid...the difference between your abilities is too great,” my dad interjects.

“Hah, don’t worry, I’ll go easy on him. A magic duel would be over in seconds, so we can use swords instead. He’s got zero magic ability. At least he knows some swordplay, right?”

Big Sis Marianne continues to try to reason with him. Laius insists.

“Bring the weapons!” he shouts, overriding his sister’s protest.

Looks like I’m being forced into a duel.

We enter the courtyard, and face off wielding wooden swords. We stand about sixty feet apart.

The swords are made of wood, but they’re modified with an iron core to give them the weight of an actual weapon. If you get hit with one, it’s seriously gonna hurt. I hate pain, so I’ve never let anyone hit me.

“What are you, chickening out? Don’t worry. I hate swordplay so I hardly ever train.”

Laius smirks and mumbles something. A spell. His body glows with light a few times, and the same goes for his wooden sword. He’s cast a spell to increase muscular strength, improve agility, reduce his body weight, enhance his reflexes, and strengthen his weapon.

I’m not knowledgeable about any kind of magic but Barrier, but the analytics barrier applied to my eyeball tells me all of this. This barrier can accurately analyze anything I program it to. All of the spells he’s using are the most basic of basics.

While I’m at it, I measure Laius’s mana level.

His current level is 9. He’s got twenty times as much power as me. His max mana level is 40. That’s impressive.

“Here I go!”

With a shout, Laius springs towards me. He’s lightning-fast, advancing ten feet with every step. He closes in on me with speed less like a kid’s and more like an Olympic athlete’s. I guess his plan is to immobilize me. His stance is low and he’s brandishing his wooden sword close to the ground, like he’s aiming for my knees.

Um, that’s gonna hurt. If I do nothing, he’ll probably break my legs.

So instead...

Whizz! Gonk! “Hyeeeeek?!”

I leap into the air, delivering a light blow to the back of his head. Laius lets out a surprised howl and lands face first on the ground.

“Wh, Wh-Wh...Wh-Wh-Wha...?”

After a moment of stillness, Laius turns his pitiful, bloody-nosed face to me as he lays on the ground.

It was just a light tap. He’s not badly hurt.

“I told you, Prince Laius...” my dad says under his breath.

“...the difference between your abilities is too great.”



What just happened?

Marianne can’t believe her eyes.

Whatever it was, it definitely happened. She saw it clear as day.

Laius enhanced himself and his weapon, then charged at Haruto with superhuman speed. Haruto leapt into the air to evade the attack, tapping Laius on the back of the head with the tip of his sword.

That’s what occurred on the surface. But there were quite a few things about the scene that made no sense.

The most incredible thing of all is the difference in their abilities.

Laius currently has a mana level of 9. He should have about twenty times as much power as Haruto.

Mana level has a direct impact on magical abilities—how quickly you can activate magic, how strong it is, how long you can maintain it, how many things you can do at once, and so on.

In theory, Haruto shouldn't stand a chance against Laius, who has a far greater mana level.

Some of it could've been due to Laius's carelessness. He was definitely arrogant.

But Laius had enhanced his physical strength and agility, lessened his body weight, and sharpened his reflexes. He'd fortified his weapon too, and he cast all of these spells nearly simultaneously.

Laius has extraordinary talent for a nine-year-old. Clearly, he intended to crush Haruto with his superior abilities.

With a mana level of 2, Haruto wouldn't even have had time to counter with defensive magic. He'd have a broken leg before even getting a chance to react.

In reality, however, the opposite happened.

"I told you, Prince Laius. The difference between your abilities is too great."

Marianne hears the count muttering beside her.

"Uncle Gold... What on earth..." Marianne is so awed, she forgets to be formal.

Gold responds with the same frankness. "It's no wonder you're surprised. I have no idea how he does it either."

"What?"

"There's no sign that he's using magic, but he's able to perform with greater skill than someone who is magically enhancing himself."

Haruto was taught swordsmanship by Gold so he'd have an asset in the future to make up for his extraordinarily low mana level. Before long, Haruto's skill improved so much that Gold is now the only man in the castle who could rival

him.

“No sign...indeed. When did he activate his magic?”

Even if he'd magically fortified himself in advance, he wouldn't last a minute with his mana level of 2. Casting multiple spells at once would be out of the question.

Did he manage to activate his magic before Laius when they faced off? Impossible. He hadn't uttered a single spell. Nobody with a mana level in the single digits can cast silent spells. That requires a mana level of at least 30, though it depends on the type of magic.

“I don't know,” Gold admits.

“Oh...”

Marianne realizes that there's no point in her trying to figure it out if Haruto's own father doesn't get it after ten years.

Still, there's no explanation for the way Haruto moves, other than magic.

“He dodged by flying, didn't he? After that, did he...hover in the air?”

There was no preparatory movement. Flight magic? Again, impossible. That's Rank B magic... Absolutely impossible without a mana level of at least 30.

“Then...that wasn't magic either?”

“Good question.”

“He must be using magic somehow. Otherwise...”

Marianne gazes at Haruto again.

At that moment, Laius stands and hoists his sword over his head. With speed that would put any adult to shame, Laius swings his sword again and again, only

to produce whiffs of air.

“G...Gah! Why? I can’t hit him!”

Laius continues swinging, looking like he might burst into tears at any moment.

Meanwhile, Haruto flutters this way and that, looking bored. He seems so unmotivated, like the whole thing is a big yawn.

“Oh! Look, Uncle. That movement was unnatural too. He just changed direction in mid-air. In fact, he’s been half-hovering in the air all this time. He isn’t even moving his feet... He seems to be skating over the ground.”

“Yes, it does look that way,” Gold replies.

“He definitely is. Isn’t that...odd?” asks Marianne.

“Odd, it is.”

“Doesn’t it...mystify you?”

“It does mystify me. During swordplay training, I’ve asked him many times how he does it, but even Haruto himself does not seem to know. He’s defaulted to a state of ‘that’s just how it is.’”

Count Gold Zenfis is extremely strong—the strongest in the country, when it comes to Earth magic. They don’t call him the Earth-Shattering Warhammer for nothing. His only weakness is that he doesn’t sweat the details.

“Look, Marianne. Haruto’s moving his feet. He’s exhibiting fine footwork.”

“Did he overhear us somehow?”

“Who knows?”

At this distance, and at this volume, it would take extraordinary hearing to

pick up their conversation. The whole thing is just bizarre.

What in the world is going on?

She wants to find out his secret, but doesn't know how.

"Aaarrg!"

Laius flails desperately, taking huge, frenzied swings, all to be effortlessly evaded by Haruto. He swings so hard that he loses his balance and crashes to the ground. His fine clothes and delicate face are covered in mud. The word "pathetic" suits him perfectly right now.

Still splayed out on the ground, Laius moves his lips.

A spell.

This was supposed to be a simple sword fight. But now...

"Laius! Stop that!" yells Marianne.

Gold notices too and leaps forward. But it's too late.

"Eat this! Fireball!"

Laius thrusts his right hand towards Haruto, who is just a few steps away.



Why, yes. Yes, I did overhear the entire conversation between the princess and my dad.

I was being lazy by secretly coasting through the air, but I guess it's noticeable to someone who is observing intently. Dad's given up on trying to figure me out, but I probably shouldn't do it in front of other people.

It is, as you already know, my Barrier magic that enables me to move better than Laius, even with his magical enhancements. The barrier I cast over my body works like a cybernetic power suit.

The only issue is that it makes my movements a little clumsy. It's easier to hover in the air. I'm hoping to update the barrier with enhancements at a cellular level, eventually.

I don't really care if people find out that I'm using a weird kind of magic. But if it draws too much attention, and they figure out I'm the prince who was abandoned ten years ago, things might get messy.

Better to just let them think, *Cool, he's a great athlete.*

I gotta do what I gotta do. I touch my feet to the ground, and act like I'm working hard to evade my opponent.

"Nghaaaah!"

Laius summons his remaining strength to swing down his sword one more time.

When I dodge, he wipes out and falls to the ground.

Pathetic. Utterly pathetic.

Yippee! In your face! I cheer. Internally, though. I'm not trying to make Dad look bad.

Not to brag, but I'm pretty well-known in the local scene as the Black Knight. Laius may be an elite royal or whatever, but he never stood a chance with his kiddie moves. Too bad, so sad. Although I shouldn't be talking because my fights are sneaky ambushes.

What's this? Still sprawled on the ground, Laius is mumbling something.

Oh, a spell. So now he's trying to break his own rules and pull a fast one.

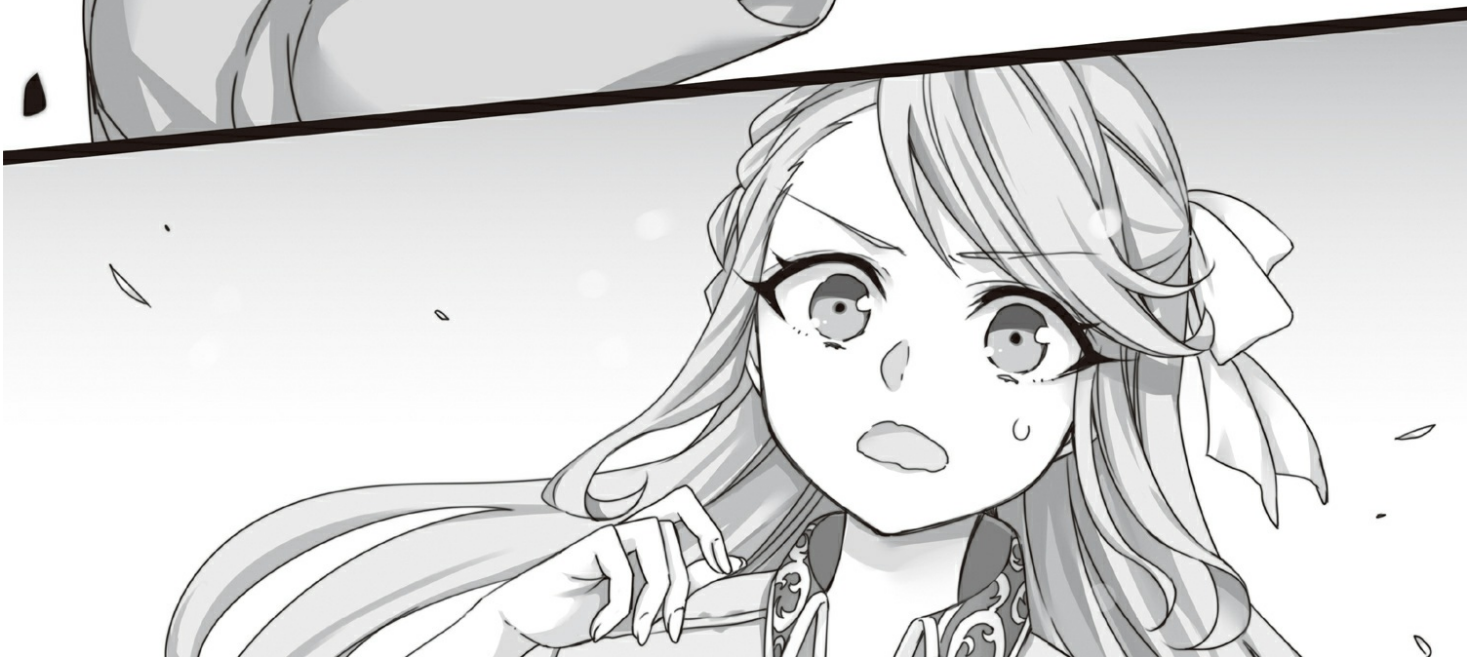
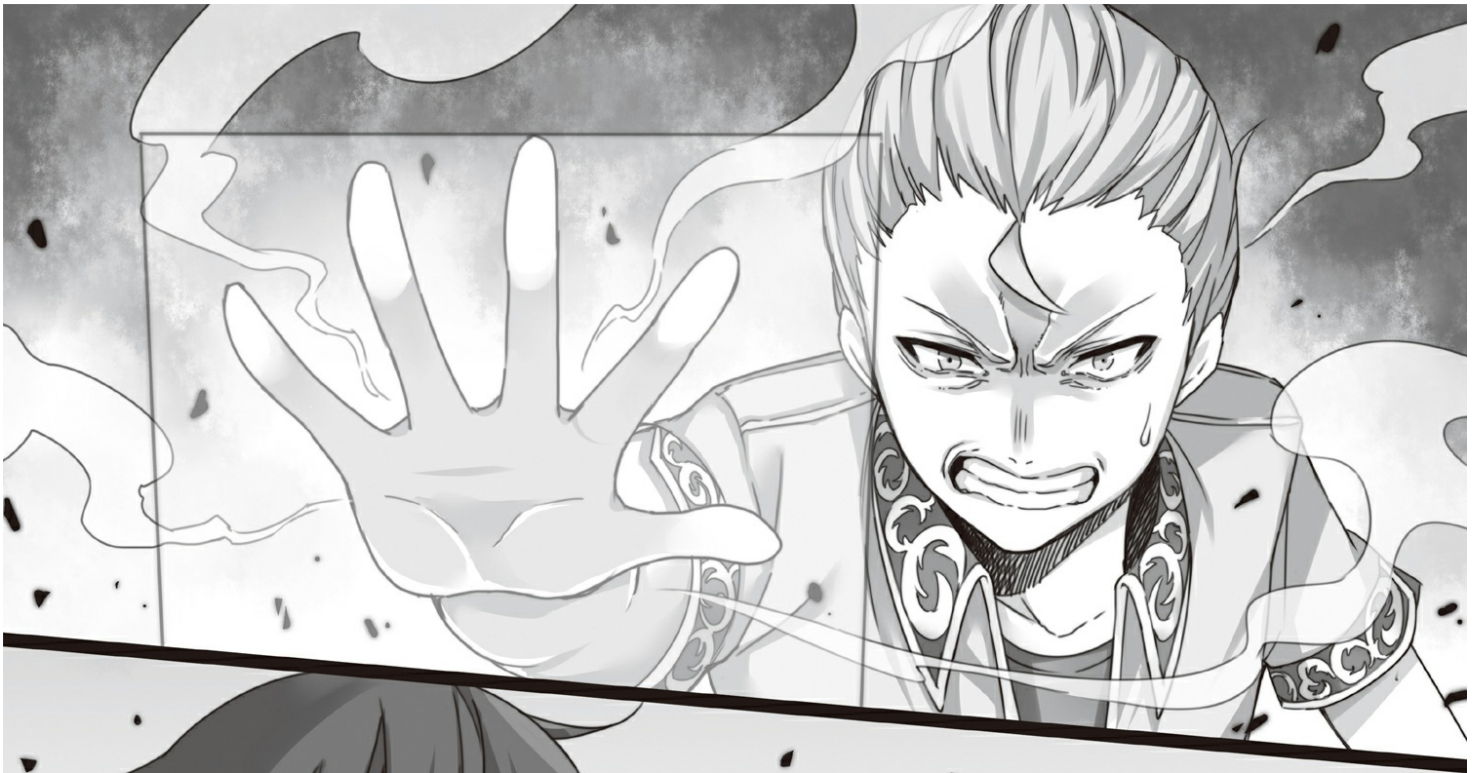
"Laius! Stop that!"

From this angle, he'll hit the castle wall if I dodge. I could just parry it the normal way, but...

"Eat this! Fireball! ...Huh?"

The courtyard falls silent.

"Wh...what? Fireball! Firebaaaaaaall!"



Laius throws his arm again and again, shouting the attack name. But nothing happens.

“Laius, you must’ve used up your mana.”

Big Sis Marianne approaches him.

“N-No, that’s not it! I still... Yeek?!”

Laius looks into my eyes and lets out a weird shriek.

You get it, don’t you, Laius. You know that your magic was activated properly.

I made a flat barrier right in front of Laius’s hand. It’s invisible to everyone else. His fireball got sucked into it and disappeared.

Disappeared *somewhere*. Some other dimension, probably. But where? Even I don’t know.

“You’re trying to tell me I’m next...?” Laius mutters, terrified. “Marianne, this guy’s—”

“That’s enough, Laius! You broke your own rule, and still you choose to further embarrass yourself?”

“Aaarrgh!”

Laius’s face crumbles in frustration as he crawls on his hands and knees.

Afterwards, my dad shows Laius to the guest chamber to rest, guards and all. Laius limps off as he leans on his guards’ shoulders for support, never once looking at me.

Well, that wraps it up. What a waste of time.

I turn on my heels to head back to my room, but a voice stops me short.

“I’m sorry for my brother’s rudeness. Pardon me, but is your mana level really

a...2?"

"Yes...?"

My first conversation with my sister ends there.



Laius is staying in the fanciest guest room in the castle.

He's lying face down on the canopied bed, punching a pillow.

"Dammit! Dammitdammitdammit! Why? How could I lose to that worthless piece of garbage?!"

He can't believe it. He can't accept it. It's just not possible.

I'm the prince! Son of the Flash Princess, the next king in line!

To be humiliated, and to be completely trounced by an opponent with one-twentieth of his mana is simply unthinkable.

"No! Dodging my attacks was all he could manage. He didn't trounce me..."

He doesn't want to admit it. He wants to believe something else.

But when he thinks back on their fight, a chill runs up his spine.

What did Haruto do at the end?

The spell Laius cast had vanished without a trace. Magic that nullifies magic. Such powers had been sought by "the great sage" over the years, but never realized.

"Why is this happening to me?"

Laius had no interest in joining the inspection tour to begin with.

He'd only traveled all this way to the middle of nowhere because of his mother's command.

To find the weakness of Zenfis, the king's strongest remaining ally. Causing Zenfis to completely lose power would be ideal. Even weakening his influence would be sufficient.

That is the assignment Laius was given. It's actually a cover story to convince him to join the tour, but the boy has no way of knowing.

What a pain. A prince shouldn't have to do this sort of thing. He may be a child, but he feels indignant about it all the same. He came all this way after convincing himself that it would be a good opportunity to impress his mother.

If he screws this up, what will his mother think of him?

You can do this, can't you?

As he remembers her icy smile, a rush of unspeakable terror runs through his body.

Laius shakes his head violently, as if to banish the horrible image.

It might be easier to create a weakness for Zenfis than to find one. If Laius struck an insolent tone with the count's son and creamed him in a fight, Zenfis might behave rudely towards the prince.

Although naïve, it was the best ploy a nine-year-old boy could come up with.

Even if Zenfis didn't take the bait, he would be distracted by the self-centered prince. While the count was attending to Laius, the prince's entourage could act behind the scenes. The queen had doubtlessly given the guards the same assignment.

It's a good plan, better than having to put on a "good little boy" act. At least, that's what Laius believes.

"Excuse me, Your Highness."

After a knock at the door, several knights enter the room without waiting for a response.

"The time of the banquet approaches. You must be ready."

His waiting maids enter and dress him.

The banquet is to welcome the delegation, but honestly, Laius doesn't want to see Haruto. Even though he's just a kid—or perhaps because he's just a kid, in fact—Laius knows instinctively...

That boy is a beast.

The knights remain in the room as Laius dresses. One of them announces, "We request that you invite Zenfis's daughter Charlotte along for tomorrow's farm inspection."

"What? Why should I do that?" Laius retorts.

"It will give you a companion to talk to on the journey. Charlotte is close to your age. I imagine you wouldn't have much to talk about with *her brother*."

Laius recoils at the knight's insinuating remark.

"Is this an order from Mother?" he asks.

"It is made with careful consideration of your interests, Your Highness."

The knight doesn't say *whose* careful consideration, but Laius can guess.

What is Mother thinking? I'm supposed to pal around with some six-year-old baby? Like she's gonna have the scoop on the count's weak points?

The prince has no way of knowing what his mother is really plotting.

As Laius heads for the banquet, the knights stay behind in his room for a private meeting.

The prince's chamber is soundproofed with multiple protective barriers. The knights take advantage of the privacy.

"The prince certainly made a fine mess of things," says the eldest of the knights. "Challenging that boy to a duel—and getting clobbered. When we get back to the castle, I expect the queen will give him a stern tongue lashing." The other knights snicker.

"Still, though, it's strange that the count's boy made absolute mincemeat out of the prince..."

"The prince is yet a child. His magic is still inconsistent. The count's boy has probably been trained at swordsmanship to compensate for his lack of magical talent. In that light, it's hardly strange."

The eldest knight gives a dismissive snort.

"There'll be no impediment to our plan. Tomorrow is the big day. We'll attack the carriage bearing the prince, the princess, and the target at this location in the forest."

He points to the map spread out on the table.

"Princess Marianne's chief guard and his soldiers will 'escape' with the children and lead them here."

"Where they will be attacked by our monsters," confirms a young knight.

"Yes. Our other group will take it from there. Their summoned monsters will attack the target. If we can, we find a way to pin the deed on the princess. But

the important thing is to eliminate the target. We will detain Zenfis near the carriage.”

“Right. We’ll interfere so the count won’t be able to use his full force,” confirms another of the men.

A separate troop is on their way to the indicated location. Their summoned monsters will do the killing; that way, the evidence will point to a demon. This would cover the soldiers’ tracks.

If either the prince or princess is injured in the process, they could accuse Zenfis of not properly protecting the royal children.

Zenfis would be wary of Laius’s guards, since they are under the queen’s command. But he has no idea that a traitor lurks among the king’s guards, who are protecting the princess.

The plan is seamless. All they need to ensure success is for Prince Laius to invite Charlotte on the trip.

“Still, we cannot be careless. Remember that if the plan fails, we will all be skewered by her Arrows of Light.”

The Flash Princess has no mercy. If they fail at such an important mission, there will be no forgiveness.

Gulping nervously, the knights leave the room.

Little do they know...

“Hmph. What loathsome scoundrels.”

The maid saw it all.

While cleaning the corridor, Flay was using Haruto’s surveillance barrier to spy

on Laius's room. She heard every last word of the knights' scheme.

Haruto holds no suspicion towards the group. Flay wasn't ordered to be there. He only gave her a general assignment to keep an eye on the castle.

Giving her some sort of task is the best way to keep her out of trouble. In the ten years he's known Flay, Haruto has been able to conclude that much.

"But...what on earth were they talking about?"

She overheard the entire conversation but doesn't understand their objective.

Who is the target? They seem to be plotting to kill someone. But why go to all the trouble of summoning a monster?

"Well, I'm certain Sir Haruto already has eyes on the matter. Yes."

The surveillance barrier can also record images. Haruto is sure to notice, Flay presumes.

"I'm sure this is but another trifle. No need for me to report what he is already aware of. Yes. It's Sir Haruto, after all."

This is important, so let's go over it again:

The reason Haruto has given Flay a surveillance barrier is to keep her out of trouble. He doesn't have the slightest expectation that Flay will actually bring him any important information.

The reports she's delivered in the past were things like "I discovered a nest of mice" or "There are rumors that the cook is having an affair." A downright waste of time. Haruto got sick of it and instructed her, "You don't have to report every little thing that happens."

Generally, not much goes on in the castle.

The result: Flay observes the knights' plot, but doesn't report it to Haruto.

“Whatever the matter this is about, they will surely taste Sir Haruto’s humbling powers! Muahaha! Muahahahaha!”

Flay waggles her tail and the broom, her cackling laughter echoing down the hallway.

Meanwhile, what is Haruto up to?



“Hlhrk?! Wha...What time is it?”

I totally passed out. It’s pitch dark outside. Whew. I was deep asleep.

The duel with Laius mentally exhausted me. The battle itself was pretty tame, but being watched by people I don’t know is draining.

The banquet is probably just about done. I passed up dinner and now my stomach’s rumbling.

I get out of bed and laze around a bit.

“Brother Haruto! Your dinner is served!”

The door bursts open, and a little girl comes running in. Geez, she startled me.

Another figure follows her. It’s me. Well, more accurately, it’s my copy android.

“So you’re finally awake. Gee, must be nice being you. Making me go to some stupid banquet while you loaf around in your room. You’re me, so you get it, right? You know how hard this is for me!”

His eyes are dead serious. And scary. Yeah, I get it. Eating dinner with a bunch

of strangers? I hate stuff like that. That's why I sent my copy instead.

"Ugh, man. I've had it," he grumbles. "You make me do all the stuff you hate. What am I to you, anyway? Just some bimbo you can take advantage of? Well, I guess that's why you made me."

My copy flops listlessly on the floor. Sulking, huh? He's seriously pissed at me.

I touch my copy's head with my hand. His body shrinks and becomes an action figure of a hot babe. The kind with big boobs and bikini armor. This is how I usually enjoy his company. I admit I feel kinda weird about it.

I dig into the banquet leftovers Char brought me. They're fancier than the usual fare. We're not hosting just anybody, after all. This is the prince and princess.

While I'm eating, Char chatters on and on about the banquet.

"...and Prince Laius invited me to go along with them tomorrow, Brother Haruto!"

"You? How come?"

Is he into loli? Then again, the kid's only nine.

But based on the information I've gleaned from my copy android—its memories flow into me when I shrink it down—the prince didn't seem to be interested in Char. If anything, he kept glaring at me the whole time (at my copy, that is).

Does he really want someone to talk with? If so, it makes sense that he'd rather hang out with Charlotte than me. Hmm. I don't know...

"I am ever so looking forward to it," Char beams.

Her smile is so angelic, it's dazzling. Char is still young, and rarely has a chance

to travel outside of the castle. Of the few times she did, she was attacked once, unfortunately.

But if Char is going with them...

The group is heading east tomorrow, crossing through a small forest to visit the farmland just beyond.

It's too close to the castle for bandits. And thanks to Flay, there's no danger of demons attacking.

But if my little sister is going on an outing, it's my duty as her brother to make sure she's safe.

I send out some surveillance barriers to scope out tomorrow's route. If there are stray critters or anything, I'll send Flay to deal with them.

"Huh? Who're these guys?" I whisper to myself.

A bit off the main road on the way to the farmlands, I spot a suspicious ring of men huddled in the forest. They're all wearing robes with deep hoods that obscure their faces, and are chanting something. At their center, a magic circle glows.

"That is a magic circle for summoners, right?"

Char's eyes are glittering.

"The bad guys are plotting something, right, Brother Haruto?"

Not necessarily. Isn't it more natural to assume that they're assigned by Dad to patrol the area before tomorrow's trip?

She may be only six, but Char's got the grandiose fantasies of a pre-teen. I don't want to rain on her parade with sound logic.

"Looks like a job for the Black Knight," I tell her.

“A mission?!”

She looks super thrilled.

“You stay here. I’ll be sure to expose the truth.”

I transform into my all-black suit and helmet as I grow to adult proportions. Now I’m the Black Knight, the fantastical superhero I invented for my little sister. Char, I hope you grow out of this soon.

“I’ll expose those villains once and for all!” I promise.

“May you reign victorious, Brother Haruto!”

I bolt through the darkness and make a beeline for the site.



In the forest, not far from the main road, the moonlight streams through a gap in the clouds. In a small clearing, a group of robed figures chants around a summoning circle.

These guys look way too sketchy.

At first, I thought my dad had sent them to do some kind of security thing, but when I peek under their hoods, I don’t recall ever seeing them at the castle. They’re too evil-looking.

I decide to quit spying on them from the shadows, and talk to them instead.

“Excuse me. What are you doing?”

Naturally, they jump at the sudden appearance of a weird guy dressed head-to-toe in black. Plus, I’m using that weird electronic effect to disguise my voice.

“Wh-Who are you?!”

I’m used to this reaction too.

“Oh, I’m just a passerby, no one suspicious. You can check with Gold Zenfis about me later...”

Everyone knows about the Black Knight. Not just my dad, but the soldiers and citizens of this region. We collaborate well together. I’m everybody’s friend, but...

“You work for the count?!”

They don’t seem to know about the Black Knight. Just then...

Bam! I hear a loud noise at my side.

One of the robed men is extending his arm towards me. He struck out with a magic attack.

“Wh-What just happened? How did he block my magic?” he cries.

I’d been covering myself with a defensive barrier, just in case. I didn’t want some scary demon attacking me out of the blue.

“What are you doing? Kill him! Don’t let him get away!” shouts the guy who seems to be their leader. They’re all dressed the same, so it’s hard to tell them apart.

So...no conversation? Just straight to “Kill him”?

The figures around the summoning circle all extend their arms towards me. Now they’re reciting a different kind of chant.

“Gya!” “Hrg!” “Oof!” “Yeek!” and the like.

Before they can even finish their spell, I’ve sent them flying. *Too slow, guys.*

I've already shot a bunch of invisible barriers at them. Invisible attacks are so effective. Especially when the targets are distracted by my presence.

"Y...You did this?! Gah! I'll show you!"

The leader-ish robe dude places his hand on the ground. He mutters something and the summoning circle radiates brightly.

"Come forth, Knight Skeletons!"

The glow of the circle shines even brighter. Out of the light, a crowd of super white, super skinny guys come clattering out. Correction: not guys. Bones.

White because they're bones. Skinny because they have no flesh. They look like the skeleton models in a science lab, only they're wearing armor and carrying swords, shields, lances, bows, and all that jazz.

There's gotta be more than fifty of them.

"Kill him! Kill that madman in black!" shouts one of the robed men.

The skeleton soldiers clack their teeth, raise their swords, and... *Shluk!*

"Aaaaagh!!"

They attack the robed guy?!

"What are you doing?! Not me! Him! Slay him!"

But the skeletons continue attacking the guy, their teeth still clattering. This is practically a comedy skit.

The guy in robes conjures himself a little magic circle to block the skeletons. Another of the men hurries over and treats his ally's wounds with healing magic.

In the next instant, the boney army begins to jitter. They attack all of the

robed guys at once.

“S...Stop! Aaah! Why? Why aren’t you following my commands?! Was there an error in the ritual?”

Uh, yeah. It’s probably my fault.

The moment the summoning circle started to glow, I immediately activated my own magic, and stabbed a few spike-shaped barriers into the circle. The idea was to mess with their spell, but I think it glitched.

A chaotic battle ensues.

But man, these skeleton soldiers are good fighters. They’re forming little teams. The soldiers with arrows and spears are containing the robed guys while the swordsmen attack from the flanks. The ones with shields are defending against magic attacks.

The mini-teams are perfectly coordinated, and are winning by a landslide.

What should I be doing now?

As I’m pondering this question, I lock eyes with one of the skeletons. Well, not exactly, because it doesn’t have eyes.

I assume a fighting stance, but the skeleton clacks its teeth and shoots an arrow at a guy attacking with magic from afar.

They’re not coming after me. Maybe they don’t see me as an enemy because I’m just standing here staring? Or maybe the glitch makes them do the opposite of what they’re commanded?

“It’s no use, Commander. We’re no match for this many Knight Skeletons.”

Half of the robed guys are already out of commission, and it’s only a matter of time before the rest fall.

That's not good. I need a few of them alive so I can question them on their objective.

"Could you guys not kill them...?" I mumble to myself.

The skeletons freeze on the spot.

Clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka!

All of them start clacking their teeth at once. The sound is really annoying.

Then they start attacking the robed guys again...but this time, they don't kill.

The skeletons are hitting with the flat side of their swords instead of cutting. They're using the blunt ends of their spears to bludgeon instead of stab. They're clearly aiming their arrows at the enemy's legs.

Is this what I think it is?

"Victory cry! Clack your teeth!" I command.

Clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka!

I know I commanded it, but what a racket!

It's obvious now. The boney army is following my orders.

But I never ordered them to attack the robed guys. Were the skeletons angry because the robed leader tried to make them kill me? That must be why they identified the other robed men as enemies too: they were dressed in the same attire as the leader and healing him.

Makes sense.

But why are they obeying me? I guess because I stabbed that summoning circle with my barriers?

Yeah... Nothing makes sense.

“Why you!”

“Commander?! Where are you going?”

The one they call “Commander”—the first robe guy who was subdued—is frantically trying to flee. He races off into the forest at top speed.

The rest of his flock attempt to follow.

“Aaagh?!”

“Whaa...?! An invisible wall?!”

“There’s one over here too!”

Sorry, but I’m not letting *you guys* get away. I’ve fenced them in with barriers, including above and below.

“Round them up, okay?” I order.

The bone gang enthusiastically clacks their teeth and descends upon the remaining guys in robes...

I leave them behind and head for the main road.

A translucent barrier screen appears before my eyes, showing a map of the surrounding area. A moving red dot blinks on the map.

He didn’t take the road. He crossed it, and now he’s heading into the woods on the other side.

When the commander ran off, I secretly tagged him with a tracking barrier.

There were no signs of cooking utensils or tents at the site of the magic circle. Which means their base camp is elsewhere.

I figured if I deliberately let the commander run off, he’d lead me there.

The red dot stops moving.

It looks to be in another clearing in the forest. I close the map, and create a new barrier. This one is arrow-shaped and it's linked to the commander's tracking barrier.

The arrow quivers, then—*snap!*—turns and points to my right. The guy who ran away is this way.

I rush to where he is.

Ghhroaaaaaah!

I'm greeted by a gigantic figure made of rock.

"Mwahaha! Behold! The Gigantic Golem! Its ironclad defense and mighty fist attack are leagues beyond an ordinary demon's. Now...kill!" shouts the commander.

Thanks for the explanation, guy who chickened out and ran away.

His subordinates around him seem kinda taken aback. "He's summoning it *now?*" one of them whispers.

"Ghroaa!"

The giant tries to pound me with his enormous fist. Looks like this guy was summoned successfully.

I swiftly dodge the attack. Its impact makes a huge crater in the ground, like the aftermath of a bomb explosion. The thing's crazy strong.

"Good. *This* one obeys. Come on now, slay him!"

The commander is pumped!

I get why he's so confident. This Golem guy is incredibly powerful. Despite its unbalanced proportions—short legs and long arms—it's surprisingly nimble. I evade it with speedy footwork, but it maintains its balance and continues to snatch at me. The other robed guys are firing magic from all directions. If I don't do something, I'm bound to get hit.

Gong!

As the Golem smashes his next punch into the ground, I slip an invisible barrier under it at the last minute. It doesn't break. The ground beneath is protected. Which means I can block its attacks.

Gong!

It's working. While I'm at it, I deploy the same barrier on all four sides and above. It's caged in place.

Skreeech! The Golem's movements grind to a halt. Still, it continues to strain against my barriers.

I can't help but start to feel sorry for it.

It's not like this monster is fighting because it wants to. It's just obeying orders. Suddenly, an image flashes through my mind: *A bully makes an errand boy run to the store to get him a sandwich. When the errand boy returns, instead of paying him back, the bully rewards him with a punch in the gut.*

The errand boy is me.

Ugh. Just thinking about it brings me down.

My heart grows cold.

I guess I can give it a shot. I make a spike-shaped invisible barrier and fire it into the glowing summoning circle.

Gnrhaaaaaaa!

A painful howl rumbles through the air.

“You’ve done enough. Have a rest.”

I withdraw the wall barriers around the Golem. If it attacks me again, I’ll do what I must. I’m prepared for that.

But the Golem does as I say. It sits down on the ground, cross-legged and...
Making yourself real comfortable there, are you?

“Wh-What are you doing? Go on... Destroy him!”

Whoops. You shouldn’t have said that.

As expected, the Golem turns its eyes (which are surprisingly sparkly and jewel-like) to glare at the commander. It stands up, clasps both hands together, and slams them down.

“Aiieee!!”

The commander jumps frantically out of the way. The blow makes the biggest crater in the ground yet.

“Could you please chill? When you freak out like that, it does a lot of damage to the forest environment,” I tell it.

Mr. Golem stops his movement as I command. What a good kid. Why was I able to seize control over it, anyway? I definitely wished for it this time. But the first time was totally by accident. Some things are a mystery.

Anyway, the strongest guy is on my team now, so it doesn’t take long for me to round up the other men in robes.

Let the interrogations begin.



What...happened?

Kerry Zoff, commander of the platoon, stares at the figure dressed from head to foot in black.

“Ah. There they are. Camped out next to a stream, huh? Well, of course. They need water and all.”

The man in black is gazing into some sort of flat object that hovers before him. He seems to be enjoying himself.

The guy's appearance is truly unusual.

His shiny black helmet doesn't have any kind of opening to see through. One eye is giving off an eerie red glow. From the neck down, he wears a skin-tight outfit made of leather-like material.

Behind him, the Gigantic Golem, which was supposed to be serving Zoff, is relaxing quietly.

Not again.

First this guy took over the Knight Skeletons, and now the Gigantic Golem. The latter is especially odd, because at first, the Golem was obeying Zoff.

“The guys at the camp haven't noticed anything yet. I'll deal with them later. Very well then...” the mysterious man in black says to himself.

Without even a spell, an invisible force silences Zoff's robed men, one by one. They are unable to escape, surrounded as they are by invisible walls. Their encampment was found out because one of the half-conscious men let it slip

amid the chaos of the fight. But more importantly...

“Time for some questions.” Slowly, the man walks over to Zoff.

“Wh-What’s happening?” Zoff asks, his voice quavering.

Just Zoff’s *head* is sitting atop a large boulder.

“Why...are we...alive?”

The ground is littered with heads, heads, and more heads. Some are twitching in fear. Others appear soulless. Another is smirking, unable to come to terms with this reality.

They’re all alive. Just their heads.

“Oh, that? One time I accidentally whacked off the head of a thief. I was just going to stop the bleeding. But while I was at it, I tried sealing up the head wound without reattaching the body. Oddly enough, the head didn’t die.”

The guy’s voice is uncanny, and it’s hard to tell whether he’s being gracious or flippant. And the things he says make zero sense.

“I panicked there for a bit. I mean, I wasn’t trying to kill him. He’s not worth it. Besides, he was working with a group of thieves, and I still needed to find where the rest of them were hiding out. But you know how an injury can have a silver lining? The guy was so flummoxed by his ludicrous situation, he spilled all kinds of stuff without me even asking. So you see...”

The guy blithely continues, “I figured this is a useful way to extract information.”

A chill runs up Zoff’s spine.

He can feel his body. But from the neck down, he can’t move a muscle—as if his entire body was encased in something.

He can breathe. He can speak. *Ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump*—he can feel his pulse racing.

Even though his head is disconnected from his body.

“Oops, sorry. I’ve been oversharing, huh? I’m not good at talking to strangers. If the other person’s quiet, I feel like I have to fill the silence, you know? Let’s see, now... Which one are you?”

The man starts poking around at the bodies lying at his feet. They belong to Zoff and his robed troop.

“Oh, is this it? There’s some kind of emblem embroidered on the breast of the robe. Very commander-esque.”

It is, indeed, Zoff’s body.

“Upsa-daisy.”

“Hrg?!”

“Don’t worry. I’m just picking it up.”

Zoff can see that much. The reason he flinched was because he felt the sensation in his body, even from several feet away.

What sort of pain will he be subjected to? Zoff is paralyzed with fear.

“Let’s start with your name, please.”

“...”

“Can you tell me what unit you belong to? Assume I don’t know.”

“...”

“Why are you summoning monsters? What’s your objective?”

“...”

Zoff doesn't want to say, of course, but he's also too frozen with fear to think of a lie.

If he continues to stay quiet, his death by the man in black's hand will be inevitable.

It's just a matter of when.

There's also no guarantee this man will let Zoff live if he tells the truth. Regardless, there'd be no way the Flash Princess would spare him after he's failed his mission so disastrously.

Whether he confesses or not, his death is certain.

In that case...

"I...won't tell you anything."

At his hour of death, at the very least, he prefers to die honorably.

"Heh... Hahaha! Behold my loyalty. Do what you will—you'll get nothing out of me!" the commander taunts.

"This is from the guy who abandoned his comrades and ran off earlier?"

"I will not make excuses. It was my duty to inform my men here of the situation. And I knew that if I left the scene, my subordinates would follow me..."

Whump.

"Aaaugh!"

"Oh, I'm sorry for dropping you. I didn't mean to, really. But that's just an excuse, isn't it? Not cool, if you ask me."

Zoff's face is a blubbery mess of tears, snot, and drool.

No! No no no no no... I cannot withstand torture...

The fall didn't hurt that badly. But one thing is clear: Zoff could feel his body's pain.

What could I do...?

Even if Zoff makes it out of here alive, the Flash Princess's punishment may be even worse than this man's.

Just kill me now.

Wait, what if I pretend to be insane...

There are plenty of other men here to torture. There's no point in forcing a crazy man to confess. And if he refuses to talk, perhaps the Flash Princess will pardon him.

Zoff waits for the right moment. The man in black reaches for Zoff's body again, then stops.

After pausing for a moment to think, he walks back into the sea of heads where Zoff is.

But instead of Zoff's, he grabs another head and lifts it up by the hair.

"Aiieee!!" shrieks the head. "What do you want? Stop! Help!"

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing else to grab onto. It shouldn't hurt that bad with only the weight of your head."

The man in black returns to the pile of lifeless bodies on the ground.

"Man... I have no idea which is which... Oh, right. If I focus on the 'link'... There. That's the one."

"No, s-stop... H-H-Help..."

The man hoists the body with his free hand. Carrying it effortlessly, he vanishes into the trees.

There are no screams.

The heavy silence seems to go on forever.

Finally, two figures reappear.

The soldier's head is back on top of his body. An ordinary sight, but to Zoff, it looks bizarre.

The soldier's expression is one of relief and confusion all mixed up together. He's walking just fine on his feet. The man in black indicates a fallen tree trunk that the Golem uprooted, and the soldier sits. He seems to be saying something, but Zoff can't make it out.

"You're next..."

The man in black grabs another soldier's head.

"No...!"

Zoff realizes what the man in black is doing.

He's taking the robed soldiers one by one, and getting them to confess everything in return for restoring their heads to their bodies. He can compare their claims to make sure they're not lying.

Three robed men have now been taken away, and have returned with their heads reattached to their bodies. They're sitting in a row on the tree trunk. None of them speak to each other. They keep their heads down, avoiding eye contact.

Oh, do you feel ashamed now? Look at me, you traitors!

Zoff feels rage bubbling up inside, and his face twists into a haughty sneer. He

feels like a fool for withstanding the terror of torture. But if his men have already spilled the beans, there's no reason to hold out now.

"My name is Kerry Zoff. I am the commander of the summoner's unit, reporting directly to Her Majesty the Queen."

"Commander...?" "What are you..."

The commander continues as his subordinates on the ground stir with confusion.

"Tomorrow, the royal party will set out to make their farmland inspection. We were preparing our summons for an ambush. Commanded by the queen."

"Why would the queen attack her own children?"

"Our mission is to assassinate Charlotte Zenfis."

A brief silence.

"Why does the queen want to kill Char...lotte?"

For the first time, the man in black shows emotion. Zoff's fear turns to excitement, and he becomes talkative.

"That child's potential is even greater than the queen's. With the count's support, she could become a hazard that splits the kingdom into two. The mission's aim was also to discredit the count for allowing demons to stray in his region."

He continues revealing every detail of the plan to the man in black.

In the distance, the three seated soldiers are shooting him reproachful glares.

Hmph! Why are you looking at me like that? You were the ones who talked first.

But...

"Is that really true?" the man in black asks.

"...Huh?"

What's he talking about?

"I mean, who does that? Like, you were hoping to pin the crime on the princess? You didn't care if the prince might get hurt? I wouldn't put it past that woman, but...seriously?"

"Why are you acting surprised? The other three just told you the same—"

Zoff breaks out in a cold sweat. *No... No!*

"The other three didn't tell me anything."

"Wh...what?"

"All I said to them was, 'If you keep quiet, I'll reattach your bodies.' If they all gave me different stories, I wouldn't know what the truth was or what was a lie. Besides, there's probably stuff only the leader knows," the man in black says matter-of-factly. "But from your reaction, you must be telling the truth. Come on now, don't look so crestfallen. Your expression says 'Oh no, I spilled it!' That's a dead giveaway."

"Haaaaa...mmm...nhhh..."

Zoff is scrambling to find words. He's forgotten how to even breathe. His heart pounds fiercely.

"I'll confirm it with the guys at your base and the guys the boney army captured, just to be sure."

The man in black shifts from his offhand tone to one of cold accusation. "So. You guys were just following orders from above?"

“Y-Yes! That’s right!” shouts one of the men in response.

“We cannot disobey the queen!”

“We didn’t want to do it!”

“Please, have mercy!”

The three soldiers in the background all beg for mercy.

Zoff explodes with rage.

“Why, you shameless traitors! You’re no different from me! Disgraceful wretches, currying favor with the queen only when it serves your interests! The whole lot of you!”

“Shut up!”

“We won’t obey you anymore.”

“You’re the one who deserves to die.”

Their scornful expressions tell the whole story. The robed subordinates intend to pin the blame solely on Commander Zoff when they report back to the queen. Every last one of them.

“Ugh, shut up! All of you,” snarls the man in black.

Instantly, they fall silent.

“If you didn’t want to do it, why are you here?” the man in all black demands.

“W-Well...we can’t disobey the queen...”

“I see. The queen is that scary, is she? But...killing an innocent child? That’s not good. Yeah, I was going to hand you over to the count alive, but...”

Slowly, the man lifts one hand.

“I’ve changed my mind. You conspired to take the life of *my dear little sister*.

That's unforgivable."

The moment the mystery man speaks these words and reveals his identity, Zoff and the others understand their fate.

"Tough luck, guys. Or rather, poor choice of leader to follow."

Snap! The man snaps his fingers.

"So long."

None of them hear the last bit. Everyone but the man in black—including the three men who were healed—loses consciousness instantly.



A horse-drawn carriage clatters down the road. I'm being jiggled inside the fancy landau of the royal coach.

"Do not feel discouraged, Prince Laius. You stood no chance against my big brother."

In the seat next to me, Char is boosting my self-esteem.

"Why, just challenging him to a duel was courageous enough of you. You should be proud of that."

Across from her, a young boy is gritting his teeth and clutching at his head.

The little girl doesn't mean to roast the prince. But the more she praises me, the more he feels dissed. Little girls are so cruel.

“Hey, Char. Go easy on him, okay?” I say.

“Shut up! Your pity is the worst insult of all!”

Laius has no retort to Char, but he doesn’t hesitate to lash out at me.

“Why are you even here? I invited Charlotte, not you,” Laius barks.

“What, you’re asking me *now*?”

We set out half an hour ago.

I wasn’t planning to come along. My intent was to camouflage myself and follow them in secret. But my dad asked me to join them, so I reluctantly agreed.

“It’s a good opportunity, Laius. We can use this time to get tips from Haruto,” suggests Marianne.

“Tips? Why would I want his tips?” snaps Laius.

“There’s no shame in losing. Getting feedback from the winner about why you lost is the best path to growth,” she insists.

“I didn’t lose!”

“Yes. You did lose.”

“Yes. You clearly lost.”

Both Marianne and Char are merciless.

“Nghh... Gah. What did you do back there, anyway? You weren’t using magic, right?” demands Laius.

“Yes, I was mystified too. There was nothing that indicated you were using magic... How did you evoke physical skills of that magnitude?”

All eyes were on Char up until a minute ago, but now the conversation is

focused on me.

“I did use magic. When I faced off with the prince, I have this thing where I kinda chant to myself, ‘Get stronger’ and it makes me stronger. I don’t really know what kind of magic it is.”

“What the hell is that?!”

“What ever do you mean?!”

The prince and princess exclaim in unison.

That’s weird. When I told my dad the same thing, all he said was “*I see,*” and he left it at that.

Flay and Char simply said, “*You’re amazing, Sir/Brother Haruto!*”

“But you didn’t cast any spell.”

“Your mouth didn’t move at all!”

“I’m a really good ventriloquist,” I claim.

“Ven-what-a-quist?”

“What sort of magic is that?”

I close my mouth and exhale through my nose, while using a barrier to fabricate my voice. “Like this.”

“Ew, what the hell!”

“Wha...” I choke.

I don’t get it. The trick was a big hit with my family.

“Are you...a ‘returned demon’?” Laius blurts out.

“Laius! How could you say such a thing!” Marianne reproaches him.

“Well, that’s the only possible logic, right?”

“Well... But still...”

I don’t know what they’re talking about. I ask Char if she knows, but she shakes her head emphatically. So cute.

“If your ancestor, um, mixes with a demon, a child can be born generations later with demon traits. It’s extremely, extremely rare. Sometimes they have exceptional physical abilities, or powerful magic,” explains Marianne.

She adds that it’s mostly the stuff of fairy tales, but there have been actual cases reported. They’re supposed to be kept top secret.

“And there are obvious physical traits. You don’t appear to have horns, and your ears and eyes are normal. Do you have a tail or scales or something?” probes Laius.

“My big brother has soft, beautiful skin. He does not have any of that stuff. And he has a beautiful birthmark of...um, never mind! Please forget about that.”

Char almost spilled the beans about my royal insignia.

“Anyway, we take baths together, so I should know,” Char assures them.

I’ve never taken a good look at my backside, but if Char says it’s normal, it must be. Not that I care. As long as it’s not causing any day-to-day inconveniences.

Huh? The prince and princess’s faces are turning bright red.

“Y-Y-Y-You took a bath with your sister?!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you talking about?!”

Whoa. Not the reaction I expected.

“A girl and boy together?! That’s an abomination.”

“How could you do something so shameful...”

Well, I mean, it wasn’t my idea.

But I should probably come up with some sort of excuse, I guess.

“It is...not okay?” My little sister looks devastated, as if this is the end of the world.

“Is it bad to...take baths...with Brother Haruto?”

“Well, no, I mean, not bad, but...usually, you don’t,” Laius says hesitantly.

Marianne begins to burble. “When a man and a woman show their bodies to each other, it has a special significance. It... How should I put this... It is a significant and sublime act of procreation to ensure a prosperous...”

You need to calm down, Princess.

We pass the time with quite the lively conversation.

“Look, Brother Haruto. It’s amazing. So much grass in the fields. This is amazing!”

Quite the vocabulary. She’s so excited, all she can say is “amazing.”

It’s the end of spring. As we look down from the hilltop, we see vast fields of barley-ish grain. A landscape painting of a shimmering golden sea, stretching as far as the eye can see.

If we were in Japan, this would be right around rice-planting season. It feels strange to be here.

Charlotte runs this way and that, sometimes skipping and hopping, sometimes standing still to gaze at the fields.

The plan is to take a little break up here, then head down the hill to greet the farmers.

The soldiers accompanying us split into two groups. One group is assigned to cooking, the other to security. They break off to cover their tasks.

“Hey, can I talk with you for a minute?” I say to my dad.

“Haruto. Thank you for coming today. I know you would have preferred not to.”

“No, that’s fine. I wanted to ask you a question.”

“What is it?”

I think about how I should phrase it, but I can’t come up with a way. I decide to ask him straight out.

“What if... This is hypothetical, okay? What would you do if the queen was plotting to kill Charlotte?”

My dad’s eyes grow wide as he stiffens.

“Um, sorry. That was a weird thing to ask.”

“I see. You sense the danger too, do you? I thought it was odd that you agreed so readily to come along—you, who prefer never to leave your room.”

My dad seems to grasp where I’m coming from. He’s right, though; I was pretty reluctant to come.

“To be honest, I fear that the moment may be upon us now. Prince Laius unexpectedly joined the delegation, and he brought along that she-fox’s closest henchmen.”

So he picked up on it too. I’m always awed by his keenness... By the way, did he just say “she-fox”?

“Furthermore, last night at the banquet, Prince Laius invited Charlotte on this excursion. I was afraid the queen might be scheming something, so I brought you along. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you why.”

“Huh? Me? How come?”

My dad gazes at his daughter, who is merrily running about.

“I’m known for my strength in defense, but I only have two arms. I cannot protect more than two children at once. Given my station, my obligation would be to prioritize the lives of the prince and princess.”

In other words, even knowing the truth, Dad would have no choice but to sacrifice his beloved daughter.

“So I hoped to entrust her to you.”

“Huh? But I’m just a ten-year-old kid.”

“As usual, you underestimate yourself. At the very least, with your physical capabilities, I trust you could take Charlotte and escape to the castle.”

Fair. Those monster-summoning soldiers were pretty bad fighters. I guess because they were only specialized in summoning magic.

Still, I don’t know what would’ve happened if all those summoned monsters had attacked me. I managed to block the Gigantic Golem with my Barrier magic. But if that many enemies had struck me at once without warning, I might’ve had my hands full.

“I wish the queen would just disappear.”

“Watch what you say,” my dad scolds. “The queen sees me as an enemy, that much is clear. But she commands tremendous popularity. I can’t make the first move under our current circumstances. If I did, I have no doubt I’d be

defeated.”

But she’s already made the first move.

“Besides...” my dad continues, “it would be unfavorable if the queen disappears now.”

I wasn’t expecting him to say that. “Huh? How come?” I ask.

“It’s a shameful story, but King Jilq’s power has been in continual decline. There are many nobles in the capital and in the surrounding regions eyeing the throne. The only thing keeping them at bay is the queen’s presence.”

“You mean that if the queen died, a civil war would erupt?”

“Very astute. Exactly.”

“Why don’t you become king, Dad?” I blurt out.

The Earth-Shattering Warhammer could defeat any resistance force. But my dad laughs wryly at my suggestion.

“I am not cut out for that role. But, well...”

My dad gives me a long look. “I do have someone in mind,” he says. “But it is too soon. This child is still too young. I want to wait at least until the coming-of-age.”

Ooh, I see. I think I know who he’s talking about. He must mean Charlotte!

“The child possesses a certain intelligence. I foresee potential to achieve the greatness necessary to lead the country.”

Yeah. Charlotte’s a goofball, but she’s really smart. She has a tendency to let her imagination run away with her, but I’m sure she’ll grow out of it.

“I can sense limitless talent. I believe this child could one day surpass the

Flash Princess.”

Charlotte’s max mana level is greater than the queen’s. Once she starts her training, she’ll catch up to the queen in no time. And I can give her full assistance with my quirky Barrier magic.

“Have I made myself clear? Do you understand what I’m asking of you?”

Sure. I may be bad at taking hints, but this one’s obvious.

My job is to protect Char until she’s ready to become a full-fledged queen. After that, I can relax and enjoy my life as a fantasy-world shut-in for the rest of my days.

“Will you do it?” he asks me.

“Of course!”

Now that I know what I need to do, I’m ready to take charge. This sort of feeling would’ve been unthinkable coming from past-life me. But now, I’m up to it.

I glance to the side.

Several of Laius’s guards are clustered together for a hushed meeting.

My dad doesn’t know it, but they’re already initiating their plan to assassinate Char—ordered by the Flash Princess, Queen Gizelotte.

That woman is going to continue to mess with us. I’m certain of it. I’m also certain that she’s the one who colluded with the empire on the attempted murder of my dad. Gizelotte—the one Dad calls the “she-fox.”

Which is why I’m not willing to just play defense anymore.

As long as I don’t kill her...I can do what I want, right?

“Time for a reunion with my long-lost mother,” I whisper softly so nobody hears.



Prince Laius and Princess Marianne’s inspection tour of the outlying regions concluded uneventfully, without the slightest hitch.

That’s right. Nothing happened. Charlotte Zenfis is alive and well.

“What have you to say for yourself?” Gizelotte demands calmly. She’s seated on a sofa in her annex room.

The commanding knight who led the expedition kneels at her feet.

“The summoners unit suddenly disappeared without a trace. Every last one of them. Even their supplies at the base vanished,” the knight explains, his voice trembling. He stares at the floor as he speaks, unable to look the queen in the eye.

“And?”

“Zenfis kept a stern watch over us the whole time. When we lost the supporting unit, there was little we could do...”

“So you had the gall to return with zero results.”

“I’ve disgraced you! I swear to redeem myself some day. I beg you—please, I beg for you to give me another chance.”

The knight grovels so deeply, his forehead touches the floor.

Without gracing him with so much as a glance, Gizelotte swirls the red liquid

in her wine glass.

“Some day? When you utter things like ‘some day,’ you leave me no choice but to deem you worthless. Your only task now is to search every nook and cranny of your empty head and discover the reason for your failure.”

“Your Majesty, I...”

“Can’t you see? Dozens of men simply vanished. The fact that there’s no trace of them suggests there was more at play than a failed summoning spell. Something else happened.”

Waves form in the red liquid. Gizelotte’s voice swells with tranquil rage.

“This is the work of an enemy. Someone foiled my plan.”

The knight frantically combs through his memory.

“Now that you mention it, on the journey, we heard rumors of a strange man. They say he goes around defeating bandits and demons. Nobody knows his true identity, but he goes by the name of the Black Knight.”

“Good heavens. I am truly astounded. If you knew this much, why did you leave him unresearched?”

“Er... I assumed this man only deals with inferior bandits and the occasional stray demons. Our summoning unit is made of cutting-edge warriors who excel not just in monster-summoning magic, but other magical skills as well. It hardly seems possible that one man could’ve defeated dozens of our soldiers...”

Splash! The red liquid drips down the knight’s face.

“Does that cool your head a bit? You truly are an imbecile, aren’t you? You *assumed*? You are like a cat assuming he’s facing a mouse and getting devoured by a stray dog instead. Do you think yourself a lion?”

“No, I—”

“And how could you be certain he’s working alone? Did you not consider he might be linked with Zenfis? If he’s mobilizing a commensurate number of soldiers, we should be able to catch them out. Then we could denounce Zenfis.”

“I am truly disgraced, Your Majesty.”

“You make me sick. Can you imagine how I feel learning that a man I put my faith in is a complete dolt? You will be punished accordingly...”

There is a long, silent pause. The knight, still frozen in his state of groveling, grows concerned. Tremulously, he raises his gaze.

The queen’s eyes are open wide, and her beautiful face is colored with surprise.

The object of her focus lays behind the knight.

“Who are you?!” the queen screams as the knight whirls around.

A shadowy figure stands behind him...

“Shadowy” is an appropriate word—the man’s silhouette is black as ink. His smooth helmet and form-fitting costume are both so dense they melt into the darkness. His stature is that of an adult.

Knights are permitted to carry their weapons in the queen’s private chamber, a policy that could only be made by someone as self-assured as the Flash Princess.

The knight reaches for his sword as he shouts, “Your Majesty! Please, stand ba—”

Before he can draw his sword, his head is sliced off without a sound. The head

thunks as it hits the floor. His body sluggishly follows.

“That should be all of them,” says the man in pitch black.

With a light wave of his arms, several more heads fall to the floor.

Gizelotte recognizes them as members of her own troop. The very knights she ordered to escort the delegation in Count Zenfis’s region.

An enemy. Now there is no doubt. This newcomer is her enemy.

This must be the same man the knight told her about—the Black Knight who serves the count.

Without a moment’s deliberation, the queen fortifies her body with a silent spell. She leaps effortlessly behind the sofa she was just sitting on. With another long leap, she jumps further back beside the fireplace.

Assuming a low fighting stance, she reaches for the sword over the fireplace. It is the Divine Blade of Light—one of the “seven sublime weapons” used to defeat the Demon King.

With this sword in my hand, there is no enemy capable of opposing me.

I’ll make him writhe with regret for not assassinating me from the shadows while he had the chance.

Even if he were to launch a surprise attack, it would activate Gizelotte’s auto-defense magic.

Regaining her composure, Gizelotte demands, “This place is protected by multiple defensive barriers. How did you get into this annex—into this room?”

“Barriers? Oh, that sloppy job? They were so full of holes, getting past them was easy. I just covered them with a soundproof barrier. Shout all you like. No one will hear you.”

“I see... I will have to severely punish the fools responsible for those barriers.”

The intruder speaks in an unnerving tone, like multiple voices speaking at once. Irrked by the sound of it, Gizelotte angrily clasps the hilt of her sword. But at that precise moment...

Tang!

A small magic circle appears just next to her fist, and glints.

“Very impressive, Flash Princess. You managed to block the attack immediately. So...*you can see them.*”

See what? Gizelotte is confounded. The defensive magic shield she cast earlier automatically activated and blocked *something*. But what that something was, she has no idea.

“Oh well. I guess I’ll have to go with good ol’ Operation Wing It. Take this!”

“What...?”

Flashes of light erupt all around Gizelotte, drowning out her question.

A barrage of unidentifiable objects bombards her from every direction.

She can’t see what they are. She can’t even sense them or tell where they’re coming from.

This is bad. At this rate...

Gizelotte’s self-defense magic is at max capacity. Her hand remains on the hilt of the sword, but all of her mana is preoccupied with self-defense.

The barrage intensifies into a maelstrom.



Tiny flashes of magic circles appear and disappear around the queen, almost completely enveloping her. The room is reduced to rubble, as if wrecked by a hurricane.

Impossible. This cannot be happening. How could anyone conceivably...

Even in the battle with the Demon King, she was never confronted with a predicament of this intensity.

There's no time to utter a spell. She is forced to depend on silent spells, which are much more mana-consuming. Too overwhelmed to counterattack, she feels her mana draining steadily.

How long can this last?

As vanquisher of the Demon King, Gizelotte is confident that her current mana level is the greatest in this land—in this world, in fact. By extension, her magic should also be unrivaled.

The man in black has also uttered no spell.

Nonetheless, the enemy's attack shows no sign of waning. On the contrary, it's growing stronger and stronger. Gizelotte puts all her focus on defending herself, leaving no room for attack.

I can't...go on...like this... My mana...

...will run out. And when it does, *I will be reduced to a lump of flesh*, she shudders.

Just then, like a storm subsiding, the barrage stops instantly.

Finally. His mana has run out...

But so has hers. The magic circles around her lose their light and disappear.

If the onslaught had continued a few seconds longer...

Gizelotte banishes the horrible thought. Her eyes glint with vengeance.

I may be out of mana, but...

She still has the Divine Blade of Light.

At swordplay, too, Gizelotte is the best in the nation. Even without self-fortifying magic, she can devastate an unarmed opponent with the Divine Blade's razor-sharp edge and intrinsic magical power.

However...

The man's next words plunge her into despair.

"Hmm. Pummeling you doesn't work, I see. I guess I'll try cutting you next."

"...?"

Pummeling doesn't work?

The man's been pummeling my magic circles this entire time. What is he talking about? Did he think he failed because they kept reappearing?

But more importantly..."next"?

Whoosh!

Gizelotte hears a gust of wind brush past her. At the same moment, she feels an inexplicable pain in her neck, hot and cold at the same time.

Her vision swerves violently. The next moment, everything goes black.

"That was a close one. Almost killed her," the man mutters.

But Gizelotte loses consciousness so instantaneously, she's unable to hear his words.

The darkness recedes, and Gizelotte's vision returns.

She seems to be on the floor. Nothing feels real yet. She hears the man's voice.

"Just because the attacks halted, you go and drop all your defenses? That's a little too careless, isn't it? But in the end, all's well that ends well. Guess you underestimated my powers, huh? Haha, I've always wanted to say that line."

"Careless?" "Underestimate?" Look who's talking, guy who didn't allow me to spare either of those things.

Her mana is used up. If he'd continued to attack her, she would've had no way of defending herself.

But Gizelotte is too preoccupied with her current predicament to express her indignation.

The back of her head hit the floor hard. She's gazing up at the ceiling.

But her body pitches forward and falls to the floor.

Unable to make sense of the contradictory sensations, she decides that she's lying on her back, as her field of view suggests. She tries to sit up, but when her hands push for the ground, they wave in the air instead. Her chest is flat against the floor and her butt sticks up in the air.

Perplexed, she goes with the theory that she's face down, and tries to get up again. She sees a headless body on the floor rise to a crawling position.

What's going on?

Straining to banish all notions of common sense, she instead tries to form a hypothesis from the information she can gather right now.

The answer she deduces is very simple.

The headless body she sees is her own.

“What the hell is this?!” Gizelotte screams.

None of it makes sense.

Why is she still alive if her head is detached from her body? She can breathe, and even move her body. So how is it that her head and body are disconnected?

“Physically, I severed your head from your body. But you aren’t dead because I sealed up the severed surfaces with mystery-space-time.”

The fact that he seems to consider this an adequate explanation is both confusing and extremely annoying.

“But...I’ve never heard of such magic...”

“Look, just take my word for it, okay? Anyway, I want to talk. Could you at least have the decency to get up?”

A wave of loathing washes over Gizelotte as she senses ridicule in the man’s tone. But remaining on the floor would be even more humiliating. She struggles to move her body.

“Nghh!! This... Right... No, not that way...Ugh! How frustrating!”

Being face-to-face with her body, she keeps moving the wrong side. Eventually she gets the hang of it. But when she reaches for her head, she accidentally pokes her finger into her nostril. Pathetic.

She finally manages to pick up her head, and rotates it so it’s facing the same direction as her body.

Carefully, she tries to place it on top of her neck...

“Wha—?!”

A strange force prevents her from aligning the severed parts together. She almost drops the head on the floor.

“They repel each other like the same poles of a magnet. And they’re impenetrable with a needle. You can’t sew yourself back together.”

“Insolent varlet! How dare you insult me thus! What do you want from me?”

She holds her head up so that her face can glare angrily at the man.

“Count Gold Zenfis, his family, and his entire region...” the man in black begins.

“?!”

“Don’t mess with any of them ever again.”

“I suspected as much. So you do work for Zenfis.”

“No. I am a superhero who fights to rid the world of evil. I have no name yet.”

“Evil? The Flash Princess is a celebrated heroine! Who says I am evil?”

“I say so. I don’t care what the world thinks, and I certainly don’t care what you have to say about it.”

The man in black continues. “You don’t have to glare at me like that. Honestly, I don’t care what you plot or do in your own castle. If you want to boot the king off and assume the throne yourself, that’s none of my business. *For now, anyway.*”

What’s he insinuating?

“All you have to do is stay away from the count and anything connected to him. Easy enough, right?”

Gizelotte declares, “In my current physical state, I can’t contain the forces that would rebel against me. Their clash for power may end up negatively impacting the count.”

This is the best threat she can come up with under the circumstances, but it seems to have an effect.

The man considers her words thoughtfully. He tosses something in her direction, even though a moment earlier, his hands were empty.

The object gives a metallic thunk as it hits the floor.

“A...collar? You don’t mean...”

“I think they call it a ‘prisoner’s collar.’ Anyway, that one’s custom made. None other like it. As long as you’re wearing it, you’ll be able to move as freely as you did before. You won’t have to hold your head in your hands all the time.”

In the kingdom, the punishment for petty crimes is a period of community service. During their sentence, convicts’ actions are limited, which keeps them from leading a normal life.

These criminals are marked with a crude iron collar known as the prisoner’s collar.

“You mean to humiliate the queen, the Flash Princess herself, with the brand of a criminal?!”

“It suits you, really.”

Gizelotte grits her teeth so hard, a trickle of blood drips from the corner of her mouth.

“No need to reply. Just show me with your actions. If you disobey my orders, I will undo my spell—the one I cast on your head right after chopping it off. When

I do...you know what happens, right?"

Death.

Blood would spurt from the wound, and her life would end immediately. Even with the highest level of healing magic to aid her, it was unlikely to take effect in time...

"That's all I wanted to say. Bye for now."

With that, the man disappears into the darkness. The room is still, as if time had stopped. Gizelotte wearily takes a few steps and sinks her knees on the floor.

With one hand balancing her head in place, she reaches forth with the other.

She touches the cold iron. Her hand recoils in hesitation.

Having to follow the man's orders is humiliating, but can she even trust his words?

If he wanted to kill me, he would have done so already.

There must be some reason the man in black wants her alive.

If the queen dies, there's bound to be an insurrection as other powers vie for the throne. Is that what he fears?

Even so, with the power he wields, he could easily repress such enemies and singlehandedly seize the kingdom. In fact, the chaos could even work in the man's favor.

Gizelotte decides to put it out of her mind.

Clink. She snaps the collar on. Strangely enough, her head and body stop repelling each other and conjoin again.

Wearily, she rises and walks over to the vanity mirror.

Her glossy hair is disheveled, and her face looks wasted away. Around her neck is the prisoner's collar. A truly miserable sight.

Gizelotte was born into a noble family whose power was declining, but thanks to her extraordinary talent, she was able to receive the best education the kingdom could offer. Great things had been expected of her.

She was endowed with unsurpassed genius, and worked her whole life to rise to the top. There was not a single blemish in her saga of brilliant achievements. Well, except for that time she gave birth to an utter disappointment.

Gizelotte is still well on her way to even greater heights.

She isn't about to give in and stop here.

"This wretched thing!"

She snatches at the lockless collar. The latch clicks open with ease.

"Oh—oh no!"

Instantly, her head springs up towards the ceiling.

She scrambles to anticipate its trajectory for a catch, but her head slips through her fingers and thuds to the floor, face down. Blood drips from her shapely nose.

Fumbling around blindly on the floor, Gizelotte fishes for her head and attempts to return it to its proper spot. She can only imagine how pathetic she looks, scuttling around on all fours as if to lick the floor.

She was revered as the Flash Princess. The greatest role in the kingdom was well within her grasp.

"Ha, hahahahaha, hah... Sniff, hnph...urrgh..."

She tries to suppress her voice. The woman who lived her entire life basking in the limelight collapses, and, for the first time, cries bitter tears.



I can't believe I just beat the Flash Princess.

Me. With a mana level of 2. Pitted against the woman who defeated the Demon King.

Aww, yeah! I'm amazing!

No. I can't afford to gloat.

The only way I was able to win was by combining my weird Barrier magic with a perfect plan.

Then again, I guess I can take credit for both of those things. So maybe I do deserve some self-congratulations.

I figured there was no chance of sneaking up on an opponent of her abilities, so I went for the big dramatic reveal instead. I brought a bunch of the heads of her soldiers, then killed another in front of her to demonstrate. This show of strength would pressure her to act with caution.

Next I bombarded her with an invisible missile raid. My hope was to throw her off with a confusing situation and watch for an opening.

But it turned out she could see them. She parried every single attack, and I thought I was done for.

All she did was sit back and observe, though. Maybe she was being cautious *because* she could see my attacks. Like she was trying to get a better look or

something.

She ended up blocking all of them. I definitely thought I was done for this time.

But all of a sudden, she let her guard down. She dropped her defenses completely, and I successfully offed her head. Nicely done.

Really, it was a total stroke of luck. So maybe I shouldn't be celebrating. Sorry.

Anyway, all's well that ends well.

From that day forward, Gizelotte hasn't been appearing in public. At first, her collar was seen as an eccentric fashion statement. Then the rumors moved on to "maybe she put it on by accident and it got stuck that way."

Shortly after, the mark of a criminal was changed from the prisoner's collar to the prisoner's shackle. This gave rise to even more gossip. It became convenient ammo for the nobles who didn't like Gizelotte's treatment of the king. My dad filled me in on the details.

I could almost hear the narration:

Slowly but surely, the kingdom lost its adulation for Gizelotte, the Flash Princess. She retained just enough power to deter the nation from falling into civil war. Gizelotte lived in perpetual fear of "death" wrapped around her neck.

What I mean to say is, she kept her end of the bargain and hasn't messed with us since.

Several seasons passed.

Life was peaceful and uneventful, with no more trouble from Gizelotte. Pretty soon I would turn fifteen.

The winters are cold up here in the north.

My footsteps crunch in the fresh snow from the night before. Of course, the very act of walking outside in freezing weather doesn't fit with my image as a shut-in. But...

"Brother Haruto!"

My sweet little sister asked me to meet her outside, and I just can't say no.

She waves as she runs towards me. She's grown too, and more beautiful than ever.

"I came up with a special attack using snow. It's called the Bloody Iceberg. But I can't make it happen. This is where I ask for your help, Brother Haruto!"

Um, yeah. Her crazy fantasy world is as lively as ever.

Excitedly, Char describes her secret attack. She even has a trademark victory pose to go with it.

"Okay, okay. I'll do it."

I gather and pack the snow in with my barrier to make a pyramid shape. With the tip pointing down, I send it high into the sky.

I strike a pose with one hand stretching up to the pyramid, and the other hand over my eye. None of it makes any sense, but it's what my little client requests.

I play around and rotate the pyramid in the air, gathering more snow into it like a whirlwind. This part's all improvised. Dramatic presentation is key.

Char is beside herself with excitement.

As the snow draws in, the pyramid gets bigger and bigger. The white pyramid begins to take on a reddish cast. By the time it's thirty feet tall, it's bright red.

“Your blood shall stain it even redder, you dastardly villains! Take this! Bloody Iceberg!”

As I deliver the lines Char instructed, I send the pyramid crashing to the ground. *Crash! Bwoosh!* Snow blows in all directions, turning our vision completely white. When it finally settles, a huge crater is left in the ground.

How was that, impact-wise? Is it to Char’s liking?

“Amazing! You’re so incredible, Brother Haruto! That was perfect!”

She seems delighted, which makes me happy too. Just then, we hear footsteps running towards us.

“Oh! Father and Mother!” Char claps her hands happily, as if she was waiting for them. *Wait, you invited them here?*



Uh, this isn't good. I shoot Char a glance.

"Oh, no! They'll find out your hidden identity, Brother Haruto!"

Did she forget it was a secret?!

"What was that huge crashing sound?! And what's this?"

My dad gapes at the enormous crater.

"It was him." I point towards the Black Knight I conjured up in a hurry. He strikes a superhero pose with a fist raised towards the sky, and zooms off into the air. I make him disappear with a twinkle of light.

"What was he doing...?" my dad asks.

"He just happened to pass by, and he was kind enough to show us his new special attack."

Char nod-nod-nod-nods furiously. *Stop being suspicious!*

"I see..."

Dad looks both exasperated and unconvinced. It's hard to watch.

Char starts rolling balls of snow with our mother. I wonder if they're making a snowman.

My dad and I watch the two of them play.

It's so peaceful. The empire hasn't bothered us in a long time, and Gizelotte is lying low too. Now there's nothing standing between me and my dream of becoming a shut-in in this fantasy world.

Just as I'm about to return to my cozy room...

"By the way, Haruto," my dad begins. "You're not going to like this, but come spring, I want you to begin your education at the capital school."

“No thanks.”

What’s this all of a sudden? How could he casually drop this bomb like it’s just a milk run?!

“I suspected you’d react this way. For some reason, you seem to have an extreme aversion to going to school.”

The most cursed, taboo word in the world to me is “school.” It’s the horrible place that made me miserable in my old life. Gold and Natalia have brought up the idea of me attending school every now and then, and every time, I’ve put up a fuss and flat-out refused.

“No thank you!”

Once again, I refuse vehemently. Just when my dream of living as a shut-in was within reach... He’s got to be kidding me. And why all the way in the capital?

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to. I’ll explain later. There are reasons this is necessary.”

My dad bows his head apologetically. This must be one hell of a reason.

In that case...

It’s time for a new mission.

I’ll call it Operation Hell No, I Won’t Go!

Whatever this necessary reason is, I’ll just have to smash it to smithereens! Heh heh heh. This mission’s getting me fired up.

“Look, Brother Haruto! It’s finished!”

Well, look at that. Even Char is celebrating me with a snowman. Hold up—it’s huge. Like, fifteen feet high. How did she even get the head up there?

Anyway.

It's the winter just before my fifteenth birthday, and I'm on a new mission to achieve my ideal life as a shut-in.

AFTERWORD

Hello. I'm 澄守彩 (Sumimori Sai). Also known as すみもりさい (Sumimori Sai).

This work was first serialized on the online novel-publishing site *Shosetsuka ni Narou* (Let's Become Writers). It was thanks to this that I was able to publish the series into a book. I am ever so grateful.

Meanwhile, a graphic novel version of the story has been launched on Nico Nico Seiga's magazine, *Wednesday's Sirius*.

The manga artist is Ai Takahashi, who's also the illustrator for this novel. I appreciate everything she has contributed, including character design and more.

I hope you'll also enjoy the manga series, well-illustrated with a good balance of comedy and seriousness.

In this book, I've expanded a lot on the web version.

Specifically, there's a whole new episode added in between Chapters One and Two of the web version.

How does Haruto's adoptive little sister Charlotte come to befriend him? And how does she develop *chunibyo*—a delusional fantasy life usually attributed to teenage otaku—at such a young age? The new material illuminates those questions!

There are also generous helpings of episodes on the birth of the Black Knight and his top secret missions.

A character who was only mentioned by name in the web version (specifically, Haruto's adoptive mother) gets more limelight and plays an important role in the story.

For those of you who've read the web version, there is a lot to enjoy!

Lastly, some words of thanks.

To Ai Takahashi, who did the illustrations for this book and the manga series. I am so grateful to you for bringing to life these quirky characters. I'm sure there will be many challenges in the future as they continue to grow and as more characters emerge. Thank you in advance!

To all the editors at KLN Books, and to my personal editor, Kurita-san. We were ahead of schedule this time, so I don't think I caused much trouble... I hope. I'm looking forward to our continued teamwork!

And finally, my readers. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Please stay tuned for more of both the manga and the light novel.

Whether or not you follow the web version, I hope very much you enjoy this book.

Sai Sumimori

Am I Actually the Strongest? 1

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