

Am I Actually the STRONGEST?

5

Sai Sumimori
Art by Ai Takahashi

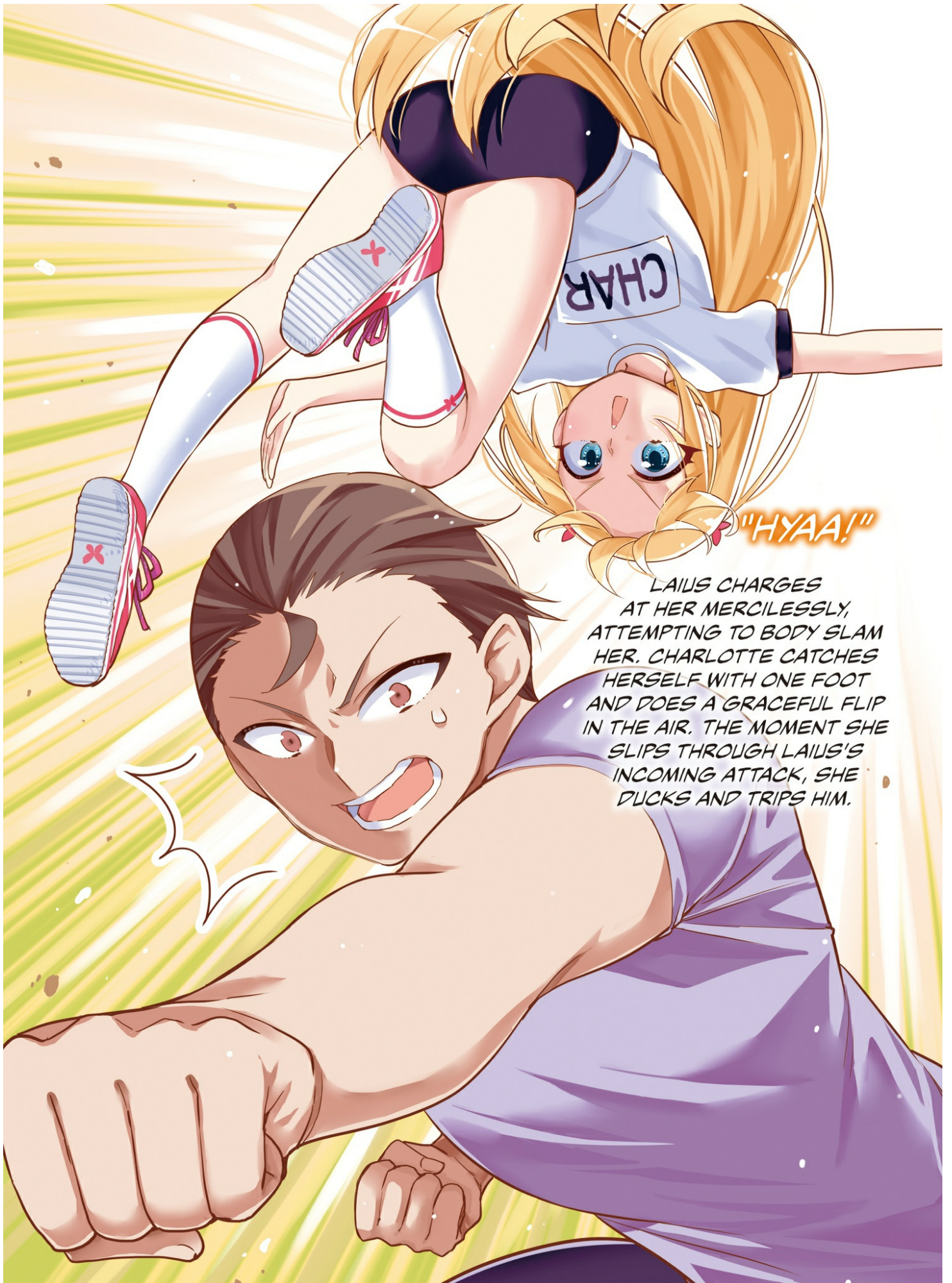


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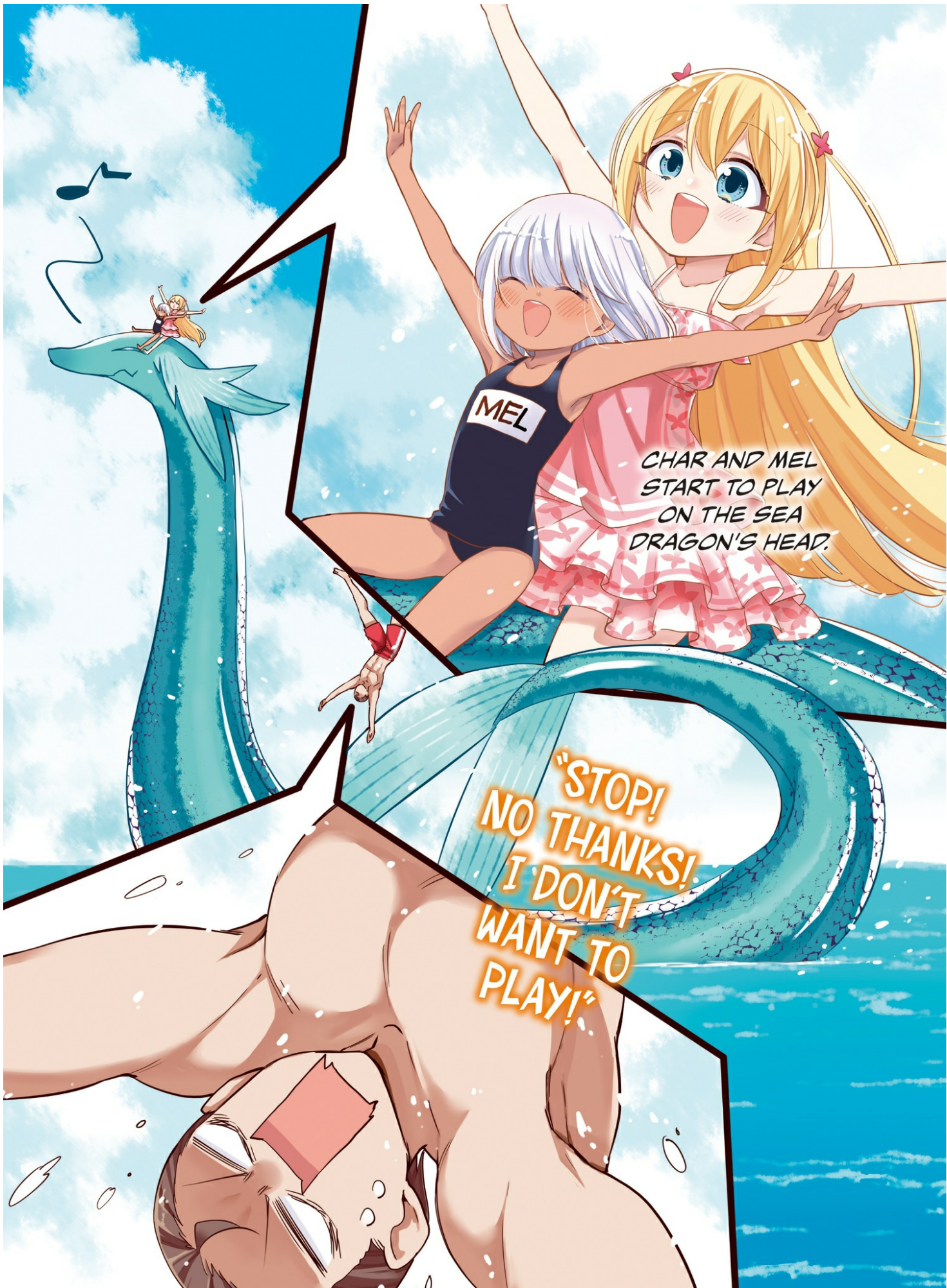
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"HYAA!"

LAIUS CHARGES AT HER MERCILESSLY, ATTEMPTING TO BODY SLAM HER. CHARLOTTE CATCHES HERSELF WITH ONE FOOT AND DOES A GRACEFUL FLIP IN THE AIR. THE MOMENT SHE SLIPS THROUGH LAIUS'S INCOMING ATTACK, SHE DUCKS AND TRIPS HIM.



CHAR AND MEL
START TO PLAY
ON THE SEA
DRAGON'S HEAD.

"STOP!
NO THANKS!
I DON'T
WANT TO
PLAY!"

The cover is decorated with several 3D cubes in dark gray and light gray, and several halftone circles of varying sizes, scattered across the white background.

AM I ACTUALLY THE STRONGEST? 5

By Sai Sumimori
Illustrations by Ai Takahashi

Translated by Camellia Nieh



KODANSHA

Am I Actually the Strongest? 5

A VERTICAL Book

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

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

CHAPTER ONE:

My Little Sister Spreads the Gospel

I am free.

After exploring the ruins of a temple, battling a giant leopard-devil, inventing a fantasy weapon, and so forth, I finally won my right to be exempt from attending classes. That's the story up 'til now.

If all goes well, I'm due to graduate in about two years.

I'm still enrolled at the Academy, so I have to stay on school grounds. But I'll leave all that to my copy android, Haruto C. (He chose that name.) Meanwhile, I'll live as a shut-in in my lake house back at the count's fief. That's the plan, at least.

It's all smooth sailing from here. The life I yearned for is finally kicking off!

There's no doubt about it. I've attained total freedom. I think.

Which means I'm allowed to indulge in my morning reverie for as long as I want. There's no reason for me not to keep rolling around in bed even though I'm wide awake.

By the way, Haruto C is stationed in my private room at Professor Tear's research lab since, technically, I'm supposed to be at school.

Bwam! "Brother Haruto! Good morning!"

The door bursts open and a chipper voice pounds into my brain.

"Good morning, Charlotte. You sure are full of energy this morning."

I'm not being sarcastic. I would never take that tone with my adorable little sister.

“Yes! I’m full of vim and vigor today!”

I sit up and turn to her.

Indeed, an aura of pure excitement is radiating from the little blonde.

“What’s with the outfit?”

She’s wearing a vaguely familiar-looking school uniform. She’s also wearing a bright red Japanese schoolkid’s backpack—which she begged me to make. Is she cosplaying something?

Behind Char, a petite, blue-haired girl peeks out.

“Good morning, Sir Haruto. Aren’t you going to school today?”

Liza is appointed as my attendant at the Academy. But now that I’m exempt from classes, that job title is moot.

Char answers for me. “Brother Haruto is busy researching Ancient Magic. He’ll be going to Professor Tear’s lab later. Right?”

“Uh...huh?”

To be perfectly honest, I have no reason to show up at the lab either. But Char takes my tepid response as an affirmative and shoots Liza a smug look as if to say, *See?*

Best not to refute her.

“I’d better head off now, Brother Haruto. I don’t want to be late. See you later!” Char says happily and makes her way out.

“Wait, Lady Charlotte! You can’t go out alone—where’s Flay, anyway?”

Liza hurries after her young master.

I wonder where Char’s off to. Normally, she has private lessons back at the

castle... Oh, that must be it.

With investigating a fictitious organization and exploring ancient ruins and whatnot, Char's been neglectful of her studies lately. Mom probably came down on her. I've been a bad influence as a big brother.

Sorry, Char! I apologize internally and burrow myself back under the blanket.
Oh, blanket, my love.

"Heya! Look who's here to see you. It's me!"

I know that voice.

"Please go away. Zzz..." I mumble.

"Pretending to be asleep so that I'll leave you alone? Oh, that's clever!"

What a pain. I sit up again. Standing before me is a tiny person with tiny glasses.

She may look young, but this very short woman—Tearietta Luseiannel (long name)—is actually a professor at the Academy as well as the head of the research lab I belong to.

"How did *you* get in here?"

I'd set up an Anywhere Door between here and the lab for easy commute. But the door is in my private room.

"I asked Haruto C where you were and he showed me the way."

That traitor! Pawning off his crap on me. Oh well, I'd do the same. Besides, the professor knows a lot of my secrets so it's not that big of a deal.

"And? Did you want something?"

"I came to pick you up, of course. You may be exempt from classes, but you're

still expected to produce a reputable body of work. By that I mean you need to be researching Ancient Magic.”

Her cheeky grin is getting on my nerves. I just want to be curled up at home—she knows that!

“I’ve got two years to do that. I don’t have to start now.”

I’m the kind of guy who procrastinates my spring break homework until the last minute and then tries to whip up just the big projects for a barely passing grade.

“You know, I did *a lot* to help you out these past few days. I can’t help but feel like you’re pretty indebted to me. Yeah, after all I did for you... Or are you just going to pretend it didn’t happen?”

“If you’ll let me.”

“Of course I won’t!”

Then don’t ask. Talk about pushy.

“What do you mean by ‘research,’ anyway?” I change the subject.

“Oh, all sorts of things. There’s the mysterious yet versatile Barrier magic of yours, the devil you captured—there’s only so much I can do alone. And the most curious of all: the conceptualization of mana levels. Frankly, two years is hardly enough.”

The conceptualization of mana levels... Oh, she’s talking about those threads that come out of people’s backs. And I forgot all about the devil I kidnapped.

“Anyway, I’m willing to accommodate your preferences. We can work here if you want...” the professor says as she walks out of my bedroom.

I follow her—what choice do I have? I don’t want my hermitage ending up a

total mess like that lab of hers.

We head to my living room.

“I can’t say this place is ideal for conducting research.” The professor looks around. “We have no materials or tools.”

“I have everything I need to be a shut-in.”

“If only you’d apply that level of dedication to research—oh?” Professor Tear plasters her face against the window. “What’s that out there? Are those Knight Skeletons? And that’s a Gigantic Golem! And all sorts of other monsters. Where are we, anyway?”

“It’s a hassle to explain so I’ll give you the short version: Flay rescued a bunch of monsters and stuff, and now they live here.”

“What about the long version?”

What a drag. But what can I do? I give her the full story about the monsters that came out of the summoners circle.

“You used barriers to interfere with the summoning spell and managed to take over the summoner’s command? As always, the feats you pull off are outlandish.”

Another topic to add to her pile of research. Does this mean I have to help her with them?

“Don’t look so annoyed. Studying Ancient Magic would benefit you too, you know.”

“How?”

“Knowing more about the magic you practice will only expand the possibilities. Seems like a no-brainer if you want to lead an easy life as a shut-in.

Besides," she smirks, "you don't want to leave Char all alone, do you?"

"She has her studies here at the castle. She doesn't need me getting in her way." I shrug in annoyance.

"Hold on! You haven't heard?"

Weird thing to ask. "Heard what?"

This time, it's Professor Tear's turn to shrug in annoyance. Her answer is even weirder.

"Char will be enrolling at the Academy as a transfer student. And as one might expect, she's decided to join my research center."

What's this woman talking about?

My little sister Charlotte is going to be a student at the kingdom's top magic school? The same one I go to?

"That's the first I've heard of it."

"I guess she hasn't told you then."

"How did this happen?"

"It was mentioned when we settled on her joining the expedition party for the Olympius Ruins investigation, wasn't it?"

Was it?—oh... It was.

I vaguely remember Char saying something about wanting to go to the same school as me.

"But isn't it way too soon? She's just a kid."

I assumed she'd be offered a chance to take the entrance exam next year or something.

“Hmm. So that’s how you view her? There’s no question that you tend to underestimate your own skills. But you’re very imperceptive about other people’s as well.”

“Sounds like you’re dissing me.”

Professor Tear sighs. “Quite the opposite. Often the strongest of the strong are uninterested in themselves and in others. But in your case, it’s quite pronounced.”

I might be uninterested in others, but nobody matters to me more than Char.

“I’m sure you care a great deal for Char,” Professor Tear says.

My dissatisfaction must be all over my face. She practically read my mind aloud.

She continues, “But you don’t fully grasp the scope of her talents.”

“I know Char’s talented.”

“She’s beyond talented. Academically speaking, she’s far ahead of where I was at her age. And I was considered a child prodigy who only comes around once in ten—no, a hundred years!”

You’re not exactly a good standard of comparison.

“So you’re saying she might surpass Iris as the top scoring student in our grade?”

“Hard to say. Iris is quite exceptional, too. As of now, it’s a close race. Either of them has the potential to become the Academy’s top student.”

Not just in our grade, but in the whole school? Gee, Iris must be quite something.

“Peculiar, though, isn’t it? Char comes from nobility and has received quality

education. On top of that, she's been getting guidance in magic from demons. Given her background, her genius is understandable. Iris, on the other hand, was raised in a convent. How did she acquire so much knowledge? Yet her understanding of social interaction is as poor as you might expect from someone with such a secluded upbringing. How do we explain that discrepancy?"

Hmm... The professor furrows her brows.

Frankly, I'm not interested.

I bring the conversation back to its original topic. "How's Char doing practical magic-wise?"

"Her current mana level is 20, which is high even for the grade she's entering. And it's gone up by a whopping 3 points in the last six months. In the next year, she's expected to come close to Prince Laius who is currently the highest in his and your grade. In fact, her prospect in practical magic is why she was accepted for mid-year enrollment."

Wow. Char's amazing, all right. Makes sense, though—she's got way more potential than a certain evil queen.

"In fact, most of the professors agree that her education should focus more on magic practicum courses."

"But she'll be under your tutelage, which is a researchers' course."

"Ha-hah! Yes! That gives me quite the advantage. Mmhmm, I was right to recruit you," the professor gloats.

Right. Char's joining this kiddy professor's lab because of me. But I don't wanna be the reason her growth is being stifled. I'll have to talk her out of it later.

“I know what you’re thinking. But Char should be with you. It’s what she wants, and it’s also what’s best for her.”

Does that mean I should transfer to a training center that’s suitable for Char?

“Again, I know what you’re thinking! It’s written on your face. There’s nowhere except my lab for you to keep your laid-back life as a shut-in. Besides, you can be Char’s advisor in practical magic.”

Am I that easy to read? I thought I was pulling off the dark, silent guy persona. Kinda disappointing.

“All right. I get why Char was granted enrollment in the middle of the school year. But why’s she hiding it from me?”

“I suppose she wants to surprise you.”

“Ah, I see. What a sweet kid. And in that case, Professor Tear, how dare you ruin an innocent little girl’s dream!”

“You’ve got it all wrong! Stop giving me that look.”

Fine. Let’s hear your excuse.

“Let’s say she were to spring the news on you without you knowing, you wouldn’t act all that surprised, would you?”

“That’s not true...”

“Nope. You definitely wouldn’t. You’d probably react dryly like, ‘Oh, is that so?’ Without a doubt!”

I picture it in my head.

Yeah. I probably would just be like, *“Oh, is that so?”*

“I trust you know what to do then. You seem to be out of it today, so I’ll be

heading out now. But to keep up appearances, you'll need to decide on a research thesis. Take the day to reeeally think it through."

Geez, what a nuisance. I'd rather just leave it all up to Professor Tear.

Apparently, my thoughts are written all over my face again because the little professor gives me a smirk as she leaves.

As I'm watching anime and grazing about in the living room of my hermitage...

"Brother Haruto! Would you like to have lunch together?"

Enter Charlotte.

"Oh, is it noon already?"

Loafing around is the best.

Liza isn't with her—she probably didn't want to travel through mystery space-time again.

Char trots over to me with a big smile. She's wearing her Japanese schoolkid's backpack.

Turns out she's been in cahoots with Professor Tear all because she wanted to be schoolmates with me. And today, she's planning to surprise me with the news. Or so I gather.

But she didn't mention it this morning and she doesn't show any sign of bringing it up now.

Has she forgotten? Totally forgot about her surprise reveal for me?

It wouldn't be proper big brother etiquette to hang around and wait. I decide to put out some feelers.

“By the way, Char, you weren’t at the castle today. Where’ve you been?”

“Today, I started—Ah! That’s right!” she flaps, but quickly straightens herself up. She announces brightly, “I’m going to be attending the same school as you, Brother Haruto! And I’m joining the same research center, too!”

Her face is glowing with pride and expectation.

“Wha-Wha-Whaaat?! Are you serious? That’s amazing, Char!”

I make a big show of being surprised.

She beams. “We won’t get to take classes together, sadly. But at least we’ll be spending time in the same institution! From now on, we’ll always be together♪”

My sister is grinning with overwhelming joy.

I was hoping to stay at my hermitage, but... Oh well.

For a second, Professor Tear’s smirk pops into my mind.

“Yeah, we’ll always be together.” I smile back at my sister.



While Haruto goes back to sleep, the first homeroom of the week has just begun.

First year, A-Class. A cloud of disquiet looms over the school’s finest freshmen.

A new student is transferring into their class today.

It’s rare to see a transfer student in the middle of a school year. Even more so at this time of year—only a few months into the semester.

On top of that, the newcomer is the eleven-year-old cherished daughter of Count Gold Zenfis. Much of the girl's life has been veiled in secrecy up to this point.

The only thing revealed to the public is that her potential far surpasses the Flash Princess, although most people are doubtful of the claim.

Having said that, she's the younger sister of none other than Haruto Zenfis.

What could she be like?

All but two of the students are holding their breath in anticipation.

However...

"Hello, everyone! My name is Charlotte Zenfis. I'm excited to study with everyone. I may be young and inexperienced in many ways, but I hope you'll be kind to me!"

...the tension in the room melts away at her sweet and amiable self-introduction.

After homeroom, a crowd gathers around Charlotte.

"How adorable! You're only eleven, right?"

"I heard you already explored the Olympius Ruins."

"Wow, both you and your brother are amazing!"

"And your mana level is already 20?"

"You're third from the top of the class! You could probably give your brother a run for his money!"

They're charmed by her cuteness, no doubt. But their main curiosity lies in the young maiden's talents.

Charlotte, sitting upright in her chair, shakes her head from side to side. “Oh, no! I’m nowhere near Brother Haruto’s level. Brother Haruto is so, soooooo amazing!”

Despite her vague and baseless praise, the gleam in her eye encapsulates absolute certainty.

The students buzz with bewilderment.

“Wow. He’s really something else, huh?”

“I mean, he *is* exempt from class attendance, after all.”

Even in the most elite class of this elite school, it’s rare for a first-year student to choose the highest-level electives. For that reason, most of the students have never seen Haruto’s abilities firsthand.

Only two of them have experienced it for themselves. “Hmph. Haruto’s rare abilities are old news,” one of them grumbles.

This catches Charlotte’s attention and she scuttles over.

“Prince Laius! Please excuse me for not greeting you sooner!”

“Sheesh. First, Haruto stops coming to class, and now you of all people are here instead?”

“Would you rather be with Brother Haruto?”

“N-N-N-N-No! Wh-Whatever! I don’t care what Haruto does!”

“Whoa... They actually do exist in real life... A tsundere.”

“What’s that?”

Their classmates are awestruck to see the girl speaking to Prince Laius, the boy touted to be the next king, with such familiarity—which shouldn’t be a

surprise since they're related.

Meanwhile, the one other person in the room who knows Charlotte is surrounded by curious classmates (mostly girls) peppering her with questions.

"D-Don't ask me..." stammers Irisphilia.

In classes, too, Charlotte is the center of attention.

During Advanced Elemental Theory I...

"You can do these complicated elemental ratio equations in your head?" gasps Professor Oratoria Belkam. "What kind of grueling education have you been receiving back at home?" She straightens her monocle.

"Brother Haruto would know instantly!"

"You mean, he can calculate that fast?!"

A huge misunderstanding. Haruto has his own Mija's Crystal (Upgraded Edition), made from a barrier, that he wears on his eye. He doesn't need to do any calculations.

"Your understanding of sub-elements is incredible, too. It's almost as if you memorized the treatises written by Weiss Owl."

As it happens, Charlotte *is* the mysterious genius researcher known as Weiss Owl. However, Professor Belkam has no way of knowing that.

"Brother Haruto can identify a person's sub-element at a single glance!"

"Incredible perception! Darn... I want him at my research center..."

Continuing to labor under her misconceptions, Professor Belkam pulls at her hair in frustration.

Charlotte is unstoppable in her afternoon practical magic classes as well.

Not only does she baffle everyone with her Japanese PE uniform (the t-shirt and bloomers kind) made by Haruto, but she also astonishes them with her high-level magic shooting skills.

“Wow! Look at how swift she is!”

The super macho teacher in a tank top is wide-eyed.

In Magical Martial Arts class, she flips and twists spryly to evade Laius’s aggressive attacks.

“Whoa! On top of her refined self-fortification magic, her physical agility is excellent!”

That’s because she plays tag almost daily with Flay, a demon.

“Hey!” Laius wheezes, “How about playing offense for a change instead of just dodging around?”

“That’s a bit hard for me, Prince Laius. You don’t leave me any openings...”

After all, she’s never learned any actual fighting moves like punching, kicking, or throwing. When she plays with Flay, they just tag each other back and forth.

“Waiting for an opening is important, but you can also force an opening!” the teacher advises.

I see! Charlotte remembers how she usually plays with Flay.

“Whoops!” Charlotte slips and stumbles as if she’s losing her balance.

She’s obviously faking it, but Laius decides to take the bait anyway.

“Hyaa!”

Laius charges at her mercilessly, attempting to body slam her.

Charlotte catches herself with one foot and does a graceful flip in the air.

The moment she slips through Laius's incoming attack, she ducks and trips him.

"Nwah?!"

Laius manages to keep his balance, but Charlotte forces him down and puts him in a joint lock.

"What the?! You've got oddball tactics just like Haruto!"

Charlotte learned this stuff from watching street fighting anime. It's her first attempt, but she nailed it.

"Oh, no! It's not even close to what Brother Haruto can do!" Charlotte releases him and shakes her head. "For one thing, Brother Haruto has such overwhelming powers that he has no need to get physically close to an opponent. The only time he uses his fists is when he wants to sap the enemy's will to fight by demonstrating how much stronger he is on equal grounds."

Of course, that's not Haruto's intention at all. If given the option, he wouldn't hesitate to use ambush tactics on his enemies. To him, martial arts is purely for entertainment's sake—for his little sister.

"Wow. I didn't realize he has such deep psychological tactics..." gasps Professor Tank Top, flexing his bulging biceps for good measure.

Little did Haruto know that this child prodigy's praise would cast a shadow on his reclusive life on campus...



My name is Haruto C. I am a doppelganger created by the weirdo-sorcerer Haruto Zenfis.

After winning his exemption from attending classes, Original Haruto moved back to the log cabin by the lake to live his shut-in life. Meanwhile, I'm living my own life as a shut-in at Professor Tear's research lab at the Academy.

What's the point?—you might wonder. Apparently, it's important to maintain the appearance that Haruto is immersed in his studies at school. If something were to come up and Haruto Zenfis is nowhere to be found, things could get messy.

Since I can't use magic, there's not a lot I can do to assist Professor Tear. I'm guessing that's why she doesn't bother me much.

So far, there's nothing to disrupt my peaceful shut-in life. Nobody has a problem with me loafing around in bed like I'm doing right now.

Wham! "Is Haruto Zenfis here?"

My door flings open, and a familiar, crisp female voice hollers my name.

"There you are! How long do you intend to stay in bed? Classes have already started."

She yanks off my blanket. This monocled beauty is Professor Belkam, I think. She's got this rivalry thing going on with Professor Tear even though she's accomplished in her own way. Sucks for her.

"I'm exempt from attending classes," I rebut.

“It’s a matter of attitude. You may not be taking classes but you’re still expected to produce fair results in your field. You can’t afford to waste a single minute—a single second, even. In fact, you should be working so hard that you barely have time to sleep.”

As far as achieving results go, I’m sure my original will go crying to Professor Tear at some point and get her to throw together some BS. But I can’t exactly say that to Professor Belkam.

“What do you want from me?”

“At least get out of bed. Then we’ll talk. Better yet, get dressed and come see me in the meeting room.”

Boy, she’s really bossy. But that’s just her personality, so what can I do? “Yes ma’am.” I oblige.

She gives me a scornful look as she walks out of the room.

I drag myself out of bed and take my time getting dressed. *Why is she even here?*

With a heavy heart, I make my way to the meeting room.

All the books and junk that were piled on the table are now scattered all over the floor. In their place are a bunch of open notebooks.

I take a peek and see rows and rows of incomprehensible mathematical formulas.

“So, I hear that you can solve these complex elemental ratio equations at a single glance,” she says.

“Who would go spouting nonsense like that?”

“Charlotte Zenfis. Your younger sister.”

Oh, why, Char? Just why?

“I can’t solve equations just by looking at them. There seems to be a huge misunderstanding.”

But if she keeps grilling me about this, I’ll be here forever. And I’m a busy guy. I wanna go back to sleep. And watch anime afterwards.

I decide to denounce the professor’s unreasonable request on moral grounds.

“You want me to perform those calculations so you can slack off?”

“Precisely,” she answers without missing a beat. Not even a blink of guilt or hesitation.

The assertion in her tone is almost refreshing in a way.

“But that’s tyranny!”

“Like I said, time is precious to a researcher. If using your brain radically reduces my expenditure of time, I absolutely must take advantage.”

“What about *my* precious time?”

“It shouldn’t take much of your time. Consider it a light mental workout.”

The woman has an answer to everything. Well, two can play that game.

“You have your own research lab, right? Why not have your students do the work?”

“Of course I’m having them do it, too. I’m here because I want you to make sure their answers are correct—oh! I almost forgot! I should’ve mentioned this first.”

Professor Belkam whips something out and places it on the table with a *clink*.

A small sack. Peeking through its opening are...gold coins!

“You may be a student, but I intend to compensate you for your help. Here.”
The professor pulls three coins out of the bag and shows them to me.

“Not the whole bag?”

“This is quite a generous sum. Hmph... All right, then. How about this?”

She pulls out two more coins. Not a bad offer for a student’s part-time job.

But complicated calculations are simply not my thing.

“I’m sorry but I suck at math. There’s no way.”

“Your sister said that you can ascertain the numbers at a single glance. Hm... Are you saying that rather than performing calculations, you’re able to instantly know a sorcerer’s elemental ratio just by looking at the individual? That’d be something else entirely...”

I don’t really get how, but it’s true—my original can instantly see a person’s elemental affinities and their ratios with the Mija’s Crystal (Upgraded Edition) that he made out of a barrier.

But that’s supposed to be a secret. If this teacher decides to bring some test subjects here, it’ll make matters worse. Original Haruto would be the one to deal with it, but I’d be the one who has to deal with him complaining about it.

I change the subject. “Where’s Professor Tear, anyway? You should at least get permission from my supervisor.”

If she were to find out that I’m helping some other lab, she’d throw a fit. *“Then why don’t you give me a hand! Not that I can pay you anything!”* she’d probably pout.

“She was up to some shady business in her lab. I did ask her for permission,

but all she gave me was an incoherent mumble.”

“Excuse me one moment.”

At times like these, I wish she’d make herself useful. I hurry off to Professor Tear’s lab room and throw open the door.

“Professor Tear!” I call out.

She’s at her worktable with her shrimpy little back turned to me and doesn’t seem to hear my voice.

She mutters to herself, “Hmm. His vital organs are no different from an ordinary human’s. Nothing unusual there. But sheesh, this is tricky... He keeps healing as quickly as I slice into his skin. And there’s no sign of his mana running out...”

There’s a weird smell. Like raw meat.

I close the door gently and zip back to the meeting room.

“She was up to something shady in there!” I exclaim.

“That’s what I just said. Besides, when is that woman not up to shady business?”

Professor Belkam acts like the whole thing’s no big deal, but my reaction is normal, right?

I guess at this point, my only option is to foist the whole thing on Original Haruto. Just as I think that to myself, another face pops into my mind.

“Professor Belkam, if you think you can buy my time with a few gold coins, you’re wrong.”

“Augh... I suppose that as a son of the nobility, this wouldn’t even be pocket change for you...”

“But I do empathize with your struggle. Let me introduce you to someone suitable.” I flash her an insinuating grin.

“Haruto, thank you!”

When Iris arrives, I explain the situation and hook her up with the gig.

Irisphilia is always scraping by with after-school delivery jobs and whatnot. Lured by the money, her response is enthusiastic.

“Hmm. She’s certainly got the brains for this task. I can’t complain. But something about this whole arrangement doesn’t sit right...” the professor grumbles.

I managed to wriggle out of a tight corner by pulling the ol’ switcheroo on Professor Belkam.

But this won’t be the last of my troubles.

Little did I know that danger was already developing elsewhere...



Professor Belkam leaves.

Now it’s just me (Haruto C) and Iris, who’s absorbed in the tough math problems. I can’t wait to get back to my room and watch anime.

That’s when I hear the pitter patter of tiny footsteps approaching.

“Hello, Mama’s Lookalike! Where’s Mama?”

A dark-skinned kid with white hair looks up at me with her curious red eyes.

It’s the mysterious abandoned little girl. The expedition party found her in the labyrinth of the Olympius Ruins.

Oddly enough, she can tell the difference between me and my original. What’s more odd is that she calls my original “Mama” even though he’s a guy. Setting that aside...

“Mel, remember, please don’t call me ‘Mama’s Lookalike’ around other people.”

“What should I call you then?”

“How about Mama C?”

“Mama C, where’s Mama?”

She’s a good kid. I don’t think anyone will be fooled, but oh well.

Iris, who’d been scribbling nonstop, freezes...and resumes her writing.

Clearly, she’s got questions. But she seems to have concluded in her head that if nobody’s informed her, it’s because she hasn’t earned the right to know.

My original doesn’t even remember what he has and hasn’t told her at this point.

Oh well. It’s only a matter of time before Char invites her to the Round Table or whatever. Once that happens, she’ll learn about all kinds of stuff. Good luck, Iris.

I answer Mel, “Mama should be back at the lake house,” and show her into

my room. I open a door embedded in the wall. This is the Anywhere Door, a simplified magical teleportation device.

“Thank you.” Mel smiles sweetly before disappearing through the door.

Good. Now I don’t have to babysit. Finally, I can watch some anime! But as soon as I stretch out on my bed, another visitor walks in.

“Yo, Zenfis! Are your muscles rarin’ to go?”

It’s a dude in a tank top with bulging muscles. He’s the professor who teaches the martial arts class, I think.

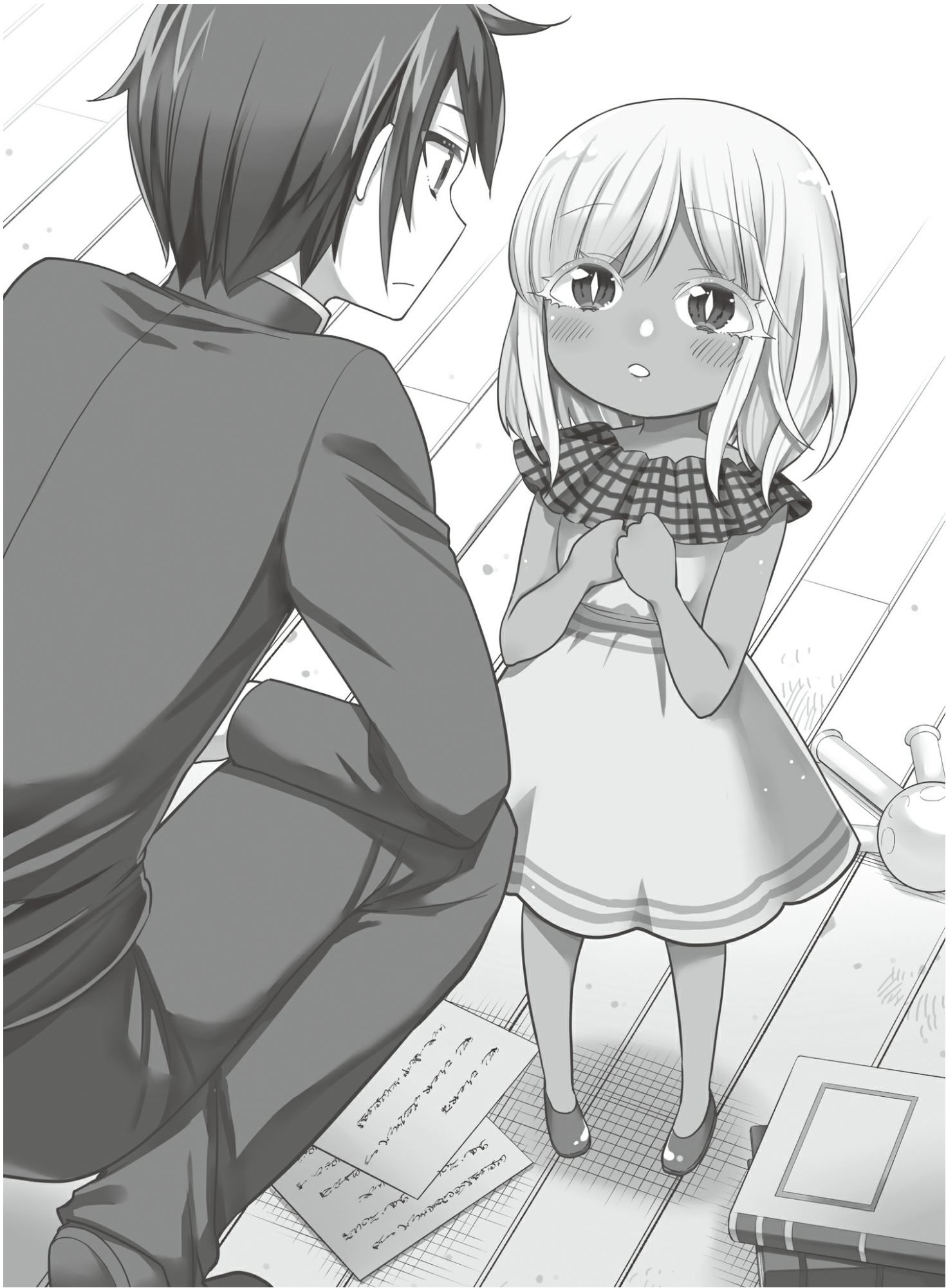
I lead him to the meeting room. Iris is still working.

“What do you want from me?” I ask.

“You don’t have to look so disappointed. Are you okay? Have you been doing your weight training?”

I’m not the athletic type. Not that I’m the brainy type either. Regardless, I hate exercising.

He says, “I’m here because I have a favor to ask.”



Please leave, I almost blurt. It takes all my willpower to swallow those words. I put on my poker face and go to the peaceful place in my head.

“It’s about the martial arts you demonstrated in my class the other day. Charlotte Zenfis’s moves have a similar quality. Would you mind explaining it to me in detail?”

“Hrf?!” I choke. *What the heck is he talking about?*

“Your martial arts style is extremely unique. I’d love to incorporate them in my curriculum. Will you help me? Please!”

Professor Tank Top bows low, making sure to flex his bulging muscles in the process. *Is that his idea of a humble request?*

Besides, those martial arts techniques I used (okay, my original used) weren’t special at all. Just stuff from anime... Oh, I get it. They’re special in this world because they’re from a totally different world.

But I can’t tell him the truth. All they’re doing is imitating stuff they saw on TV, so I wouldn’t know how to teach it.

“Unfortunately, it’s a technique that’s been passed down in my family. It’s not something I can go and share with strangers.”

Iris, who was doing her math problems in silence this whole time, suddenly butts into the conversation. “Huh? But, Haruto, your sister’s been giving me a lot of pointers. You were with us one of those times. And you didn’t seem to mind—wh-why are you glaring at me like that? Did I say something wrong?”

Yes, you did. Sheesh.

No matter. I’ll just have to use her as a scapegoat again.

“Sensei, Charlotte and I did teach Iris all about our martial arts style. She can

explain it to you.”

“Huh? Why me?”

I throw in a bargain while I’m at it. “Of course, you’ll compensate her, right?”

Professor Tank Top flashes his pearly white teeth.

“Absolutely! I’m planning to implement it in my classes, so I intend to get paid for it from the headmistress.”

“There you have it, Iris. You’ll do it, won’t you?”

“Me? Are you sure I’m good enough? Wouldn’t you or Char be more suited for—”

“Char and I are busy. You should go for it. Sounds like the pay’s generous.”

“I appreciate that. But if I take on too many after-school jobs at once, I’ll end up neglecting my own training.”

You’re quibbling over that now?

“Teaching is the best way to learn,” I bullshit.

“That’s a good point.” Iris is won over.

Once again, I’ve dodged a bullet.

“Haruto, are you in? Hey, would ya teach me how you do that long-range control magic...”

“Is Haruto here? I’d love to consult with you about magic theory...”

Who could it be? This time, it’s Laius and my older sister Marianne.

And it doesn’t end there. A whole stream of teachers and students are lining up, looking for guidance. Even people I’ve never spoken to before.

What the heck is going on? For the time being, I decide to blow them all off and...

I'm relaxing at my hermitage when Haruto C, my copy, barges in furiously.

"...so that's what's been going on. Do something about it! You're the original!"

Apparently, there's been an endless drove of visitors asking questions and wanting advice.

"Why is this happening?" I ask my copy.

It's never happened before.

"Apparently, Char is singing your praises all over campus."

So even when I'm not around, Char's talking up her big brother? What a sweet kid!

I can't possibly reprimand her for that. Maybe a gentle scolding? Although it seems a tad late for that, too.

"Sounds like I have no choice but to deal with it. Okay. You take care of her, then."

Next to me, Mel is quietly scribbling in a hiragana workbook (made by me) to study Japanese with.

"What are you making her do?" my copy asks.

"She wants to watch anime but she doesn't understand the language."

"So, you're dragging another innocent child to the dark side?"

Having more comrades in arms is a good thing, isn't it?

And so, I head over to the Academy. Not thrilled.

And I've given zero thought on how to handle the situation. I'm sure it'll work itself out, though. If necessary, I'll drag Professor Tear into it. Hey, that's a good idea. That should resolve everything.



And thus, due to my little sister Charlotte singing her “amaze-bro” hymn far and wide, a nonstop stream of visitors is pouring onto my copy's doorway. They remind me of a boy with glasses who goes crying for help to a futuristic omnipotent robot.

I say this from the bottom of my heart: I don't want to deal with them.

Forcing a shut-in to meet with strangers is practically bullying.

But if I burden my copy with too much work, he'll wind up going on strike. He's such a pain in the butt. But what can I say? He's me.

As the original, it's my job to contend with these guys. But to tell you the truth, I don't have a plan.

“Save me, Tear-emon!”

For starters, I decide to go crying to Professor Tear, just like the aforementioned bespectacled boy would do. She's busy performing some kind of experiment (on a human body), but I pretend not to notice.

“Why, of course! You can rely on me all you want.”

I was expecting her to brush me off, but her reaction is surprisingly accommodating.

“I’m not going to pass up on the opportunity to rack up more favors for you to owe me. Just leave everything to—”

“Never mind.”

“Whaaat?!” She looks dejected.

Sorry. But if I owe her favors, I’m gonna end up paying a hefty price down the road. I just know it. Although it may be a bit late—I already owe her plenty.

There goes my only plan. Just as I’m sitting in the meeting room feeling lost, I get a flash of inspiration.

I have a friend!

And friends help each other out.

Iris is still busily working at the table. As she’s scribbling across the papers, I ask her to deal with the visitors on my behalf.

“I’ve got my hands full already. I can’t stand in for you anymore.” She rejects me flatly.

But I refuse to give up. “Come on, please? We’re friends, right?”

I brandish my secret weapon to the girl who really cares about being a good friend. If I appeal to our friendship, I’m sure I can get Iris to do what I want.

“As a friend, I do want to help you out. But the work I’m doing right now is also on your behalf.”

Now that she mentions it, my copy did brag about pawning off a bunch of chores to her.

I wasn’t really paying attention. It’s annoying listening to people brag. Even if

that person is my own doppelganger. In fact, it's even more annoying to hear it from my identical copy. At least that's what I think.

In any case, I've already played the friend card with Iris.

This isn't good. I don't have any cards left. Because I don't have any other friends.

At this point, I'm at a loss. Regardless, the problems keep coming at me.

"Hey, Haruto! How long do I have to wait?" The bro built like a rugby player barks at me.

Um, rude? That's no way to ask for a favor.

I respond to him, "You should dance the haka, Laius. I hear it gets a guy really fired up."

"What are you talking about?"

That's my line. The very premise of trying to learn magic from me is where you've gone wrong. After all, my magic is a little different from everyone else's.

"Oh! You're back, Haruto. Finally, we can have a chat about magic theory."

Now it's my big sister.

"A chat..."

I've got nothing to chat about. Plus, she's the royal princess and the president of the student council. Doesn't she have other stuff to—oh?

I stare intently at Princess Marianne.

"Wh-What? Please don't...look at me so intensely..." She averts her gaze.

This timid young lady is the princess of this kingdom and the president of the student council.

I look over at the buff dude.

“Wh-What? Quit looking at me...like that...”

This blushing bro is the prince of this kingdom and the top-ranking student of this year’s freshmen.

These two have the highest authority and capabilities of anyone in the Academy.

“Seriously, what’s the deal?” Laius demands. “People are lining up here. Hurry up and help us out!”

“That’s it!” I point at Laius, making him flinch. For a big guy, he gets spooked easily. “I’m busy. Extremely, super busy. I don’t have time to deal with all these people.”

Which isn’t a lie. There are lots of anime titles I want to watch.

“Therefore, I have a proposal. The two of you can act as registrars. You can process the visitors’ requests, and refer them to other teachers or whatever and send them away.”

I’ll bet most of their queries can be handled by someone else. In fact, I’ll even bet most of them are totally over my head.

But I’m a terrible negotiator. If I try to say no, there’s a risk they’ll push me over. In fact, I’m sure of it.

This is a job for Marianne and Laius.

Nobody at this school can get pushy with these two. After all, they’re the royal princess and prince of the kingdom. They’re also highly accomplished, so they’re kind of intimidating. If these two can serve as a fortress that protects me from all the strangers, I can kick back and live my shut-in life.

They look like they're about to protest, but I ramble on. "Of course, I'll do my best to respond to your requests. I'm a busy guy, but... You know—we're in this together and all!"

"In this together... Yeah. It's hard to say no when you put it like that," agrees Laius.

"I feel bad about keeping you all to ourselves, Haruto... But since we're working together..."

"In this together" is an ambiguous and convenient phrase. Sounds like we're more than some schoolmates, but not quite friends.

They agree to do it.

As we're talking, I come up with another brilliant idea. My sneaky scheming circuit is in full throttle.

No offense, but I don't want to deal with these two either.

"Laius, I know some experts in long-range control magic. You should consult with Flay and Liza."

I can't refer the other students and teachers to them. If anyone finds out they're demons, we'll all be in trouble. But Laius and Marianne already know, so it shouldn't be a problem.

"Princess Marianne, you should talk to them, too. They're super knowledgeable about magic."

The siblings give me vaguely dissatisfied looks. I throw in a couple of more "I'm super busy" excuses and they finally comply.

Yes. It's the perfect solution.

Now I can shut out all of those annoying visitors. Hooray!

I give the prince and princess one last aggressive reminder of our agreement and return happily to my hermitage.

However...

“How do you read this kanji, Mama? What does it mean?”

This time, I’m apprehended by a studious little kid.

She’s already memorized hiragana and katakana. Kids in this universe sure are smart. Char was a fast learner, too.

She hounds me with questions for almost an hour. I can feel my life slipping away.

Flay and Liza usually handle the childcare but teaching Japanese isn’t something they can do.

I find myself on the verge of groveling to the little kid and begging, *“Please let me go!”*

Just then, I hear, “I’m home, Brother Haruto!”

A savior appears!

“You’re just in time, Char! I have a favor to ask!”

“Brother Haruto! A favor? From me?!”

Wow, are her eyes actually shimmering?

I guess it is kinda rare. Normally, I’m the “dependable big brother.” Whether or not I am one is another story. But in truth, I rarely ask Char for a favor.

So when I ask her if she could teach Mel Japanese...

“I understand! I, Charlotte Zenfis, shall spread the teachings with all my soul!”

Um, I'm not sure we're on the same page. Or are we? Eh, whatever.

Having overcome countless hurdles back to back, I finally return to my peaceful shut-in life...



The hermitage stands on the shore of a lake. Not too far from it, there's a pavilion. And inside the pavilion is a big circular table.

Charlotte and three of the sitting members are gathered around it. They're joined by two new "knights."

"...and so I have officially invited Tearietta Luseiannel to Camelot as our newest knight!"

"Hey there! Thanks for having me. It's a long name so you can just call me Tear. Pleased to meet you!"

The small woman rises as the three members greet her with a round of applause.

"I have grave doubts, but if Charlotte recommended you, I have no choice but to defer," Flay greets.

"If Charlotte trusts you, I will not dispute," says Liza.

"Since we've never met before I'll refrain from commenting," Johnny remarks.

"Wow, you call that a welcome?!" Tearietta looks disappointed.

"Nice to meet you," booms a deep voice from outside the pavilion.

Tearietta glances up and sees a gigantic boulder-man sitting, humbly hugging

his knees. It's Gigan. Mel, or the former devil Melcuemenes, is perched on his head, bouncing around and giggling.

"I've heard about you guys—but wow! Summoned monsters who can talk! I'm guessing your voices are created with Haruto's magic somehow. What surprises me most is learning that summoned monsters have the intellect to communicate verbally. It's not my expertise, but I'm extremely fascinated!"

"Hahaha!" Johnny clacks. "I see you're full of curiosity, just as we've heard. Your eyes are gleaming with the thirst to dissect us. I'd rather you not, please, madam."

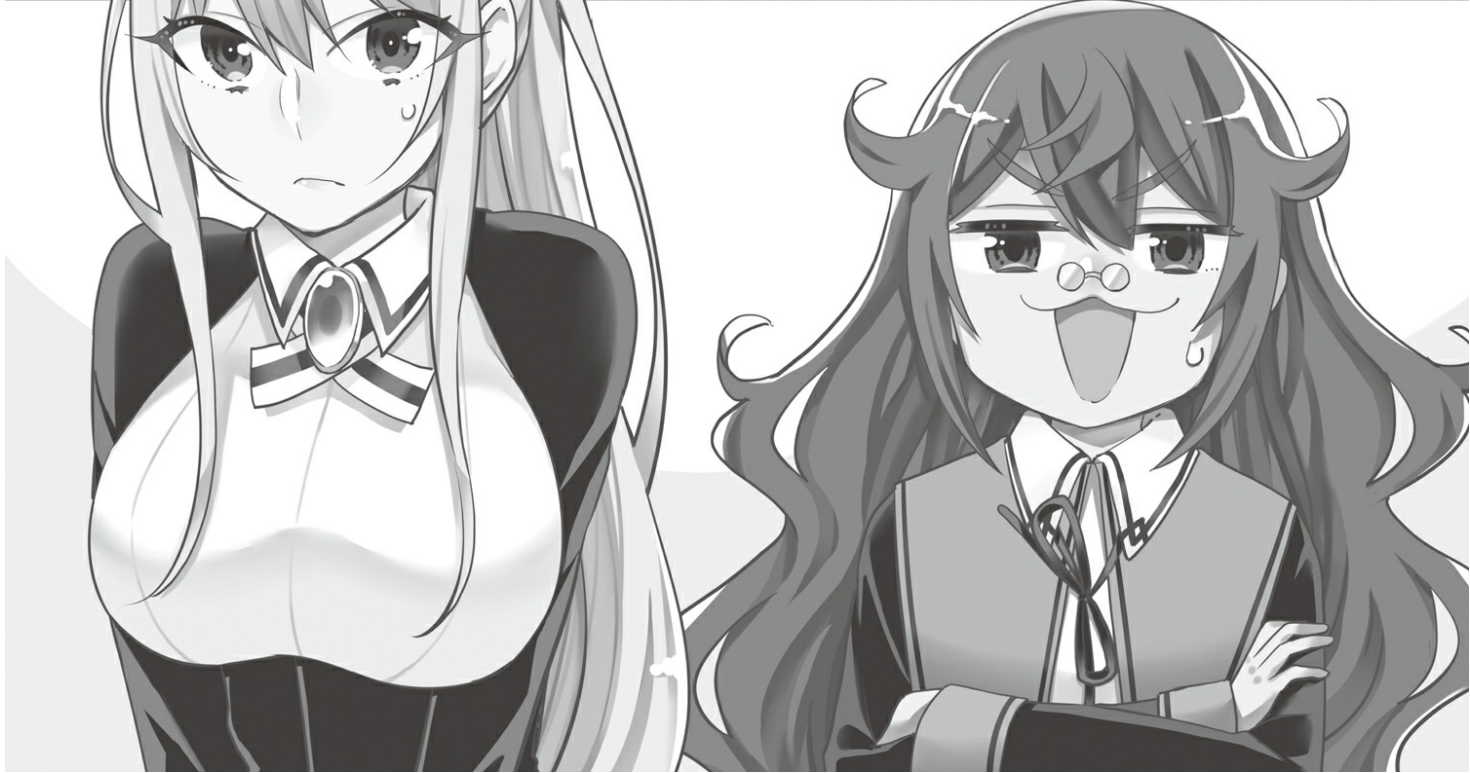
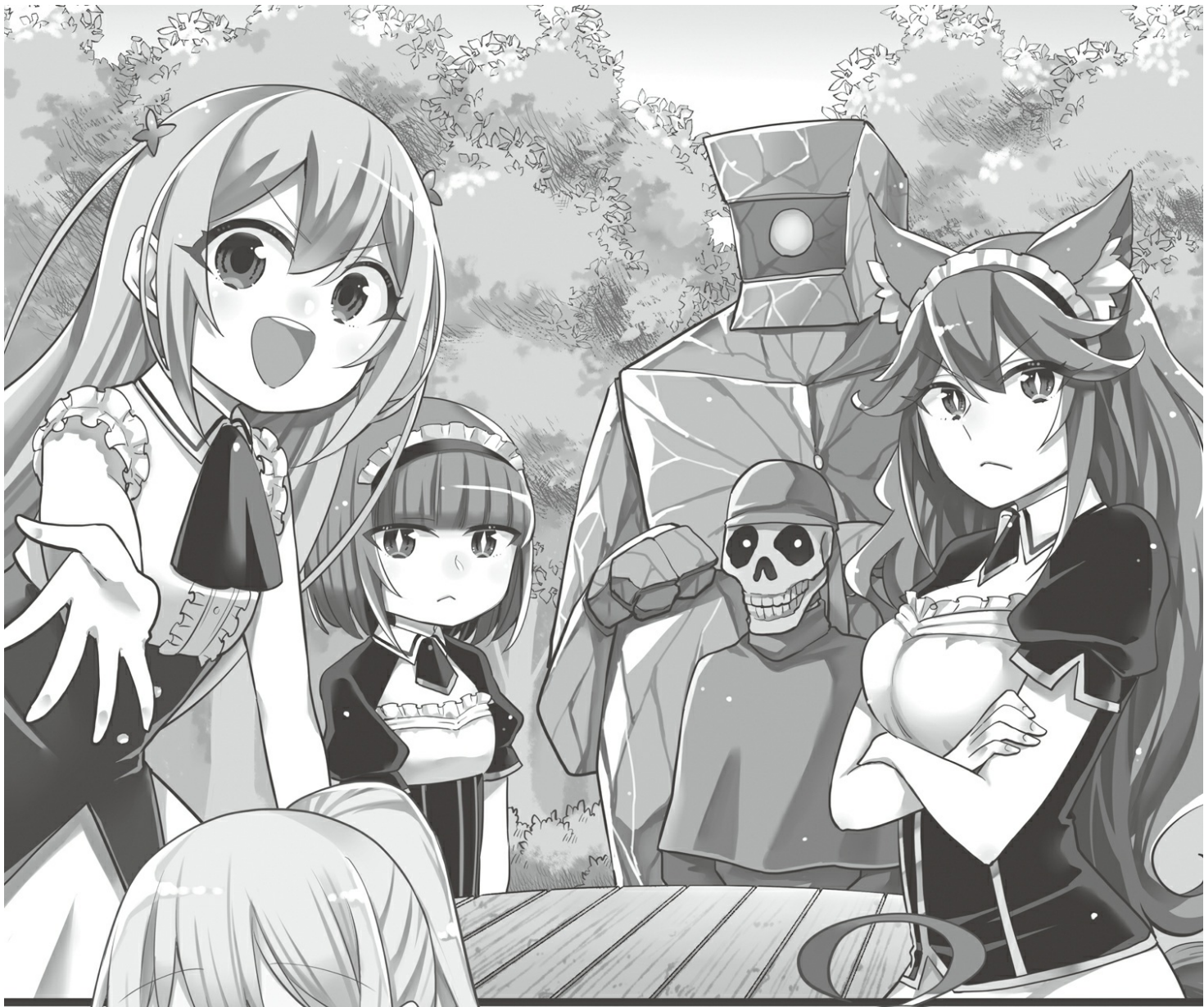
As Tearietta leans in towards Johnny, he pulls away.

He nervously changes the subject. "I understand you're not the only new knight. Lady Charlotte, will you introduce us?"

"Of course," Char smiles at the anxious girl sitting next to Tearietta. It's Irisphilia. "Are you ready to greet the group?"

Iris was in the middle of studying at the research lab when Charlotte brought her here without any explanation.

This is a dicey situation...



Irisphilia is the former Demon King.

She'd cast a high-class spell on herself to reincarnate into a human, but she's been keeping her real identity to herself.

Iris is determined to rid the world of mankind's hatred towards demons. But she's kept her mission a secret—not just from humans but from her former comrades as well—and has been fighting the long battle alone.

Here she is now, sitting before Flay, an old demon friend of hers. If Iris introduces herself by name, even Flay (who isn't exactly the brightest crayon) might put two and two together.

She already knows me by my nickname. The chances are slim, but perhaps I can continue to get away—

Iris's thoughts are interrupted.

Charlotte introduces, "Flay and Liza, you already know her. This is Brother Haruto's friend from school, Irisphilia!"

“““?!”””

Not just Irisphilia but Flay and Liza are dumbstruck—they know the name very well.

The same name as the Demon King?! Come to think of it, her mana does feel unhuman... Flay thinks.

She bears the Demon King's name? Actually...her mana is of a different quality than an ordinary human's, speculates Liza.

Unable to sit still under their piercing stares, Irisphilia rises to her feet.

“Um, I...”

She's certain that these high-level demons can sense her mana isn't quite human.

Irisphilia summons her resolve—it's time to come clean and tell them everything.

"Flay and Liza, is something the matter?" Charlotte asks naïvely.

The woman with the flaming red hair softens her expression. "Oh, I was just surprised—she bears the same name as an old comrade of mine."

"An old comrade? A demon friend, you mean?"

"Yes. Quite a coincidence. But that friend died long ago. Besides... Heh, heh-heh..." Flay lets out a suggestive chuckle.

Liza nods knowingly.

"What's so funny? Is it another demon secret? Please tell me!" Charlotte begs.

"I'm curious too," Tear chips in. "Don't tell me Iris is the reincarnation of your late demon friend?"

Iris's heart jumps.

Charlotte counters, "But is it even possible for demons to reincarnate as humans?"

"It isn't impossible, but the chances are slim. Reincarnation magic is extremely sophisticated. Although, if anyone were to be able to pull it off, I'd imagine it to be the Demon King," Professor Tear muses.

Once again, Irisphilia jerks.

"Oh? Quite perceptive of you—no wonder Sir Haruto respects you as a researcher," says Flay.

The white-haired girl can't stop sweating.

Flay crosses her arms and closes her eyes. After a moment in thought, she opens them wide and says, "I realize we're in the presence of our newest recruits, but perhaps the timing is perfect. There's no reason to hide it—the Demon King's name was, in fact, Irisphilia. And after his death, the Demon King reincarnated as..."

Everyone gulps (and Johnny clacks) in anticipation.

Flay introduces valorously:

"Sir Haruto!"

"Whaaat?!"

"Really?!"

Charlotte and Tearietta, the two humans in the group, shout in surprise.

.....*Huh?*

Meanwhile, question marks dance around Irisphilia's head.

"Brother Haruto is...the Demon King reincarnated?! He's been hiding his identity as he dives headfirst into his enemies' territory? And dedicating himself to fighting evil, enforcing justice, and righting the wrongs of this world? Brother Haruto truly *is* amazing!"

"Agreed," Flay starts. "In his previous life, the Demon King aspired to create a paradise for demons. But Sir Haruto takes it to the next level by working to establish a world where humans and demons can coexist in harmony. That's why he reincarnated in human form: to raise social awareness and change

human society from the inside!”

Flay is in full preaching mode. Charlotte’s starry-eyed while doing a little dance. Liza and Johnny are nodding enthusiastically. Gigan and Mel have fallen asleep.

She’s not wrong...she’s not wrong, but... Iris is dumbfounded. *She’s off by a mile in one crucial detail. But...I see. Haruto has the same intention as I do.* A smile rises to her lips.

Of course, Haruto has no such intention. It’s purely Flay’s delusions.

The only realist here is Tearietta. *Haruto? That kid? Does he really have such virtuous intentions?* But she keeps quiet because she finds the whole thing hilarious.

With this new (false) revelation, Charlotte’s fantasies run wild.

“This is a pathway to global unification. There’s no time to waste! Today’s meeting was just to introduce our new members, but now we must map out our next step.” Charlotte punches her tiny fist into the air. “First and foremost, we must make contact with the underground student council that rules the school and learn their intent. Once we do that, we must pursue the giant evil organization that rules *them!*”

“Hear, hear!” The demons and monster shout in agreement.

“Wait... What are you all talking about?”

Tearietta and Irisphilia are confused.

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes, including cubes and circles with halftone patterns, scattered across the top and bottom areas. The cubes are in different shades of gray and are oriented in various ways. The circles with halftone patterns also appear in different shades and sizes.

CHAPTER TWO: **Something is Afoot**

As soon as the prince and princess took on the role of registrars, the incessant stream of visitors slowed down significantly. The number of requests that reach me is now zero.

At last, I can get some peace and quiet. Just as I'm enjoying some anime episodes at my lakeside hermitage...

"Brother Haruto! I'm home!"

Charlotte is back, and she's bubbling with joy. She was assigned her own dorm room at the Academy but, for some reason, she's been staying here at the lake house ever since she started school.

"Welcome home, Char... Huh? What are you up to?"

As soon as Char sets down her red backpack, she rushes to fix her hair and straighten her school uniform.

"I'm heading out to meet someone. I want to look presentable."

Oh. A VIP of the aristocracy or something? I'm not involved with that stuff, but Char's the daughter of Count Zenfis, a pretty important noble. I'm sure she has social obligations... Or does she?

"I'll see you later, Brother Haruto!"

A sense of dread washes over me as I see off my little sister who seems way too elated.

Who's she getting all dressed up (overstatement) for?

"Could it be...a guy?!"

Hahaha! Not Char, right? Hahaha...

“Wait—that’s not *not* a possibility!”

Come to think of it, I’d forgotten (more like I chose to forget) that there might be some kind of douchebag trying to get acquainted with Char.

As her big brother, it’s my duty to find out who it is. Because I’m her big brother. That’s what big brothers do, right? *Right?*

While I could send out a surveillance barrier to observe her from the comfort of my cozy home, I’d feel guilty about spying on my sister. It’d be a violation of her privacy.

Instead, I conceal myself using an optical camouflage barrier and follow her. *This isn’t spying. I’m right here, openly watching her! (Ignore the fact that I’m hiding from her.)*

As soon as Char arrives on campus, she makes a beeline for the main gate.

Hold up—she’s leaving school grounds to meet this guy? It’s not someone from the Academy? Some VIP of the aristocracy, then? Or a social gathering for high society?

But Char doesn’t take the public carriage. Instead, she slips in and out of alleyways like she’s trying to avoid being seen. Before long, she’s in a pretty sketchy area.

The kind of backstreet where you’d expect to see a drunk slumped along the wall. But there isn’t even a single street dog in sight.

What's going on? Who could she be meeting in a place like this? I think I'm getting déjà vu. Isn't this what you'd call a "secret rendezvous"? The feeling of dread just keeps growing.

'Sir Haruto,' A voice reverberates directly into my ear, making my earlobe vibrate. Communication magic. 'I'm sorry to interrupt you when you're busy...'

I respond in a whisper so that Char won't hear. "Flay? What's up?"

'I was just about to clean your bedroom but the floor is littered with random objects. I take it they're important. What shall I do with them?'

Oh. They're magical items Char asked me to make. I'd left them lying around.

"Just stash them in a corner."

'Yessir.'

As we're talking, Char turns a corner and greets, "Thank you for waiting for me."

"Not at all," a voice replies. "I'm glad you found your way without any trouble. Please forgive me for summoning you."

It's a blond-haired...handsome guy... What? Seriously...? *Seriously?! She really is meeting up with some guy?!*

Come to think of it, I've seen him before.

It's Number 1!

He's the leader of the secret student organization called Numbers.

Um, what's his name again? He's a fourth-year student called... Ah... Al-uh?

“No worries at all. I appreciate the invitation, Mr. Alexei Guberg.”

Right, that’s the name. Not that I care.

And I don’t give a crap about his idiotic club either.

But the fact that Mr. Studly here is putting the moves on my little sister...

“I must destroy him.”

‘?!’

“I’ll eliminate that evil pest (who dares to make a pass at my sister).”

‘.....’

Whoops. I almost flipped a switch there.

I don’t know for sure if Number 1 is trying to seduce Char.

But if he lays one finger on her, I’ll drag him straight into mystery space-time and feed him the meagerest portions of food and water to keep him barely alive in my bottomless black pit. Let him stew forever in eternal darkness covered in his own urine and feces!

I can feel my face hot with wrath as I tread after them.

There’s no conversation between the two. All Char does is scurry after the 1 guy.

“Hm?” Suddenly, she stops and looks back.

I freeze, standing on one leg. Awkward.

“Is something the matter, Charlotte?” Number 1 asks.

“...”

Char stares intently in my direction. *Huh? Did she notice me?* But my optical camouflage barrier is supposed to be flawless...

“No, it’s nothing.”

Char smiles and then turns to follow Number 1 again.

She didn’t notice me...did she? But Char’s got this thing—a sort of supernatural sense that alerts her when I’m in a pinch. I wonder how she does that.

In any case, I continue to follow them.

The pair enter an old apartment building. *Haven’t I seen this place before?* Anyhow, things are about to go down and I need to be prepared.

A guy leading a little girl into an abandoned building... I know where this is going. He’s got a gang of scumbags waiting inside who will snicker lecherously when they see her. There are studio lights and HD cameras set up around the room. And then they do this ’n that to the young, innocent girl and... *No-o-o-o-o!!*

“You can change in this room. Just as we discussed earlier.”

Number 1 gives a smirk and carries on down the hallway.

Char enters through the door he just indicated.

She’s supposed to change? Probably into some slutty costume that barely covers her—wait a sec.

That wooden box in the middle of the room looks super familiar.

Etched on the box is the number 7. Char opens it and finds a couple of empty bottles inside. And just as I remember... Yep. A hidden compartment. Tucked in it is a white cloak and a white headdress that goes over the whole head...

“Thank you for the introduction! My name is Charlotte Zenfis, and I’m honored to have been selected as the new Number 7!”

In a spooky room down the end of the hallway, a group of figures dressed in white cloaks and headdresses are gathered around a table.

My little sister delivers her bubbly self-intro to the comically somber congregation. She's wearing a headdress with the number 7 on her forehead.

"Um, as I told you earlier, you don't have to use your name here," the leader tells her.

"Huh?! Oh, I'm so sorry! I just...forgot."

Char scratches her head. She's probably making a goofy face and sticking out her tongue under the headdress. Adorbs.

But hold up!

Uhhh? What's going on here? Why is Char suddenly a member of this embarrassing teenage blunder clique?

I'm totally confused. I decide to sit down in the corner and gather the pieces of this puzzle.

The flickering candles set an eerie mood in the room. I sit with my knees up, leaning against the wall.

"I suppose we should be welcoming our newest member, Number 7," says the girl with the number 12 written on her forehead. She turns to Char. "But do you really understand the principles of Numbers? We are the agents of a global revolution."

I...I can't! I C A N N O T !—no, hold it in! But...global? *Revolution*? BWAHAHA! I want to laugh in their faces. Are they okay in the head?

"Yes, sort of!" Charlotte beams. The other members fall silent to her chipper response.

Number 1 is the first to speak up again.

“W-Well... She’ll understand soon. I’m sure our sublime ideals will resonate with her, too.”

“That seems rather naïve...”

“Number 12, we all agreed at the last meeting to invite her in. I thought you, too, accepted the decision.”

“I-I did... Her abilities and bloodline are quite adequate. But her father is the leader of the king’s faction. I want to be sure she’s committed to our mission...” Number 12 drops her shoulders and turns to the newcomer. “Anyway, welcome, Number 7.”

Her greeting is followed by a smattering of weak applause. Hardly a warm welcome.

After that, a boring discussion of the group’s ideology, details of their rules, and so forth carries on endlessly. Then they move on to complaints against the current monarchy, and preach about the principles of aristocracy and blah-dee-blah-dee-blah.

Char is nodding and mmhmm-ing attentively.

Uhh... This seems like a bad influence on a little kid?

As her big brother, I’d like to get her out of here ASAP.

But Char is a precocious child. She must’ve accepted Number 1’s offer with a plan in mind.

Maybe she decided to infiltrate the organization with the intention of saving them from their evil path. She’s sweet like that. Yeah, that’s gotta be it.

But dear Char, there are bad people in this world who simply won’t change no

matter what.

How would sweet, innocent Char feel when she realizes that fact?

She'd be heartbroken. I'm sure of it.

Do I really want Char to have to deal with such a sad, painful truth? No. Absolutely not.

There's only one thing for me to do.

I'll have to use whatever means necessary to get this group back on the straight and narrow.

But in case that doesn't work, I'll just disband the group by having a heart-to-heart chat (AKA seizing them in an ambush and "persuading" them until they break).

Just as I've laid out my plan...

"Thank you so much for sharing your valuable perspectives with me today."

Their long-winded and boring conference finally ends, and Char leaves with a polite bow.

I stay behind. I wanna know their true intentions.

The thing is, I already know their identities—I can see their faces with my x-ray vision barrier. Besides, I've already screened each member beforehand.

Come to think of it, I don't know why the previous Number 7 was cast out of the group. I'm pretty sure he was a part of Schneidel's entourage. I wonder if he's still enrolled at the Academy.

After Char leaves, the group is quiet for a moment. Number 9 is the one to

break the ice. She wasn't here the last time I came to eavesdrop.

"What an adorable girl. I quite like those pure-hearted types," she laughs in a sultry voice.

Number 4—a brawny dude who was here last time—responds haughtily, "Number 9, she's not your toy. Be careful with this one." He seems bossy.

"Why, I'd never! She's the daughter of the king's faction's leader; if we can win her over, we'd have a very valuable pawn. But slathering black paint over a fresh white canvas... The idea of it is just too irresistible!"

"It's a matter of moderation. Have you forgotten last time? You tormented that young heiress from the queen's faction and drove her into having a mental breakdown. You're the reason she became useless to us."

"But that was before she joined Numbers. I fully intend to be careful this time."

"I should hope so."

The conversation is taking a weird turn.

Normally, I'd be losing my cool by now and sending them all into mystery space-time. But instead, I feel oddly relaxed. There's no harm in just letting them be.

"Back to the matter..." Number 1 takes the reins. "As Number 9 was saying, if the newcomer sympathizes with us, there's no question she'll be a powerful asset. Including pacifying Count Zenfis. What's more," Under his headwear, he grins like a slimy crook. (I can see with my x-ray vision.) "Perhaps we can lure in her older brother, Haruto Zenfis. I understand his powers are even greater than Charlotte's. And like his father, he's a softie when it comes to her."

He's got the last part right, but the part before that... Oh, whatever. His

misapprehension might come in handy for me.

“Yeah, but do ya think Number 7 will be that easy to play?” Number 6 interjects. “I mean, she seems gullible and all, but won’t that brother of hers, like, try to get in our way?”

He talks like a goof, but he’s pretty astute. I was, in fact, just making plans to get in their way.

“I’ve thought about that. If we play our cards right with the girl, her brother won’t be able to lay a hand on us.”

Number 1’s an insightful guy but he’s already blown his chances by spilling the beans right in front of said brother.

“Fixate on those siblings all you want.” This time, it’s Number 2 who speaks up. “But aren’t you forgetting another very important element?”

What are they talking about now?

“I haven’t forgotten. I’m trying to arrange an appointment with her sometime soon.”

A flurry of cheers sweeps across the room.

“Very impressive, Number 1—making contact with the queen!”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Number 10. The meeting has yet to happen. There’s no guarantee that the Flash Princess will collude with us. She didn’t climb to her current position by competence alone. It was also her wiles. We must be vigilant. But not to worry,” Number 1 assures, “we have the Congregation on our side as well. I’ll persuade her. Just wait and see.”

The group rejoices.

They seem already convinced of their victory (over what?).

Ding! I have a sudden flash of inspiration.

I don't know what the deal is but apparently, collabing with that hag means something favorable for them. So off I go to the next location...

"Yeek! Wh-What are you doing here?"

I arrive at the annex in Shiva Mode.

The queen, who was languidly nursing her glass of wine, is awfully surprised to see me.

I'm about to use this shrew to pull one over on that stupid afterschool club.

Unable to contain my enthusiasm, I get straight to negotiating...



Here I am visiting my birth mother. To be perfectly honest, I'd rather not have anything to do with this woman. She's done nothing but awful things to me and my family, the Zenfises.

But I can't knock her off her pedestal just yet.

If I do that, the kingdom might fall into chaos. I need her alive to maintain the country's order until Char comes of age.

However, not even the neck collar I shackled her with stops her from continuing her crookery. She's been secretly allying with devils and whatnot. She's a tenacious woman.

And now she's about to get acquainted with this afterschool club.

I don't really care what she's plotting with them. The trouble is that Charlotte has chosen this funny little clique as her new plaything.

I gotta act carefully to make sure my little sister stays safe.

"You know Alexei Guberg, don't you?"

Gizelotte's eyebrow twitches. She's got her guard up. "My, isn't this sudden... I know him. He is not only the heir of Lord Guberg the count, but he's also a gifted genius with the highest mana level at the Academy."

Okay, so he's pretty famous.

"I hear you're planning to meet with him soon."

"Here in the capital, Alexei's the delegate of the Guberg family. It's not unusual for nobles to meet with royalty and exchange ideas."

"But you're not meeting with him as the head of the Guberg family. You're meeting him as the leader of Numbers."

Gizelotte glares, her eyes bulging. *I'm not scared. I swear.*

"I see... Nothing gets by you." The queen downs the rest of her drink and straightens up in her sofa. "I understand you're on good terms with Count Zenfis. Which means you're aligned with the king's faction."

What's she talking about all of a sudden?

"Eh-hehe. And I, the queen, am collaborating with the aristocratic faction—even a man of your caliber must be terrified of that fact."

Again, what?

"Very well. Let's make a deal. I'll decline their request, and in return, you'll remove this colla—?!"

Doink! Gizelotte's head shoots straight up. *Ka-donk!* It ricochets off the ceiling and—*thwok!*— it reattaches to her body like a magnet.

“Wha... Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha...” she stammers.

“I don't think you understand the position you're in. You think you're in any place to negotiate with me?”

“Then what have you come here for?!”

I did come here to tell her not to cooperate with Alexei-senpai AKA Number 1. She's got that part right.

“Oh... I see now.” Gizelotte gives a sly grin as she presses her hand on her bruised head. “I suppose you want me to help you extract information from them.”

I hadn't thought of that. Geez, when it comes to evil scheming, this woman comes out on top.

“Very well,” she continues. “I may do that for you. It was my plan from the beginning, anyway.”

I haven't said a thing so far. Before I can even get a word in (or keep up), she's setting herself up right where I wanted her.

Fine by me. What she suggested isn't what I had in mind, but maybe I can find out more about what Numbers is devising.

However, I do have to make one thing clear:

“Don't let the students get in any danger.”

She doesn't seem to know yet that Char is in Numbers. I don't care about the other members, but if they're gonna be Char's new playmates, I can't have Gizelotte making mincemeat of them.

“What do you mean? These are the offspring of the aristocratic faction, and thereby your enemies.”

So? I don't care about the aristocratic faction. As I'm pondering what kind of excuse to make...

“I see...” She nods. “Your interest is in the mastermind pulling the strings behind the students—the Congregation.”

Once again, she reaches her own outlandish conclusion.

And there's that word again. Alexei said something about a congregation, too. What's that about?

“In that case, I believe you and I can work together. Don't get the wrong idea—I'm only funding them so they'll be of service to me. Not because I buy their doctrine.”

“I have no intention of collaborating with you.” I turn her down bluntly. Hehe. Look at Mrs. Royal Queen quivering in frustration.

Anyway, I don't want her bothering me later on, so I decide to make one more thing clear:

“While I'm here, I should warn you. You won't stand a chance against the Congregation. Not only will you take a fall, but you'll also sever that meager thread your life hangs on by your own hand.”

Gizelotte's face grows stern.

Honestly, I don't know anything about the Congregation. I'm just BSing. But it seems to really hit home for her.

“How...how much do you know about the Church of Lucifyra?”

Lucifyra? The name sounds familiar—oh.

“The Devil Lord...” I mutter.

Wasn't his name Lucifyra or something? Bar Agoss, the devil masquerading as a noble, mentioned something along those lines. About reviving the Devil Lord, or whatever.

“Wh?!”

Huh? Why is Gizelotte turning white as a ghost? Did I say something I shouldn't have? Eh, either way.

“Anywayz. I'm done here. Keep your distance from Numbers but stay in communication with them. Designate Guberg as your sole point of contact and only get information through him.”

“More rules?”

I can't have her associating with the other members—she could wind up meeting Char. This woman is not a good influence on a kid's moral development.

“So long!”

I use my optical camouflage barrier to vanish. *Heehee, the old bag's stupefied by my disappearing act.* I tiptoe out the same window I entered from and quietly close it behind me.

Sidenote: When I got back to my hermitage, I found Flay, Liza, Gigan, Johnny, the whole boney army, and all the other demons armed to the teeth. They were fired up and ready to storm the capital. It took me half the day to convince them to wind down.

Apparently, I said something about eliminating evil pests, but I have no

memory of this. Yeesh. I'm exhausted...



Shiva, the Black Knight, disappeared.

Gizelotte remains on guard for a few minutes before finally letting herself relax. Her head throbs with pain as if to warn her, *You're no match for that man.*

Anyone who's ever faced him would be consumed by this terror, this curse.

Boundless mana. Inexplicable magic spells.

Queen Gizelotte is celebrated as the strongest warrior of her era. But once upon a time, even she had to confront a foe she couldn't beat alone. The Demon King—although he wasn't completely unconquerable. Ultimately, the humans did win by banding together.

But Shiva...

Even if they were to mobilize the kingdom's finest soldiers, she doubts they'd put up much of a fight, let alone defeat him.

Perhaps the beings of mythical ages might stand a chance against the Black Knight.

In which case...

"The Devil Lord..." The phrase Shiva had let slip from his mouth.

Still cradling her throbbing head, Gizelotte's expression contorts into a twisted sneer.

No matter how much digging around she did, she wasn't able to ascertain the Congregation's true objective. But when the words "Devil Lord" came up in conversation, Gizelotte immediately put the pieces together.

"They're trying to revive the Devil Lord..."

If only I could wield such power...

Gizelotte strokes the collar around her neck.

"...I might be able to defeat that man."

Zing! A burst of pain floods her skull. She clutches at her head—*it feels as though it's splitting open.*

"Wh-What...?"

Along with the pain, a voice booms inside her head.

'Ah, that burning thirst for vengeance. A grudge of smoldering malice. I have found thee.'

"Wh-Who are you? What on earth..."

'Thou who heareth mine voice, thy wish is granted. Here and now, thou shall be mine vessel!'

"What?! No! Wait!"

But it's too late. Struggling is futile. Once the wish is made, she has no means to resist.

Gizelotte's eyes roll back in her head as she falls unconscious...



Classes are in session. Only a few figures dot the broad road leading to the main building.

Beneath the leafy trees and the dappled sunlight, a young male student sits absorbed in a book. His silvery blond hair flows in the breeze.

A female student approaches.

“Why, if it isn’t Number 1. Quite the privileged life, enjoying a book while classes are in session.”

Her long, golden locks are wavy and she has a well-defined face, but her eyes give off a sadistic gleam.

“Oh, it’s you, Zara. I happen to have a free period. More importantly, you know better than to call me by that name outside of our meetings whether someone is around or not.”

“My mistake, Alex. It slipped my mind.”

Her name is Zara Yessel. Her condescending smirk suggests that the “mistake” was quite intentional. She’s Number 9 of the aristocratic supremacy group Numbers.

“May I join you?”

Without waiting for a response, she sits down next to Alexei.

She comes right up against him so that their sides touch, but Alexei doesn’t bat an eyelid. He closes his book and turns to her.

“I’m surprised to see you on campus. Don’t you already have all the credits you need to graduate? I thought I wouldn’t see you here again until

graduation.”



“Yeah, well, I got all my required credits by the fourth year. Now that I’m in my fifth year, I’m doing as I please. But now that we have a new fun toy, I can’t help wanting to play with her.” Zara licks her lips.

Alexei eyes her with distaste.

“More importantly, how’d the whole thing go?” she asks. “You met with the queen yesterday, didn’t you? Did you manage to reel her in?”

“Again, watch your mouth in public. And yes. Overall, it went just as we’d hoped.”

“Hah! Of course you did it. But we can’t be too careful with that wily she-fox. Don’t let her take advantage of you.”

“I know. Believe me, I was well aware of that when I approached her. But there was just one thing...”

“What? Something bothering you?”

He chooses his words carefully. “Something about her felt...off. She seemed...different, somehow.”

Alexei has engaged with the queen on various occasions during official events. He’s spoken with her a number of times.

But when she invited him to her private chamber in the annex yesterday, her usual refined, elegant aura and intimidatingly cold gaze were missing. Instead...

“She was...surprisingly cheerful.”

“Cheerful?! Do you suppose she was giggly about being alone with a young man?”

If only it were that simple. As Alexei sifts through his memory of the queen’s behavior that day, he notices someone approaching.

A figure is walking up the road that leads to the main campus building, and it's heading straight in their direction.

He shoots Zara a glance, *keep quiet*, as he looks to the stranger.

Alexei can't believe his eyes.

Humming and skipping along is none other than Queen Gizelotte. She's completely alone. Not a bodyguard in sight.

What's she doing here?

Zara, too, is stunned as they both rise to their feet.

"My, my! What have we here? If it isn't the House of Guberg's young heir. For the second time in two days! I thought you were a strait-laced honors student, but what's this? Cutting class for a secret date with your girlfriend?"

"Surely you jest, Your Majesty. I was simply having a chat with a schoolmate during our free period."

"Ah, but what a dull answer! Such a handsome face and such talents—but not much aptitude for witty banter, I see. Your admirers will quickly lose interest if you can't do better," the queen teases. She even throws him a wink.

There's definitely something odd going on, Alexei thinks. "I shall endeavor to improve myself, Your Majesty. Although I suspect this response, too, will fall short of satisfying you. More importantly, what are you doing here at the Academy without a single escort?"

"Oh, just here to see the headmistress. She's an old acquaintance." With a wave goodbye, Gizelotte continues on her way to the school's main building.

An old acquaintance?

Once again, Alexei is puzzled.

It's not unusual for the headmistress and queen to have dealings related to their respective posts. But the headmistress wasn't involved with the Academy yet when Gizelotte was a student, and Alexei has never heard about their families having any sort of connection.

Given their ages, it hardly seems likely that an acquaintance of ten years would qualify them as "old acquaintances."

"You're right, Alex. The queen is not her usual self." As Zara watches the unguarded queen disappear, she murmurs, "She seems awfully happy."

"Happy?"

"Perhaps something good happened to her. This is getting interesting!" The fifth-year girl is ecstatic.

Alexei, on the other hand, is dubious...



Queen Gizelotte bursts into the office without even a knock.

"Helloooo! Long time no see!"

Headmistress Theresia Montpellier freezes at the sight of the unannounced visitor.

The queen smirks, "Oh, my. How vulnerable you've become. You're practically human. So, you go by 'Theresia Montpellier' now? Shall I call you by your new name or your old one?"

"H-How...did you—no! This cannot be! It must not be! The conditions to revive you aren't met yet..." Theresia leaps to her feet so quickly that she knocks over

her chair.

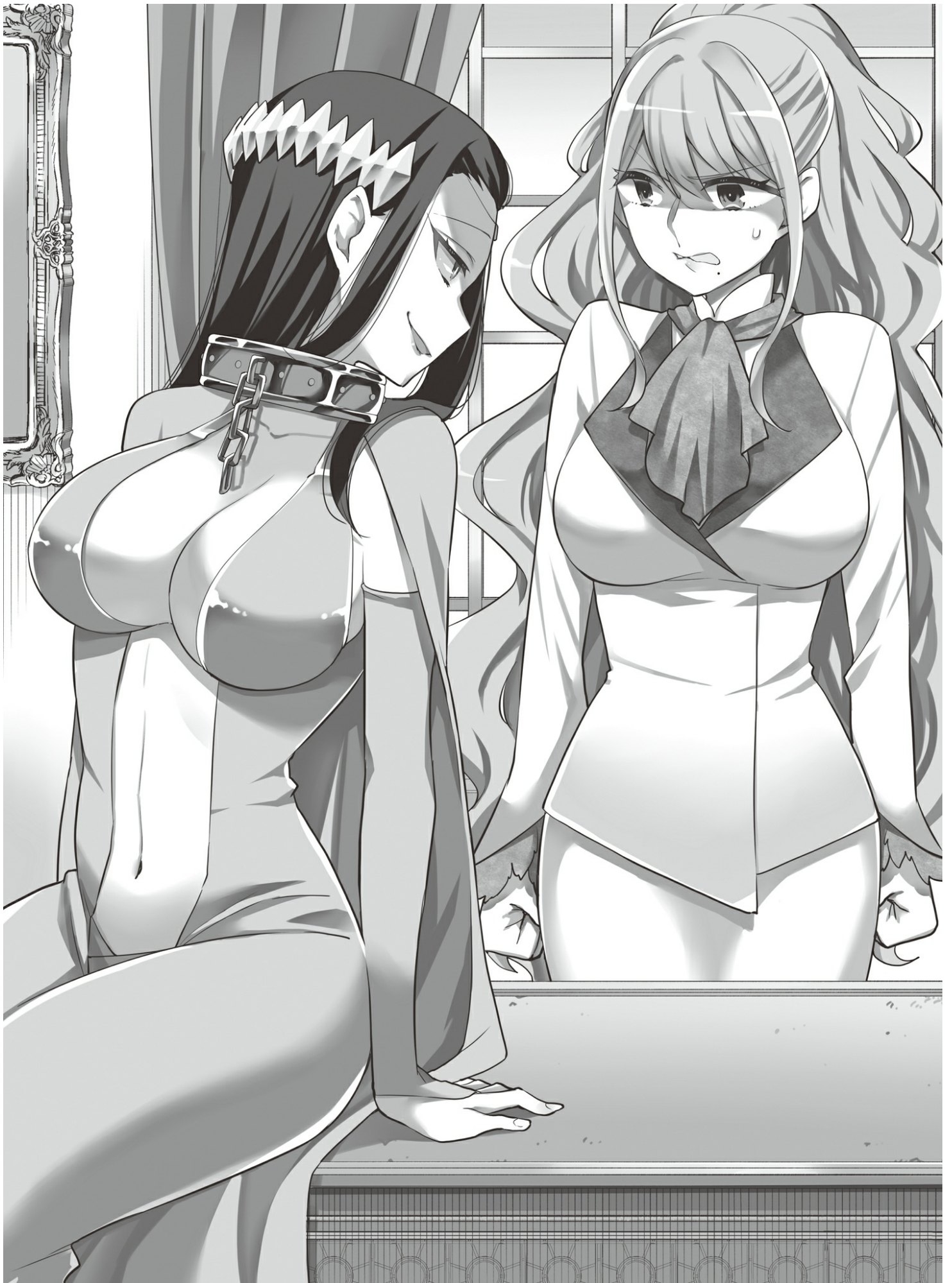
“...Lucifyra!”

Gizelotte giggles. “Not so loud. You’ll attract attention. Not that I’m worried, though. My barrier is always active. And luckily, *that man* hasn’t noticed yet.” The giddy queen approaches the headmistress’s work desk and brazenly sits on it. She crosses her long legs and leans into Theresia.

“Well? Don’t just stand there. Why don’t you take a seat so we can have a conversation.”

“...”

Theresia rights her chair and sinks down, glaring up at Gizelotte.



Whatever this thing is, it's not the queen.

She tries to restore her composure in order to grasp the situation.

I never imagined the Devil Lord would use a human as a vessel...

It's not impossible. If anything, a human would be the easiest choice because the requirements are less stringent.

But it's like stuffing a human mind into the body of an insect. The Devil Lord's powers will be severely limited. Thus, it's not really a practical option.

Since hardly anyone had ever attempted to use a human as a vessel, there's no knowing what the consequences might be.

"What's become of Queen Gizelotte?"

"Aw, your first concern is for the welfare of the vessel? Don't tell me you've degenerated into a human down to your very core."

"You're the one who wants to talk. Stop skirting around and answer the question."

"Oh, aren't you frightening. Don't look at me with such unveiled bloodlust in your eyes."

Theresia steadies herself, trying not to let Gizelotte's nonchalance provoke her.

"The vessel's psyche is intact. Think of it as a sort of dream-like state. If I destroy her mind completely, my true colors would show."

"Very well. I'm relieved to hear that. Which means if I drive you out of the queen's body, she will regain herself."

"If you think you can, be my guest. But the vessel and I are partially melded in

the mind. You can try to force us apart. But you don't believe she can survive, do you?"

Theresia knows better than to take her words at face value. It's clear that the queen's psyche is exerting significant influence—either that or she's putting on an excellent act.

"I see..." Gizelotte says. "So you won't even lay a finger on me. You really have gotten soft, Theresia. I came here expecting you to strike me before I could get a word in."

"That may be true. But the main reason is because I don't sense much of a threat from you at this moment. Queen Gizelotte may be the Flash Princess, but she's hardly a sufficient vessel to contain a being who was once considered a god."

"I do not deny it. In fact, this body has a terrible flaw," Gizelotte laughs as she hops off the desk. "Here. Watch this."

She reaches for the crude collar around her neck. *Pop!*

"What?!"

The moment she removes the latch, her head springs up into the air. She catches the loose head in one hand.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What just happened?!" Once again, Theresia leaps out of her chair.

The head in Gizelotte's hand smiles with the innocence of a young girl.

"Hilarious, right?"

"This is no laughing matter!—wait. You can talk? And there's no blood..."

The severed ends are pitch black. No bone or flesh.

The head in the queen's hand is still tittering with amusement. It behaves no differently from when it's connected to its body.

"A spell was cast on the open ends when her head was severed. Even when they're separated, it's as if they're still attached. In fact, they *are* still attached."

"How can...that be..."

Is this really possible? But indeed, the queen's neck is in this state due to some sort of magic spell.

"It's essentially a barrier. At least according to the principle of magic as we know today."

The head in Gizelotte's palm peers down the gaping void in her neck.

"The openings are sealed with magical films. They're so thin, they're almost like membranes. The other side of the film seems to be on a different plane of space-time from the one we're in. Theoretically, it's similar to teleportation magic."

"Are you saying it's continually maintaining teleportation magic?! That's impossible..."

"It functions differently, so we can't really compare it to actual teleportation magic. If the two connective ends have been established beforehand, it requires almost no mana to maintain them. In fact, the mana to sustain the magic is supplied by this physical body."

"Unbelievable..."

"But there's more. The severed ends are treated with a special effect that causes them to repel each other. And this collar has the power to reverse that effect. In other words, unless I wear the collar, the head and body won't stay fastened. Quite a nasty spell, don't you think?"

So she says, but her expression is quite gleeful. Evidently, this Devil Lord has little emotional attachment to its current vessel.

Lucifyra is only using the queen's body as a steppingstone to its full reincarnation... Theresia speculates.

Theresia doesn't know what its intentions are, and she doubts asking it will get her any answer.

Instead, she probes, "But who could've cast such a spell on someone as capable as the queen?"

The answer must be inside Gizelotte's memory.

"Shiva. The Black Knight."

Theresia isn't surprised. He could do it. In fact, he's the only person alive today who uses magic completely outside the realm of modern magic.

Shiva's true identity is still a mystery.

But one thing is clear: his mana level is far beyond that of an ordinary person's.

Don't tell me—Lucifyra wants to acquire Shiva's body and soul?!

Theresia is lost in thought. But before long, she's interrupted by Gizelotte's severed head leering into her face.

"Hehe. What are you thinking about? I'm sooo interested!" The corners of the queen's mouth turn up. But her expression suddenly turns from amusement to annoyance.

"What a shame, though. We're out of time. That man will come poking his nose in here soon. He's trying to slip through my barrier as we speak. I can't tell if he's daring or cautious..."

She fastens the collar back on and stations her head to its original position.

“I almost forgot what I came here to say. Don’t reveal my secret to him, please. You’re the only one who can detect me—we *are* of the same ilk. That’s why I went to the trouble of visiting you.”

“What do you mea—”

Gizelotte shoots a scowl so hostile that it paralyzes the headmistress. “I’m telling you, do not let that man catch on to my existence. If you do, I’ll decimate this precious little school of yours and the whole capital with it.”

Theresia stares speechlessly. The queen’s cold eyes quickly shift into a playful smile.

“That shouldn’t be so hard. All you have to do is keep quiet.”

“Do you really believe he won’t notice?”

“Oh, he’ll notice eventually. I don’t think he’s that dense. Nonetheless, I wish to buy a bit of time.”

Gizelotte turns on her heels and heads for the door.

“This is for your own good, too. That man is not your friend, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

Gizelotte turns her head and side-eyes Theresia.

“Surely you sense it, don’t you?” she says with pleasure. “A traitor like you surely would... You’re the *God Killer*.”



Here I sit on the edge of a cliff overlooking a quiet lake, holding a fishing pole.

I know—I'm a disgrace of a shut-in for enjoying the great outdoors, but cut me some slack. Mom's been worried about me never getting any sunlight. Besides, I'm here for another reason.

Not too far from where I am, Char and her friends are gathered at a round table inside a pavilion.

Apparently, they call this the "Round Table meeting."

I'm eavesdropping on their conversation.

Unrelated, there's a giant man made of stone next to me who's also fishing.

He's a member of the Round Table too, but he's keeping me company. What a sweet guy.

Anyway, the agenda for today's meeting is:

"The queen is collaborating with Numbers. What could this mean?!"

The other members of the group contribute excitedly to Char's headline.

"Obviously, they're afraid of us. Hehehe. They're terrified!" Flay is way off the mark, as usual.

"They could just be having a peaceful exchange of ideas." Iris is so good-natured.

"Perhaps they've identified common interests?" Liza makes a reasonable speculation.

"Hahaha! Miss Flay, have you forgotten that our existence is a secret?"

Johnny takes a subtle jab at the red-haired maid.

The only person here with the potential to judge the situation rationally is Professor Tear...

“Hurrr...”

...but she’s picking her nose!

I see. For once, the woman’s not spoiling Char’s fun by blurting out some obnoxiously logical hypothesis. She’s learning to read a room. Surprise, surprise.

She still participates, though.

“What do you think, Char?” the professor prompts.

Everyone turns to Char, who declares heartily, “First and foremost, the members of Numbers have a unique belief that, as aristocrats, they’re the chosen ones, and that the kingdom has been ‘meh’ lately and it’s up to them to make it bitchin’ again. Plus, they’re hating on the queen because they believe she’s the one who made the kingdom ‘meh’ in the first place.”

“Uh... Okay?”

Char’s language is getting crass. What kind of anime has she been watching lately?

“And the queen’s all like, ‘I’m the best in the world!’ But she’s wrong because Brother Haruto is the best in the world!”

Char can be pretty blunt sometimes out of sheer innocence. If the queen were here now, she’d be hitting the roof.

“To sum it up, I imagine the queen must also despise those involved in Numbers. Probably.”

“Mmhmm! Yes, I think you’re right on the money so far,” Professor Tear

agrees.

“Tee-hee♪”

My little sister’s getting all bashful from Professor Tear’s praise.

“So two conflicting parties have decided to collaborate. Why do you suppose that is?” Professor Tear quizzes her.

Char widens her eyes.

“Just a hunch, but... There’s some sort of monumental global threat approaching, leaving them no choice? Again, just a hunch!”

She’s super amped. Adorbs.

“Interesting. You could be right!” agrees Flay.

Liza and Johnny nod vigorously.

Iris eyes them skeptically. For someone who’s notorious for being socially tone deaf, she sure is keeping her mouth shut. Showing some real character growth there.

“Interesting. You’re saying the Flash Princess has joined up with Numbers, the group we’ve been monitoring. And there may be an even bigger threat looming over *them*? Oh, what to do, what to do?” the professor provokes.

“Special training!” Char shouts without missing a beat. “Our ultimate goal is to defeat the giant evil organization behind Numbers. But now with the added obstacles in our way, we’d better upgrade our forces, too!”

Flay adds, “Hmm. Quite right. Liza and I cannot utilize our full strengths in human form. In our original forms, too, physical space hinders our powers.”

“But raising your mana level isn’t easy,” Iris interrupts.

“Not true! Iris, your level went up a whole bunch just recently. Teach us how you did it!” Char begs.

“Uh... Well, it just happened. Not my doing...” Iris mumbles. She dug her own grave there.

By the way, I’m the one who made it happen. I’m also the one who hasn’t properly explained how I made it happen.

Professor Tear stands up. “Welp. I won’t be one of your front-line fighters so I’ll be going now. When you decide on your special training menu, I’d be happy to offer advice.”

With that, she peels off.

Char turns to the gang. “First thing’s first. We need a waterfall!”

“Why?!”

Their conference is taking a funny turn.

I continue to listen in as I stare at my fishing line, which, by the way, hasn’t moved an inch.

“Hey there! Catch any fish?” a voice calls from behind me.

I turn around to see who it is. It’s Professor Tear.

“No fish. I’m not using bait.”

“Ah, I see. To better focus on eavesdropping, huh?” Professor Kiddy Glasses lets out an “Oof,” as she plops down next to me.

“Thank you for going along with Char and the gang.”

“Ugh, since when are you so polite? That meeting of theirs is amusing, no doubt. But I don’t consider it a waste of time.”

Huh. Weird. I was expecting her to complain about taking away valuable research time. Which is why I tried to lead the conversation by thanking her.

“Charlotte has a mysterious sort of intuition. On top of her extremely high max mana level, she’s got a bunch of defense spells cast on her thanks to her overprotective big brother. I don’t know all the details, but perhaps those elements interact in a way that enables her to detect unsettling ‘vibes.’”

“Huh? Are you saying that whole ‘global threat’ thing could be real?”

“The queen, who ranks among the most egotistical people in the world, has decided to associate with a bunch of teens. Something must be afoot.”

Yeah, because I ordered her to.

Has the professor been infected by Char’s delusion bug, too? I guess there’s no problem with that.

“So, what are you going to do?” asks Tear.

“About what?”

“The special training.”

“I’m not doing it.”

Hard work doesn’t belong in a shut-in’s lifestyle.

“I’m not asking if you are. Setting aside this global threat, if worse comes to worst, they could end up at war with the Flash Princess. Even with you in their defense line, they’ll still need to get stronger for there to be any kind of contest.”

“True—I don’t want them to train and have nothing to show for it.”

I definitely don’t want Char’s hopes to be dashed.

“You can make it happen, can’t you? Just like you did with Iris?”

An evil grin smears across Professor Tear’s face. I turn my gaze to her backside and squint.

A bunch of faintly glowing threads are growing out of her back.

Thirty-six in total. Of these, thirty-three reach the ground. The other three are dangling partway. Of the three, one is longer than the other two.

Apparently, these threads represent Professor Tear’s mana level.

One of Iris’s threads was all tangled up, preventing the others from reaching the ground. That’s what was keeping her mana level from increasing. When I untangled the knotted one, the other strands started growing really fast and her mana level shot up.

I stare at Professor Tear’s longest thread that hasn’t reached the ground yet...

“Ai-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi!! Pyeow!”

Professor Tear flops around like a fish out of water and jerks up in the air.

“Wh-Wh-What did you just do?!”

Hmm. That was actually pretty easy.

“I tugged at one of your threads by force and connected it to the ground.”

And, as a result, her current mana level went up by 1.



I've been reborn into a world where magic is power.

Your max mana level is determined at birth, and with hard work, you can raise your current mana level to that number. However, there are exceptions in which a person's mana level can stop increasing. Iris used to be one of them.

That said, I have the ability to perceive people's mana levels in the form of fine threads that grow out of their backs.

Actually, not only can I see them, but I can even maneuver them by enveloping them in a barrier.

Just now, I forcefully plugged one of Professor Tear's threads into the ground. And surprise, surprise. Her current mana level increased by a point.

"All of a sudden my level just went up... Give me a warning, at least! Or rather, don't use me as your guinea pig!" yelps Professor Tear.

Man, she's fuming.

"I didn't think it'd actually work."

"It's not about success or failure. It's a big deal to mess with something so fundamental to the people of this world. In fact, my body feels feverish right now but at the same time, I can't stop shivering. And my head is woozy! What the heck is this?!"

Her eyes are spinning.

"Sorry. That was careless of me. But I can't try it on myself, and Gigan's threads are all linked to the ground already. There was no one else around."

"You don't sound sorry!"

Your anger is completely understandable. But I'm not lying; I *am* sorry.

"Anyway," I say. "If that's the kind of side effect you'd get, I can't use it on

Char and the others.”

“Heh heh heh. It’s too soon to draw that conclusion from one trial. Now that we know it’s possible, we’ll need to run a sizable number of tests.”

Despite what a pale, shivering mess she is, she’s thrilled to experiment. Typical of her.

“Okay. Wanna do a test now to see what happens when I pluck one out of the ground?” I suggest.

“No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!!!”

I pull one of the threads out of the ground but—*nyooop!*—it just stretches longer and longer with no end in sight.

Apparently, pulling them out like weeds isn’t a thing.

By the way, Professor Tear is doing a weird dance and howling.

“I said! I’m not your guinea pig!”

“Then who’d make a good one?”

“Let’s see... We can’t use a low-level commoner because they might not be able to endure the side effects of the sudden increase. Ideally, we’d want someone with a relatively high mana level who also trains in magic daily.”

Mmhmm. That kinda sounds just like...

The professor nods. “Yup. A student at the Academy would be perfect.”

Why does she look so thrilled? She *is* a teacher, right? Using her students as lab rats—is this woman right in the head?

“I suppose you’d rather not try it on one of your friends,” she offers. “And if you use some random student you don’t know, you could end up hurting them

and feeling bad about it.”

“Yeah, even I have a basic sense of morals.”

“Right, right. But think about it. Students with relatively high abilities whom we wouldn’t feel too bad about harming a teeny bit. We know the perfect group of test subjects.”

Do we? That sounds too good to be—

“Ooh...” My lightbulb flicks on. “We do. That silly little—I mean, unscrupulous gang that’s trying to revolutionize the world to serve their own interests.”

The one and only Numbers. Adding that title in front of their name makes them sound even more silly.

“But won’t I end up making them stronger?” I say.

The whole point is to raise a person’s mana level easy-peasy and hassle-free.

“Oh, that’s fine. Their max mana levels aren’t high enough to pose a threat to us. And if experimenting on them results in learning how to reduce the physical and psychological burden of the process, we can use it on Char and her friends, too. Besides...” Professor Tear leers, “...the tougher the enemy, the greater the thrill for a certain someone, right?”

Yes. It definitely would make Char happy.

“But I don’t want to risk anyone actually getting hurt.”

“You’re so overprotective. Just keep a watchful eye on her like you’ve always done.”

That’s true. But accidents can happen.

The strongest member of Numbers is Alexei-senpai, Number 1.

His mana level is 30/37—both high numbers. When I sparred with him in class, I managed to hold my own, but I don't know how things would go in a full-on fight to the death. Even Laius's current mana level is 24.

Messing with Alexei is not a good idea. I probably wouldn't want to make him any stronger.

The rest of Numbers (minus Char) have max mana levels of around 30, with current mana levels in the 20s. Only one of the members is a low 18, if I remember correctly...

"Do you know Zara, the fifth-year student? The girl who seems like a sweet-but-psycho stalker-type with a sadistic streak?"

"Hm... Oh, you mean Lord Yessel's daughter."

Can't believe she actually got that.

"Despite his title as a duke, his family has lost a lot of power recently for lack of a strong heir. I'm not really up to date on these things, but I recall they don't have a fraction of the influence that the Hafens have."

The Hafens... Oh, right. Mr. Rich Kid's family.

Professor Tear continues, "But that girl left an impression on me. She's the black sheep who publicly admits that she's in the Academy to get her hands on a good man. Yup, she'll do. Let's start with her."

"Do you hate her or something...?"

"Not really. I quite like her kind. She's got clear goals and the determination to achieve them. Even if that goal is snagging a man. But the first time I met her, she had the gall to look at me with an expression of pure pity and say, 'Looks like you're doomed to be single forever.' Dammit! I don't even want to get married!"

So you do hate her.

Anywayz. We might as well go with Zara. Since I don't have anything against her personally, ensuring her safety is my job. Besides, the whole point is that her mana level goes up. It's not a bad deal for her. I don't see any issue.

"Heh heh heh. I can't wait. First, we'll strip her naked and hang her in the air. I get to have my experiments *and* watch that brazen hussy scream and cry and dribble bodily fluids from every orifice. Talk about killing two birds with one stone. Yippee!"

Apparently, keeping Professor Tear under control is also gonna be my job.
How is this woman allowed to be a teacher?



Zara Yessel has fairly low potential for a duke's daughter. Her family doesn't expect much from her.

The family's heir is her eldest brother. He's mediocre at best, but is engaged to the daughter of a viscount with a high mana level, and his father casts his hopes on the boy for a better future for their bloodline.

However, the Yessels have lost influence over the years. So it'd be a foolish gamble for the duke to put all his eggs in one basket.

His other children—particularly Zara, who's got the good looks—all have an assignment:

To marry someone with a high mana level and have lots of children.

All they need is for one of those offspring to have a high mana level. The idea is that the Yessel family can adopt that child as their heir in order to lead the family back into prominence.

That's why Zara had enrolled in the most prestigious school in the kingdom.

But to tell the truth, she was sick of it.

Sacrificing yourself for the family is expected as an aristocrat. Even more so as a woman.

However, she's not as naïve or as dedicated enough to accept such outdated values.

For her first three years at school, Zara used her father's order as an excuse to enjoy all sorts of romantic exploits.

Before long, the consequences of her sadistic and self-centered actions caught up to her. Rumors spread about her habit of eating guys up and spitting them out. By her final year of school, few guys would go anywhere near her unless they were just looking for a quick and easy "good time."

Ironic how Alexei, the school's valedictorian, is one of the few decent guys left.

Zara shakes her head with a slight smile on her lips as she sips her tea on the school's open terrace.

Alexei Guberg is reading a book next to her.

"Did you remember something funny?" asks Alexei, as he flips a page. His words may seem thoughtful, but his eyes never leave the book in hand.

"No, nothing. By the way, Alex, should you really be hanging around me? Someone might spread nasty rumors."

Alexei Guberg is the son of a count and the next head of his well-respected family. Up till last year, he was the strongest student on campus. He's also blessed with good looks and, although still in his teens, possesses enough leadership skills to manage the aristocratic supremacy faction.

Not only is he admired by the girls at his school, but gossip has it that even princesses from other lands have sought his hand in marriage.

There's no question that the competition for his betrothal is the most fiercely contested in the kingdom.

A square like him really isn't my type, anyway. Besides, he'd never go for me.

Alexei is popular. But while on the surface he comes off as approachable and gracious, he keeps a distance from the female students. The fact that he's relatively frank towards Zara is probably because they both consider each other off limits. They also share a strong sense of comradery for a common cause.

However...

"Rumors, huh," Alexei replies. "I've been asked a few times if there's something between you and me. Recently, that is."

"Oh, really? You should be more careful, then."

"Not an issue. It's favorable, in a way. It'd be easier for us to discuss our country's future as comrades. Of course, it's important that nobody hears what we're talking about. Besides..."

His next words take Zara by surprise.

"I wouldn't be opposed to that happening with you in the future."

At first, she doubts her ears. But from a quick glance at Alexei, she deduces his intention. His eyes never left his book. This is obviously no declaration of love.

“I get what you’re saying. My father’s influence may have declined, but he is, no less, a duke. You’d gain a sturdy steppingstone to boost your social standing.”

“I won’t deny it. And I don’t think it’s a bad option for you either. We both stand to reap great benefits.”

He’s right. If she marries Alexei, her father certainly wouldn’t mind. In fact, she can picture him dancing with joy. But...

Two months ago, I might have accepted that option.

She’d already lost interest in him by then. Or to be precise, she *was* still interested, although the point of her interest had changed. But even that interest vanished at the arrival of a certain male student.

“As far as ‘benefits’ goes, isn’t there a girl more suitable for you?”

Alexei raises a brow.

“Charlotte Zenfis. Is there anyone with greater talents and better bloodline?”

“She’s not the kind to prioritize social standing. Besides, she very much worships her unrelated older brother.”

“Hah. Then why not charm her the old-fashioned way? Suppose there *is* someone on her mind, surely she’d have to surrender if another woman snatches him up, right?” Zara licks her upper lip.

Alexei finally turns to look at her. “What are you scheming?”

“I’m interested in her older brother—the guy who managed to give *you* a

trouncing.”

“I see. His actual abilities are still a mystery, but his family name is undeniably passable. If all goes well, the two of us could corner Count Zenfis, the king’s strongest ally.”

Zara doesn’t care about that. What interests her is...

His potential as a “vessel.”

Zara was desperate.

She had no freedom. She lived her life according to her father’s orders. While it seemed like she was living a carefree school life, the truth was that she was completely imprisoned under her father’s rule.

And that wasn’t going to change even after she graduated. Having a career was never an option with her mana level. The only future waiting for her was returning home and continuing to exist as her father’s pawn.

Her life was pointless from the very start.

And so, she lived in despair...until that day.

Perhaps her saving grace was the fact that she wasn’t the type to surrender to her fate like a good obedient daughter. She yearned for more. She longed to escape from her prison.

‘Pray to our Lord. The object of your desire matters not to Lord Lucifyra—what matters is its essence.’

Two months ago, Zara met Bar Agoss, the baron. He was gentlemanly, but also somehow veiled in a sinister aura.

At that point in her life, Zara had no interest in divine salvation. Regardless, she fell to her knees and prayed as if Agoss had put her under a spell.

That's when it happened.

'Ah, yes... Your desperation pleases me. You're too feeble to serve as my true vessel, but good enough for a trial run.'

A voice spoke directly into her head. And then, the *thing* entered her body.

A trial run—she was nothing more than an experiment. She'd only been chosen as a tester in anticipation of a more appropriate vessel to prepare for the main event.

For that reason, her conscience can't communicate with Queen Gizelotte's—where the largest portion of Lucifyra's entity resides.

She's nothing more than a disposable unit supplied with a sample of the Devil Lord's divine powers.

Nonetheless, her tenacity is what earned them.

Once Zara was melded with the Devil Lord, her mission was to acquire a greater vessel.

Charlotte Zenfis would be an acceptable candidate, but he's in the way.

Then why not take over him first and test his quality as a vessel?

Maybe he'll turn out to be even more suitable than the girl.

In addition, there's the mysterious Black Knight. Perhaps she could get close to him, too.

“In that case, I’ll go pay him a visit. Good luck with yours.” Zara waves and heads for Professor Tearietta’s research lab.

Alexei shrugs his shoulders.

What’s happening?

She can’t move.

Haruto Zenfis sits opposite her in a cluttered meeting room. Near the doorway, Tearietta appears to be immobilized, too.

Zara shifts her eyes to the right. She catches a glimpse of...

“You’re a devil, aren’t you?”

...a man dressed entirely in black, pointing his finger at her.



I stayed up all night watching anime and then slept like a log until noon in my peaceful lakeside cabin. My slumber was interrupted by my doppelganger Haruto C. He delivers an emergency message:

“The hot girl’s here.”

Haruto C stares down at me as I blearily manage to let out a “Huh?”

“You know, the senior girl with the sadistic stalker vibe.”

“Oh, you mean Zara?”

“Yeah. I don’t know why but she came to the lab asking to speak with Haruto. Not Char, but Haruto. I can’t handle girls like that. They’re my natural enemy.

You fight her.”

If my copy can't handle something, it goes without saying that I'm gonna be bad at it, too. *And what do you mean, “fight her”?*

Oh well, I needed to see Zara anyway. This saves me the trouble of visiting her. But what could she want?

I roll out of bed, change into my clothes, and head over to Professor Tear's meeting room where Zara's waiting.

Zara sits across from me at the table. She scans me up and down with her slimy gaze like she's sizing me up.

She gives me the creeps.

Professor Tear is nowhere to be seen. Iris is in class. Polkos was the one who escorted Zara to the meeting room but he disappeared to prepare some teaching materials.

It's just the two of us. I feel suffocated. And sleepy.

“So, you wanted to see me about something?”

“First, allow me to introduce myself. I am...”

Zara-senpai recites a bunch of information I already know. I try not to yawn.

When she finally finishes her self-intro, she crosses her arms on the table and leans forward. She rests her huge breasts on top of them.

“Now, the reason I'm here. Are you dating anyone?”

“Uh...huh?”

“Ah, that's too bad. May I ask who it is?”

“Oh...no. That wasn’t an affirmative. That was like, me asking you why you’d ask me that.”

“You loaded all that subtext into those two syllables? Never mind that. You don’t seem very perceptive, so I’ll break it down for you.”

She tosses me a casual insult but I’m too tired to care.

“When a person of the opposite sex asks you if you have a partner, it’s usually because they want to go out with you.”

“Oh...”

“What I’m saying is, I’m interested in you. Now, just because we’re members of the nobility, it doesn’t have to be for a betrothal. You still want to be free to date around, don’t you?”

“Uh...”

“That’s not much of an answer. Are you even listening?”

“I’m listening, but I don’t understand why I’m dealing with this situation.”

“I like the honesty, but can you try thinking for yourself first? If you use your head a bit, I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“I’m not very perceptive, so...”

Zara sighs and drops her shoulders.

“In your case, it seems like it’s more a lack of self-awareness than a lack of perception. Do you even realize that you’re quite famous at the Academy? You completed an expedition at the Olympius Ruins in the very beginning of your first year and got excused from taking any classes. I’m sure there are lots of girls trying to get close to you.”

“No, not particularly.”

In fact, the number of such occurrences has been zero.

“That’s surprising. Am I the first?”

I nod.

I’m just realizing that I haven’t offered her a cup of tea. Then again, there’s no need to be a polite host to her, so I pretend not to notice.

“I imagine you must be quite intimidated by a woman like me. Well, you’re in luck!” Zara is all smiles.

If *she* had any self-awareness at all, she’d realize that she’s on the path to rejection.

“If you don’t have a specific partner right now, why not try dating me? You’ve got nothing to lose—at the very least, we can test the waters for physical compatibility.”

She leans over in a way that accentuates her chest as she gazes at me seductively.

“I’m not interested,” I say.

Zara blinks at the blunt rejection.

“I could give you pleasure...”

I’m sure she could, but the fact is that I’m genuinely not interested.

Had this happened in my previous life as a frustrated virgin, I would’ve jumped at the opportunity. But strangely enough, my sex drive has been nonexistent since being reincarnated.

“Please leave.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize I’ve screwed up.

Now that I think about it, this girl is supposed to be the guinea pig for our mana level-tweaking experiments.

Eh, but it's kinda difficult to handle her when she's throwing herself at me. Better to grab her from behind as she walks away sad and dejected. Yeah, I'm an animal.

However, Zara refuses to step down.

"Why not just give it a try? I wanna get to know you. You've got nothing to lose, right?"

Uh, I run the risk of getting a reputation for messing around with a skanky hoe. But I decide not to say that. Even I have that much decorum.

I wrack my brain trying to figure out how to get rid of her.

What if I play the inexperienced prude card and claim, *"I'm in love with someone else!"*?

She might come back with, *"In that case, let me teach you a thing or two so you'll know what to do with her (heart emoji)"*

I've seen this stuff in adult manga. Yeah, won't work.

Now what?

I'm so sleepy, my brain isn't working well. Maybe I should just snatch her and get it over with.

Just as I'm summoning all the mana I can into my pupils...

"Why, hey there! Zara Yessel!" Professor Tear enters the room. "I didn't know you were here—you could at least say hello to me." She's smiling but her eyes are bloodshot.

Where the hell were you?

Zara turns around in her chair to look at the professor.

I catch a glimpse of her back.

“Haruto, now!” yells Professor Tear. “This is our chance! Quick, try that thing we talked about—huh? What?! I can’t move... W-W-Wait! Not on me! On her! Hrk?!”

Shut up. I’m already on it.

The “switch” inside of me just flicked on, I realize.



You can't blame me, though. Given the circumstances.

"What's that? A barrier...?" Zara rises to her feet. "What the?! I-I can't move?!"

Without missing a beat, I restrain her with a barrier and whip up a fake Black Knight Shiva.

"You're a devil, aren't you?" It speaks and strikes my signature pose.

This one's not like my copy android. It can't move around autonomously. I have to operate it like a puppet.

But isn't this a surprise.

When I tried to get a look at the fine threads coming out of her back—the strings that represent her mana level—I couldn't find a single strand.

She's just like him. Bar Agoss, the devil I captured.



What's happening to me?

Zara is paralyzed. Despite her confusion, she focuses on analyzing the situation.

A high-level barrier is fixing me in place. Escaping this would be far beyond my capability.

She exhales, relaxes her shoulders, and peers over to the Black Knight.

He stands frozen in a strange pose, one arm thrust forward with his finger pointing at her.

This man... He's empty inside!

A doll. He doesn't exude the faintest whiff of mana.

That means the real Shiva is hiding somewhere and controlling this puppet.

Or...

This time, she doesn't shift her gaze—only her attention to the boy seated across the table.

Haruto Zenfis. Could he be...?

He's staring blankly in her direction. No sign of wielding advanced magic.

No, it can't be him. Or can it? Perhaps it's too soon to draw conclusions...

In any case, there's no question that Shiva is nearby. She'd better watch out—one slip could trigger his next move. This time, in the form of an attack. Zara must think quickly.

"A...devil? What's that?" She decides to play stupid.

"Huh?" The empty doll utters and strikes another weird pose. It pauses for a second before stiffly marching over to Professor Tear who's still frozen in place.

*Mumble mumble...*the Shiva puppet whispers something in her ear.

Professor Tear shoots him a look of annoyance and says something. Zara can't make out her words.

The Shiva doll wheels around and points a finger at Zara again.

"Don't play stupid!"

This is gonna take forever.

She's losing patience.

"I'm already onto you!" he accuses.

Based on what evidence? The girl wants to ask, but she's sure he'll blow off the question.

"You give off the same vibe as Bar Agoss, Melcuemenes, and that giant leopard guy who looked all big and threatening but had nothing to show for. They were all devils!" Shiva yaks his argument.

Not exactly evidence but whatever. He thinks I'm just a devil... In that case, the misconception might prove useful in our negotiations.

She's melded with the Devil Lord—she ranks above pawn devils. Zara herself isn't exactly a "Lord" but revealing that fact would be unfavorable to her.

"I see nothing gets past you. You're right. Two months ago, I became a servant of the Devil Lord Lucifyra..."

"I knew it! Bwahahaha! I was just fishing for information, but you confessed so easily. Fool!"

This guy's really getting under my skin.

Her annoyance is exacerbated by Shiva's weird little dance as well as his creepy voice that sounds like layers of voices talking at once.

His oddball behavior must be a tactic to confuse the enemy and gain the upper hand.

Impressive. Even having immobilized her, Shiva's still playing his cards carefully. *I can't allow him to set the pace.*

"You're right that Bar Agoss and Melcuemenes were my comrades, but I'm not as loyal to the Devil Lord Lucifyra as they were."

"Hmph. Don't think you can fool me. I bet all you devils say that."

"The other devils wouldn't say that. Did they?"

“Hm? Oh. Yeah. No. They didn’t!” With each word, he strikes a different pose.

Another tactic to confuse me?

“Anyway, there you have it. If information is what you want, I’ll give it to you. What I can tell you regarding the Devil Lord is limited, though. There are restrictions I must abide by.”

She’ll have to give up some amount of dirt. There’s no getting around that. But if it’s something that can’t be fact-checked, a lie would be just as good.

“I suppose it’ll take some time for you to trust me. I don’t expect you to release me immediately, but considering my status as a daughter of the nobility...”

Whud. There’s a sudden dull thump behind her.

She turns to look. Haruto had collapsed. She was so distracted by Shiva that she’d almost forgotten he was there. Blood is dripping from his nose.

“Huh?!—wait, it wasn’t me! I didn’t do... Kghaa!”

She feels her back burning, followed by a sickening sensation in her body as if there are hands clawing around inside her.

“Wha... What...are you doing?!”

The Shiva doll is standing with one hand stretched dramatically in her direction.

This is bad.

She has no idea what’s happening or what’s being done to her. But it’s bad.

I must escape... This vessel is...

...done for.

The fragment of Lucifyra that was melded with Zara slips out of her body.

“N-No... No!” she whimpers. “That wasn’t me! There was something...inside of me!”

All that’s left is Zara Yessel.

“It seems so.” The man in black approaches her.

Zara remembers everything that happened when the Devil Lord was possessing her, including their conversation until now.

All she could do is violently shiver from fear. Her teeth can’t stop chattering.

“There’s something I want to ask you, but first, I need to have a private conversation with the professor. Go to sleep.”

His black-gloved hand covers Zara’s forehead.

“Ah...”

Zt! Zara feels a jolt of electricity and she falls unconscious.



Ugh... I’m so tired. And my head is pounding.

Looking at the threads is hard enough. On top of that, controlling the Black Knight puppet, keeping a close eye on Zara’s reactions, and whispering with Professor Tear.

I’m exhausted!

I erase the Black Knight puppet and stand up.

“That was some impressive acting. At least she didn’t seem to notice that you

were puppeteering the doll.”

“You think so? Not that I care either way.”

Zara is asleep while standing upright. I focus my attention on her back and examine twenty-two threads growing out. Some connected to the ground, some not.

Yep. She’s back to her original state.

“Mmhmm,” says Professor Tear. “Just as you suspected, something was possessing her. Possibly an evil god?”

I thought she was a devil like Bar Agoss, but Professor Tear speculates something more powerful based on Zara’s choice of words.

The teacher adds, “Are you sure about letting it escape? Now that it’s gone, I’m not confident we’ll get any useful information out of her.”

“If it’s able to escape at will, I doubt it would’ve given us any honest information. Zara still has the memories from when she was possessed. We’re better off interrogating her.”

“Good point. But...you’re not feeling pity for her, are you?”

Nope, not one bit.

Consequently, I did her a favor by exorcizing the evil spirit that was possessing her. She owes me. I’m confident I can get information out of her...

...and it turns out, I’m right.

Zara is as meek as a kitten in a new home. Bit by bit, she shares all kinds of details.

The biggest news is...

“Really? The Devil Lord’s possessing the queen?”

Professor Tear is the one taking charge of the interrogation. With the help of the Black Knight puppet. (I’m hiding.)

This is a surprise. Apparently, the Devil Lord’s soul or whatever is possessing Gizelotte.

For the time being, I say we plan out our next move based on the info we’ve gained.

While we’re on the subject of devils and Devil Lords...

What’d Zara (or the thing) want from me, anyway?

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 shapes inside them. These elements are scattered across the page, creating a modern, abstract background.

CHAPTER THREE:

Founding an Organization of Justice

Rumor has it that Queen Gizelotte's gotten herself possessed by the Devil Lord. As usual, that woman is nothing but a thorn in my side.

The person I least expect trouble from is the one who ends up becoming the biggest headache.

There's no time to be worrying about the kingdom's power conflicts or whatever. Better if I go ahead and ambush the queen, and show her the exit from this world once and for all...is the conclusion I've come to.

However...

It's summer already but the air is still chilly deep in the mountains of the imperial territory.

Bloooosh! A huge gush of water is streaming down from the sky in the middle of the thick forest. We're by a waterfall.

"Why is this happening to meeeee?!"

Professor Tear's lament is drowned out by the roaring waters.

The torrent is pummeling her head. She's wearing a white robe like an undergarment for a kimono. All made by me. Upon Char's request.

Flay, Liza, Iris, and my little sister, too, are all lined up under the crashing icy water. They look cold.

"Hang in there, Professor Tear! We must endure this ascetic trial. Only then will we reach 'the awakening' or a power-up of some kind!"

Char's hanging in there too, but her lips are turning purple. This is getting

dangerous.



“But I’m not a front-line fighter!”

“We must all face this great evil together!”

“Are you even listening?! Besides, I’m almost at my max. I’m not going to ‘awaken’ to any new levels of power!”

“But gaining unexpected new powers is essential to an ‘awakening’! Maybe your max mana level will increase?!”

“That is absolutely *not* happening! I’ve had enough of this! Count me out!”

Professor Tear runs out from under the waterfall fully soaked.

And who could blame her? It was pretty sporting of her to even comply in the first place. I appreciate her playing along with Char’s games.

But “awakening”? I sure hope it’s not a prophecy.

“Humph! I can’t believe I have to deal with this.” Professor Tear is shivering uncontrollably as she stomps towards me.

I’m standing at the top of the waterfall in my all-black superhero outfit, looking down on their so-called training session. There’s a reason I’m in Shiva Mode.

“Oh, you brought *her* along?” The professor side-eyes us.

“What kind of kink is this?” Zara Yessel looks down at the scene bemusedly.

Next to her, Haruto C is sitting on the ground spacing out.

“Also...where are we? I never heard of a waterfall like this near the capital...”

“We’re in imperial territory.”

“You mean we crossed the border just by going through that weird door?”

“I’ll explain the details some other time. More importantly...”

I need to organize my thoughts first.

Something needs to be done about the Devil Lord possessing Queen Gizelotte. Ideally, I'd like to just end her and be over with it. The reason I can't do that is because...

"Lady Charlotte, perhaps you should take a break," Liza suggests.

"I-I-I-I'm okay-y-y-y! Th-Th-Th-This is n-n-n-n-nothing!" *Chatter-chatter-chatter-chatter!*

Char has her hands clasped together in front of her chest as she endures the cold.

This is their special training.

The goal is "to achieve some sort of awakening and power up!" so they can contend with the colossal foe.

Char had also invited Princess Marianne and Prince Laius but their responses were:

"I'm sorry but I'm quite busy with my student council duties..."

"Standing under a waterfall? Hah, sounds dumb. If only increasing our mana level was that easy!"

Laius, you're not wrong but that kind of attitude is not what makes the world go round smoothly. Jerk.

Anyway.

Char is seriously serious about battling this giant evil organization and the Devil Lord, which Professor Tear accidentally spilled the beans about.

By their own hands, Camelot shall bring peace to the world!

Now, what would happen if I swoop in and take out Queen Gizelotte along with the Devil Lord inside her?

It might put an end to the evil organization's (in this case, the shady cult of Lucifrya's) operation within the kingdom.

But it sounds like they've already expanded their influence outside of our lands. It's possible they'll shift their focus to somewhere else.

Which means the enemy that Char's all fired up to vanquish would disappear from the kingdom.

"Gee, amazing as always, Brother Haruto." (Monotone.)

What good is a word of praise from my little sister if it means extinguishing the sparkles in her eyes? Nothing.

Offering my help is strictly off limits. My only role here is to guide Char and the gang to achieve their goal in satisfaction.

As long as I support them from the shadows without anyone noticing, there shouldn't be too much danger. And between Flay and Liza, they pretty much have all the ammo they need.

That's right. My job is stage production.

It's not all that different from the insurrection incident in the capital. Should be fine. I think.

While we're on the topic, they're probably not going to raise their mana levels by standing under a waterfall. It's sad, but that's the reality of the situation.

However!

I can't give up. I can't let them give up.

All the more reason to get a move on with my plan, Operation: Investigate the

Mysterious Mana Level Threads that Grow Out of People's Backs.

If I can figure that out, I can secretly give Char and the others a boost.

And my collaborator for this operation is none other than Zara-senpai! (End of long explanation!)

"Are you really okay with this?" I ask in Shiva Mode. "I intend to ensure your safety, but accidents can happen. But I do intend to ensure your safety!"

"You're really driving that point home, huh. It's unsettling."

Zara eyes me dubiously, but then she shrugs as if to say, *Whatever, go ahead.*

"You want to use my body to investigate the mysteries of mana levels? Sounds interesting. Nobody expects anything of me, anyway. So if something were to happen to me, who cares?"

I seem to have triggered her. She's gonna grow up to be a full-on yandere, no doubt.

"Based on my minuscule experience," the professor offers, "you'll get a horrible feeling like someone digging around inside your body."

"Seriously? I'm not really into that..."

Professor Tear, why do you have to butt in?

"Oh well. If it gets unbearable, I'll speak up. I don't suppose you'd take pleasure in violating a vulnerable young woman."

No, I wouldn't take pleasure in that but I also wouldn't feel obligated to stop. Maybe I should draw up a contract and have her sign it first? And write the important stuff in teeny tiny print so she'll miss them.

"Why aren't you saying anything? You're making me nervous!"

Oh, well.

“Fine,” I sigh. “I agree to that condition. But if we’re going to do this, I’m expecting you not to wimp out right away.”

“You mean, you believe in me?”

“You’re free to take it that way if you want.”

So are we good?

A look of uncertainty lingers on Zara’s face. After a pause, she smiles as if she’d shaken off her doubts.

“All right. Let’s do this. I just have to show you my back?”

Slowly, she begins to remove the blouse of her school uniform. She doesn’t seem uncomfortable at all despite my copy sitting right here with us.

And just like that, she exposes her delicate porcelain skin.

“Well? Aren’t you going to do something?”

“Oh, uh...”

R-Right.

Up until now, I’ve only seen the threads through a person’s clothes. I’ve never actually witnessed them growing directly out of someone’s back.

But never mind that.

There are some threads that reach the ground and others that dangle partway. Just like when I saw them through clothing.

But what I’m also seeing is...

“Holes...”

“What?! What do you mean?! I don’t have any scars on my back!”

Yeah, I know. They're not scars.

The threads are very fine and there aren't that many so it's not like her whole back is covered. The strange thing is that there appear to be a bunch of black specks on her otherwise smooth skin.

They almost look like they could be beauty marks, but they look more like holes that are practically screaming, *"You could stick a thread in here!"*—and there are ten of them.

I can't exactly peek into the holes or anything. They're pitch-black inside.

"What do you think these are?"

I whisper what I see to Professor Tear so Zara can't hear.

"Don't ask me. Without something to stick inside, we have no way to test them."

Good point.

I decide to ignore the holes for now and start with the threads that are connected to the ground. There are eighteen of them. And there are four that don't reach the ground, so twenty-two strands in total.

I grab one with a barrier and try to yank it out of the ground.

"Nya-wa-hyaa?"

Zara lets out a weird yelp.

I ignore her and keep tugging at the thread with all my might. Still won't come out.

"Ah... W-Wait... Aaaaaaah... Ooooooh... Mmm!—ah... N-No..."

Her moans are getting...erotic?

She's crouched on all fours now as she squirms.

All the piece of string is doing is stretching out and getting longer and longer. Just like what happened with Professor Tear.

I decide to try snipping them.

I conjure a sharp blade out of a barrier and take a whack at one of the strings.

"Hyaw?!"

Nyoiing! The thread stretches while senpai writhes around, twitching.

I try a few more times, but I still can't cut it. Each time, Zara lets out an R-rated moan.

"Is it possible for a person's mana level to decrease?"

"I've never heard of such a thing."

Then I guess it's impossible. Too bad. Otherwise, I could storm the enemy from behind and debilitate them by axing their mana levels.

Back to the matter at hand. So far, all I've been doing to her are horrible things. (Yes, I'm aware of it.) The least I could do is raise her mana level.

Of the four threads that are in the air, I grab two of them and stick them into the ground.

"Aaaah! Oooh! Mmm!!"

Zara collapses on the floor quivering.

"Pretty sure she passed out," Professor Tear observes.

"You're right." My copy slaps at the back of Zara's head.

She doesn't move.

We peer into her face. She's drooling and her eyes are rolled back in her

head.

I've seen this expression in a dirty manga.

What now? I wonder. Just then, Zara comes to.

"Why did my mana level go up? And by 2 points?!"

She rises to her feet and lurches towards me. *Your chest! Cover your chest! You're still half naked, remember?*

"Oh...huh? I feel...dizzy..."

She stumbles, nearly falling to the ground but I catch her just in time.

Professor Tear shoots me a dirty look before explaining, "Take it easy. I experienced the same thing. Your body is in an altered state. Your head feels disordered, doesn't it? And it looks like your mana level suddenly increased by 2 points."

Professor Tear alleges she hates Zara, but maybe she's feeling sympathetic from having been through the same thing.

I should probably be nice to senpai, too.

"Take a rest. We'll resume later," I offer kindly.

"You mean there's more?!" cries Zara.

"You're a monster!" Professor Tear exclaims.

I mean... That's what experiments are.

"What do you think I am? Your toy?"

Yeah, I get that you're upset. But I just had a great idea that I wanna try out.

Should I? Or should I not? Ooh, the dilemma.

Zara is sitting on the ground with a shirt draped over her shoulders to cover

her enormous breasts. I whisper my idea to Professor Tear so the test subject won't hear.

"Sheesh, the things you come up with... I believe there's value in trying it, but whatever happens, it's not gonna be my fault."

Putting all the responsibility on me, eh? *I admire your style, but I've lost all respect for you as an educator.*

Since we have no idea what might happen, I'd better take precautions.

I summon a medical expert I can count on, just in case.

"Got it," the dragon girl and specialist in Water magic, Doctor Liza, says. "In the event of an emergency, I will cast healing magic on the girl."

She's completely drenched and her white robe is clinging to her body. She blow-dries herself off with a gust of Wind magic. She's got skillz.

I'd also called Flay for help. She's sopping wet, too.

But—*shakashakashakashakasha!*—she dries herself off by shaking like a dog. Albeit she's still a bit damp.

"Got it. You want me to pin her to the ground so she can't move."

"Only if she gets violent and starts to hurt herself. Stop wiggling your fingers like that! You're not restraining her yet."

I finally get Flay to settle down. Better Flay than me to do the job of holding down a girl.

"This seems like a big deal. I'm not so sure about this," Zara says. Despite her words, she removes her top and sits with her back to me.

All in all, she's quite cooperative and hasn't asked me to stop once. I respect her courage. I'll try to prioritize safety.

“All right... May I?” I offer.

“Oh, now you’re being all polite? Kiss-asses make me sick,” she snaps at me.

Haha. Fine, bitch. I’ll let her have it then.

She gets on my nerves there for a second, but I pull myself together. This isn’t a game, after all.

I stare intently at Zara’s back.

There are ten holes. Professor Tear said we have nothing to stick into them...

...but we do.

I grab one of the dangling loose strands and wrench it so that it folds back on itself.

That’s right. My great idea is to stick one of these into the hole.

But...is this really safe to do? What if it makes her mana flow in reverse and something terrible happens?!

And...if that happens... What if...

What if I can’t pull the thread back out?

Even with Liza’s healing magic, there’s a chance she could be stuck like that forever, slowly grow weak, and then die.

I’m hesitant.

It’s not like this girl’s done anything bad to me or my family. I don’t want to take a young person’s life.

“Um...there’s a chance you could die... Is that okay?”

“Don’t scare me like that!”

Good point.

“But go ahead,” she assures me. “I don’t know what you intend to do, but I’ve already made my decision. If you’re going to do it, get on with it.”

What is it with this girl? What pushes her to such an extreme?

I have no idea what her deal is but she’s saying to go for it. Guess there’s no need to hold back.

Kchik!

The sound from the mismatching thread and hole seem to say, “*Perfect fit!*”

“—?!”

Zara lets out a voiceless scream and starts shuddering violently. Her eyes roll back, and now she’s frothing at the mouth—*this is bad, isn’t it?!*

“It’s okay. There’s no physical damage,” Doctor Liza gives a calm diagnosis. “I think she was just shocked by the intensity and fainted.”

But it didn’t fry her brain or anything, did it?

“More importantly, Haruto, can you tell us what happened?”

Right—Professor Tear and the other two can’t see. Of course they’re curious.

I explain exactly what I saw.

“Right after I stuck the thread in, it split into two.”

Once both ends were connected to her back, the thread split—*shwing!*—right in the middle. Ever so naturally.

As a result, there’s now one more strand that’s hanging out of her skin.

Which could only mean...

“Her max mana level went up?!”

I nod at Professor Tear.

“Incredible, Sir Haruto! Truly, this is the realm of the gods!”

“Yes—beyond that, even!”

Flay and Liza, too, look flabbergasted...



Thanks to Zara-senpai’s noble sacrifice, I’ve made a historical discovery: how to raise a person’s max mana level.

“Sacrifice? She’s not dead, Haruto,” jabs Professor Tear.

Right. *And stop calling me Haruto. I’m in Shiva Mode right now.*

Then again, Zara’s on the floor as limp as a ragdoll, frothing at the mouth with her eyes rolled back in her head. She can’t hear. It’s fine.

Wait—it’s not fine! What do we do with this unconscious girl?

Liza’s casting some kind of spell on her.

“The healing magic isn’t working. Her trauma is psychological, not physical. Even after she wakes up, I don’t think she’ll be able to walk or stand on her own.”

“This seems to hit quite hard on the test subject. Let’s take her back to the lab for now and have her rest.”

Professor Tear, Liza, Haruto C, and I return to the research lab building with Zara in tow. I ordered Flay to stay behind and look after Char and Iris.

Polkos sees the state that Zara's in and stumbles over in panic. Typical of him. Understandable, though. Seeing the horrific state of a duke's daughter and all.

We lay Zara down on the sofa and take a break.

By the way, Polkos was also feeling a little lightheaded so he went to lie down in another room.

"Now, Haruto!" The professor turns to me. "Why don't you go ahead and try the same thing on me?"

"Are you insane?"

What gives? She was so resistant to the idea of serving as a guinea pig. Did the shock of seeing someone's max mana level increase get to her head?

"Yes, I'm insane!"

I knew it. Her eyes look deranged and out of focus.

"This is a historic achievement! I've never been so excited in my life! Precisely why I'm able to push my fears aside and offer myself up as a test rat!"

Swept up by the moment, huh?

"Go on, do it!"

Professor Tear boldly strips down naked and turns her back towards me.

You know you don't have to be fully nude...

There are a whopping twenty-one black holes on her scrawny back. They don't look weird or anything because they're so tiny.

If I stick threads into all of them, her max mana level would skyrocket up to 57. The Flash Princess would weep.

“Okay. Here goes.”

I grab one of the hanging threads and wrench it back.

“Hyeeek?!”

Ka-chnk! In it goes.

“A-babababa!”

The petite lady’s body jerks up and down as she screams incomprehensibly.

Fwump!

She collapses.

“Sir Haruto, Professor Tear is foaming at the mouth and her eyes have gone white.”

“Yeah. The same reaction as Zara-senpai. Is she gonna be okay?”

“The symptoms are the same. Healing magic won’t help so there’s no point in trying.”

The results are the same, too. The newly connected thread split into two and her max mana level went from 36 to 37.

There isn’t much else to do. I carry the professor into her own room. I feel bad about leaving Zara by herself so I bring her along, too.

With all the books and stuff scattered across the floor, it’s hard to walk. Her bed is full of crap as well. I fling them out of the way and lay Professor Tear and Zara on the bed side by side.

“Urrh...” the teacher groans. “What on earth...happened to me?”

Wow. She’s tough. Didn’t think she’d wake so soon.

“Don’t worry. The experiment was a success. Your max mana level went up.”

“I...see. Finally, I’ve achieved...a historical success, too...”

Um, I’m the one who achieved it. But given her weakened state, I decide not to quibble.

“By the way, there’s one other thing I want to try. Can I use you, Professor?”

“What...are you? A heartless monster...?”

She barely has the energy to argue. If I try another experiment now, she might never wake up again.

But I’ve encountered a problem.

Seeing how debilitated the subjects get, I definitely can’t perform this operation on Char or the girls.

Professor Tear whispers, “I know...what you want...to try. Call in Polkos...”

You’re quite the heartless monster yourself.

But Polkos *is* the perfect guinea pig. Because he’s already at his max mana level. (A modest 21.)

That’s right. The next thing I want to test is whether a person’s max mana level can increase even if it’s already maxed out.

In his case, there’d be no unattached threads. And the ones connected to the ground can’t be pulled out.

Which means there’s no thread to stick into the hole.

Haruto C’s way ahead of me. He fetches Polkos with only a vague explanation: “Professor Tear passed out while we were doing a secret experiment.”

The man comes huffing in. “Oh, Doctor! You poor thing...”

“Polkos... I won’t last much longer...” heaves Professor Tear.

“What?! But Haruto said you’d be all right...”

“Eh... It’s my body. I should know best.”

What’s with the soap opera act?

“Would you be willing to fulfill one final wish for me?”

“Anything! If it’s within my power—no! I’ll find a way! No matter what!”

His face is smeared with tears and snot. Liza looks slightly grossed out.

“Thank you... Then, let’s get to it. Take your shirt off and show your back to Shiva.”

“Huh? Uh... Well, if that’s all...”

He seems hesitant, but he humbly removes his shirt and turns around for me. Despite having no clue what’s going on, his tired and sad middle-aged back seems to exude a sense of gallant resolve.

Still, though. *Only one hole?*

It won’t hamper the experiment, but the man truly is mediocre. I guess it’s better than no hole at all.

Anyway, might as well give it a try.

One hole but no thread to plug into it.

I tug on a strand that’s connected to the ground. All it does is stretch out longer and longer. “Hyawaa?!” yelps Polkos.

I already learned from the experiments on Zara that the threads can’t be cut.

But just in case, I try snipping Polkos’s threads—“Hehgyo?!”—but he just—“Twaa?!”—makes—“Ghfoo!”—funny noises.

No sign of the strings breaking.

I'm getting nowhere. I grab one of the strands connected to the ground and shove it at the hole.

"Nyohoo?!"

Ploink. Ka-chk!

What's this? The unbreakable thread just split into two!

The lower half that's connected to the ground got sucked into the hole.

The part that comes out of his back is now dangling in the air.

His max mana level has increased to 22. His current mana level is still 21.

"Even if a person's already at their max mana level, you can still raise the ceiling! This is another huge discovery."

While I stand there congratulating myself, the poor man convulses on the floor.

He stops moving.

"Sir Haruto, Polkos's heart stopped."

"Cardiac compression! Quick!"

Liza scrambles to resuscitate the man. Thanks to her fast response, Polkos's heartbeat comes back, and he starts breathing again.

Yeesh. That was close. If I killed someone—even in the name of science—I'd definitely have nightmares.

I gently lay Polkos down next to Professor Tear.

"This isn't something we can casually perform on a person," I say to her.

"Once or twice might be fine...but I have twenty more, right? I'd really have to think about it."

But you'd be down for one or two more tries?

She shakes her head. "Nah, I think that's enough for me. If your max mana level is already high, the relative effect is less. It's not practical unless we can figure out how to mitigate the physical and psychological costs..."

Yeah. If only increasing your max mana level were that easy. Besides, everyone still has their personal limits.

But for some people, it'll open the doors to whole new worlds.

I'd love to figure out a way to raise all of my friends' levels to their max.

There are still a few hurdles, but I'm gonna stay optimistic.

The experiment comes to an end for now. I decide to spread a little joy to Char and the gang who are probably hard at work.

Char and Iris are still under the waterfall enduring their special training. I grab a loose thread from each of their backs and stick them into the ground (or the water, rather).

"My level! It went up!" Char squeals.

"I can't believe it. It really worked!" Iris is stunned.

"That proves it. Waterfall training *is* the best form of training!"

Char does a little dance. Her lips are blue. Iris is still in disbelief—but I catch a little glitter in her eyes.

By the way, Charlotte's white robe has slipped off while she's been whooping and hollering under the rushing waters. Her upper body is pretty much exposed.

I count a total of seventy-seven tiny black holes on her back.

That's more than her max mana level. *Oh, Char... Seriously, you never cease to amaze me.*



I basically figured out the secrets of the threads—mana levels conceptualized—that grow out of people's backs.

I pulled off the incredible feat of raising a person's max mana level. Unfortunately, it wreaks a heavy toll on the person both mentally and physically. (But mostly mentally.) Not exactly something I can offer around like candy. Too bad.

But raising a person's current mana level by just one or two points doesn't have an adverse effect on them, so I plan to raise everyone's levels bit by bit.

I've also decided not to share this information with Char and Iris. I don't want them to know that I'm the reason their mana levels are increasing.

Speaking of my little sister Charlotte...

"Y-Y-Y-You s-s-s-sure this can r-r-r-really raise a person's m-m-m-m-mana level-ve-ve-vel?"

"L-L-L-Laius! C-C-C-Concentrate!"

Encouraged by her initial success in gaining a point through trial by waterfall, Charlotte has roped Princess Marianne and Prince Laius into standing under the roaring waters.

"D-D-Don't w-w-w-worry," Charlotte reassures.

“I-It already worked for us!” affirms Iris.

The four of them are standing under the waterfall in white robes. Laius is on the side by himself with his back turned to the three girls whose soaking wet robes are clinging to their bodies and really accentuating their figures. For a big macho guy, Laius is surprisingly a prude.

Watching over...or more like glaring down on them is Flay the maid.

She’s standing on a boulder above the basin in her usual stance—hands on her hips and her feet apart. She’s sweating bullets like she might faint at any moment.

I’d maxed out her mana level yesterday.

In her original form as a wolf, her mana level was 57/73. I boosted her by 16 points. It must’ve been pretty hard on her. She’s still pretty wobbly today.

I also raised Liza’s level from 51 to her max of 71. But 20 points all at once really took it out of her. Like Professor Tear and Zara, she’s recuperating in bed. Sorry, Liza.

It was a necessary step to take. I need these two to protect Char from Numbers and the Lucifyra cult in the upcoming clash.

Come to think of it, I remember them saying that a demon’s strength is halved when they’re in human form.

Your magical power is roughly equivalent to your mana level squared. In human form, their mana levels would be around 51 and 50. That said, they both still surpass the Flash Princess.

“Arrgh! This isn’t honing my mana one bit!” Laius moans.

No shit. They’re not using any magic.

“This doesn’t make sense! How can you increase your mana level without using magic?”

I hate the fact that we agree on something, but geez, all this guy does is whine.

“Laius! We agreed we’d trust Charlotte and give it a try.”

Marianne is purple-lipped and shivering but she’s not relenting. So noble of her.

I’m hiding behind the waterfall all this time. I decide to grab one of her loose threads and connect it to the ground (or the water, rather).

“Hyawa?! Eh? Oh... My level went up?!”

“Say what?!”

While I’m at it, I raise Charlotte and Iris’s levels, too.

“Mine went up as well!”

“Mine, too!”

“Whaaat?!” exclaims Laius.

I wanna get the girls out of the waterfall training ASAP. The water’s freezing. I’d hate to see them catch a cold or something.

It’s about time I put a stop to this.

I slip out from behind the waterfall, keeping myself dry with a barrier over my head to repel the water, and touch down next to Flay as if I’d just arrived.

“Good work, Char!”

“Brother Haruto!”

“But your level won’t increase any further from the waterfall training.”

“What? Why not?”

“Well, you know. Because, like... Your body’s getting used to it.”

“But our mana levels went up quicker this time. It seems like it’s getting more efficient.”

“Oh, right... Good point. But you can only raise your level by 2 points with the waterfall. Shiva told me so.”

“Really? I’m not sure I understand, but if you—I mean, if Shiva says so, it must be true!”

Yup, yup. What a good kid.

“In that case, next on our training menu will be balancing on logs down the river and—”

“I don’t know about that...” I murmur.

No more dangerous stuff, please.

“How come...everyone but me...” Laius is on all fours, getting beaten by the gushing waters. I feel a bit sorry for him so I pull on one of his threads, too.

“Hr?! I leveled up! No way...”

I lead the four of them back to the place Char calls Pandemonium: The Garden of Gathering Demons. It’s the lake shore where I built my hermitage.

“Charlotte, what happened to you? You’re soaked!”

Waiting for us there is my adoptive mom—and Char’s birth mother—Natalia Zenfis. She’s got long blond hair and a great figure. Makes me wonder if Char will be pretty like her when she grows up.

Mom’s quite a bit younger than Dad. It’s hard to believe she has an eleven-

year-old daughter.

“And my goodness! If it isn’t Princess Marianne and Prince Laius.”

“Aunt Natalia, it’s been too long. It’s wonderful to see you.”

“H-Hi...”

Upon seeing how drenched they all are, Mom rushes into the cabin to grab a few towels.

“There’s a hot spring over there. Please, go and warm up.”

She seems to know her way around. The shivering bunch head to the hot spring.

I haven’t told my mom and dad about the weirdo Barrier magic I can use, or the fact that I’m secretly the dark superhero who fights for justice.

Char has explained to them that I’m collaborating with Shiva to create a haven along the lake where demons and magical beasts can coexist peacefully with humans.

“Haruto, what on earth were Charlotte and the others doing?”

“They were standing under a waterfall to raise their mana levels.”

“A waterfall?! I can’t imagine doing that would raise anyone’s mana level...”

“Yeah...but apparently, it worked.”

“Huh?” My mom’s expression seems to say, *That’s hard to believe...but it’s also hard to believe that you’d lie about such a thing.*

“As long as you’re with them, Haruto, I’m sure I have nothing to worry about.”

Where does all her trust in me come from?

I think she’s figured out a lot of my secrets. Doesn’t really seem necessary to

hide them from her anymore, but I haven't found the right moment to open up. At this point, it'd just be awkward...

Oh well, I might as well have a hot soak, too. I follow Laius.



Ka-tonk! The placid sound of the bamboo bark hitting a rock. It's a traditional Japanese deer-scarer fountain that Haruto made. A special touch for that classic hot spring vibe.

"Ahhh!" (Charlotte's contented sigh.)

"Oooh!" (Irisphilia's blissful sigh.)

"Mmmm!" (Marianne's beguiling sigh.)

"Blugga blugga blugga blugga blugga..." (Flay's sinking noises.)

The four girls who were at the waterfall today are dipping in an open-air hot spring.

Laius and Haruto are bathing on the other side of a wooden partition. The royal mark on Haruto's chest is covered up. Always well-prepared.

It's Marianne's first time bathing outdoors. She was hesitant at first, but when she saw how relaxed the others were, she resolved to bite the bullet.

"The water's just right. And it feels like it's making my skin smoother."

She lifts her slender arm out of the slightly milky water and runs her fingers across it.

Charlotte is gawking...not at the gesture, but at the princess's bosom. *It's*

true—they really are buoyant!

But apparently, they can also sink. The two girls don't notice...

"Hey, Flay! Are you okay?!"

...that the red-haired maid is sinking to the bottom of the bath. Irisphilia pulls her to the surface and props her up against the edge.

Charlotte, again, stares at their chests. Their generous bosoms are bobbing in the water, defying gravity.

Mother's are just as big. I'm sure I'll grow up to be just like Mother one day... But... She presses her hand to her own little chest and shivers. *It seems like such a long way to go.*

Whrr, whrr! She shakes her head vigorously as if to banish the unpleasant thought and lets herself melt into the water.

After a few minutes, Char comes out of her tranquility and declares, "There's something I must tell you all... Well, Princess Marianne and Prince Laius, actually."

Marianne turns her attention to the little girl.

"There is a shady underground student council operating in secret at the Academy. Danger is nigh!"

"What?" Marianne exclaims.

"..." On the other side of the partition, Laius listens skeptically.

"Um, Charlotte? What do you mean, 'a shady underground student council'?"

"A group called Numbers is plotting to overthrow the official student council and take over the school!"

“Huh?”

“What?”

“And there’s a giant evil organization behind them pulling the strings! The Church of Lucifyra! They’re plotting to revive the Devil Lord and rule the earth!”

““?!””

Marianne and Laius were confused at first, but at the mention of the cult’s name, they realize that they can’t simply dismiss the child’s confession as a game of make-believe.

“What do you mean, ‘Devil Lord’?” pries Marianne.

“It’s a fallen god from mythical times. It is very, very evil.”

Laius is especially shocked.

He can hear the girls’ conversation from the other side of the partition because Haruto is amplifying their voices a bit. His body—immersed in a steaming hot bath—can’t seem to stop trembling like a leaf.

“It can’t be... Mother...?”

Setting aside this far-fetched Devil Lord business, rumors of his mother, Queen Gizelotte, sponsoring the Church of Lucifyra have been ceaseless.

And here he is now, getting a glimpse of her motive. If the cult’s aim is to rule the world, his mother might be exploiting them to usurp the king’s power.

Laius gulps. “Hey, Charlotte... What exactly are *you* trying to do?”

“First, we must expose the truth about Numbers and make them change their ways. No more doing bad things!”

“And then?”

“At that point, the cult will be made aware of our existence. Of Camelot, that is!”

“Save the theatrics for later—don’t tell me you’re gonna take on the Church of Lucifyra, are you?”

He glances over at Haruto.

Haruto is relaxing in the bath as if none of this concerns him.

“Of course we are!” Charlotte responds fiercely. “There are rumors that the cult was behind the insurrection in the capital. We can’t let them continue doing evil!”

“Seriously?!”

Laius doesn’t want to believe it.

But he can discern that Charlotte’s story isn’t pure fantasy.

Laius himself narrowly escaped death during the insurrection. He was nearly bitten by an Elder Ghoul and could’ve been mutated into a living corpse.

If his mother was involved, it means she’d taken no measures to ensure her son’s safety. Rather...

Was she actively trying to get rid of me and Marianne?

Since birth, Laius had never experienced a normal parent-child relationship with his mother.

He’d always been plagued by the suspicion that he was no more than a pawn to her. Laius would become the next king, but the one pulling his strings would be the queen.

Maybe I’m not even a pawn to her anymore...

Laius grinds his teeth.

Meanwhile, in the women's bath...

"Wh-What's this?" Charlotte hesitates. "I'm picking up on some super serious vibes from the other side of the partition. What's going on?!"

Marianne explains cautiously, "There are rumors that Queen Gizelotte has been funding this Church. Based on what I've noticed around the royal castle, I suspect they're true."

"H-Huh?"

Iris answers for the bewildered little girl. "If that were so, we're eventually going to have to take up arms against the queen."

"Oh my goodness gracious!"

There's a chance Laius might be forced into a battle to the death against his own mother.

"Th-Th-That sort of thing comes up a lot in anime. But this is real life... Oh my, oh my, oh my!"

The sudden conundrum starts to overheat Charlotte's little head.

"What does it matter?" Haruto remarks off-handedly. "Being related by blood is no big deal. All it means is that the enemy happens to be your birth parent. There's no reason to let that stop you from destroying them."

Laius shifts his gaze to his side.

The dark-haired boy looks relaxed and content in the steaming water. In spite of that, Laius senses gravity in his words.

Haruto's background remains unknown.

All they have is Count Zenfis's claim, "Haruto is an adopted orphan from a peasant family." That's it.

It's possible that Haruto's outlook is based on his own experience.

Whether or not that's true...

"Yeah, you're right."

Haruto's words feel empowering to Laius.

His mother's been acting stranger than ever lately. She's been extremely irritable ever since she started wearing that collar five years ago. But recently, she's become so cheerful that it borders on creepy.

What's she plotting?

Perhaps she's already putting her plan into action.

In any case, there's no doubt at this point that she's a threat to the kingdom.

It's time for him to let go.

"She may be my mother, but if she betrays this country, I'll finish her myself!"

"Like that's gonna happen. You're no match for her," Haruto jabs.

"Couldn't you just let that slide?!"

At any rate, the prince and princess join Camelot.

Now, what's my next move? It's gonna be quite a lot of work, but Haruto wants his little sister to enjoy her fun and games.

As he settles back into the blissfully warm bath, he contemplates his next plan.



There's something in the room.

It must've been waiting for him. It's no accident that it ended up here.

Which can only mean one thing: it wants something from me...

Alexei doesn't know what the thing is. It has no physical form—in fact, it's not even visible.

Unperturbed, he strides into the large room where the mysterious *something* is flickering in the air.

'Do you not fear me, Alexei Guberg?'

The voice speaks directly in his brain.

"Hmm. You don't seem to be a hallucination. I suppose you're some sort of soul or spirit. If so, you're beyond the realm of man. Why, I'm tempted to believe I've been granted the ability to communicate with the divine."

He can't prove it, of course, nor is he sure.

At the same time, Alexei isn't trying to challenge it either.

He senses a sort of unadulterated intensity from the thing—an aura so magnificent that it could take Alexei's life if he isn't careful.

And it seems quite weakened. Perhaps in its complete state, it would've already attacked me, but for some reason, it needs to communicate and coerce me into some kind of agreement...

Alexei is calm and collected.

The reason he doesn't speak his thoughts aloud isn't because he wants to hide them.

He's not afraid of the thing reading his mind—and if it's not capable of that, it must not be all that powerful.

'I'm fond of your guile and insight. But we are not compatible. I have no interest in those who lack even the slightest shred of desperation.'

"And yet you choose to appear before me. I surmise that your circumstances are forcing you to do so?"

'Indeed. The vessel I've been harnessing as a trial has become unusable. There are risks given your proximity to her, but nonetheless, you're the most suitable candidate I've been able to find.'

"I see. You're not a god, but rather a sort of evil spirit. The kind that possesses people and enslaves their bodies. Unfortunately, I do not thirst for power enough to relinquish my own free will. You'll have to look elsewhere."

It's half true. Which means that it's also half a lie. If the power to be gained is worth the price of losing himself...

'You're quite intriguing. Who would've thought there'd be such an amusing specimen so close by...' The mysterious being cackles with pure delight. 'If your will is strong enough, you won't lose much of yourself.'

"The terms you propose are vague. But setting that aside, would you be satisfied?"

'Yes. All that remains for me now is to dwindle and die. I was an expendable piece to begin with. But I refuse to wither away in defeat. Not before I wreak a bit of vengeance.'

"I...wasn't expecting such honesty. I would've anticipated an evil spirit to

entice me with something a bit more compelling.”

‘You do not live in despair, but despite that, you’ve surrendered to your fate and live only for fleeting pleasures. For that reason, I am suited to you.’

Alexei Guberg’s intellect and magical powers are exceptional.

But from a young age, he was resigned to the fact that his talents would never allow him to overcome the obstacles around him.

He would never be “number one.” From the very beginning, he lacked that very potential.

The Flash Princess Gizelotte, the warrior. Tearietta Luseiannel, the genius.

Then there’s Charlotte Zenfis, the upcoming child prodigy who threatens to surpass them both.

On top of that, there’s Haruto Zenfis, the boy who seems to possess abilities beyond anyone’s comprehension.

The best Alexei Guberg might expect to do is to briefly make a fool of himself before the great masters.

Even so, he’s resolved to enjoy life in his own way until his downfall—by toying around with the kingdom’s stability.

He hasn’t the slightest interest in the aristocracy.

Alexei founded Numbers to stir up chaos within the kingdom.

“Very well. Given that you base your proposal on an understanding of my true nature, I suppose this could be fun.”

The atmosphere in the center of the room appears to waver.

The next moment, Alexei's vision goes completely black.

"Gr...aaaaauugh!!"

It feels like his flesh is boiling under his skin.

This is a surprise... I didn't actually think it'd be something close to a god...

Its memories flow into his brain.

But it does not override his identity as Alexei Guberg.

'Excellent. Go on and try to tame me. If you command the might to subdue me, be they mere vestiges of my true form, you shall surpass the realm of man.'

The burning sensation dissipates but every cell of his body throbs in pain.

"Ah, so this is what 'superhuman' feels like. A bit too rich for my blood."

And yet, a crooked smile spreads across Alexei's face.

The Devil Lord Lucifyra... To think that the Church was established by its servant devils for the sole purpose of reviving the Devil Lord...

The only reason Alexei is able to experience a sense of genuine surprise is because his psyche is still intact.

It seems the thing that entered me is only a tiny fragment of the Devil Lord. Perhaps it was designed as a sample test. I suspect the one melded with Queen Gizelotte is the more powerful, larger piece.

And the smaller portion within him had chosen Zara Yessel as its first sample.

Alexei decides he should check on what became of his comrade after the Devil Lord fled from her. But he must also assume that Shiva, the Black Knight, is probably watching her closely.

Lucifyra has been acting with caution. On the other hand, I care not when I die so long as I get a little bit of fun. I may as well live boldly.

From what he heard, Zara is so unwell that she can't even stand on her own, and she's been convalescing at Lord Yessel's town house in the capital.

But the timing seems off. I heard she was transported home several days after her encounter with Shiva. What happened in between?

He'll have to look into that, too.

That same day, Alexei heads over to the Yessel estate with a bouquet of flowers. Nothing more than a visit to see a sick friend. But to his surprise...

What rotten timing. Is this Devil Lord cursed or something?

...Zara already has visitors.

"Mr. Alexei! Good afternoon!" Charlotte Zenfis flashes her usual bright, innocent smile.

"Heya, senpai." Haruto Zenfis is there too, looking bored.



When Alexei goes to check on Zara, he finds Haruto and Charlotte already there at the Yessel residence.

Based on the Devil Lord's memories, the siblings may be connected to Shiva, Alexei theorizes.

In which case, there's a good chance that Shiva is keeping a watchful eye on

them as they speak.

Alexei tweaks his mana level, then suppresses and disguises the essence of the mana he's emitting.

The slightest external change could give away that a greater entity is inside of him. He takes heed of his speech and mannerisms, although he's skeptical of his efforts.

I don't know what kind of magic it is, but it seems that Shiva has ways of distinguishing humans from demons and other beings...

If the Black Knight finds out, it's all over.

My timing couldn't be worse, he chuckles. But deep down, he was tittering.
How shall I get myself out of this?

He'd just been gifted the Devil Lord's powers and he's already at risk of coming to his end. Nonetheless, Alexei finds himself enjoying the plight.

"Why, I had no idea you two were acquainted with Zara. I know you both come from families of high standing, but I wasn't aware of just how close you were."

"We just recently became friends!" Charlotte chirps.

"Right. Friends..." Zara sighs wearily.

"If you ask me, it's a shame for a pure and modest young girl like you to fall under Zara's influence."

"First you show up here uninvited, and then you insult me? Why are you even here?" the bedridden girl snaps at the blond young man.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm checking in on you. I heard you'd fallen ill and couldn't get out of bed, but I see you're recovering enough to sit up at least."

Alexei hands Zara the bouquet in his arms.

"I didn't take you for the type of guy who offers kind gestures," Zara teases.

"I also wanted to talk to you about something. But first," Alexei turns to the siblings, "I'd like to speak with the two of you since you're here. May I?"

"With us? Of course we don't mind. What is it?" Char says.

"It's about the future of Numbers."

Hua?! Charlotte panics, throwing glances at Haruto as if she's troubled by his presence.

"Oh, were you keeping it a secret from your brother?"

"Er...well... How can I put this..."

Haruto, who's been impassive this whole time, gives Char a chuckle and offers, "I had it more or less figured out."

"You're so amazing, Brother Haruto!"

Didn't she want to keep it a secret?

"As long as you don't get into anything dangerous, I'm okay with it," her brother reassures.

In other words, *Don't expose my little sister to danger. If you do, you'll have to deal with me personally*, is what he's saying.

It's impressive how Haruto manages to appear so aloof while packing such an intense threat into a brief remark.

I'd better watch out for this guy.

Rather than assuring Haruto that there's no danger, Alexei decides to dodge the topic.

“We’re a group of volunteers who’ve gathered to address our concerns for our motherland. The kingdom is being wracked by instability. I believe Charlotte joined us because our mission resonates with her. Charlotte?” He looks to her.

“Yes! I want to work hard for justice, too! But...” She tilts her head to the side.
“What exactly do we do?”

“It depends on the circumstances. The bottom line is that we can’t let the tension between the king and queen trickle down to our generation.”

“Huh?”

“Ah, sorry. You want specific examples, right? Currently, almost all the members of Numbers are not in agreement with the king or the queen. We want to restore the aristocracy’s rule so that we’ll be the ones to guide the populace—not very balanced at the moment, wouldn’t you say?”

He intentionally avoids using the term “aristocratic supremacy.”

“I’m not sure I fully understand, but I agree that it isn’t balanced.”

“Right? But at the same time, inviting more students whose families support the king’s or queen’s factions wouldn’t be ideal. If our group becomes too large, we’ll just splinter into smaller factions.”

“...”

Haruto looks like he’s about to say something, but keeps his lips sealed.

“So my idea is to have a well-balanced group by handpicking the most influential people.”

Char affirms, “I see. And you want Brother Haruto to join, too.”

“If Haruto is willing—”

“Nope,” Haruto cuts him off rather spitefully.

“Oh... I suppose if you don’t want to, I won’t push the issue. But, if I might ask a favor...”

“What do you want?”

That intensity again. Almost as if to say, *I’ll hear your request but it doesn’t mean I’ll listen. And if it pisses me off, there will be hell to pay!*

Alexei is shaken. With one wrong move, he could get himself killed.

Is this boy...really just a boy? Is he even Haruto Zenfis?

The Black Knight Shiva is known to wield incomprehensible Barrier magic. Could he be masquerading as Haruto?

If so, this could be interesting. This might be a real life-or-death moment for me.

Alexei’s off target, but he’s not far from the truth.

“I was wondering if you would be so kind as to speak to Princess Marianne and Prince Laius, and invite them to join Numbers.”

“?!” Zara twitches.

Alexei shoots her a glance. *Keep quiet.*

“Will you do it?”

“You go to the same school. Why not ask them yourself?”

“I’ve met them before...but my family isn’t of a very high rank. Greeting them or exchanging brief pleasantries is fair, but I fear it’d be impudent of me to invite them to join an organization with secretive operations...” Alexei campily shakes his head.

Haruto replies, “Why not ask—actually...nevermind. I’ll do it. It’s not a big

request.”

“Thank you. We can get into the details another time. Now, I’d like to speak with Zara about a personal matter...”

He trails off ambiguously, but the Zenfis siblings don’t take the hint. Instead, Charlotte asks gingerly, “What’s it about?”

“A confession of my love.”

“Oh?! P-P-P-Please excuse us! W-W-We’re done here! Take your time!”
Charlotte shoves her unresisting brother out the door.

For a second, Alexei feels a stinging glance behind him from the dark-haired boy.

At last, he’s alone with Zara. Nobody else left to interrupt. *But I should probably still conduct the conversation under the assumption that Shiva might be listening in*, he thinks.

Alexei composes himself as he approaches Zara.



Char pushes me out of Zara’s room, and we leave the Yessel estate.

“Th-That was certainly a surprise. Alexei is in love with Zara? I wonder if Zara will return his love.”

My little sister seems fascinated by the older teens’ love lives.

Setting that aside...

That guy was sure full of dumb and annoying ideas. Like recruiting me to their

club and making me coax the prince and princess to get on board.

I got a little pissed there for a second.

And setting that aside, too...

That hypocrite. Trying to pass himself off as some kind of moralist.

Char joined Numbers of her own accord intending to overturn them from the inside. But what's Alexei trying to achieve by roping in Marianne and Laius?

And he even tried to recruit me—who knows what his intentions are?

I don't trust him for a second.

After all, that guy's a devil.

Letting me get a glimpse of his back was his mistake.

Well, well, well. What to do now?

Spying on people and violating their privacy isn't my idea of fun. I have no interest in these people to begin with.

But if there's a possibility that a Devil Lord is involved, rules don't apply. At least according to my rules.

I didn't see any mana level threads or whatever growing out of Alexei's back.

That means either he's a devil or the new host for the Devil Lord's soul after it left Zara.

Just to make sure, I should tune in on their conversation.

I stick a barrier over one of my eyes and connect it to the surveillance barrier in Zara's room. I also plug a barrier in one ear so I can listen to their voices.

“A confession of love? That was a pretty bold way to get those two to leave.”

“Technically speaking, it’s not far from the truth. I actually do want to ask you to marry me.”

“Because of my pedigree, right?”

“Is that a problem? That’s generally how marriages work in the upper class.”

“I prefer to be free from all that and pursue whoever I choose,” she argues as she tosses the flower bouquet to the side of the bed.

“As soon as you bear me an heir, you’re free to do whatever you want. So long as you’re discreet.”

Zara sighs dramatically.

Their conversation is so cut-and-dried. Is that how marriage works in the aristocracy? No hopes or dreams?

Oh well. My dream is to be a shut-in in this alternate world. Not my problem.

Alexei says, “I’m not looking for an answer right away. You have plenty of time until you graduate. Give it some thought.”

“I’ll do that.”

But Zara is already in her fifth and final year. That doesn’t leave a whole lot of time.

“And?” she continues. “Are you going to tell me why you’re *really* here?”

“There’s no need to be so guarded. I want to know what caused you to fall so ill that you’ve been bedridden. Simply concerned, nothing more.”

Zara looks visibly displeased with his answer.

I’d warned her earlier to keep her mouth shut about taking part in the mana

level-raising experiments with Shiva.

One of the reasons I went to her place today was to make sure she's keeping that promise. (Char's intent was to genuinely check in on a sick schoolmate. She's so sweet.)

I'm not expecting Zara to blab.

Not that I trust her to be a forthright person who'd keep her word. But she certainly is self-interested enough to do whatever necessary to protect herself.

Nonetheless, it's always better to take control of the situation than to idle around. So that's what I'm doing.

"This is Shiva. Starting now, you will say what I tell you to say."

"?!"

Zara looks all around the room in bewilderment. *Stop acting suspicious.*

But she plays it cool. "Was that a fly buzzing around?"

Her noble upbringing among underhanded slime bags must've honed her guile.

And I'll pretend that wasn't an insult to me.

I whisper into her ear through a barrier. Only she can hear me. Even Char, who's walking in front of me, doesn't notice.

"Um... Let's see, where were we? Oh, right! You wanted to know what knocked me out," Zara says breezily. "When I went over to hit on Haruto Zenfis, Professor Luseiannel made me help her with one of her magic experiments. Something happened, apparently, and I got knocked unconscious."

She ad-libbed the part about hitting on me. Gotta hand it to her—she's a smooth talker.

“You agreed to help with the experiment without knowing what it was?

Whisper whisper.

“She explained it, but I don’t understand a thing about Ancient Magic. She said the reason I got knocked out had something to do with a reflux of mana or whatever...”

“Don’t you think a professor should be punished for endangering the daughter of a duke?”

“I made up some story to throw Father off the trail. Professor Tear *is* the daughter of a count. I didn’t want our families to get into some stupid feud.” Zara runs her mouth before I even prompt her.

This part is actually true. I figured I’d show up as Shiva and threaten Mr. Yessel if he got feisty, but Zara did an impressive job of smoothing everything over.

“Hmph. I suppose there was a silver lining to your fall, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“You went over there to hit on Haruto, right? His visit today may have been out of a sense of obligation, but nonetheless, I imagine you’re happy to close some of the distance.”

Given that he’d just proposed, I’m impressed that he can say stuff like that.

But wait—what’s he talking about?

“No, forget it,” Zara shakes her head. “He isn’t the slightest bit interested in me. And I don’t like wasting my energy. More importantly,” she smiles cattily, “shouldn’t you be making advances on his little sister instead of me?”

“If you refuse me, I will.”

Zara grimaces. “Well, now I can’t...” she mutters under her breath.

I’m glad you understand the position you’re in. I’m definitely going to need her to serve as a firewall.

I manage to contain my urge to rip Alexei’s head off. After all, Char’s right here. I don’t want to frighten her.

Their conversation is veering off in another direction. There’s no point in having Zara continue.

Whisper whisper.

“Is that all? I’m tired and I’d like to rest.” Zara wraps it up.

“Of course. I’ve taken up enough of your time. As I said earlier, please give it some thought.”

Alexei strolls out. Not even a lingering gaze.

Meanwhile, Char and I are on our way back to school in our carriage.

Klankity-klunkity, the coach bounces along.

“Hey, Char. What are you planning to do with Numbers?” I ask her straight out.

Char looks bewildered for a moment. Then she takes on a look of resolve.

“I suppose even evildoers are acting out of their own sense of justice. Howbeit, if our differences cannot be settled with words, an exchange of fists will be in order!”

What’s that now?

“We shall battle on the riverside! And before long, we’ll be walking with our arms around each other like buddies against a sunset background!”

That's a really outdated trope.

"Having said that, Alexei has expressed his wish to involve Princess Marianne and Prince Laius. The first step is to find a peaceful solution by talking things over." She smiles in earnest.

And that's all I need to hear to read what's on her mind.

It's clear that Alexei has a hidden agenda for recruiting the royal siblings. The chances of hashing things out with a civilized conversation are pretty much nil.

Char's already mentally prepared for the worst: first, for the discussion to fail; followed by an inevitable feud.

I got your back, Char.

I still have to figure out the specifics, but your big brother is here for you!



In one of the rooms of Professor Tear's research lab building, Marianne and Laius are sitting at a table opposite me with grave expressions on their faces.

"To cut to the chase, Alexei-senpai wants you guys to join his secret society," I brief them.

"Wait, wait, wait! You can't just summon us out of the blue and drop a bomb like that!" Laius protests.

"Haruto, please don't 'cut to the chase.' We need the full explanation," Marianne adds.

Darn, I knew you'd say that.

“Sorry. It’s a pain in the butt to explain, so I figured I’d jump straight to the point.”

“By the way, you’ve only been addressing my sister this entire time. You’re just gonna ignore me?” complains Laius.

I’m not trying to ignore him, but Princess Marianne has seniority.

“So, basically...”

As succinctly as possible, I dive into the tiresome chore of explaining the afterschool club called “Numbers,” their principles, their activities, and their masked meetings.

“Why the masks...?” Laius asks.

“Masks... That’s...disturbing,” comments Marianne.

I figured you’d get hung up on that.

“Back to ‘Numbers,’” Marianne resumes. “Charlotte has mentioned them before. It’s really a shame that the heirs of the nobility have established such an organization on school grounds.”

Ah, that’s right. Charlotte already talked about Numbers. Guess I didn’t need to explain that part.

Laius asks, “Aristocratic supremacists—they’re the ones who want to overthrow Father, drive out Mother, and take over the country, aren’t they?”

“Rumor has it that most of them are followers of the Church of Lucifyra, or are at least connected to it in some way,” Marianne explains.

“Scamming Mother for funds... Actually, Mother’s probably using them for her own purposes as well. But anyway, the leader of that student organization wants to recruit us? Hah. You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“It is evident Numbers is plotting something. They claim to be ‘seeking a peaceful resolution,’ but we cannot take them at their word.”

The two of them seem to be figuring things out on their own. Makes my job easier.

“Refusing the invitation doesn’t seem like a good solution. Besides, we can’t let Charlotte take on an undercover investigation all alone,” says Marianne.

“Yeah, that little runt might end up falling into their trap,” Laius snorts.

‘Scuse? What did you just say about my precious little sister?!

“Wh-Why are you glaring at me like that, Haruto?”

“He would prefer that you choose your words more carefully,” the princess scolds.

That’s putting it gently. But I appreciate her gentle warning and decide to leave it at that.

“In any case,” she continues, “I intend to accept the invitation and, as an equal member of their circle, refute their dangerous ideology. What about you, Laius?”

“I’m in, too. But I’m not as eloquent as you. I wouldn’t want to accidentally blow our cover—what? Why are you smirking at me now, Haruto?”

I’m giving him a “At least you have some self-awareness” look.

Laius goes on, “I’ll keep my mouth shut and stick to letting my name and title speak for me. Haruto, aren’t you joining?”

“I wasn’t invited.”

That’s a lie. But I already said no, so it won’t change the fact that I won’t be joining.

“Yeah, they’re probably wary of you. Guess they figured they should rope in his little sister first.”

“I’d feel safer if you were involved, Haruto...” Marianne glances at me wistfully.

Don’t worry. Char’s surprisingly reliable. And now with Princess Marianne’s support, I’m sure it’ll be fine.

Nonetheless, there are always going to be risks.

I won’t have time to kick back and watch anime. A seamless surveillance setup is in order to ensure Char doesn’t get hurt—not that I’ll ever let such a thing happen.

That’s why I’ve prepared a secret weapon.

I decide to wrap things up. “Great. Please tell Alexei-senpai directly that you two accept his invitation. Also...”

Snap! With a snap of my fingers, I summon my secret weapon.

Blam! The door bursts open. A young red-headed woman wearing the Academy’s school uniform enters.

“Your humble servant Flay awaits your command, Sir Haruto!”

“She’ll be infiltrating with you. If both of you make the request to let her join, Alexei-senpai can hardly refuse.”

“No way! Isn’t she a demon?!” exclaims Laius.

“Her ears and tail are hidden,” I say.

“She’s not even a student!”

“Should I make her a teacher instead? But then they won’t let her into

Numbers.”

“That’s not the issue! She’s obviously an outsider!”

“She’s got a free pass to be at the Academy as Char’s attendant.”

“Yeah, but she’s still not a student!”

I shrug. “Find some way to play it off. Tell them she’s an exchange student or something.”

I don’t know if such a program even exists in this world.

Flay interjects, “Enough. All you do is complain. You’re a scholar. Use your brain and come up with some constructive ideas.”

“But what I’m saying is just common sense,” Laius attests.

Sorry, but common sense means nothing to Flay.

“In any case! I’ve agreed to tolerate these restrictive garments at my master’s command. Bwahaha! Just you wait, Numbers! By my own hand, I shall reduce you to ashes!” Flay lets out a peal of laughter.

Laius leans into me across the table. “Psst, could you at least send the blue-haired one instead?”

He means Liza. Yeah, she was definitely my first choice, too.

But Liza still gets spooked by my mysterious Barrier magic. Depending on how things play out, we might have to use a ton of communication magic. Plus, I intend to install Anywhere Doors all around to make it easy to travel.

It’s unlikely, but I don’t wanna run the risk of Liza getting freaked out at a critical moment.

Flay, on the other hand, just goes with the flow without a shadow of doubt.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be fine. Flay’s really reliable when she commits.”

“Sir Haruto! I’m honored by your kind words. I hereby pledge to reduce the enemy to smithereens!”

Which is it, ashes or smithereens?

Oh well. If Flay wants to do some rampaging, I’m not going to stand in her way. After all, the enemy is a pretty sketchy group, and their leader is a Devil Lord (or something).

“Welp, good luck, you three.”

How will Alexei-senpai handle this? Things are about to get interesting.



We are encroaching on a totally chaotic situation—

—which is fully expected. But I wanted to make it sound cool.

Cloaked silhouettes with headdresses are gathered around a table in the same old room of the same old shabby building that we’re all familiar with at this point.

Amongst them are two new members who vehemently refused to wear the uniform’s full-face coverings: Princess Marianne and Prince Laius.

“Are you insane, Number 1?! Inviting the prince and princess to Numbers?!”
Slam! A burly dude with the number 4 on his forehead pounds the table.

“And don’t get me started on the clown. Who the heck is this?!” He points his finger straight at what looks like Medjed—a minor Egyptian deity.

The mystery character is covered in a white sheet with two holes for the eyes. There are two small lumps atop her head. I hid her ears with my Barrier magic but it's kind of useless with the sheet-ghost costume.

You guessed it. It's Flay.

She spent last night slaving over her DIY costume project with a needle and thread, but it turns out her idea of the club uniform was entirely wrong. Looks nice, though. She has a huge number 0 on her forehead. *Bold choice. Just who does she think she is?*

"I thought we weren't revealing our identities here," says Flay.

"That doesn't mean I can't question an obvious impostor!" Number 4 rants.

"Then I shall do you the favor of answering your questions. I'm a foreign exchange student who arrived a few days ago. The name's Fletch Zenpos."

She didn't give her alias much thought.

"You clearly have no business here!"

Alexei-senpai (who's also unmasked) cuts in, "Calm down, Number 4. She is... Number 7's attendant. When the prince and princess agreed to attend this meeting, they requested that she be allowed to sit in as well. She's a bodyguard."

"I'm not a bodyguard. I am a secret weapon."

"A secret weapon, you say?"

"Mwahahaha!" cackles Flay. "Your evil machinations will come to an end today!—hm? Oh, okay. What...?"

I whisper in Flay's ear to shush. I'm in the room too. Just invisible.

"What is it? If you have something to say, say it then!" barks the hulky 4.

“Number 4, I told you to settle down.” Alexei darts him a look.

The big guy plops his butt back down in his chair.

“Allow me to apologize to you all for inviting the royal prince and princess without prior explanation. I anticipated that the idea would be met with dissent from the group. Which is why I figured we may as well discuss the topic in their presence.”

“It’s not like you to act unilaterally,” Number 4 grunts.

Number 12 adds, “He’s right. You’re usually very inclined to maintain peace and order. Almost to an obsessive extent.”

“Don’t tell me the queen’s gotten her claws into you?” accuses Number 6.

“Is our own founder betraying us?” Number 2 jeers.

Alexei’s authority is dwindling rapidly.

But senpai seems unperturbed. He flashes an icy grin.

“My principles are unchanged. We younger nobles must unite to protect the nation from the encroaching quagmire. Is that not our shared objective?”

“Yes, but...” hedges Number 12.

“I’ll go ahead and say this in the presence of the prince and princess. The rivalry between the king and queen is why this kingdom is in decline. I believe they must feel the same, which is why I’ve invited them here today.” He looks at Princess Marianne.

She speaks up. “I understand the intention of this gathering. While we do share a common goal, our approaches are starkly different. Let me be clear. Your way will lead to nothing but further unrest.”

“Hmph! The spoiled little princess thinks she knows everything!”

“Perhaps she needs to expand her horizons.”

“A bit naïve.”

Wow, they think they can get away with that tone with the princess. Do they seriously believe they’re anonymous?

But my big sis doesn’t shrink at their derisive laughter.

“The way I see it, you’re the ones with a narrow perspective. You’re being ridiculous and pathetic, dancing in the hands of evil puppeteers...”

A murmur of dismay runs through the masked club members.

Marianne declares steadily, “...The Church of Lucifyra.”

The room falls silent at her words.

“They are dangerous. Not only have they wormed their way deep into the core of the aristocracy, but they’ve also gained influence over the queen of the kingdom—which I’m sure you’re all aware of. Why can’t you see that they’re the evildoers bent on overthrowing the government?”

But the princess’s pleas are lost on Number 4.

“To ascribe such an imposing ploy to a measly little offshoot of Mijaism—I’ve never heard such delusions of grandeur!”

“No! If you knew what they’re truly plotting—”

“M-Marianne! Don’t—” protests Laius.

The siblings’ faces are flushed.

Number 4 doesn’t miss the chance to prod. “And what might that be? Do tell us!” He sneers tauntingly (only I can see his face, though). The other masked members start demanding answers as well.

Princess Marianne's face gets even redder as she whispers...

"Revival of...the Devil Lord."

A hush falls over the room. Then...

"Bwahahaha! The *Devil Lord*?! Oh, that is rich!"

"Your royal highness, please spare us the fairy tales!"

"I take it you have no interest in having a real conversation."

Princess Marianne falls silent. Laius grits his teeth, red-faced.

Just then, Number 7 shoots her hand up in the air.

Alexei nods.

She proclaims assuredly, "If the Church succeeds in reviving the Devil Lord, the entire world will be in peril—not just the kingdom. We must set aside our factions and unite forces right away. Everyone, do not avert your eyes from the impending crisis!"

"You can't be serious..."

Number 7 asserts, "I understand, Number 4. It sounds unbelievable, and yet it is true. Have you already forgotten the tragic Bloodless Vier?"

"Blood...what?"

Perfect timing. Just as the crowd is puzzling over Char's unique lingo, I whisper instructions into Flay's ear.

She hollers, "Hear me, o foolhardy humans! If these burning pleas fail to reach your ears, then I have no choice but to deliver them directly to your hearts! Let

my blaze of passion illuminate your ignorance!” As Flay leaps to her feet, flames envelope her body.

Everyone’s freaking out. Utter chaos.

Suddenly, a second figure in a sheet-ghost costume enters the room and dumps a gush of water all over the first. *Bloosh!*

The flames are extinguished. Medjed Number Two immediately leaves the room, leaving Medjed Number One standing there dripping wet. *Nice work, Liza.*

As for you, Flay. Jeez. All I said was, “Step in and set things straight.” She sure took liberty with her improvising. I doubt we got our message across.

“I don’t get what just happened,” Number 4 growls, “but are you suggesting we settle this with a magic duel?”

But the message was clear enough for the meathead.

The other members pipe up.

“That certainly would simplify matters.”

“A rather bold approach.”

“Our opponents are a princess who’s unfit for combat and two first-year students.”

“Plus a flashy sidekick who’s all bark and no bite.”

“They wouldn’t stand a chance against us!”

The masked gang is getting all riled up.

My little sister muses, “Does this mean a battle scene is coming up?”

She doesn’t seem too excited?

“I suppose we can’t avoid it,” Char says decidedly. “Time to show off the fruits of our painstaking training regimen!”

Phew, she’s down.

In any case, it seems we’ve set ourselves up for a showdown against Numbers.

All right, everyone! Knock yourselves out!

I catch a glimpse of Alexei pressing his fingers to his temple and shaking his head. *Aww, does someone have a brainy-hurty?*



Well, that took a weird turn. Alexei is nervous.

Recruiting Princess Marianne and Prince Laius to Numbers is sure to throw the kingdom into further disorder.

Whether or not the siblings agree with their ideology, their names are now added to the roster of the aristocratic faction student organization. This fact alone would plunge the popularity of the king who’s been planning to establish Marianne as the next queen. The current queen, who happens to be possessed by the Devil Lord, would be a whole other conundrum.

Alexei had anticipated that the sitting members would rebel.

The reason he didn’t explain to the group in advance was to prevent information from leaking to Shiva. He also wanted to prevent the clever princess from doubting his sincerity. Number 4 in particular is a hothead and not much of an actor.

Alexei was confident that he could attract the royal prince and princess to join Numbers—whether they're on board with their ideology or not.

But that attendant of Charlotte's... She's truly a force majeure.

He never expected the newcomers to propose settling their differences with a duel.

Was that their objective from the start? If so, it's more likely that Shiva or Haruto had put the idea in their heads, and not that woman.

A rush of terror shoots up Alexei's spine—the Black Knight has already sussed out his plot—but at the same time, he finds himself smirking in delight.

He recognizes me as an enemy. That makes things far more interesting. I may wind up dying a disgraceful death... But until then, let's have some fun, shall we?

Alexei arrives at the school's main building.

He gives a knock on the door before stepping through.

Headmistress Theresia Montpellier is sitting at her desk facing the entrance. At the sight of the blond male student entering, her eyes widen in surprise.

"Please excuse the sudden intrusion. I need to speak with you about something...and I don't want us to be overheard, so please lower your voice."

She's sure to understand that I'm being wary of Shiva listening in on the conversation.

In fact, Theresia does. However...

"Don't you think Shiva's already noticed that the Devil Lord is possessing you?" She deliberately speaks aloud.

If Shiva didn't know, he sure does now.

“Well... This is problematic. I didn’t expect you to be on my side, but I didn’t think you’d be on his either.”

“That is accurate, Alexei Guberg. It’s only a matter of which side to give precedence to. My role is to vanquish the Devil Lords regardless of the circumstances.”

“To vanquish gods, you mean.”

“It’s the same thing. Ghosts of the ancient gods have no place in the modern world.”

“I see. But we seem to have a slight misunderstanding. I’m still Alexei Guberg—I am simply borrowing a bit of the Devil Lord’s knowledge and power. Unlike *her*.”

“Unlike the queen, you mean. There’s no need to beat around the bush at this point. I suspect you were able to relocate from Zara Yessel’s body into Alexei’s.”

It seems ridiculous to keep up the ruse—she’s saying it all out loud.

“Zara attempted contact with Shiva and was captured,” Alexei confesses. “Whatever fragment of the Devil Lord residing in her body escaped and took refuge in mine. Does that lower your suspicion towards me at all?”

Theresia remains guarded. “I am also wary of *you*, Alexei Guberg. You’re an incredibly dedicated and talented student, but your core beliefs are dangerous. I am referring to your interest in wreaking havoc within the kingdom for your own amusement.”

Alexei can’t help but let out a chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, I was just thinking how truly admirable you are as an educator—you’re

able to recognize me for who I really am. Meanwhile, in the Devil Lord's memory, you're nothing more than a God Killer. The thought of such a person influencing today's youth is laughable."

"You didn't come here to waste my time with this drivel, did you? What do you want?"

Alexei shrugs his shoulders. "Ah, right..."

He explains how the princess and company wound up challenging Numbers to a duel during their meeting. He keeps his own opinions veiled, and instead, focuses on the pretense of "collaborating across factions."

"But your true motive is something else... Setting that aside for now, I certainly can't condone a duel among students."

Alexei counters, "I don't wish for any fatalities in this conflict, either. If that were to happen, Shiva is sure to intervene."

"In that case, the school could organize a mock battle between teams at our arena with ample safety considerations—"

"No. That will not do," Alexei interrupts Theresia's proposal. "The other students will surely find out about an on-campus duel going on even if we close off the site. They'll be bound to stir gossip and slander. My feelings aside, the other members will be livid."

"However, if the duel is held off campus, the school faculty will have limited authority to oversee it. I cannot permit such a thing."

"I can understand that. Which is why I want to propose that we organize a contest instead."

"A contest? Rather than a magic battle?" asks Theresia.

“Essentially, it’ll amount to the same thing. However, the primary objective is different,” Alexei explains. “I propose an expedition in the Olympius Ruins.”

Since expeditions in the ruins are used as a graduation exam, the school definitely has the know-how to ensure safety.

“To my knowledge, there have been graduation exams in the past where two opposing teams compete to retrieve an object from the ruins. The teams are allowed to interfere with each other. This would be a viable format for dueling.”

“The faculty must regulate the level of ‘interference’ allowed. But I suppose that might do... However, the ruins have been facing strange phenomena as of late.”

“Monsters have stopped appearing.”

Theresa’s eyebrow twitches with surprise.

“More precisely, the monsters are all concentrated in the lowest level. Ever since Haruto Zenfis and his party visited.”

“You certainly know plenty.”

“No need to give me that look. One of the servants of the Devil Lord caused some mischief. Not that it’s my business to clean up after her, but I can remedy the situation.”

Theresa is silent for a moment.

“Very well. I give you my permission. But I will make the rules.”

“I’m fine with that. I wish to play fair, too.”

Alexei’s expression is sunny and carefree. Theresa wonders how much of his words are genuine.

But you’ve been listening to our conversation, haven’t you, Shiva? I trust you’ll

be able to contend with whatever happens.

It goes without saying that the Academy's headmistress intends to exercise extreme caution. But at the same time, Theresia finds herself feeling dependent on the man of unknown identity and allegiance.

Meanwhile, in Haruto's room...

"Hnaugh?! Num num..."

He bumbles in his sleep.



A girl is trudging across the campus grounds.

She appears to be about fifteen years old. A petite but curvy figure with a dark complexion. Her long white hair that almost reaches the ground is woven into a single braid. Her red eyes look gloomy and lifeless.

I hate walking... she sighs.

Walking, standing, even keeping her eyes open is a bother.

She lets out another heavy sigh, yet nobody around her seems to notice.

The girl drags her feet as she exits the school's gate. By the time she reaches the main street, it's already dusk.

"This should be far enough, I guess."

She stops just in front of the royal castle and casts flight magic on herself.

Yet again, not a single person notices her as she hovers in the air...

In a large, dimly lit room in the annex of the royal castle...

Queen Giselotte brings a wineglass to her lips. The liquid gives off a mellow fragrance as it slides down her throat. She laps up the red droplets that attempt to escape the corners of her mouth.

“Well, well. What an interesting stunt that little scrap piece of mine is trying to pull.”

She gives her glass a light swirl as she casts her gaze down playfully.

“Good work on the report, Murzalla. It seems neither Alexei nor Theresia noticed you.”

The girl kneels and bows her head low before the queen. She’s just returned from investigating Alexei’s activities at the Academy.

“Good thing I’ve optimized you for intel and investigation. No sign of you-know-who, I take it?”

“No sign of him, I believe. The barrier created by that cheap knockoff of a devil—Alexei didn’t pick up on an intruder, nor was there any sign of someone listening in on him and the God Killer. As far as I could tell, *he* doesn’t know...”

“I see. If you say so, I’m sure it’s fine. I must say, though...”

Murzalla flinches.

“...you have a lot of work to do. There’s too much for a single devil to shoulder alone.”

“N-Not at all... Really, I’m fine just as I...?!”

She feels something trickling down her face. The pungent aroma that permeates deep in her nose... It’s alcohol.

“Drink. With it, you may obtain new powers.”

Trembling in terror, Murzalla sticks out her tongue to lick up a tiny amount of the red liquid running by her mouth. She swallows.

Ba-dump.

Her chest begins to burn as if the droplets are swelling and boiling up inside of her.

“Gah–ghrouuhhh!”

Her scream is stifled by something blocking her throat. Her body wants to writhe in pain but she’s unable to move a muscle.

“I will provide you with a partner,” the queen says. “I expect you to work together.”

What’s going on? Why should she have to suffer just to create another servant?

“Acquiring power comes with a price. Think of it like the pain of giving birth,” Gizelotte tells Murzalla who continues to seethe and gag in silence. Gizelotte points her finger at the girl and fixes her gaze at the tip of it.

Shlik. Her skin splits open at the tip of her finger, and a single drop of bright red blood falls to the floor. It sinks into the burgundy puddle and begins to bubble furiously.

Murzalla, still paralyzed, fixes her eyes on the phenomenon. She clings to the hope that she’ll be liberated from this excruciating pain when the spectacle before her simmers down.

As the liquid fizzes, it seems to grow.

“We might as well make it a boy, don’t you agree? We’ll name him... Let’s

see... Urim!"

The queen's cheery tone piques Murzalla but all she can do is pray for the torture to end. Foam is building up on the corner of her mouth.

The boiling puddle gradually begins to darken and take shape. Dark skin and white hair. A young boy with bat-like wings growing out of his back. He's a little under Murzalla's age, and has a look of insolence.

Finally, Murzalla finds herself liberated from the pain. She's able to move her body again. Although, at this point, she's too weak to do anything but lie helplessly on the floor.

"How do you feel, Urim?"

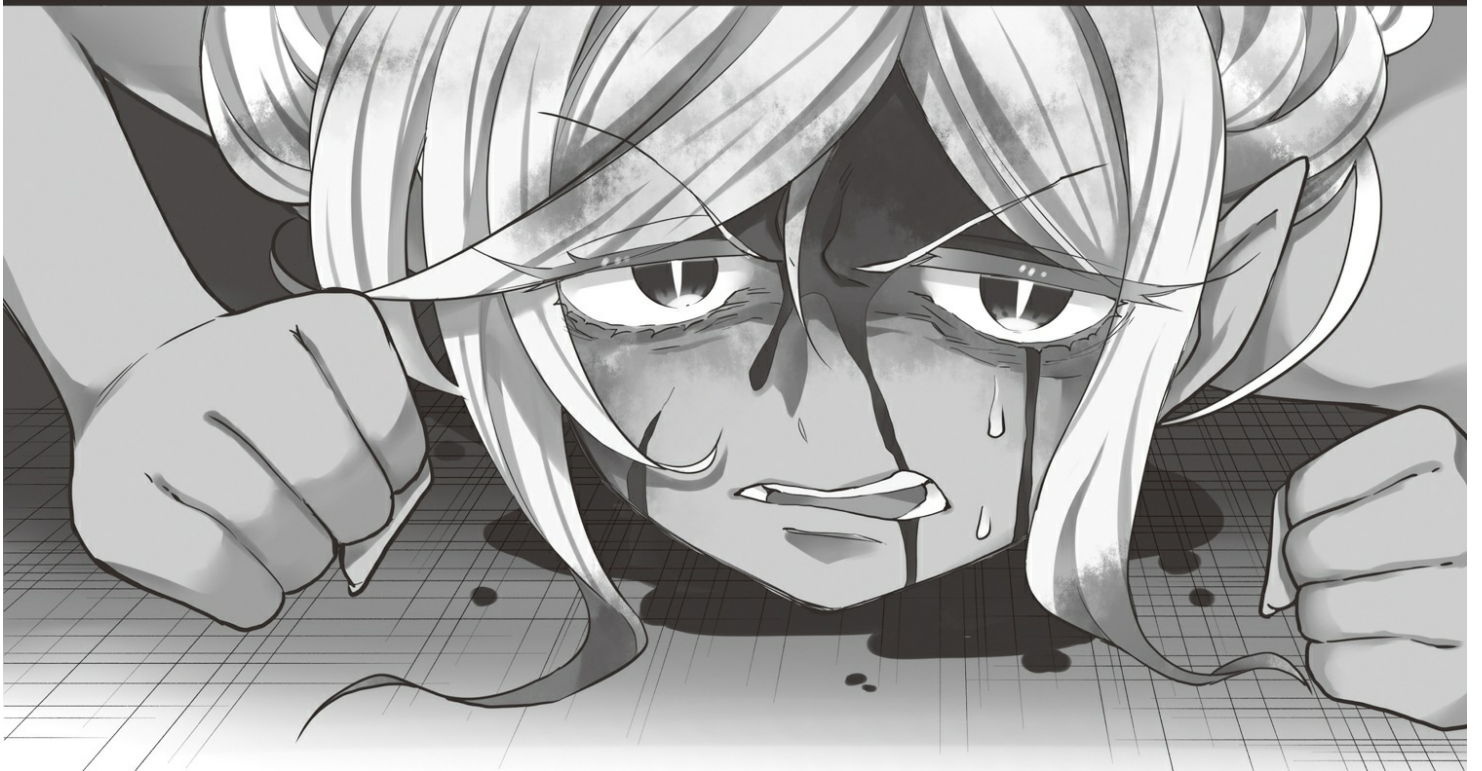
"I feel fantastic, Lord Lucifyra!"

"Your job will be to support Murzalla. Be prepared—I intend to put you to the test."

"Gotcha! Heya, Murzalla! We're gonna make a great team!"

Murzalla turns her red eyes in Urim's direction to see him looking down at her with a scummy smirk.

"Go to hell..." Murzalla barely manages to retort.



The page is decorated with various geometric shapes. There are several 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 shapes inside them. These elements are scattered across the page, creating a modern, abstract background.

CHAPTER FOUR:

A Battle We Can't Afford to Lose

Here I am, in Shiva Mode, standing in the headmistress's office.

Theresia Montpellier sent a message to me through Professor Tear. She wants to see me for something.

She starts off with an "As I'm sure you already know..." but I have no idea what she's talking about. But when I hear what she has to say, it all makes sense.

"...so, in conclusion, I'm asking for your help to ensure that Alexei Guberg, Charlotte Zenfis, and the others are able to safely complete their expedition in the ruins."

Things sure took a weird turn while I was asleep.

I don't know what Alexei's scheming, but I guess an expedition tournament in the Olympius Ruins is a relatively peaceful solution.

Then again, the rules allow the teams to interfere with each other. Wouldn't that make it more or less the same thing as a straight-up duel? In fact, wouldn't it be more dangerous since there are gonna be monsters in the mix?

"Very well," I nod. "I'd hate to see youngsters get recklessly heated and endanger themselves."

By them, I mostly mean Char.

"Thank you for accepting my request. The Academy will take measures to ensure that any interference between the teams is conducted safely. May we rely on you to monitor the situation and intervene in the event of an emergency?"

To be more specific on the safety rules, the students are only allowed to use weak spells that won't result in injury, and they're to wear special protective gear that reacts to magic attacks.

Kind of like an airsoft match? Not that I've ever been in one.

Sounds like my job will be to shield them with barriers from monsters or from each other in case they get carried away and use lethal magic.

Basically, if I cast some strong magic defensive barriers on everyone—Numbers included—that should solve pretty much any problem.

On the other hand, we're talking about a labyrinth teeming with monsters. I should take some safety measures on that front, too. After all, not even the school staff can control the monsters.

Here I am at the Olympius Ruins. Long time no visit.

'You really are overprotective, aren't you?'

The exasperated voice chimes in through my communication barrier. It's my advisor, Professor Tear.

"It's just a game; we don't want anyone getting hurt. Especially with Char involved."

'That's what I mean by overprotective—anyway, just like last time, I don't see any monsters around. I can't imagine the headmistress isn't already aware of this situation.'

Ever since we came here on a mission to retrieve some legendary weapon, the monsters have been prowling only in the deepest level of the labyrinth.

Since that hasn't changed, the place isn't all that suitable for an expedition

game.

But the headmistress didn't mention anything about it. And I forgot to ask.

Eh, whatever. I shrug it off and continue my way.

Right when I'm about to reach the last level, I see a shadowy figure up ahead.

"What's he doing down here...?"

Zippering through the passageways and heading straight for the lowest level is Alexei Guberg. His back is turned but I can tell it's him.

I make myself invisible and follow him. I also envelop myself in a soundproof barrier so he won't hear my voice.

'He might be possessed by the Devil Lord, right? I wonder what business he has on the lowest level,' Professor Tear muses.

"Let's just watch what he does for now. I'm undetectable. He won't know I'm here."

We descend to the final floor.

This layer is crawling with monsters, but Alexei hardly glances at them as he rushes off.

'The monsters do acknowledge him as prey. But the boy seems to have no interest in fighting them.'

I almost bump into one of the beasts. They can't see me, so they don't try to get out of my way.

Suddenly, Alexei kicks one of the monsters near the wall and sends it flying. This is his first act of aggression on them. He then turns his back against the wall, and with a wave of an arm, he knocks over all the monsters around him.

The agitated beasts are keeping their distance. Alexei simpers and touches the wall behind him with one hand. *Vwah!* A bright light bursts under his palm as a black stain rapidly spreads in the center of the wall. Alexei disappears into the dark hole.

‘It’s some kind of entrance. Want to check it out?’

“Obvi.”

I leap into the shadowy hole before it shrinks away.

We’re in a dimly lit room. The walls, floors, and even the ceiling are covered in strange inscriptions.

There’s an enormous crystalline globe about seven feet in diameter hovering in the middle of the room. It gives off a bluish-white glow. Ribbon-like rings of magic circles are slowly orbiting it.

“What is this place?”

‘...’

My advisor offers no response to my question, so I turn my attention to Alexei.

He holds both arms out to the crystal and chants in some language I’ve never heard before. Must be Ancient Language.

The rings of magic circles start whirring as they rotate faster and faster. The crystal starts to illuminate.

A smile rises to the corners of Alexei’s mouth.

Too bad he’s not the type to think out loud.

Several translucent windows appear around the crystal. When the young man waves his hand in the air, words begin to stream across the screens. Every now

and then, a segment of the text blinks.

I watch in silence for a while.

Then, one by one, the screens in the air disappear. “Perfect,” Alexei nods and leaves the room through the same black spot in the wall.

I send a monitoring barrier after him and stay in the chamber.

“Did you see that, Professor Tear?”

‘I saw it all right.’

“So this crystal is some kind of controller for the labyrinth?”

‘Yup. And he seems to have registered himself as the master operator. He commanded the monsters in the deepest level to spread out to the other layers.’

I see. I guess, in his own way, he’s trying to make the expedition tournament more entertaining?

“What are you trying to do?” asks Professor Tear as I wave my hand in front of the crystal the way Alexei did.

“Oh, I wanna contribute to making the game more fun, too.”

‘I think you’re completely misinterpreting his intention... Eh, I won’t stop you, though. Oh, but if you take over, he’s bound to notice when he’s lost control.’

If we’re both helping out to improve the game setup, what does it matter if he notices?

But I see her point.

Alexei-senpai’s putting his time and effort into making this project a fun experience for everyone. I don’t want him to feel like I’m stealing credit.

Plus, he's trying to be discreet about it. If he finds out that I know, he might feel embarrassed.

I know we've got that whole Devil Lord issue going on, but maybe he just wants to have fun like everyone else.

"Fine, then. I'll be discreet, too."

The giant crystal flashes and the transparent windows appear. I tweak the information on the screens.

'Can you read Ancient Language, Haruto?'

"More or less."

It's full of grandiose expressions so it's kind of hard to follow, but I can read it.

I mess around with the script a bunch.

"Done. I registered myself as the system admin and Alexei as a user. This way, he can still control the labyrinth. It'll be a while before he notices that I interfered."

If he gets carried away and tries something dangerous, I'll be able to pull the brakes.

'Truly anything goes with you, huh.'

Professor Tear sounds exasperated but I decide to take her remark as a compliment.

Now that the big scary monsters are under my command, the labyrinth's safety is secured.

Job well done. I go back to my room and sleep.



High above an empty field, two young teens with black wings are soaring across the sky.

“Hey, Murzalla. What are we doing in this boring place?” asks Urim, the boy devil.

“Do I have to explain every little thing to you? I thought I told you not to follow me,” Murzalla, the girl devil, snaps back.

“Hah, are you trying to leave me behind so you can reap all the glory? That’s not gonna happen!”

“Ugh... Whatever.”

“What’s your problem? You think you’re above me just because you were born first? All you’re good for is peeping and sneaking around.”

“I get it, you’re a moron. Now shut up. Clearly, you don’t understand that Lord Lucifyra has bestowed great powers upon me.”

“Yeah? Well, let’s see what you’ve got! Why don’t we settle this here and now?”

Urim crouches like he’s ready to pounce. Murzalla lets out a heavy sigh. She knows he’s nothing more than a bigmouth. He could never actually attack her.

Doesn’t he even realize that’s how he was designed?

Urim was created as Murzalla’s aide. As far as rank goes, there’s no question that she’s above him.

His belligerence is bound to come in handy eventually. *If only he had a bit more discretion*, she laments. But voicing a complaint would be terribly

disrespectful to their creator.

Guess it's up to me to steer him properly.

Reluctantly, Murzalla begins to explain. "Right now, we're heading for the Olympius Ruins. Alexei seems to be on his way there to lay some groundwork for his game. We're going to take advantage of it and add on some of our own machinations."

"What? I thought we're allowed to kill that knockoff. Why not just get rid of him right now?"

"We will if necessary. Don't lose track of our actual purpose. What are you, stupid?—oh, that's right. You are."

"You wanna fight?!"

There he goes again. Murzalla ignores him and continues. "Our job is to analyze Shiva's powers. If Alexei is taking him on, there's no reason for us not to exploit that."

"Bo-ring. Just cut to the chase already..."

Just as he finally stops grumbling, a temple atop a cliff comes into view.

It's the entrance to the Olympius Ruins.

Murzalla speeds up and glides straight into the building.

They arrive at the control room hidden behind a wall in the deepest level of the labyrinth. Murzalla stares at the sight before her in disbelief.

A faintly glowing crystal globe. Rings of magic circles slowly orbiting it. Translucent screens that hover around the monument.

“What the hell is this...?”

An unfamiliar spell has been added to the pre-existing one that controls the monsters.

A hierarchy system added to the authorized controller function—pretty much what she came here to do. The master controller is...not Alexei.

Her aim was to secretly add herself as another controller with equal authority. It never occurred to her to do something like this.

This is bad. Even if we fool Alexei...

The holder of the master key will be alerted right away.

Who could it be? There’s only one possible answer.

Shiva...

Murzalla must come up with a new strategy, but all she could do is grind her teeth in consternation...



Around a big round table by a serene lake, I’ve gathered all the party members.

In Shiva Mode, I explain how the competition with Numbers will work.

“...so one week from today, the expedition tournament between the two teams will take place in the Olympius Ruins.”

Each member listens with a grave expression. Char’s hand shoots up in the air.

“I have a question! May we bring snacks?”

“You may bring anything necessary for the expedition. Snacks are a key resource to satisfying hunger and ensuring your top performance. There is no cost limit, so feel free to bring as many snacks as you like.”

“Yay!” Char and Flay look stoked.

Laius, Marianne, and Iris act indifferent. *C’mon guys, get with the vibe.*

I brought my copy along, too, but he’s asleep face down on the table. *Why’d I even bother...*

“Another way to look at it is that you have a whole week to prepare. If there’s anything you want to do, I can help,” I offer.

Laius responds dubiously, “I appreciate that but aren’t you supposed to be like a referee? Should you really be taking sides?”

“Nobody said I couldn’t.”

Again, Char’s hand shoots up in the air. She’s so polite. Adorbs.

“I understand that in order to win the contest, we need to retrieve an object that a school official has hidden in the labyrinth. I believe that if we can anticipate where the treasure might be placed, it will bring us closer to victory.”

How about stealing that information from the headmistress’s office? I almost utter, but I swallow my words.

Laius counters, “But the labyrinth is so big, the Academy doesn’t even have the entire place mapped out. They probably have a floorplan of the parts that are explored, but since we don’t have access to it, I don’t see how we can predict where the goods might be.”

“If you want a map, I can give you one.”

“Hwa?” Laius lets out a funny sound.

Marianne and the others look puzzled.

“This should give you the basic idea.”

I conjure up a three-dimensional hologram in the air.

It’s a transparent model—an accurate rendition of the sixty-level underground maze.

“How the hell are you able to just whip up stuff like this?!” shouts the prince.

It wasn’t that hard. It’s designed based on the data collected from the thousands of surveillance barriers I’d sent out.

“Amazing as always, Shiva! But...won’t it be cheating if our team uses this?” Char says hesitantly.

Her righteousness is endearing.

“Don’t worry, Charlotte. Numbers also entered the labyrinth on their own to do some stuff.”

Alexei could probably make a map, too. Given that he’s possessed by the Devil Lord and all.

“Which means the battle has already begun!” Char declares. “In order to defend justice, we, too, must be prepared to get our hands dirty!” Her eyes are bright and full of vigor. Again, adorbs.

“Yeah, but that place is huge. How are we supposed to predict where the treasure could be?”

As usual, Laius has nothing positive to contribute.

I look at Professor Tear. She sighs. “Since the mission is for students, they

won't hide the treasure that far deep. For graduation tests, you'll never have to go below the thirtieth level. In fact, even the teachers aren't capable of going any further. I'm guessing the twenty-seventh or twenty-eighth floor at most."

That narrows the scope by half.

I pitch in, "I doubt they'd just leave it in the middle of some passageway. It'll probably be at a dead end or in a clearing."

"If I were the exam supervisor, I'd take team battles into consideration and plant the treasure where a boss fight is anticipated," the professor adds.

Rather than a simple game of "finders winners," fighting for the prize or joining forces to defeat a big monster and *then* fighting for the prize will definitely make the game more challenging.

Planting the loot in the upper levels would be plain boring. There aren't even any big monsters up there.

I go through the map between the twentieth (broadening the range just to be sure) and thirtieth floor, and place a red dot to mark where the boss monsters are.

"Just in case, I'll mark the clearings in blue. There, that should do it."

Still, that's a lot of markers. But now we can finally devise a strategy.

"You can race through the first twenty floors at full speed," I suggest. "Then pass through all the blue points and fight the monsters at the red points along the way. How's that?"

"It will be a long journey, but this seems to be the only option," says Marianne.

"I have no objections," agrees Iris.

“It’ll take days... No, at least a week.” Laius slumps his shoulders.

Char’s hand shoots up a third time. “In that case, our next step is obviously to memorize the map.”

“We have to memorize it?!”

Ignoring Laius’s groan, Char continues, “I’d love to start right away with a simulated mock expedition, but would that be against the rules?”

“I’m sure it’s not a problem if nobody finds out about it.”

Too late, anyway. Alexei and I have already been in the labyrinth. But I guess we should consider the possibility of getting caught. We don’t want to catch hell from a certain Ms. Zero Tolerance for Dishonesty.

“How about a VR simulation?”

I think I can whip up some VR goggles and recreate the labyrinth setting.

But it’ll be kind of a hassle and there won’t be actual monsters. A simulation would give them a feel for the run-through, but not for real battles.

So...

Shhh-Shwaaaa.

Here I am, standing on the ocean shore where the cool waves are lapping at my feet. There’s not a soul in sight on the expansive beach.

The sun is blazing. It feels like mid-summer out here.

Beyond the open sea, a small flat island peeks out just barely above the water. In its center stands a temple-like structure—the entrance to the mock labyrinth. The maze inside is an exact replica of the original dungeon. I’ve even

populated it with monster-ish thingies.

Yep. I've created a Labyrinth Simulator that's no different from exploring the real Olympius Ruins.

This is going to be the team's training ground.

The expedition party stares at me in bewilderment as I (in Shiva Mode) explain the plan to them.

"I need to stop getting my mind blown by every little thing you do," mutters Laius.

"Why the beach, though?" Marianne wonders.

"There *is* plenty of space..." observes Iris.

Laius, Marianne, and Iris all look baffled.

Don't they get it? After they're done training...

"Beach episode!" squeals Char, starry-eyed.



It's slapdash work, but the underground maze I created beneath the ocean is identical to the original.

The monsters wandering around the passages are remote-controlled copies of the ones from the actual ruin. Made out of barriers.

Charlotte, Iris, Marianne, and Laius are forging their way through the labyrinth, honing their teamwork.

Flay is in her sheet-ghost costume again for some reason. I had to reprimand

her a few times for going too far ahead of the group, but she's finally settling into an overseer role for the party.

Everyone is working on memorizing the maze and contending with the monsters—sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

Iris and Laius are at the fore. Charlotte and Princess Marianne are supporting them from behind. Every now and then, flames shoot out of the sheet-ghost's eyeholes.

On site, Flay gives out general directions. Professor Tear follows up (remotely) with more detailed advice.

The training scenario even anticipates interference from Numbers. Things are going smoothly.

Frankly, I can't even be bothered to provide even a brief recap of the training process.

I'm quite busy. I'm doing a heck of a lot of work controlling the monsters, setting traps, simulating mischief waged by Numbers, and so on.

Before we know it, it's the day before the actual expedition.

"Well done, you rascals! Have a blast tomorrow! I'm going to finally get some sleep! Adios!"

I'm exhausted, but I try to stay cool as I deliver my words of encouragement. Exit Shiva.

Now I'm here as Haruto, wearing a rash guard and a withered look on my face.

It's not that I'm physically tired or that my mana is depleted or anything. Just mentally, you know.

"Thank you so much, Brother Haruto! Please have a good rest."

Char quickly sets up a parasol and a beach chair. The little angel offers the resting spot to me with the sweetest smile.

She's wearing a pink two-piece swimsuit with cute ruffles on the chest and around the hips, paired with a bright smile from ear to ear. What a perfect little sister. I appreciate her.

"Very well, everybody!" she calls out. "Tomorrow's the big day. Have lots of fun today and eat lots of food to power up for the tournament!"

"Yay!"

The hearty cheer comes from Mel, the mysterious little girl we found in the labyrinth. Despite her enthusiasm, she doesn't express much with her face. She has dark skin and white hair, and she's wearing a Japanese schoolkid's swimsuit with her name written across the chest.

"Hold up. What the heck is this costume?!" Laius blurts, staring down at his board shorts. With his burly physique, he looks like a total meathead. Throw on some big chains and rings on the guy and you'd have the stereotypical beach bum douchebag.

"It's swimwear. What's the problem?"

"It's way too skimpy!"

Apparently, swimsuits in this world are pretty much the same as regular clothes. Also, swimming at the beach as a leisure activity isn't really a thing here.

“I agree... This attire is...too much like underwear.”

Marianne is fidgeting in her string bikini. *Okay, but you picked that out yourself.* I gave her a few options and she chose the one with the least amount of coverage.

“I suppose it is practical, but I still feel embarrassed...” Iris chose a one-piece athlete’s swimsuit. It’s not as revealing, but it is super high cut around the crotch, and the way it accentuates her body is definitely lewd.

“It is a bit hard to get used to even for me. But as Iris says, it seems practical for swimming.” Professor Tear is in a strapless one-piece swimsuit. It looks like it might slip down at any moment.

“What are you all, soft in the head? Complaining *after* you’ve put it on?” Flay has a good point. She’s wearing a red, intricately designed bikini. It’s got slightly more coverage than Marianne’s, but her boobs are spilling out from all sides.

“Haruto, how come you’re the only one wearing a top?” Laius demands.

“This is called a rash guard. It’s mostly for protection against the sun.”

“All you’re doing is sleeping in the shade!”

It also serves the purpose of hiding the royal insignia on my chest. I have it covered up with my barrier, but I wouldn’t want it slipping off at the wrong moment.

Anywayz. Funny thing—I was in Shiva Mode the whole time so from everyone else’s point of view, I’m just showing up now. Yet nobody’s complaining like, *“But you haven’t done any of the work!”*

“I brought a bunch of stuff to play with so knock yourselves out,” I offer as I ignore Laius’s glare and flop down on my beach lounge.

“Sir Haruto, your drink.” Liza approaches with a glass of some kind of tropical beverage.

“Thank you.”

I take it from her and drink it down. It’s cold, sweet, and delicious.

“Um... Why was I invited? I didn’t do anything to help...” says Liza.

She’s in a bathing suit, too. A cute one-piece.

“We wouldn’t want you to be left out.”

Char made sure of that. Of course, I’d planned on inviting her from the start.

“Thank you...”

Liza gives me a meek smile as Char pulls her into the water. Pretty soon everyone joins in on the fun.

Char and Liza are splashing at each other. Droplets of water sparkle in the sun. As pretty as a picture.

Iris and Flay are engaged in a ferocious beach volleyball game. I made the ball extra sturdy so it could withstand plenty of beatings. It whizzes back and forth over the net at a crazy speed.

Marianne and Mel seem to be hitting it off. I wonder when that happened. They’re collecting seashells together.

Professor Tear is quietly building a sandcastle, and Laius is off swimming in the waves.

My work is finally complete. I’m ready to chill out, watch anime, and drift off.

I create a barrier over my eyes, put on my earbud barriers, and start watching an episode.

Ahhh, free at last.

Watching anime while enjoying the ocean breeze has its own charm.

“Fweh!” I let out a snort right when the main character lands himself in an accidental nudity scene.

At that second, I hear someone yell.

“Yee-ikes!”

The deep wail belongs to Laius.

Now I’m regretting not turning on the noise-canceling function. *What’s with him?*

I pause the anime and turn my head to the shore.

A huge shadow rises out of the water. The dark head of a dragon is looking straight this way. It’s kinda similar to Liza’s original form.

“Hm? Oh, a Sea Dragon. They don’t usually come out this close to the shore.”

“You know what it is, Flay?”

“Of course. It’s a type of dragon that lives in the ocean. Also known as a Sea Serpent!”

Thanks for the info!

“Its head is that of a dragon, but its body is long like a snake’s. It mainly inhabits the deep seas...”

Sorry, I’m not that interested. Not gonna remember any of it.

“Halt, dragon! What business have you here? This isn’t your territory.”

Flay struts over to the giant beast. Her generous bosom jiggles as she crosses her arms and comes face to face with it.

Whether it understands her or not, the dragon stares back for a few seconds before opening its mouth.

Pshoo! Jetstream spurts out of its jaw.

“Glurf!”

Flay takes the blast of water head on. It sends her rolling and backflipping across the beach. She lands face down in the sand.

After quivering for a few seconds, she sits up.

“You wastrel! How dare you humiliate me in Sir Haruto’s presence!”

She’s furious but otherwise fine. Phew.

The red-haired woman extends her sharp claws. Her fluffy tail sticks straight up. *Battle Mode!* She looks like she’s ready to pounce on the Sea Dragon at any moment.

“Please wait, Flay! We can’t have a conversation if you open it with threats,” exclaims Charlotte, the little angel of my heart—nay, the goddess of the whole world.

Every inch of her face glows with goodwill. Char addresses the dragon with open arms.

“We are not your enemy. There’s no need to be afraid.”

Pshoo!

“Hyaaaw?!” my sister yowls.

Without warning, the serpent hits Char right in the face with a water gun attack. She, too, rolls backwards and lands flat on her face in the sand.

Why, you insolent scoundrel! What do you think you’re doing to my little

Char?!

She's completely uninjured thanks to her self-defense barrier, but an attack on my little sister is an attack on me. This means war!

I slowly rise from my beach chair.

But now, Liza is the one standing before the Sea Dragon.

Liza's true form is a Blizzard Dragon. They're both of the dragon species. She must be furious with her kin's impudent attitude, and she'll probably try to reprimand it and beg me and Char to spare its life.

I suppose I could let it slide just this once for Liza.

"An attack on Lady Charlotte is an attack on me. Prepare to be frozen solid and shattered to pieces."

Nope. She's pissed for realsies.

Pshoo!

"Hah!"

Liza intercepts the stream of water with a giant lance she conjured out of nowhere. The water splits into multiple streams at the tip of the lance, all missing Liza.

"Freez-?!"

Just as her lance glows with light, a tiny figure leaps into the line of fire.

A little girl in a swimsuit labeled "Mel" across the chest. She jumps up and down with her arms outstretched in front of the giant serpent.

The waterjet stops. The Sea Dragon eases its head down to the ground.

The little girl climbs up.

The monster's huge head rises.

The Sea Dragon raises and lowers its head, swinging left and right.

Mel is squealing with laughter.

"Our message of goodwill has been heard." Charlotte smiles.

There was no conversation, and I don't think it even understood us.

Maybe the monster just wanted to play?

But a good big brother doesn't have to point that out. "I think you're right," I reassure my sister.

"May I ride, too?" she calls out.

Char and Mel start to play on the Sea Dragon's head.

Boing, boing! "Stop! No thanks! I don't want to play!" The dragon is bouncing Laius atop its tail like a ball.

Before long, it's lunchtime.

Skewers of meat and vegetables are sizzling over a barbecue. Looks delicious.

"Oough... I feel sick..." moans Laius.

"Meat's ready!" I holler.

"Ugh, get that away from me!"

Geez, I was just being nice. Oh well, I'll just have to eat it myself. *Nom, nom.*
Yum!

"Brother Haruto, what shall we do in the afternoon?"

One thing's for sure: I'll be lounging in my chair.

"You've still got more playing to do, don't you? Let's take the rest of the day

off. After dinner, we can do fireworks.”

Yay! My little sister, Mel, and Professor Kiddy Glasses all fling their hands up in the air.

“They’ve got way too much energy...” Laius is slumped over.

“Perhaps you should learn to pace yourself,” scolds his big sister who’s been mostly looking after Mel.

While everyone’s chattering happily and enjoying the meal...

I wonder... I glance back at the beach.

The giant serpent is lolling on the shore. I think it’s sunning itself.

Why is that thing out here?

Was it attracted by all our whooping and laughing?

Oh well. Doesn’t matter.

I take a big bite of meat.





On top of the cliffs that encircle the beach...

A boy with white hair, red eyes, and wings like a bat is looking down at Haruto and his friends.

“Hmph! That Sea Dragon was totally useless!” the boy spits bitterly.

It’s the new devil boy, Urim.

“Hey, Murzalla! What’s the deal?” Urim gripes telepathically to the other devil who’s at another site.

‘Ugh, shut up! You’re the one who chose that thing and sent it out. You were supposed to be stopping Shiva, but he isn’t even there. What are you, stupid? I mean, that was truly idiotic.’

“*You* shut up! Gah! The whole thing was a waste of time.”

Urim isn’t powerful enough to command a dragon. Instead, he lured the Sea Dragon over to the beach, hoping it would raise a loud enough commotion to alert Shiva. Unfortunately, the dragon was a curious youngster that got caught up in playing with the targets instead of attacking them.

‘Who are you really mad at? Anyway, you might as well come back. Haruto Zenfis is there, right? We don’t want him or his demon friends noticing you.’

Tsk! Urim sucks his teeth.

“What about on your end? Everything going according to plan?”

‘So far, so good. I just have to be careful not to attract Shiva’s attention. If he

shows up, I'm hightailing it out of here.'

Murzalla had already laid out the plan and finished setting up for it. She even stayed to watch the woman known as the God Killer hide the treasure.

'As long as Shiva doesn't intervene, we have time. All we have to do now is wait for those idiots to come bumbling into our trap.'

"Hah. Why don't we just cut to the chase and obliterate them right here, right now? The whole point is to take one of those kids hostage and destroy Shiva."

'You? Pitted against two highly skilled demons? You wouldn't stand a chance. Hurry up and get your butt back here.'

Once again, Urim lets out a loud *tsk*. He flaps his giant wings and rises into the air.

"Whosoever opposes Lord Lucifyra, I'll wipe them off the face of this earth!" He smirks as he flies off towards the capital...



And here we are, summoned at the crack of dawn in front of the Olympius Ruins.

"Thank you for gathering here so early in the morning." In Shiva Mode, I greet the row of attendees.

On my right is the usual crew. Char's raring to go in her Magical Girl outfit. Flay's sporting her sheet-ghost AKA Medjed costume again—she seems to have taken to it. The rest of the party, well, look the same.

Lined up on my left are the members of Numbers in their school uniforms.

Where'd their white headdresses go? *I hope you won't regret showing your faces.*

Setting aside my concern, Numbers looks like they're pumped, too. On top of that, they're giving *me* the death glare for some reason. I'm not even their opponent.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Where did you come from, and what are you doing here?"

"Hey, isn't that him? You know..."

"The so-called Black Knight?"

Oh, I get it. I suppose it's only natural they'd be alarmed to see some new guy in a funny black outfit pop out of nowhere and start running the show.

"The headmistress asked me to serve as a referee for this competition."

Ka-pow-pow-pow! I strike the signature pose that my sister coached me on for this special occasion.

"I am the mysterious superhero and harbinger of justice—Schwartzner Krieger, also known as Shiva!"

"Kyaaa!"

The squeal of delight is coming from only one person, unfortunately. Flay remains silent but bobs her head (her entire body, actually) up and down under her white ghost costume.

Alexei, the leader of the opposing team, steps forward looking slightly annoyed.

"Headmistress," he says. "I understand this mysterious man operates in the fief of Count Zenfis. How can we trust that he will be a fair referee?"

“I understand your concern. But since this tournament was decided on my own accord, I cannot ask too many of the school staff to help manage the event. I’ve chosen this man out of consideration for your safety. Do not worry—he will not act in favor of one team or the other.” The headmistress turns to face me. “Isn’t that right, Mr. Shiva?”

Her mouth is smiling but her eyes are glowering.

“Of course. I am the harbinger of justice. I swear by my principles to serve as a fair judge!”

I’m lying♪

She glares me down, but she can’t see my face under my helmet. *S’all good.*

The headmistress turns to the row of participants again and explains the rules.

“You are to find the Mija’s Crystal that I hid somewhere in the ruins.”

She sure chose a valuable object for a recreational game.

“I’ve also planted several decoys. Please be sure to check the item carefully.”

Which means there are regular crystal balls lying around, too. *Kind of a meanie, no?*

Unfortunately, the headmistress herself hid the goods. Would’ve been way easier if she’d asked me to do it.

But not to worry. I’d already sent a handful of radar barriers throughout the dungeon.

I can’t tell a fake Mija’s Crystal from the real thing just by looking at it, but I’ll be able to tell right away if I reach my hand through the barrier and pour some mana into it.

I hope it won't break...

I'd accidentally broken one before. No idea why. All I did was channel a little mana into it.

"At the first intersection inside the temple, the two teams will proceed down two different paths. After that, you are free to choose whatever pathways you please."

From that point on, all bets are off.

"Best of luck to you all! On your marks, get set... Go!" *Ka-pow-pow-pow!* I strike my pose again, but Char and Flay are the only ones who give me any reaction. Sad.

"C'mon! Stop clapping and let's go!" hisses Laius.

"Uh-oh. They're already ahead of us!" points out Iris.

Team Numbers is off and running.

Team Char chases after them.

I watch the crew take off. *Go team.*

"Mr. Shiva? Aren't you going with them?"

I guess she's expecting me to keep a close watch or something because I'm the referee. But that's too much work.

"This should do it."

I conjure a giant screen in the air. It's split into smaller monitors that display the players in the two teams.

"What on earth...?"

I ignore the jaw-dropped headmistress and pull out a desk and some chairs

out of mystery space-time. I also set up a toy microphone made out of a barrier on the table. Just to set the mood.

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry. This is your seat, Headmistress.”

I offer her the middle seat of the three chairs and station myself next to her.

“Here we go! The race is on! The contestants may be teenagers, but these are the top-scoring cream of the crop students at the Academy! Now, which team will emerge victorious from this tournament?!”

Headmistress Theresia is floored. “Professor Luseiannel? Where’d you come from? And what on earth are you—?”

“She’s sportscasting,” I answer.

“What?”

“You and I will be commentators. Professor Tear will make remarks and inquire your opinion. Just respond to her accordingly.”

Oops, I went out of character a bit. I need to keep it cool.

Might I admit, I’m somewhat excited.

“What is the meaning of this?!” The headmistress’s voice is shrill. It’s rare to see her all worked up.

“I thought it’d be nice to livestream for the students. To have them watch the game in real time.”

You know, like a public viewing.

The headmistress’s eyes bug out. She’s trembling like a leaf.

Professor Tear grins cheekily. “See? Keeping it a secret till the last minute was

the right call. If we'd told her in advance, she would've put a stop to it for sure."

It seemed wasteful for such an entertaining event to go unseen.

Moreover, the biggest goal today is to pulverize Numbers both physically and psychologically.

That and to showcase Char's incredible talents to everyone, which will bolster her reputation as the eventual queen of this kingdom.

"There's no use trying to stop the broadcast now. The students have been watching all this time. They're always studying from morning to night. Don't they deserve a bit of entertainment as a treat?" The professor is moving in for the kill.

The headmistress rebuts, "Shiva, you realize that you'll be putting your rare magical powers on display as well?"

Oh.....

Professor Tear is up. "Meanwhile, our two teams are encountering their first monsters! What do you make of this, Shiva?"

Welp, whatever! It's Shiva's powers, not Haruto's.

"They seem to be some sort of mummies," I comment.

"Those are Flame Mummies," elaborates Theresia. "They're an advanced species of mummies. Ordinary ones are highly vulnerable to fire, but these are actually flame-resistant. They can even use fire attacks. Normally, you wouldn't see monsters like this on the ground level."

Didn't know that. Maybe I should pay better attention to which monsters I place in what area.

In any case, Team Char's battle has just begun!



The Olympus Ruins expedition tournament started.

I'm juggling between commentating on Char and the gang's adventure, steering the monsters through the labyrinth's control device, keeping an eye out for any emergencies, and playing support for Char's team from the sidelines. Yeah, I'm busy!

That might be why the first monsters the contestants encounter are the Flame Mummies, an advanced species of the undead that normally doesn't spawn so close to the surface.

They looked so wimpy. I figured they'd make a good appetizer.

But it's cool. I'm confident Char and her crew can beat these guys!

Team Numbers is in the lead. I turn to one of the split screens where they're just about to encounter the mummies. Let's observe how they handle their foe.

"Wow, this is terrible..."

The battle is so shambolic, Professor Tear immediately loses the oomph in her voiceover.

'Huurgh!' Number 4—a beefy dude who looks like he'd never get carded for alcohol—swings his fists and pummels the mummies in the face and torso.

'Hyahahaha! I'll slice you to shreds!' A pretty girl with crazy eyes is literally tearing through the undead with a whip. She's got a trashy sense of style but her weapon's cool. She's Number 12.

"Impressive! As expected from the school's top performers in practical

magic,” Theresia says.

“Yeah, but it’s not exactly a pretty picture.”

“Nor is it a clean sweep.”

Number 4’s been getting slammed and fire-blasted every now and then. His face scrunches in pain.

And the Number 12 girl is, uh...getting in the way. Her teammates are having a hard time launching attacks without accidentally hitting her.

Among all that, one young man stands out in the mix.

‘Dark Storm!’

Mr. Handsome unleashes a barrage of pitch-black missiles, blasting away mummy after mummy.

On another screen, the student spectators are cheering.

‘Did you see that? He can accurately maneuver his magic shots!’

‘Incredible...’

‘Kyaaa! Oh, Alexei!’

Ugh. I hate it when the hotshot shows off.

Watching him is starting to piss me off. I turn my attention to Char’s team instead. They’re just about to approach the mob of mummies.

“Enter Prince Laius, the top student in his grade and the future king of the coming era!” The zest in the sportscaster’s voice comes back.

“Is it just me or is your commentary for this team much more enthusiastic than for Guberg’s?” the headmistress mutters.

It’s (not) just you.

Laius pushes Iris out of the way and leaps out in front of the monsters.

‘Fire Storm!’

He unleashes a Fire magic attack. A beam of embers blasts like a flamethrower and catch onto the mummies, but...

‘What?! It didn’t even faze them?!’

Char, flying in the air, hovers down towards Laius and tells him, ‘Those monsters are flame-resistant.’

‘Why didn’t you say so?!’

Pfft, look at him getting beet red, I snicker to myself.

‘Laius, step back, please,’ instructs Marianne.

‘I’ll handle this!’ shouts Iris.

Laius looks peeved but he steps aside as Iris smashes into the front-line mummies with her fists. Princess Marianne supports from behind with Water magic attacks.

Meanwhile, Char floats in the air and waves her magic wand.

Wings made of light sprout from her back and spread open. With a wistful expression, Char incants, ‘Pure Reinigung...’

Dazzling, almost divine, beams of light flows out of Char and gently veil the mummies.

“Look at that!” shouts Tear. “Char’s mysterious sacred magic seems to be dissipating the mummies!”

“She’s an angel...” I utter. And I honestly think so.

Whereas...

“No, that’s an intermediate purification spell. It’s astonishing to see it wielded by a girl of her age, but there’s no need to give it a new name. However, the amount of light emitting from her seems excessive...” The headmistress elucidates with a sigh of disdain.

Yep. Char’s magical girl costume is designed to light up in different colors depending on the element her magic spell wields. The wings on her back are similar—they’re both basically just for show.

But the production value seems to be hitting its mark. The student audience is transfixed.

‘Incredible! Did you see how many she wiped out in one sweep?’

‘What is she, an angel?’

‘Charlotte’s so adorable!’

‘I wish she were my little sister!’

That’s my little sister. Jealous?

‘Dang it! I’ve got this too! Lightning Arrow!’

Laius shoots off a bombardment of bolts from behind Char. They pierce through the chests and heads of the remaining mummies. Chunks of dry flesh streak in all directions.

“Not exactly picturesque,” comments Professor Tear.

“By contrast, Charlotte chose a humane method to eliminate the monsters. What an angel... Nay, the Holy Mother!” I praise.



“Your remarks seem biased even among members of the same team,” says Theresia.

No, we’re just being honest.

Eventually, both teams make it past the first batch of monsters.

After that, it’s smooth sailing (now that I’m being careful by sending only weak monsters) and both teams clear the temple zone at pretty much the same pace.



Something strange is going on.

As Alexei Guberg advances through the underground maze, he gets a nagging sense that something is off.

They ran into a swarm of Flame Mummies on the ground floor of the temple. These guys don’t normally spawn until the middle levels of the labyrinth. He certainly hadn’t summoned them.

Once underground, Numbers continues to run into unexpected monsters.

After Alexei had seized operational control over the dungeon, he’d stationed just enough monsters along their path to not arouse the headmistress’s suspicion—which is going according to plan. However, they also keep running into monsters he didn’t assign.

I’m still the master controller. It’s not like someone else has seized command...

And yet he doesn’t have full control. The fact that he’s unable to tame the

unexpected spawns makes it evident.

Is the mechanism itself malfunctioning? Is Shiva interfering somehow?

The first scenario seems totally possible—it's an old structure. When the devil Melcuemenes pulled the crazy stunt of gathering all the monsters to the lowest level, she could've screwed something up.

However, the second scenario is also extremely likely.

But how could Shiva be controlling the labyrinth without revoking my authority over it?—no, there's no use even trying to figure it out. He doesn't seem to be bound by the same constraints the rest of us have.

There is one more possibility. An extremely slim one, but a dreadful one, nonetheless.

Could she be interfering?

Queen Gizelotte's psyche is melded with the Devil Lord Lucifyra's "main entity." Perhaps it resents Alexei's existence. He's an irregular fluke, after all.

But even if Gizelotte isn't willing to help us, why would she support Charlotte's team—effectively siding with Shiva?

It doesn't seem like anyone's trying to kill him. The monsters they've been encountering are barely a threat.

"Hey, Alexei! Snap out of it!" the burly guy barks. A monster shaped like a huge worm is bearing down on them. Countless rows of fangs gleam in its O-shaped mouth.

A Rock-Eater. It's not as terrifying as the giant version, but the venom it spews is extremely dangerous.

Alexei thrusts out one hand and conjures a defensive magic circle.

The beast headbutts into the circle and—*Splak!*—its round mouth suctions onto its surface. Alexei blasts a round of dark missiles into its gaping hole.

The creature's head blows off, and its meat and blood splatter everywhere.

"You're supposed to be our leader. We can't have you lost in la-la land in the middle of a battle."

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about something."

Once the flock of monsters clear out, the team's only female fighter approaches Alexei.

"There's something strange going on. Not just with the monsters, but with you."

"If you're upset with me in some way, please don't hesitate to speak up."

"It's not that I'm upset, Alexei. It's just... Since when do you have affinity to Darkness? Plus, long-range magic control isn't something you can learn overnight."

The other members of the team eye him as if they've been wondering the same thing.

Given the spectacle he's been putting on, their suspicion is well expected. Alexei had never demonstrated Dark spells before, and even the Flash Princess wasn't capable of long-range maneuvers when she was still in school.

"I can't share the details because it's a family secret, but both are the effects of a specialized magic device. Its existence was meant to be confidential at least until I graduate. However, I decided that the situation was dire enough to warrant its use."

"Oh! A secret heirloom of the Guberg family? In that case, no wonder we

didn't know about it. And you've decided that now is the time to put it to use—well, I'd say that really demonstrates your commitment!" Gullible Number 4 flashes a hearty grin at his leader.

But Number 12 and the other members of the party don't seem convinced.

Number 1 takes charge. "We'll fall behind if we stand around here arguing. Let's keep moving."

"But I don't see how we're going to find the treasure by blindly foraging around."

"We can deduce its location to some extent," asserts their commander.

The others frown suspiciously.

"The underground labyrinth is an ancient ruin—ruins are manmade structures. If we profile the architect and trace his thought process, we can predict where certain rooms might be located."

Alexei already knows the layout. He's only offering a reasonable-sounding explanation as a cover.

"Once we draft a basic blueprint, we'll be able to surmise suitable hiding places—hiding places that Headmistress Theresia would find suitable, that is."

Alexei already has this information, too.

It wasn't easy to pull one over on the headmistress, but Alexei was able to gather where Mija's Crystal is hidden.

"I'm sure you have your doubts about this plan. But if we want to move quickly, we'll have to agree on a strategy. There isn't much time for debate. Are you willing to trust me on this?"

The rest of the group is silent, unsure how to respond. Finally, one boy grows

impatient and shouts, “Fine by me! You’re the leader, Alexei. I trust you!”

The other members follow suit and nod in agreement.



Too bad. For a moment there, it felt like there was gonna be a falling out. But in the end, Numbers resolved to move forward as a unified team.

By the way, is it just me or does Alexei-senpai seem to know where the treasure is hidden?

I decide to ask the person next to me.

“Headmistress Theresia, is there any risk that someone could’ve found out the location of this Mija’s Crystal?”

“That’s an interesting question. What do you think? My aim is to give both parties an equal and fair chance, always.”

Dang. Did she somehow find out about our team’s Labyrinth Simulator training?

If so, it’s possible that she’s decided to turn a blind eye to Alexei’s chicanery.

Ms. Zero Tolerance my ass.

Are Char and the gang gonna be in trouble now? I check out their screen.

Char: ‘*Nom!* This red bean-filled mochi is so yummy♪’

Iris: ‘Such a curious texture! And the black filling inside is sweet and tasty.’

Marianne: ‘I’ve never had anything like this back at the castle. It’s delicious!’

Laius: ‘This tea is good, too. Hard to believe Flay made it...’

Flay: *'Chomp! Om-nom-nom-nom!'*

A tea break?

Laius and Marianne eye Char suspiciously.

The prince whispers, 'By the way, where did this table and tea set come from?'

His sister replies quietly, 'It appeared as though she pulled them out of her purse...'

'But that's physically impossible...'

Char's handy dandy "4D Purse" can store anything.

The crew is relaxed and blissful. Before long, even Laius warms up to Char's mellow vibe and starts savoring the tea and snack.

As far as solidarity goes, they've definitely got Numbers beat.

But...are they getting a little too soft? Nah, I should know better than to doubt Char.

At this point, nobody could predict that my little sister's about to really put the pedal to the metal.

'May I have one more, please?' Char asks politely.

Seriously, Char. Can I really trust you?



Their bellies are full. Their HP and morale are boosted. Sweet snacks are,

indeed, the ultimate source of strength.

Charlotte rubs her tummy as she takes flight.

“All right, everybody! Let’s go treasure hunting!”

She zooms off. The rest of the group scrambles after her on foot.

Medjed Flay runs alongside her little leader without breaking a sweat but the other three are barely keeping up.

Laius shouts, “Hey, Charlotte! Are you sure we wanna go straight? The room we just passed on the right was one of the hot spots.”

“Keep going! Our target will most likely be where we expect it to be. If we make any detours, Numbers will beat us.”

Marianne wrinkles her brow.

“Are they headed for the same place?”

“They appear to be. They were moving about randomly when they first entered the labyrinth, but now they’re heading straight for our destination.”

Charlotte has a special barrier applied over one of her eyes.

It’s linked to a tracking barrier I planted on Alexei. Char can see where he’s located in the labyrinth.

While she appeared to be lounging about and enjoying a tea break earlier, she was keeping a sharp eye on the enemy’s movements.

For such a young kid, she’s sure got it together. Laius is impressed. But at the same time, he still has some doubts.

“Couldn’t it be a coincidence?”

“It’s possible, but we’re better off assuming it isn’t.”

The fastest team wins the contest.

Even if the treasure isn't at the destination, converging with the enemy shouldn't be a problem. All that does is place both teams back at square one.

Before long, they come across another horde of monsters.

The monsters are humanoids clad in armor. They're all lined up in position and ready to go.

The audience stirs. 'Aren't those Wandering Knights?! Yikes!'

'What's that? Are they tough?'

'They're super tough. You'd need a mana level of at least 30 to fight one alone.'

Little do Char and her friends know that the spectators are in an uproar.

The magical girl waves her wand. "Time to annihilate them clean! Ka-poot!"

Char doesn't show the slightest hint of fear. After all, she's fought these guys before. She had Haruto's direct assistance then. But now, she has an assortment of special powers her brother had built into her wand.

The wand unleashes a barrage of bright blasts. Her attack doesn't completely decimate the monsters, but it definitely takes the wind out of their sails.

Bam! Vwam!

As the Wandering Knights falter, Irisphilia darts in and clobbers them with her fists. The monsters, although not completely vanquished, don't have any opportunity to counterattack. Their armored bodies fall apart into pieces.

"..."

Sheet-ghost Flay charges into the oncoming mob. With a cloth covering her

body, she can't attack with her mighty claws, but she thwacks them with her trademark yakuza-kick.

"Whoa, those two are good... Kind of intimidating." Laius assists her from behind with Light magic. There's no way he could jump in with all the bits and pieces of monsters flying every which way.

"Flay's one thing, but hasn't Iris gotten dramatically stronger in such a brief time?" remarks Marianne.

"Yeah. Hard to believe her mana level was stuck until just recently," Laius replies.

"Is this the 'awakening' they're talking about? In any case, we'll just have to do what we can to help out!"

The siblings provide seamless support for Flay and Iris—being careful not to get in their way.

"Take that! And that! And that!" Charlotte fires off nonstop blasts of light.

"Hey, watch it!" hollers Laius.

"Don't worry! There's no risk of hitting one of ours. My magic wand has a special function to prevent any friendly fire!"

"What?! That's cheating!"

It doesn't take Charlotte and the gang very long to wipe out the Wandering Knights.

Alexei's team is a step ahead. They're already one floor below where their opponents are.

Hmm. Looks like they've chosen the same route as us.

Unlike Char, who has a special barrier to spy on Alexei's team, Alexei has no means to track his competitors.

But because he can control the monsters in the dungeon, he's able to grasp their whereabouts by detecting when which of the monsters have vanished.

They're predicting our moves. Or more like...tracking us. This is rough.

A rather underhanded act from a party who claims to be all about justice. Haruto or Shiva must be helping them. Their willingness to use any means necessary to achieve their "justice" suggests great zeal in their crusade.

Anyway, I'd better put a stop to it.

He suspects there must be some trick but he can't figure out what it could be. *Could they have affixed something to my body? In which case...*

Plink!

...he unleashes a burst of mana and feels something snap behind his back. His team's footsteps drown out the sound.

The old Alexei wouldn't have been able to pull off something like that. But with the little bit of power that he gained from the Devil Lord, it's a piece of cake.

Now they won't be able to monitor us. If we carry on at this pace, we should be able to get our hands on Mija's Crystal first, but...

That doesn't mean their worries are over. Simply obtaining the treasure doesn't equate to instant victory.

For the team to win, the players need to bring the item back to the Academy.

Getting it snatched from their hands during a face-off would be the worst possible scenario.

It's not that Alexei is afraid his team won't win. But if Shiva were to secretly intervene from the shadows, they could be in trouble.

If his opponents are headed for the same destination, there's a good chance Alexei's team will run into them on the way out. Were his party to slow down now, there's the risk of being ambushed the instant they reach the treasure.

"No time to dawdle. Everyone, stay with me!"

Now that the enemy can't track us, we definitely have an overwhelming advantage.

There's no use trying to cover his tracks for all the trickery and subterfuge he's been pulling. Alexei may as well gain the upper hand in deceit tactics also.

What now, Shiva?

At this point—well, from the start, actually—Alexei's interest is in Shiva.

Charlotte Zenfis is hardly an obstacle to him. *No matter how talented the young girl is, without Shiva's help, her magical abilities will never exceed that of a human*, he belittles her.

Little does Alexei know that *that* will be his downfall.

With one full floor in between themselves and their opponents, Alexei is convinced victory is theirs. That's when he hears a voice.

"All we have to do is defeat them in a face-off. After that, we can take our time with the treasure hunting!" It's Charlotte Zenfis.

The enemy team has appeared right in front of them!



Alexei is sure of his team's victory.

They're ahead of Charlotte's party by a whole level, with only two floors left to where the treasure awaits. And the final room of this level is not far. The stairway leading to the next floor is in the same room.

A giant monster—the floor boss—awaits them, but it shouldn't hold them back for long. *Better yet, we'll slip past the monster and have it block the way for Charlotte's team*, Alexei thinks.

If Team Numbers picks up the pace by just a little, they can nab the goods and get out without running into anyone.

Even if Charlotte's team hounds them at top speed, Alexei is sure his team can evade her party.

Ka-boom!

Suddenly, an ear-splitting crash rumbles through the labyrinth.

"Wh-What was that? It sounded like an explosion up ahead..." Number 12 mutters nervously.

"We'd better hurry." A chilling wave of anxiety washes over Alexei as he speeds up.

They arrive at the biggest chamber—the same room where the stairs are—and hear a voice.

“All we have to do is defeat them in a face-off. After that, we can take our time with the treasure hunting!”

Before their very eyes, Charlotte is floating in the air in her frilly pink costume. She points her magic wand at Numbers.

How could this be...? Alexei gnashes his teeth.

There was no way for their rivals to catch up, let alone get ahead.

But the answer is in plain sight.

Littered all over the floor are piles of rubble. There's a gaping hole in the ceiling above the debris. It was evident that the ceiling came crashing down, and even buried the floor boss.

They busted through the level from above?! That's beyond ludicrous!

The Olympius Ruins is protected by a magical force. Breaking the floors, ceilings, and walls of the structure is all but impossible. Even an extremely powerful mage armed with one of the seven sublime weapons would struggle to achieve such a feat.

In fact, the floors (or ceiling, in this case) are at least forty feet apart. To break through them is practically impossible.

The ceilings in the great chamber are much higher than those in the narrow corridors. Which means the layers are thinner—relatively speaking, that is.

It must've been that she-demon...

A white mound of fabric lies limply on the floor. The woman underneath it is drained of all her power. But even if she'd used all of her mana on her greatest spell, could she really have wreaked such damage?

Oh, what's that...?

Alexei notices Irisphilia holding an unusual weapon. She's hauling a quiver full of strange metal spears on her back. Strapped on her arm is the most extraordinary magic device.

I hear they discovered a sublime weapon in the labyrinth... Could that be it?

Rumor has it that Irisphilia had sealed a covenant with the found weapon. But Alexei doesn't recall seeing her carrying it earlier.

No time to waste thinking about such matters.

It doesn't change the fact that it's here now.

Alexei regains his cool. "That was certainly ruthless of you. But do you really think you can beat us now that you've lost your strongest fighter?"

There are ten members in Team Numbers, minus Number 7 (Charlotte), and Number 9 (Zara). Each of them are the very crème de la crème of the elite academy.

By contrast, Charlotte's team has only four remaining members now that Flay's down.

The she-wolf alone is powerful enough to contend with the entire Numbers party excluding Alexei, but she's in no state to fight. And Irisphilia may look well, but she's most certainly depleted at this point.

"Hmph!" the sheet-ghost huffs on the floor. "So what if my mana is drained at the moment? I'll show you how quickly I can recover. Give me five minutes...er, ten minutes? Just to be on the safe side, let's say twenty minutes... Why not thirty? By then, I should've regained enough mana to completely annihilate the lot of you!"

"Flay...er, I mean, Fletch Zenpos the exchange student, please take it easy for now," Char quells.

“Nghh... I trust you’ve got this!”

“Yes! Your sacrifice will not be in vain!”

“Hey, I’m not dead!”

Their senseless banter seems to be hitting someone’s nerve. “Quit running your stupid mouths!” Number 4, the big burly one, charges into Charlotte’s party.

“Hah!”

Irisphilia attacks him from the side. The weapon she was just holding—presumably what busted the ceiling—is nowhere in sight.

“Hrf?!” Number 4 blocks her forceful kick with one arm. “Oh-hoh! Not bad. But did you really think you were any match for me?—hrk?! What? Why you—yikes!”

The white-haired warrior batters with a rush of attacks, overwhelming the beefcake.

Charlotte spectates with a look of satisfaction.

Amazing, Miss Iris. She’s using her speed to dominate him. Pairing her up with Number 4 was the right call!

Still, victory hardly seems imminent. Without the team’s close combat ace, the fact remains that they’re woefully outnumbered.

“You’re done for,” Alexei jeers. “Do you really think the three of you can take on nine of us?”

Charlotte counters his pretentious smirk with a sweet smile.

“No need to worry—we won’t be outnumbered. Allow me to bring out a little surprise!”

She rummages around in the purse and pulls out a small folded cloth.

“Whee!”

She flings the fabric into the air. It seems to grow bigger and bigger in size.

Clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka!! Noisy soldiers fall from above. “Wha?! Knight Skeletons?!”

There are around fifty of them. More than five times the manpower of Alexei’s team.

“Johnny—oops! I mean, summoned monsters! Please take care of everyone except for Numbers 1, 4, and 12. Prince Laius and Princess Marianne will take on 12. I’ll handle Alexei. That splits both teams into four groups, so it’s essentially four-on-four. All right, everyone! Let us battle honorably and fairly!”

“You call that fair?!” cries Number 12.

Clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka!!

But her words are quickly drowned out by the clattering teeth...



This is getting exciting!

A clever strategy devised by none other than our dear Charlotte. Taking a shortcut by smashing through the ceiling had Numbers pretty shaken up. The fact that it put Flay temporarily out of commission probably evens out the playing field.

But you rallied Johnny and the Knight Skeletons... I wonder what the verdict is.

I glance over to see how Headmistress Theresia is reacting.

“...”

She’s gaping in amazement.

Now’s my chance to twist her arm. “What a brilliant surprise tactic! Don’t you think, Professor Luseiannel?”

“Setting aside busting through the floor to take a shortcut, I’d think adding members to your team is an illegal-ish move.”

Don’t throw them under the bus.

“It’s not. Those were summoned monsters, not team members. Using a magic weapon isn’t against the rules, is it?”

“Oh—is that how we’re playing it?”

“Playing it?” The headmistress glares at us.

“Hey, look at that! The prince and princess are in a jam!” Professor Tear smoothly switches to commentator mode again.

On the big screen, the Number 12 lady (what was her name?) is swinging some sort of whip. She’s deftly manipulating the middle and end of the whip to flog both siblings at once.

‘Gah!’

‘Ow?!’

Laius blocks with both arms, but Marianne takes a direct blow to the shoulder. The whip slices her school uniform, revealing a bright red welt on her porcelain skin.

‘Ah, I do apologize, Your Highness,’ scoffs Number 12. ‘But this is a formal

battle. Your status shouldn't hold me back, should it?'

'O-Of course not. No need to have any reservations.'

Hmm. I guess Number 12 is an anti-authority advocate or something.

'Ah-hahaha! Don't mind if I do!'

Nope. She's just a sadistic maniac. Come to think of it, so was Zara. What's with the girls in Numbers, anyway?

We'd better hurry up and wipe them out. Otherwise, I'm worried they'll be a bad influence on Char's moral development. She's pretty easily influenced.

Meanwhile, Number 12 is going to town with her swishing whip.

'Who do you think you are?!' Laius delivers a punch that thwacks the whip away.

'Ugh! Prince Laius, you're not my type at all!'

I think you're better off that you're not, Laius.

The brawny prince closes in for a boxing match.

Number 12 backs away as she lashes her weapon in an attempt to keep him at bay.

Marianne is inching in from behind her like a tiger.

They're all dancing around, but they seem to be at a standoff.

Meanwhile, Iris and the hulky dude continue taking turns playing offense and defense. Number 4 counters Iris's agile moves with stalwart defiance. He's taking a lot of hits, but he manages to get back at her each time out of sheer determination. Looks like Iris is in a tight spot.

But by far the most entertaining battle is...

‘Wh-What’s with these monsters?!’

‘They keep reassembling every time we knock them apart!’

‘Ackgh! I’ve had enough of this!’

Commander Johnny and his boney army are giving Numbers a real ass-kicking.

I retrofitted them with magnetic barriers so that their bodies (bones) snap back together if they’re knocked apart. Sometimes, the wrong parts click into the wrong places, but there’s always someone there to piece them together. Looks like they’re pretty close to bringing their opponents to their knees.

And as for our Char... She’s intensely locking eyes with the rival leader Alexei.

They’re standing a little ways away from everyone else and gazing at each other. *Is this a romantic moment? Can I go berserk on this jerk now?*

Alexei breaks the silence. ‘What’s the matter? If you aren’t going to make the first move, do you mind if I get this duel started?’

‘I don’t mean to sound presumptuous, and it may even be audacious of me to say this but...’ Char’s eyes widen.

What, is his fly down or something?

‘I think that a showdown between the big leaders should start *after* the others have settled down!’

Good point. The girl has a knack for entertainment.

‘I’m hoping we could continue glaring at each other for the time being and give off a “first one to move loses” kind of vibe.’

‘That doesn’t benefit me in the least. Your summoned monsters are giving my team quite a bit of a headache. I’m looking to get this over with and go to their aid.’

‘The Knight Skeletons are instructed to exit when I cue them with the line, “Oh dear! We seem to be out of time!” I hope you don’t mind?’ She peers up at him with her doe eyes.

The standard response to this sort of question should be a loud and firm, “*Not at all!*”

But instead, Alexei utters, ‘Rather arrogant, don’t you think? Assuming everyone will act according to your script?’

What’d you say, jerkface?! I’ll come over there and kick your ass!

“Er, Shiva? Mr. Black Knight?” The sportscaster next to me peers over. “You’re giving off some pretty murderous vibes there. Let’s calm down, now.”

I can’t believe Professor Tear, of all people, is telling me to calm down.

Charlotte says, ‘My intention is to make the event more exciting. I certainly don’t take for granted that my team will win, and I don’t mean to be condescending—oh?!’

‘What the—?!’

A sudden mishap. The giant screen goes completely black.

No images, no sound. Nothing.

“Shiva, w-what’s going on...?” sputters Professor Tear.

“An accident seems to have occurred at the scene.”

I have my own surveillance barrier to keep an eye on Char and the gang that’s completely independent from the big screen. I know exactly what’s going on.

I turn to the headmistress. “Do you mind if I go?”

She doesn’t hesitate to say, “Yes, please do. Please ensure the students’ safety.”

Maybe she has an inkling of what’s going on, too?

Anyway, I’d better hurry—two funny-looking devils popped out of nowhere.



The unsavory duo suddenly appeared in the midst of Team Char’s battle against Numbers.

“It’s been entertaining watching you guys go at it with each other, but I’d much rather kill you all myself.”

One of them is a young boy about Charlotte’s age.

He has white hair, red eyes, and a cocky demeanor. Growing out of his back are a pair of bat wings.

“Ugh, lame...”

The other one is a girl with a curvy build—particularly in the chest area.

She has white hair, too, tied in a single braid that reaches down to her ankles. Her expression is sullen as if the whole thing is truly one big “ugh” to her.

The two devils are hovering in the air without moving their wings.

“Excuse me... But who might you be?” Charlotte inquires politely.

“Hey, Murzalla! Did you hear that? This human has the gall to ask the great devil Urim a question!”

“And what is your business here?” Charlotte adds on.

“Hah! Isn’t it obvious? We’re here to take you hostage and kill you-know-who. A few of you will get away with a missing limb or two. As for the rest of you, I’ll crush you like ants.”

“What a moron...” Murzalla, the girl devil, sighs and rolls her eyes.

Urim, the boy devil, has already blabbed his name, identity, and purpose.

Number 4 yells, “Whatever that means, I don’t care. It’s plain to see that you’re an enemy. Your flight magic is quite impressive, but at the same time, it makes you vulnerable. Let’s go, team!”

He lets out a battle cry and charges at Urim.

Number 12 doesn’t miss a beat to encircle him from the other side.

“Stop, both of you!” Alexei shouts, but he’s too late.

Number 4 focuses his mana into his fist while Number 12 swings her whip around.

Urim strikes them both with blasts of Dark magic.

“Gahh!”

“Aah!”

“Fools. Did you really think flight magic would drain our mana? We’re on a whole different plane from you humans. But I suppose for someone with a death wish, it’s a reward. I regret not going a little easier on you. Would’ve liked

to watch you suffer a bit more.”

The devil boy cackles. Once again, Murzalla sighs.

“You’re truly idiotic. Look again. They’re still alive.”

“What?!”

Number 4 and Number 12 are both sprawled on the ground, but they’re still breathing.

Urim glowers at Alexei. “I assume this was your work, you cheap knockoff!”

“It wasn’t me. But I surmise from your words that you are my enemy, too.”

“True enough. We’ve been granted permission to dispose of you while we’re at it. I do pity you, but don’t worry; I’ll make it quick.”

Charlotte, who was quietly watching the whole thing, raises her magic wand.

“I don’t completely understand what’s going on, but as the old saying goes, ‘The enemy of my enemy is my ally.’ Mr. Alexei, now that we have a common foe, I propose that we collaborate. What do you say?”

“I suppose we’ve no choice. But I’m no match for them and neither is your team. Our only option is to wait for *her* to recover.” Alexei glances at Flay, who is still quivering on the floor under her white sheet.

He then sweeps his gaze across the battleground.

The rest of Numbers are out of commission; they’ve been quelled by the boney army. Not that they would’ve stood a chance against devils anyway.

“Knight Skeletons, please protect the injured. Princess Marianne and Prince Laius, you will back them up. Iris and Alexei, you two will contend with the devils. I’ll assist you while doing something about the whole situation!”

Despite Charlotte's vague commands, everyone quickly grasps their role and springs into action.

"Well, well! Suddenly they're all worked up. Do they really think they stand a chance against me, the great Urim?"

"Will you quit blabbing and just kill them? Leave the annoying little one for me."

"Back me up!"

"Sigh... You're a pain in the ass."

Alexei and the others decide to focus on playing defense. An offensive battle would be too reckless. They brace themselves for an attack.

"I'll start with you, cheap knockoff!" *Byoom!* Murzalla's arms spring out of her body like rubber.

"?!"

She lunges for Alexei's head but he dodges by a hair.

The wriggling long arms chase him around as he slips through and deflects them with his Dark magic bullets.

"Not enough, huh?" Murzalla grumbles. Her shoulders swell and—*Byoom!*—another pair of arms grow out of each side.

"Quite an unsettling feature you've been gifted with," Alexei grimaces as he scrambles to evade the four arms.

"What are you waiting for, Murzalla? Quit messing around and lend me a hand over here. Literally!" complains Urim.

"Ugh, shut up!"

Meanwhile, the boy devil unleashes a torrent of black missiles.

Johnny and the Knight Skeletons parry with their swords but a few of the missiles hit home, disassembling the skeletons to pieces. Fortunately, their limbs reattach right away.

“Augh!” A stray shot hits Laius, knocking him over. “Dang. That was a heavy hit...” As he staggers to his feet, another missile bolts towards him.

“Move, quick!” Princess Marianne sends a Water attack right into the black bullet, changing its course just in time.

“It’s my fault! I just can’t get close to him...” All Iris can do is to deflect the blasts with her fists and feet. She’s trying to narrow in on Urim, but instead, she’s getting pushed further away.

The battle is heavily one-sided. And yet Urim clicks his tongue in annoyance.

“Something isn’t right. My magic is infused with a curse that should penetrate the target’s core. How can they be unscathed after taking a direct hit?!”

Despite that, the devils inarguably have the upper hand.

“Hua-wa-wa... This is getting dangerously dangerous...” Charlotte, who’s been supporting her comrades with her Light magic, is starting to get overwhelmed.

Flay is their last ray of hope. Yet she remains flopped on the ground, still shivering.

“Hmph! What a bother. Take this!” A giant pitch-black sphere—ten feet in diameter—appears in front of Urim’s face.

“Oh no!” shouts Charlotte.

The projectile roars through the air, heading straight for the injured members and the boney army surrounding them.

Charlotte jumps into its path as she thrusts both arms forward to stop the blast.

“Hah! I was gonna spare you, but, oh well. Go ahead, get blasted into the darkness!”

Charlotte clenches her teeth.

My little sister is sacrificing herself for her friends’ lives—what a touching sight. Here come the waterworks!

All right! Now!

Up until this point, I’ve been preoccupied with a few tasks: blocking and canceling the weird effects of the devils’ attacks and etcetera—all behind my optical camouflage—and it’s at this moment that I drop the optical camo to jump in.

I block the massive black sphere with a defensive barrier and, at the same time, blast it to ashes with a barrage of tiny bullet barriers.

“What the hell?! Where did you come from?!” Urim fumes.

Nice. Sweet production value if I do say so myself.

“Shiva!” Char’s eyes glimmer.

“Sorry I’m late. You all did a great job holding your own.”

A superhero always swoops in at the right moment. I would’ve preferred to ambush the bad guys from behind and get it over with, but I gotta make sure I hit all of Char’s happy buttons.

As a side note, Flay's already recovered. I ordered her not to interfere.

"I'll take care of these two. You can get back to your treasure hunting contest."

Two Anywhere Doors appear, one in front of each devil.

"...?!"

"What the heck?!"

The doors open and swallow them up.

I conjure one more door and step through it myself.

"Keep up the good fight!" Char hollers after me as I make my way to deal with the intruders. *It's all the motivation I need!*



After passing through the weird doors, the devils find themselves up in the clouds.

What's even weirder than the door is...

Is this a...floor? Murzalla is baffled.

Under her feet is an enormous, white, circular plane with a grate pattern.

Poof! Another door appears and a figure clad entirely in black steps through it.

"What the hell? Teleportation magic? And you're pulling it off with a device I've never seen before."

Urim has been transported here, too. He rights himself in the air and glares at

the man in black.

“So we’re somewhere new. What about it? You think you can take on the two of us alone? You really think you’re that good?!”

Yes. Yes, he does.

So good that he didn’t even bother to take advantage of the few seconds of confusion when the devils were being transported. Instead, he created a space where they can have a fair fight.

The Black Knight explains, “You see, there’s a special audience who’s looking forward to watching this battle,” and mutters under his breath, “Can’t pull any underhanded tricks...”

Murzalla catches it but she doesn’t know what he means. She knows she can’t just take it at face value.

It’s him. He’s the guy who defeated Orsay. We can’t beat him.

Orsay was the devil who was sent to search for Melcuemenes after she fell off the map.

He was specifically designed for assault and extermination. But the Black Knight had vanquished him without even giving the devil a chance to make a move.

On the other hand, Murzalla was tasked with only one mission from her creator.

Shiva, the Black Knight... I’ll reveal your powers and your face under the mask.

Both she and Urim had been created for the sole purpose of investigating Shiva’s identity and powers.

The she-devil doesn’t care if they die. In fact, Shiva’s more than welcome to

end them right there and then if it means he'll exhibit enough powers that could decimate two devils.

Murzalla extends all four of her elongated arms and focuses her mana into her palms. Black misty clouds appear above each hand and swirl around until they shapeshift into spheroids.

She swings her arms back and flings the dark energy balls with all her might.

The spheres howl through the air into Shiva.

"Hm, interesting. I've never played baseball before, but I will gladly hit your pitches!"

Shiva babbles nonsensically as he crouches. Out of nowhere, a wooden stick appears in his hands.

Ka-ting! An unexpected sound rings as soon as he swings. Impossible.

What's even more impossible is that his piece of wood struck one of the balls and sent it flying.

"Keep 'em coming!"

The man quickly moves into the trajectory of one of the other black spheres. Once more, he sends the ball streaking across sky with a resounding *ka-ting!*

He's muting the actual sound of the impact and playing another tone over it. And he's enveloping my magic attacks with barriers so they won't explode on contact.

Murzalla turns her attention to the wooden stick in his hands.

That's made of a barrier, too. And so is this floor... But what's the point of doing all this?!

She can't fathom why the piece of wood needs to be rod-shaped. And what's

the point of the floor when they can all fly?

The four balls all disappear as they whirl off into the distance. The barriers that were encasing them had burst.

“Hmm. My memory is pretty vague, but I think that was a fairly good rendition. I hope.”

She watches Shiva carefully as he hoists the wooden stick over his shoulder.

What did he mean about his “special audience” and “can’t pull any underhanded tricks”?

Murzalla can only come up with one possible interpretation—*but could it be?*

“How ’bout this?!” Urim interrupts her thoughts and discharges thousands of black pellets.

“What’s this? You don’t expect me to hit all of those, do you?”

But Shiva doesn’t look worried in the least.

No way...

Behind Shiva appear thousands of glowing orbs of light.

Are those barriers too? But how...

The balls of light launch at once. As if possessed by wills of their own, each one homes in on a single black pellet, smashing it to dust with astounding precision.

“Whoops. I should’ve made those funnel shaped. Or maybe I could’ve whipped up a whole bunch of magic circles...”

He’s mumbling to himself again. But even when she manages to make out the words, they make utterly no sense.

Apparently, what Orsay told Lord Lucifyra as he drew his last breaths is true. Shiva can create and manipulate barriers without any restrictions.

Moreover, the fact that he can produce barriers in such astonishing quantities, capture the trajectory of the black pellets with accuracy, and blast them to pieces with perfect precision can only mean one thing:

His mana level is off the scale...

That's all there is to it. And it's on a level that cannot be measured. There's no way of even knowing if his power is containable for a devil. She shudders.

"Dammit! What the hell's going on?!" Even Urim is losing his will to fight.

"Hmm. You guys are just like—um, what was his name again? The dude who transformed into some kinda wolf or leopard or something."

"You mean Orsay?"

"That, probably. He was a super weak devil despite his looks. You're just like that guy."

The man in black doesn't seem to be bluffing.

Orsay was Lucifyra's most powerful servant. If Shiva judged him to be "super weak," his powers must be akin to the highest-rate devils birthed by a Devil Lord.

"Done attacking already? Mind if I take a turn?"

Shiva's wooden stick disappears. A pair of unusual-looking weapons appear, one in each hand.

From what I've heard, he's got something called "magic guns." Those must be it.

Haruto, the boy who seems closely connected to Shiva, was seen using such a

weapon at his school. Beyond a doubt, the guns are Shiva's creation and he'd lent it to the boy.

Shiva fires the magic guns wildly.

Murzalla scrambles to swat them away with her four hands, but there are just too many—a few of them strike her.

Before Urim could even react, he's being bludgeoned by the cannonade of shots in midair.

No... We're no match for him. Murzalla resigns herself. A slight smile rises to her lips.

Just...a bit longer...

Her defeat is certain—she's not in denial of that. If she can hold out a bit longer, she's sure she can decode the secret to Shiva's powers and his true identity.

But it'll take more than her life alone.

"Ngh... Dammit... Do you know...who I am? I'm a servant of Lord Lucifyra..." Urim drones in agony.

Murzalla looks at her partner. All he can do is blubber pathetically as he slowly slips out of consciousness.

"Hm? What are you doing?" ponders Shiva.

She knew he wouldn't ignore her next move but she hadn't expected him to fully cease his attack to stand back and watch.

Each of her four arms splits into two, then into four, and then into eight. They continue to splinter into long, thin branches. The dozens of limbs suddenly intertwine and bunch together. In the next instant, they unravel and sprawl out

to form an umbrella and—

“H-Hey, Murzalla, what are you...”

—*Chomp!*

The huge “umbrella” swallows Urim and snaps shut like a snake gulping down prey. The lump travels down the tube into Murzalla’s body. When it finally reaches her chest, her body starts to swell...

“Graah...aah! Ahahaha!”

The devil girl’s figure radiates blazingly. Her silhouette contorts.

‘It’s a fusion!’ squeals a voice somewhere far away. Never mind that for now.

Murzalla’s body balloons bigger and bigger in size. Millions of cracks emerge on her skin and pieces of them start to flake off. The surface underneath reveals...

“A...tree?” Shiva says under his breath.

Murzalla lets out a harrowing cackle.

From the waist down, she takes the form of tree roots. The shoots writhe around like tentacles. Her arms have settled back into two limbs, but they look like masses of twigs twisted together. Her upper body looks the same as before, only her skin is now as coarse as a tree trunk.

She looms over thirty feet tall.

Finally, you’ve made yourself useful, Urim. This is what you were created for.

“It’s truly a nuisance, but I’m afraid the game isn’t over yet!” Murzalla bellows.

She bends her two trunk arms and cracks them like a whip. *Byoooom!* The ends

stretch out like rubber.

Her weaponized arms are so fast that they're barely visible to the naked eye, and they're several times swifter than her or Urim's magic missiles.

For this brief moment, Murzalla's power exceeds the strongest devil Orsay's—much closer now to the Devil Lord's.

This ought to do it!

Just as she whips her arms into Shiva's head—

Thwok. "Huh?!"

—one of them is hacked off her body and continues to swing past him until it hits the floor with a forceful bounce.

"How...could this be..."

Before she could even think, her other arm, too, has been severed from her shoulder. She didn't even feel the cut. And now that limb is nowhere to be found.

"You're the same as Orsay. Even after transforming, you're not really any better."

Shiva raises his magic gun again.

He fires off a barrage of shots so unbelievably fast that she can't follow them with her eyes, let alone dodge them.

The bullets pierce right through her.

In...conceivable...

Murzalla's more than just speed. In her tree-like form, she's as impenetrable as a castle wall. In theory, it's impossible to inflict so much as a scratch.

He's...beyond the scope...of a devil...

This is the realm of a god.

But Shiva can't possibly be a Devil Lord. If he was, surely Lucifyra would've detected him. And the God Killer certainly wouldn't tolerate his existence, even tacitly.

Which could only mean one thing. He must be a devil.

Creating a devil with powers comparable to a Devil Lord? Under normal circumstances, it'd be impossible.



But there are exceptions to every rule.

The creator must've transferred almost all its powers into the Black Knight. In which case...

All we have to do is find the higher power who created Shiva and destroy them.

But where is this Devil Lord, and what is it doing at this moment?

One little girl comes to mind.

It's her. It must be that brat.

The child Shiva cares about more than anyone.

Charlotte Zenfis must be the Devil Lord who created Shiva.

There were a few things that struck Murzalla as odd from what she observed of the Black Knight. He started appearing shortly after Charlotte and her mother were attacked by bandits (imperial soldiers pretending to be bandits, actually).

Since then, Shiva had been often sighted in Count Zenfis's fief. He started turning up in the capital not long before Charlotte entered the Academy.

The Devil Lord most likely "took over" Charlotte around that time.

That must be it. Still though, I cannot fathom why it pretends to be a human.

It's not unlikely that her older brother Haruto could be the Devil Lord, but Shiva is clearly focused more on the little girl. There's a possibility that Haruto received powers from the deity, too.

The maelstrom of Shiva's magic gunshots continues.

Her entire body becomes numb from the torturous pain. She can't move so much as a finger.

"That should do it. Maybe a bit too one-sided... Should I have thrown in a suspenseful moment where I was in trouble...?"

Murzalla can sense a terrifying magnitude of mana from the man in black who's jabbering to himself.

"Time to wrap it up. I should put on a bigger show next time. Like an explosion on the edge of a cliff or something."

His words make absolutely no sense. But at least it sounds like he's finally going to finish her.

It doesn't matter. I've already served my purpose. We were merely spies. Our only task was to learn his true nature and report it back to Lord Lucifyra...

She's been sending all of the information to her master this whole time.

Lord Lucifyra, I've done enough, haven't I?Huh?

That's strange. Why...

"Why aren't you answering me?"

Shiva catches her whisper. "What was that? Did you have a question for me?"

"Not you!—answer me... Answer me, please!"

Shiva tilts his head, then—*ding!*—a lightbulb flicks on.

"Oh, you're trying to communicate telepathically with your Devil Lord. Is that it?"

What does it matter if he finds out now?

“Yes! But...why...”

“Your message isn’t going through? Um, probably because of the barrier around us?”

“What...?”

“I mean, we are pretty far from the surrounding villages, but I still wouldn’t want anyone getting hit by a stray bullet or anything. So I sealed us up in a dome barrier about a mile wide. Light and air can pass through from the outside, but not even a speck of light from inside can get out. I wouldn’t want anyone seeing us.”

“No... You’re lying! That would mean...”

“Yeah. Your telepathy or whatever won’t pass through either.”

Despair sinks into Murzalla’s heart.

“But I’m livestreaming so it’s not like there’s no pathway at all. Anywayz, before you cause any trouble...”

The battered remnants of Murzalla’s body lift off. Suddenly, she’s enclosed in a sphere. And it seems to be growing smaller and smaller.

If only... If only I can send just one bit of information...

But before she can think of a way...

Plick.

She shrinks to the size of a tiny dot and disappears.



Well, that was a strange interruption, Alexei Guberg sighs.

He'd sensed the presence of the two devils since the game had begun.

When and how would they intervene? Or were they only planning to spectate? Alexei kept a watchful eye on them. And of course, they had to butt in right at the competition's climax.

What's more, they tried to erase me as well. Though I'm not surprised.

From the Devil Lord's point of view, Alexei was nothing but a useless peg who's off clowning around on his own.

As long as there's a risk of Alexei leaking information about the Devil Lord to Shiva during their showdown, the servant devils are bound to try to eliminate their master's scrap of consciousness as soon as possible.

Not surprised at all. After all, the Devil Lord Lucifyra and I do think alike.

Alexei can't stand the thought of his games being interrupted.

Now that he has access to a portion of Lucifyra's memories and powers, he can fully sympathize with the entity; however...

Whether or not I submit to his rule is a separate issue. If the Devil Lord is trying to rob me of my fun, then he's my enemy.

But Alexei is no match for the Devil Lord in terms of power.

All he has is a tiny shred of the Devil Lord's knowledge and a sample of his powers.

As soon as Shiva leaves with the two intruders, the tension in the dungeon room instantly eases.

Only Charlotte flits about excitedly, glancing this way and that way at seemingly nothing in particular.

“Whew!” she sighs blissfully. “Thank you so much—that was incredibly entertaining!”

Who is she thanking, and for what?

In any case, she seems to have settled down and now she’s basking in the afterglow of something satisfying. She’s certainly left herself wide open to an attack.

“Charlotte, I must declare your team the winners.”

“Huh?”

Alexei waves a white flag.

“My entire party, except for myself, has been disabled. Meanwhile, your team is almost completely uninjured. Even your strongest warrior who was out of commission is now fully recovered.”

Sheet-ghost Flay is back on her feet. Her drapery sways as she glowers at her enemy’s leader.

I’d still have a shot at winning if I give it my all...

One against many might seem like a disadvantage, but it also means that he can unleash his full power without having to be mindful of his teammates. Moreover, there is a wide disparity of strength among his rival team members. Targeting the weakest link would easily invoke chaos and confusion.

But Alexei surrenders the fight anyway.

“If there’s no chance of winning, there’s no point in engaging in activities that risk someone getting hurt.”

“In that case, Mr. Alexei...” Charlotte looks at him expectantly. “Does that mean you’ll join us in overthrowing the giant evil organization and preventing the revival of the Devil Lord?”

“Um... Sure.”

How much of the situation is this girl actually aware of?

Either she’s speaking pure fantasy or she possesses extraordinary intuition and insight.

“And what about the other members?” She looks around.

The rest of Numbers are sprawled on the ground, unable to get up. They each take turns pitching in.

“If that’s what our leader has decided, then I guess we have to go with it.”

“Given the circumstances, we can’t really blow it off as a kid’s silly game of make-believe anymore...”

“If you’re telling me those guys were servants of the Devil Lord, then yeah...”

Having seen the menacing devils with their own eyes, the members of Numbers have no choice but to agree.

Charlotte throws both hands up in the air.

“Yay! Now, will you do the honors?”

Huh? Just as Alexei and his team wonder what she means by that...

“Numbers surrenders! The victory goes to Team Charlotte!” a voice announces.

Shiva, who'd returned before anyone could notice, grabs one of Charlotte's hands and raises it in the air.

Did he already defeat those two devils?

But the evil duo had a special secret power: the ability to fuse into a much more destructive gigantic being. Alexei knows this because his fragment of Lucifyra knows this.

The blond boy had figured that Shiva could beat them—but not this quickly.

Is this man truly more powerful than a god?

Alexei is astounded. Meanwhile...

"I hereby declare the members of Numbers to be provisional Knights of Camelot. Welcome! But please understand that I cannot permit you to enter Pandemonium."

...Charlotte makes a gibberish announcement.

In a room of the royal annex...

Lucifyra—in Queen Gizelotte's body—hears a faint whisper in her ear.

'Shiva is a devil. An irregular existence endowed with almost all of his creator's power.'

The voice is shaking and strained.

Your one job was to gather intel and this is the best you could do? How useless can you be?

Gizelotte sighs deeply and accepts that it must mean the enemy is simply that powerful.

“I sensed that his powers are close to mine. But... I see... Tee-hee-hee-hee...”

From this iota of information transmitted by Murzalla, Lucifyra sees it all.

“What a surprise—there was already another Devil Lord here. But if it’s birthed a devil with so much power, that explains why I didn’t detect the main entity. It’s probably a strategy to mislead the God Killer. If so...”

Lucifyra reaches the same conclusion as Murzalla.

“That child is, indeed, what I’m looking for. If I destroy the creator, its creation should vanish as well.”

A little girl with an extraordinarily high mana level tucked away in the herd of meek humans.

Having transferred most of its power to its human vessel, the Devil Lord is now passable as a normal person. And yet that human still stands out from the crowd.

“Charlotte Zenfis—ah, what’s this, Gizelotte?” Lucifyra notices a surge of venomous energy from the vessel. “I see the idea excites you quite a bit. Yes... I like that hatred. Of course. You have a score to settle with the girl.”

“I, too, have business with her. Tee-hee-hee... This shall be fun.”

Lucifyra lets out a loud peal of laughter...

...completely unaware of their rudimentary misunderstanding.

AFTERWORD

Hello! I'm 澄守彩 (Sumimori Sai). I've also been active on the online novel-publishing site, *Shosetsuka ni Narou* (Let's Become Writers) under the name すみもりさい (Sumimori Sai).

Thanks to you, here's volume five! Volume five! (I said it twice because it's important!) Seriously, thank you so much!

If I'm being honest, I'd love to continue the series. Your continued support would be much appreciated.

In volume five, we finally have our first swimsuit episode. You may be annoyed that it didn't happen sooner, but it totally slipped my mind. Sorry about that!

There's also a hot springs episode (second one, in fact) in this book. I hope you'll forgive me.

With a mysterious transfer student coming in at the beginning of the volume (Haruto's adoptive little sister, obviously), our protagonist's aspirations to enjoy an on-campus shut-in life seems destined to be beset by troubles! Or maybe not? No, it is. Probably.

Also, everyone's excited about a showdown with the (not-so) mysterious and hilarious student club and meanwhile, wh-wh-what's this? Something fishy about the queen?

Seems like there's trouble brewing in the shadows, but not to worry! To

quote his greatest admirer and biggest fan of an unnamed magical girl, Brother Haruto is the strongest!

As always, here's another rowdy volume of "Will Brother Haruto ever see his long-awaited hermit days?"

The manga version that's being published on Nico Nico Seiga's magazine *Wednesday's Sirius* is getting great reviews, too. Thank you!

And I really appreciate your support for the light novel as well. Truly.

Lastly, some words of thanks.

To Ai Takahashi, who did the illustrations for this book and the manga series. The swimsuits! Are! Awesome! (I'm at a loss for words). Personally, you nailed the new characters. And as a reader, I look forward to every new chapter of the manga. And I'm definitely looking forward to our future collaborations!

To all the editors at K Ranobe Books, and to my editor, Mr. M. It's been a while since you became my new editor—I'm so sad we haven't been able to meet during these times. Here's to more projects together in the future!

Lastly, I want to thank my readers from the bottom of my heart. Your support for the light novel and the manga is what makes it possible to come this far. I cannot thank you enough!

Whether or not you follow the web version, I hope very much that you enjoy this book!

Am I Actually the Strongest? 5

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