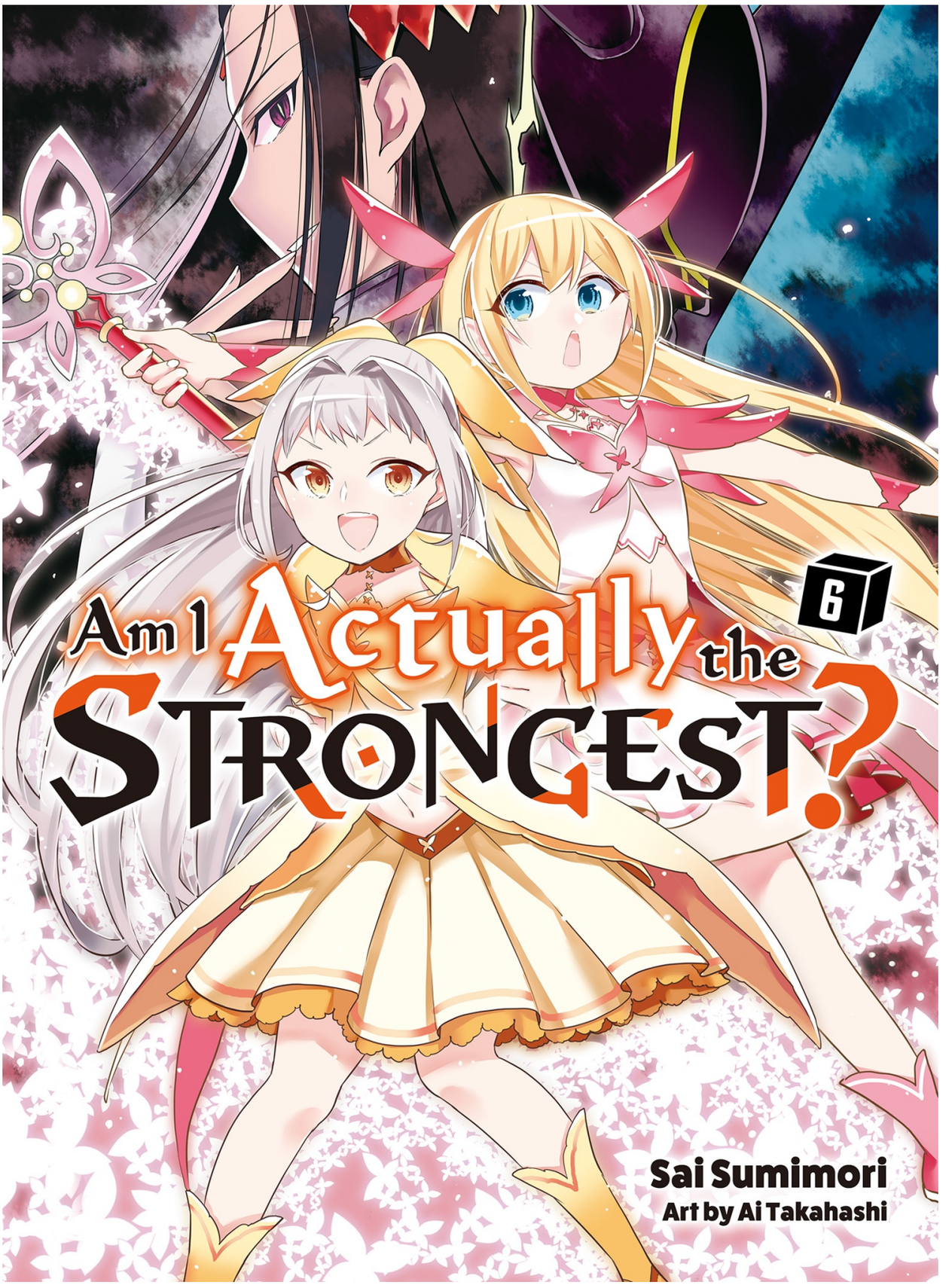

Am I Actually the Strongest?
6
Sai Sumimori
Art by Ai Takahashi


Am I Actually the Strongest?
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"FLAY, THEY CAN'T SEE YOU FROM THERE. YOU'RE HIDDEN IN THE FOG."
FLAY
"MUAHAHAHAHA! SO YOU'RE THE DEVIL OR WHATEVER THEY CALL IT. YOU DARED TO SHOW YOURSELF BEFORE ME, AND NOW YOU WILL REGRET IT!"
"HIYAH!"
CHAR
"WH-WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU GUYS?"
LIZA
VARI


✦✦✦ CHAR ✦✦✦
✦✦✦ HARUTO ✦✦✦
✦✦✦ VARI ✦✦✦
✦✦✦ IRIS ✦✦✦
✦✦✦ URANIS ✦✦✦
✦✦✦ YULIA ✦✦✦


MECHA
MAGICAL
GIRL OF
JUSTICE

AM I ACTUALLY THE STRONGEST? 6

By Sai Sumimori
Illustrations by Ai Takahashi

Translated by Momo Fukazawa

KODANSHA

Am I Actually the Strongest? 6

A VERTICAL Book

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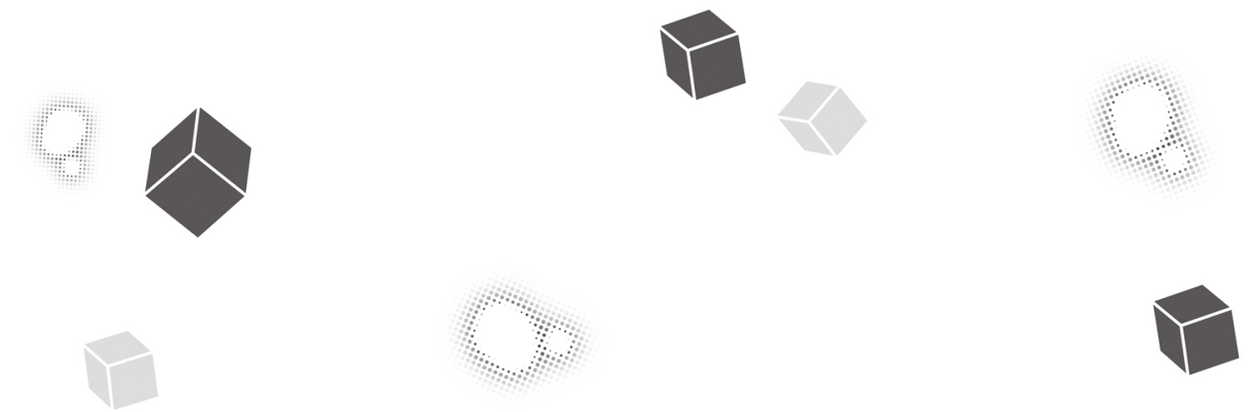
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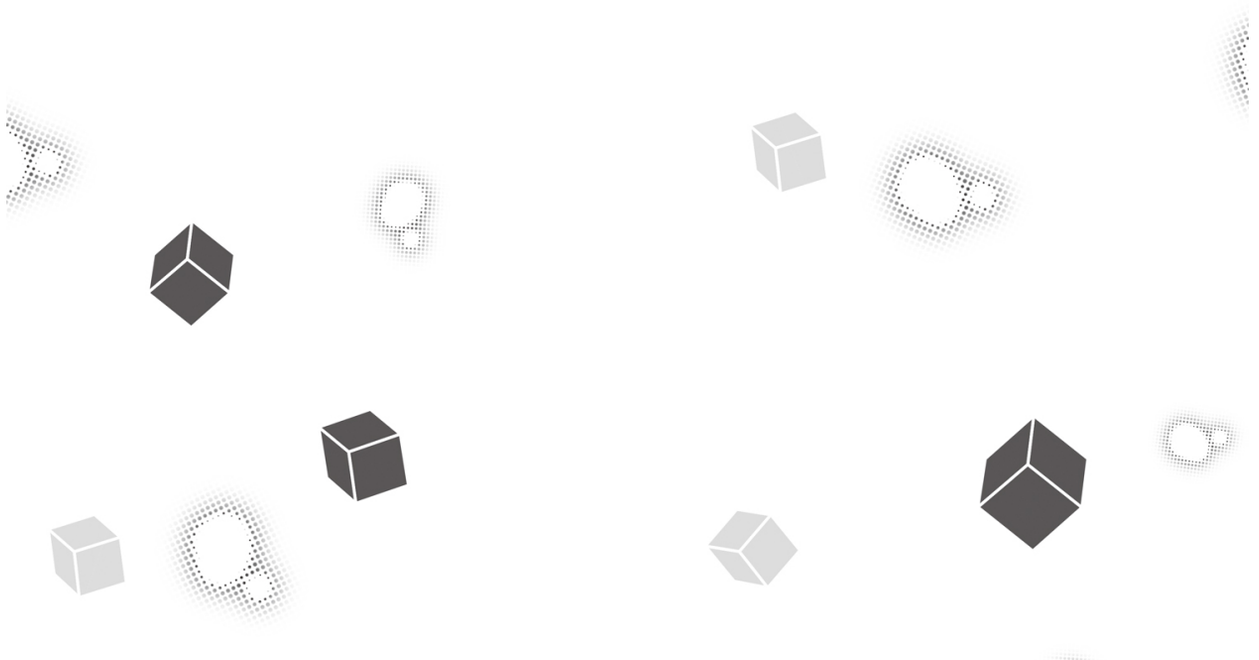
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Design: **AFTERGLOW**
Illustrations: **Ai Takahashi**



CHAPTER ONE:
Card Collector Char



Char and the gang have defeated one of the branches of the giant evil organization(?) known as the underground student council(?) AKA Numbers and corrected(?) their evil ways. Now they're amped up and ready for the final showdown(?) with the Devil Lord(?)…is the recap from where we left off.

Yeah, that's a lot of question marks.

In any case, I'm not one to spoil my little sister Char's fun, so I'm gonna do my best, too. (On what, though?)

We're gathered around a circular table by a serene lake, but today's meeting is a bit different.

It's full of Medjeds.

They're all wearing white sheets over their heads with two circles cut out for the eyes like a Halloween sheet ghost—which looks very much like Medjed, the minor ancient Egyptian deity—and each one is marked on the forehead with a numeral of their choice.

Um, three *of you went with "7"?*

It's awkward being the only guy here dressed completely in black.

"As the newly founded Camelot—or since we have a special remote guest today, we'll call ourselves by a temporary name for

third parties: Chronos. Let us begin our round table meeting." Charlotte, who has a 1 on her forehead, announces sternly.

As my dear little sister mentioned, there's a guest attending today's meeting via my—Shiva's, rather—communication barrier.

Displayed on the floating screen is Number 1 AKA Alexei Guberg-senpai. He's wearing a head covering that hides his entire face. Since it's the first meeting, only the leader of Numbers is present.

'Is there any reason you're masking your faces?' says senpai. 'I suppose I understand wanting to hide that obviously non-human member in the corner of the screen. But they're not even well hidden, so what is the point in wearing the garment?'

I know, right?

He's talking about Gigan.

The towering giant covered in a white sheet with the number 7 (one of three) reminds me of a unveiling ceremony for a giant Buddha sculpture.

"I believe dressing for the part is important," answers my sister. "We shouldn't take formality for granted."

'In Numbers, we referred to one another by numbers on the principle that "all members are equal." But your group clearly has an established hierarchy. Therefore, wearing a mask marked with a number isn't… Wait, I see multiple "7s". Is there any meaning to your attire?'

I knew you'd notice, senpai.

But don’t worry about that. Let them proclaim whatever number they want. That’s one of the perks of a “we’re family here” workplace.

“Anyhow!” Char exclaims with the gusto that could blow away any smidge of doubt.

Go, Char, don’t sweat the small stuff!

She says, “You and I have come to an alliance. We’ve bonded as if we’d just formed an honorable and beautiful friendship after a smackdown against a backdrop of a setting sun along the river. To defeat the greater evil! Together!”

‘…’

Alexei’s expression looks like a complicated mix of defeat and sadness. I can tell under his mask.

Char continues, “And what is this ‘greater evil,’ you ask? That’s right. I’m talking about the giant evil organization who’s plotting to revive the Devil Lord!—or at least, that’s what I thought. It seems that the situation is worsening.”

“And by that you mean?” asks the little Medjed with a 13 on her forehead.

This rather odd choice of number that Chronos, the god of time, might not approve of was made by Professor Tear. Are we going by twenty-four-hour military time here?

“Two devils made an appearance during our competition. It’s safe to assume the Devil Lord has already been revived.”

As usual, Char’s right on the mark.

“If the Devil Lord’s already revived, wouldn’t they just come forward?” mumbles Medjed Number 4. It’s Liza.

“A final boss sits on his throne and waits for his challengers to come to him,” proclaims Char. “That’s what makes him the final boss. It’s unlikely that someone with the title of a god would directly approach us. And seeing how the Devil Lord was able to summon two subjects of enormous strength, we can judge that it must be fully capable of harnessing its powers.”

Several of the round table members nod in amazement at her deduction.

‘…’

Alexei seems to want to say something, but he doesn’t.

That’s because I had a word with him beforehand and made him agree to refrain from spilling the beans.

Alexei Guberg is possessed by a piece of a Devil Lord or something. I’d asked him to explain what his deal was because the lack of clarity was bothering me.

Lo and behold, the main piece of the Devil Lord Lucifyra is possessing Queen Gizelotte’s body.

According to Alexei, she’s not in her final form yet, but she’s likely up to no good.

At the same time, she’s still very cautious of Shiva for putting a collar on her neck and getting in her way time and time again. *Not that I mean to do that…*

By the way, what am I supposed to call her? Gizelotte? Lucifyra? Devil Lord? “That hag” is more than enough, but I just want to be formal. I asked Alexei and his answer was:

“That thing is definitely Queen Gizelotte’s flesh and body. Yet its psyche is undeniably the Devil Lord Lucifyra.”

Gizelotte, no more. I guess.

“Not necessarily,” Alexei continued, “Gizelotte and the Devil Lord share a fundamental nature. But her psyche hasn’t disappeared. If anything, it has melded with the Devil Lord—no, more like unified. Nevertheless, they’re still two different minds. They’re not completely one and the same.”

Uh huh, I don’t get it. So what do I call her?

Setting that aside…

What would happen if I were to tell Char, *“The queen identifies as the Devil Lord now”*?

“Amazing as always, Brother Haruto. Surely, you’d save the day before any of us even act.” (Monotone)

Who would want to see my darling little sister’s eyes void of life and sparkle? I know I don’t.

Once again, my role here is to work behind the scenes so my sister can have some fun.

Which means I’ve got a lot of planning to do. Yup.

Back to reality.

The Medjed with the number 0 on her forehead (Flay) speaks: “If we know who our enemy is, there’s no need to hold

back. Let's get right along and pulverize the crap out of them."

Char replies, "But we don't know where the Devil Lord is or what physical form it takes."

Number 10—or Iris—says gravely, "It looks like we're always going to be waiting for their move and reacting after the event. We'll have to handle each situation as they come, and simultaneously gather information."

"That's too tedious. We don't have the time," answers another 7. This one is Laius.

Side note: the third 7 is Johnny. He's keeping his mouth shut in today's meeting. He's a chatty guy, but he's also a respectful gentleman who knows when to mind his manners.

"The enemy has inarguably marked us as their target," says number 8. "Constantly looking over our shoulders will do nothing but drain our energy…"

I don't know why, but Marianne decided to go with 8. Not that I know why any of these guys chose the numbers they did.

Char rebuts, "That's precisely what a hero of justice does. He nips each pawn as they come, levels up at every mid-boss encounter, and finally, conquers the final boss."

Yeah, that's the standard in anime and tokusatsu shows. Otherwise, the series would be over in just a few episodes.

However, reality is unkind.

Expecting the Devil Lord to graciously abide by some anime trope is—huh? Hold on a minute.

I already know who the enemy is.

It’s none other than Gizelotte—the hag whose life or death depends on my ruling. She may be possessed by the Devil Lord now, but I’ve still got her by the collar.

Couldn’t I steer her into acting according to my scenario with a stern warning?

If she won’t keep her promise, make her.

Or something like that.

What we’re going against is a godlike being called the Devil Lord or whatever—it’s probably powerful. But it’s probably not fully revived yet. I’m just thinking optimistically here.

The fact that the final boss is Gizelotte is honestly a dilemma.

For now, I decide to head to the frontier region to pay my dad, Count Gold, a visit at his castle.

◆

Whoa it’s been a while since I’ve been here, I think to myself as I stroll down the castle’s corridor.

By the way, what’s with everyone? The second they see me, they’re dropping their laundry basket, gawking wide-eyed, and pointing and whispering to each other.

Never mind that. I head over to my dad’s study and knock on the door.

“Come in,” says a voice from the other side. I step into the room.

“Grlck?! Bgough, eherm… Ha-Haruto?” chokes the impressively bearded man.

This is my dad, Count Gold Zenfis.

“Why are you here? You’re supposed to be at the academy in the capital.”

Oh, right. I’m not in any position to be popping by my old place. I forgot.

My hermit house has been my domicile where I go to sleep and hang out every day. I walked into the castle with the same mindset.

My dad says, “If you’re trying to hide something, at least make an effort to be more carefu—”

“Never mind that, Dad.” He’s hinting at an *“I know you know, I know”* situation, but I ignore it and cut to the chase. “Can you tell me about the current political climate in the kingdom?”

“Oh? I see. So, you finally…”

He seems happy about something, but why?

My dad gestures me over to the guest sofa and starts making tea. He sets the cups down and seats himself across from me.

“Now, where to begin…” he starts. “The capital has access to all the latest news. Much of it passes through the academy’s young noble scholars. What is it that you want to know?”

Uh, I’ve never had any interest in political news, so I know squat.

I decide to skip all the fluff and get to the point.

“Remember when you said, ‘It would be unfavorable for the kingdom if the queen disappears’? Is that still true today?”

“?!”

Wow, he looks like he’s about to fall off his seat.

“Don’t tell me… You’re going to challenge Gizelotte…? No, there’s no reason for you, a child, to sully your hands. That is something for us adults to do. It’s a disgrace to admit, but we’ve been dragging our feet on the matter all this time.”

Suddenly, my dad grows sullen.

Sully my hands? I’ve already chopped off her head once.

“To be honest—” I don’t know where to start, but I begin to talk. I tell him everything I know about the existence of a mysterious organization called the Church of Lucifyra, the devils, the Devil Lord, etc.

But I leave out the part where Char is involved.

I wouldn’t want to worry him.

My dad grows increasingly pale as I talk.

By the time I finish, he’s pinching the bridge of his nose and groaning.

He finally gathers his words to speak. “So…you’re saying the Church of Lucifyra is working to revive the Devil Lord?”

“Yup.”

“And the recent insurrection in the capital was…instigated by a devil—a subject of the Devil Lord—and Queen Gizelotte was complicit?”

“That’s right.”

“Furthermore, the core of the Devil Lord is now occupying Gizelotte’s body…?”

“Apparently.”

My dad takes his time to digest everything I just said by repeating it. He lifts his head and looks up to the ceiling.

Yeah, it probably sounds too far-fetched and out of the blue.

Who’s gonna believe such poppycock—huh?

He turns to look straight at me, presses his hands on the coffee table, and leans forward.

“You saved the kingdom from a crisis! I can’t thank you enough!”

He bows his head at me, practically digging his nose into the table.

“Uh, no. It’s thanks to the Shiva guy…”

Dad readjusts himself on the sofa.

“Right. Very well then. If that’s what you wish, we can leave it at that.”

Come to think of it, why haven’t I told Mom and Dad that I’m Shiva?

Sheer laziness.

That’s the only reason. I should just fess up. Then again, *because* it’s the only excuse I have, I’m hesitant to tell them.

“Regardless,” says Dad, “if Gizelotte has fused with the Devil Lord and there’s a possibility her psyche is completely gone, we

don’t have much time.”

“That is a problem, isn’t it?”

“The Devil Lord’s powers are incalculable. It’s bound to be a grave threat to this kingdom.”

“Then I’ll—Shiva will go take her out.”

My dad lets out a long sigh. “You say that like it’s nothing more than crushing a bug. Well, I suppose with your powers, it’s understandable. However—”

He gives me a solemn look.

“The kingdom is sure to face turmoil. In order to avoid that, I’ll need to make some arrangements in advance with the other nobles. But there’s little time for that…” He trails off with a big sigh.

Now that I think about it, I can’t just go and take out the queen.

Never mind the kingdom’s turmoil; my little sister needs her entertainment.

“I’ll do something about buying time, Dad. Can I leave you to make those arrangements in the nobility? I can’t do that part…”

“I have no words for you, Haruto…” He smiles as if he’s made up his mind. “All right, leave it to me. But allow me some time. I’ll need to travel all over the kingdom.”

Take your time. I’ll be taking it easy till then.

Nonetheless, our enemy is the Devil Lord.

Anticipating any unforeseen circumstances is a necessary precaution. I can’t let my guard down.

I should do my part in helping my dad negotiate with the nobles while being ready to ambush the Devil Lord from behind at any moment.

I stand up and stroll over to one of the walls, cast my hand against it, and conjure a door.

“Whaaat?!” my dad cries.

Beckoning my dumbfounded dad over, I open the door and walk through.

“Where are we…? This isn’t the next room.”

“This is my room in Professor Tear’s research building.”

It’s clean and tidy since it’s basically only used (for Haruto C) to sleep in.

“Is this…teleportation magic?”

“Let me know where I should set up your Anywhere Door so you can travel back and forth between the castle and the capital.”

K-chk.

As soon as I tell him that, the door to Haruto C’s room opens.

It’s Professor Tear.

“Oh, hey. There you are, Haruto—hm? And this rugged gentleman with you is…Count Zenfis?”

“Can’t you knock first?” I retort.

She and my dad exchange the conventional greeting of “Good to meet you,” and “Thank you for looking out for my son.”

Perfect timing, actually.

I fill in Professor Tear with what I just revealed to my dad. While I’m at it, I whisper to her, “Don’t let him know Char is

involved.” Best to drive that point home while I can.

“Why am I getting a bad feeling…?” my dad mutters from behind.

Keen as always. Can you tell?

“Dad, Professor Tear is a noble with a lot of time on her hands. Feel free to use her as your henchman.”

“Hey, my freedom belongs to me! But I see what you’re trying to do. And since doing you favors doesn’t get me anything in return, I suppose I can shift my favor-owing to your parents.”

Geez, she’s blunt.

Oh well. If it’s my dad you’re helping, of course I’ll return the favor. Probably.

◇

Alexei Guberg steps onto the royal castle’s premises.

His destination is a short distance away from the main castle: the royal annex.

Queen Gizelotte, who’s possessed by the Devil Lord, had summoned him out of the blue.

He’s aware that meeting with the woman who had tried to kill him is dangerous. But he also knows that if someone is trying to eliminate him, they wouldn’t be so upfront about summoning him.

If anything, it’s a perfect chance to investigate what her next move is.

He decides to be optimistic.

Once inside the annex, a servant leads him into the queen's chamber.

"So you came. I knew you would."

The Devil Lord—in the form of the queen—invites Alexei to take a seat on the sofa. Gizelotte is in her own chair a good distance away from him, swirling her glass of wine around.

"Are you trying to welcome me as your ally after you've attempted to erase me?" Alexei provokes.

"I am." Her answer is straightforward. "The circumstances have changed. One of the devils I'd sent left me an intriguing piece of information."

"I thought she was annihilated by Shiva without even being given a chance to demonstrate her powers."

"I warn you to watch your tongue. I'll let it go this time, but only because we're alone right now."

I have no intention of seeing you out in public.

Alexei shrugs to himself and asks, "And? What is this intriguing piece of information?"

Lucifyra sips her wine, taking a dramatic pause before revealing the big news.

"That man called Shiva the Black Knight—he's a devil birthed by another Devil Lord."

Alexei raises his brow with curiosity.

Pleased with his reaction, Lucifyra continues, "This lord transferred most of its powers to Shiva and took the form of a

human themself. They're watching from very close. And that human is…"

Lucifyra thunders:

"Charlotte Zenfis, that wretched little girl!"

Alexei furrows his brows in distress.

"Simmer down," he says.

The Devil Lord responds, "Oh? I wasn't that worked up, was I?"

"Huh? Oh, uh… May I ask how you came to that conclusion?"

Alexei's gaze shifted by a hair, but Lucifyra takes no notice.

"That was the report from the devil who fought Shiva directly. Her specialty was magic detection. She was also exceptional with her analysis ability, although not as good as Melcuemenes. If this was the conclusion she came to, it's highly likely to be correct."

Is it, though? It seems far from the truth. Alexei thinks to himself, trying to ignore all the obnoxious whining and yelling going on in his ear.

But I see. I suppose we could take advantage of her misjudgment.

The voice in his ear seems to calm down.

Alexei nods slightly and says, "Transferring most of their powers to Shiva and disguising themself as a human is likely a

tactic to steer clear of the God Killer's keen eye. Your reasoning is logical," agrees the young man.

"Yes, I knew you'd see it."

"Furthermore, if we defeat that Devil Lord—Charlotte Zenfis—its devil Shiva will also be vanquished."

"You've been close with that girl these days, haven't you?" Lucifyra hints.

"Are you suggesting I assassinate her?"

"If you refuse, I'll have to kill you."

Alexei heeds no mind to the Devil Lord's chilling glare and thinks deeply—or at least pretends to.

He takes his time to collect his words.

"Eliminating Shiva is favorable to me, too. However, assassinating Charlotte would be impossible."

"Let's hear why."

"Charlotte is under the protection of Shiva. Not only is she being personally guarded by Shiva, but she is also protected by an indestructible defensive barrier. Not even you, my Lord, would be able to penetrate it."

"Don't belittle me."

The queen's eyes glow a deep red hue.

Her icy glower feels like a dagger to the throat, but Alexei explains calmly.

"I apologize. What I meant was you, in your current form, wouldn't be able to destroy the barrier."

Lucifyra's eyes remain red as she speaks: "I suppose Shiva wouldn't let it slide if I act on the assassination myself." She clenches her teeth in vexation.

"There is a way," Alexei offers composedly.

"Really?!"

She leans into him in anticipation, but Alexei ignores her and wrinkles his brows sorely.

I can't believe the moronic line that's about to come out of my mouth, his face seems to say.

He finally squeezes out:

"You must collect the seven secret cards scattered across the world."

A chilling breeze drifts across the room. Or at least that's what the long pause feels like.

"…Secret cards?" The queen squints.

Her dubious look stings.

But what's said is said. There's no taking it back now.

"That's right," continues Alexei. "The cards to tear down the girl's indestructible defensive barriers, one by one. You must collect all seven cards, and then strip Charlotte naked—huh? Oh, no, she's wearing clothes, of course. Don't get any ideas."

"What the hell are you saying?" the queen scowls.

My sanity is being questioned; I can see the contempt in her eyes. Never did I, a born-and-bred elite, imagine I'd be looked down

on with such disdain.

“AHERM!” Alexei clears his throat loudly to change the topic. “Anyway, collecting all the cards is the most efficient solution. Yes.”

“That’s hard to believe. Why would someone cast a magic spell that strips them of their defense into a physical object that could easily be snatched…?”

I wonder the same, Alexei thinks to himself. Despite what he thinks, he recites his argument:

“That’s precisely the reason why her defense is indestructible. Preparing a physical ‘key’ is what amplifies her magic.”

“Conditional fortification… Normally, the caster would bear the burden on their body in exchange for such power, but I’ve never heard of converting it into a magical item.”

“But the logic is sound.”

“I suppose,” says the queen. “It’s still hard to believe, though. Anyway, first things first. We’ll need to verify whether those secret cards are real. Where are they?”

“Not even Charlotte herself knows the whereabouts of the cards. She’s searching for them as we speak.”

“Ah, right, you did say they were ‘scattered across the world.’ But they’re valuable keys to maintain her defense. Why doesn’t she know where they are? Is she stupid?”

Alexei grimaces.

“Please, watch your tongue. Charlotte is a lord like yourself. I do wish you’d refrain from speaking of her vilely.”

He rubs one of his earlobes before clearing his throat again.

“I have a theory regarding your concern. There’s a possibility that Charlotte may have experienced some sort of trouble while reviving as a human, and her memory is disoriented. Hence why she cannot recall the whereabouts of her cards. She is, however, slowly regaining her memory, and I am assisting in her search.”

“So you’ll be my informant.”

“That’s right. I shall interfere while pretending to accompany them in their search for the cards. Meanwhile, you will go to the cards’ locations and retrieve them before she and her comrades do. But I don’t recommend you personally going to the locations. Shiva is keeping a vigilant watch over you more than anything.”

“Which means I can distract Shiva’s attention while sending one of my devils to claim the card.”

Alexei nods firmly and rises to his feet.

“Shiva is probably aware that I am here today. However, I doubt he could know what we’ve been discussing. It’s impossible even for him to break through the layers of barriers protecting this annex. If he pries, I’ll make up something about what we spoke of today.”

“See that you do. And if you gain any intel, relay it to me as quickly as possible.”

“I will try. But it’ll be difficult for us to act if Charlotte can’t remember where the cards could be. I ask you to please keep a

low profile.”

Lucifyra agrees, albeit reluctantly.

Once Alexei leaves the royal annex, he returns to his dorm room.

A man dressed in black from head to toe is waiting for him.

“Was that how you wanted it, Shiva? I don’t mind you giving me instructions, but there’s no need to yell into my ear.”

“Sorry about that,” says the man in black. “You were quite the thespian, though.”

The conversation earlier with Lucifyra was exchanged while lending one ear to Shiva. Needless to say, the Black Knight was listening in the whole time.

“Never mind that,” Alexei says. “You suggested collecting cards? What sort of joke is this?”

The man in black answers, “Just stonewalling, in a way. Besides—”

His face is concealed under his jet-black helmet, but he seems to be grinning.

“Competing in a treasure hunt sounds fun, doesn’t it?”

Alexei blinks dumbfoundedly for a moment. “What a surprise. You and I might have more in common than I imagined.” He can’t help but let out a little smile.

◆

The Devil Lord was successfully duped. I think.

For the time being, she won't act as long as our side (Alexei) doesn't reach out to her with any new findings. I hope.

Up next is…

I'm in the meeting room at Professor Tear's research lab building with Char. She'd just finished her classes for the day and we're having teatime.

I decide to throw the question at her.

"By the way, Char, can you do me a favor?"

Om nomnomnom, gulp!

"Of course, Brother Haruto!" she gives me a hearty reply after swallowing a mouthful of the cake that I'd brought over.

Next to her, Professor Tear—who, by the way, wasn't invited to our tea party—is greedily munching away at her slice of cake.

She remarks, "You can't just start a conversation with 'By the way,' when you gave zero context. And accepting a favor without even hearing out the whole story is ill-advised."

Char responds, "You've got it wrong, Professor Tear. A little sister *knows* what her brother is thinking without him having to say a word. Also, a proper little sister shall not reject her brother's favor."

The little professor turns to me. "Is that so?"

Don't ask me, I don't know.

Either way, I probably shouldn’t let her accept any favors before listening to the details first. If I let her run off with her grandiose imagination at full throttle, it’s gonna be a hassle later.



I’ve prepared a “plot hook” for Char to follow. I spent all last night devising it. Then, I slept in till noon, woke up, and worked on it a little more. I propose what I’ve been envisioning in my head:

“You see, Char, I’ve learned a valuable piece of information regarding the revival of the Devil Lord.”

“Amazing as always, Brother Haruto! But…that should’ve been my job… I’ve caused you to go through the trouble of finding that information. Please forgive me…”

Char looks sincerely woeful about it. Adorbs.

“Oh, no, I just happened to stumble upon this information while I was on another mission. Worry not! No need for you to be dispirited.” Whoops, I sounded like Shiva for a second there.

“What’s with the melodrama again?”

I’ll ignore Professor Tear for now.

To be honest, I feel kind of bad for sort of lying to Char.

But I’m doing this so she can have some fun while I hold up the wall to give Dad some time to negotiate with the nobles. I must stay strong.

“It seems like the Devil Lord isn’t fully revived. And there exists a magical item that holds the key to the completion of their ritual.”

“I see! And we need to retrieve that item before the Devil Lord gets to it first!”

She’s a sharp girl.

“That’s right. More specifically, you must search for the seven secret cards and obtain them before the Devil Lord and the devils do!”

“Whoa!” my sister exclaims. Super-stoked Char is adorbs, too.

“That’s not specific at all.” Professor Tear isn’t impressed.

Char deduces, “Based on the fact that the Devil Lord doesn’t have them in their possession, the cards must be scattered all over the world and nobody knows where they are.”

Yup, yup. Something like that.

“Do you have a way to find them?” asks the professor.

Charlotte continues her deduction. “Bloodless Vier—the insurrection incident in the capital—was probably instigated by the Devil Lord and its subjects to search for the cards.”

Oh, it was?

“But since then, the Devil Lord hasn’t attempted any large-scale atrocities. It must’ve decided to change tack.”

Uh-huh? Which means?

“Secret cards… They must bear the Devil Lord’s suppressed powers. And they’re bound to spread their evil mana throughout the world and bring disaster. The dark energy that oozes from the cards is sure to have a bad influence on everything they come across. When an inexplicable incident occurs, that’s when the secret card will reveal itself!”

Is that so…

The petite teacher comments, “Hmm, so what you’re saying is if you chase after mysterious cases, you’ll be able to find these so-

called secret cards."

"Exactly so, Professor Tear. The cards' official name is unknown, so let us call them Lucifer Cards: Shards of a Fallen Angel. The Devil Lord has been trying to revive itself in our kingdom, so it's safe to assume they're scattered nearby."

My dear sister ruthlessly overwrites the plot that I spent all night working on.

I was planning to give her a simple, *"My senses are tingling! It's that way!"* type of hint, but it sounds like I'm gonna have to set up these "inexplicable incidents" myself.

"Oh?! Come to think of it…" Char says, her expression growing intense.

Adorbs.

"A while ago, one of the students at our academy turned into a ferocious mutant. Although he was saved by a hero of justice, his sanity was destroyed."

Seriously? Geez, the capital's surprisingly a bad neighborhood.

Professor Tear responds, "Ah, you mean Schneidel, the son of Marquess Hafen. He was bullying a certain someone, I heard."

Really? Who?—Oh, me.

Uh, yeah, I was the one Schneidel-senpai was bullying, and he's the one who lost his mind.

Now I remember.

He turned into a giant mutant after injecting himself with a questionable drug. He managed to return to human form, but it

was too late to save his sanity…is what I recall. I even let Char watch the whole thing.

“Looking back, that incident was peculiar. I believe it’s worth investigating.”

Yeah, why not.

Fabricating a whole incident from zero is too much work. And I don’t want to waste Char’s effort.

“I’ll be busy with another case. Will you take on the task?” I ask.

“Leave it to us, Brother Haruto. We, Camelot—nay, now that Numbers has joined, we, Chronos, will do our utmost to fulfill your expectations.”

Char is burning with determination. Again, adorbs.

Anyway, now that Char’s delusions have been upgraded to the official plotline, I know where I stand.

There are a lot of strings I’ll need to pull, but if what lies beyond all that is Char’s radiating smile, it’s a small price to pay.

Hm? My little sister is contemplating again.

“But even if we gather all seven Lucifer Cards, there’s still the undiscovered eighth card that would complete the Devil Lord’s revival…”

Hmmmmm? Do I have to take care of that, too?

My little sister’s grandiose delusions continue to expand with no bounds.

◇

Night had fallen.

Charlotte and the gang arrived at the Hafen estate in the inner city.

They've come to search for one of the Lucifer Cards (name coined by Char), which hold the key to the Devil Lord's revival.

The Hafen estate is currently vacant.

After their heir, Scheidel, had lost his mind and took a leave of absence from the academy, the marquess had put the mansion up for sale.

The place was silent. Charlotte—in her magical girl outfit—gulped loudly.

"It looks like it could be haunted by ghosts."

"What, are you scared?" scoffs Laius.

"I do have some fear of the unknown. Just like you, Prince Laius."

"I-I-I-I'm not scared!"

"Then why are your legs trembling?"

"Shut up! This is, uh—I'm quivering with excitement."

"What a cliché excuse…" Marianne sighs.

In truth, Laius is terrified. Not of ghosts, but of the possibility of encountering a devil.

Irisphilia, taking no notice of the tension between her peers, says, "There's no time for banter. This place may be empty, but we're still trespassing. Let's finish the investigation quickly."

"You're so calm and collected, Miss Iris," says Char.

“I am nervous, too. If we come across another devil, I’m not confident we’ll be able to take it on without Shiva around…”

Iris, Laius, and Marianne had all heard from Char that Shiva is busy with an errand tonight and can’t join them.

In spite of that, I’m sure he’s still watching from somewhere… Iris thinks.

It’s hard to believe Shiva would let Charlotte get into any danger.

Iris has a hunch on the Black Knight’s true identity, but she believes the reason he hasn’t revealed himself is because she hasn’t earned the right to know. In actuality, it’s because Haruto has been dragging his feet trying to find the right moment to come forward.

“By the way, it looks like nobody from Numbers is here today.”

Char replies, “I invited them. But they all seem to have plans tonight…”

Whether they really do have plans or are just politely declining the silly invitation is unknown.

I want to believe it’s the latter… Iris secretly hopes. *After all, they did witness the devil’s powers with their own eyes.*

With the exception of Alexei, the members of Numbers aren’t exactly willing to cooperate. But Iris doesn’t necessarily trust Alexei either.

It’d be best if we could keep our distance from Numbers…

Iris had already shared those feelings with Laius and Marianne. They seemed to take the hint from her expression and responded with a nod.

“All right, everyone! Let’s go!”

Charlotte takes flight and floats over the high wall surrounding the estate.

“Hey, wait up! Don’t go off on your own!”

Laius fortifies himself with magic and jumps over the wall.

Iris and Marianne follow.

To their surprise, the front door is unlocked. The four of them enter the main building.

“There’s nothing here!”

They’d just finished searching every nook and cranny of the vast mansion, only to find nothing.

“No devils either. Maybe our suspicions were wrong,” says Laius.

Char wilts.

Marianne gently pats the little blonde girl on the head and says, “Don’t give up hope, Char. We’ve only looked inside the building so far. Come, you can see the courtyard from up here. Maybe there’s something…out… Um, there is. There is something out there…”

As they peer out the window to the courtyard down below, they notice a treasure chest in the middle of the yard.

A large box, brightly decorated in red and gold. A classic treasure chest just like the kind you see in video games.

“It’s way too conspicuous!” Laius exclaims.

“Hold on,” says Iris. “It wasn’t there when I looked out to the courtyard earlier. When did it…?”

“It may be a devil’s trap.” Marianne wrinkles her brow.

Charlotte responds assuredly, “Perhaps a demon in the form of a treasure chest wandered into the yard.”

“What the heck kind of demon is that?”

“I’ve never seen them around here. It may have wandered over from distant territory,” Char says.

“Uh, no. I’m asking if treasure-chest shaped demons with sentience and will to move on their own exist.”

“They’re common in games,” Charlotte answers him as she flies out the window.

“Geez, you have no sense of caution, as usual,” grumbles Laius as he jumps out. Iris and Marianne follow close behind.

“Huh?” Laius tilts his head as he lands on the ground.

The treasure chest they saw from the window had vanished.

Did the chest really walk away on its own?

“It was here… Wasn’t it?” Laius strolls over to where he last saw the chest.

“You shouldn’t get too close. Have you no sense of caution?” warns the little girl floating overhead.

You’re one to talk.

Charlotte is flying in circles above where the chest was.

“It seems the treasure chest is only visible from certain angles. Firstly, we should check to see if it’s actually a demon—”

Right when Char raises her magic wand, Iris calls out, “Char, look out! Behind you!”

The little girl in the sky twirls her body to the side instinctively. Something darts past where she was just hovering.

Not something—some*one.*

“Aww, I’m surprised you were able to dodge me.”

The owner of the sultry voice swoops down next to the treasure chest.

Her black leather outfit barely covers her chest and privates. Her voluptuous body looks about to spill from all angles.

White hair, red eyes—the woman with the bat-like wings is…

“The token female agent!”

Char is ecstatic.

“Why the hell are you dressed like that?!” Laius looks away.

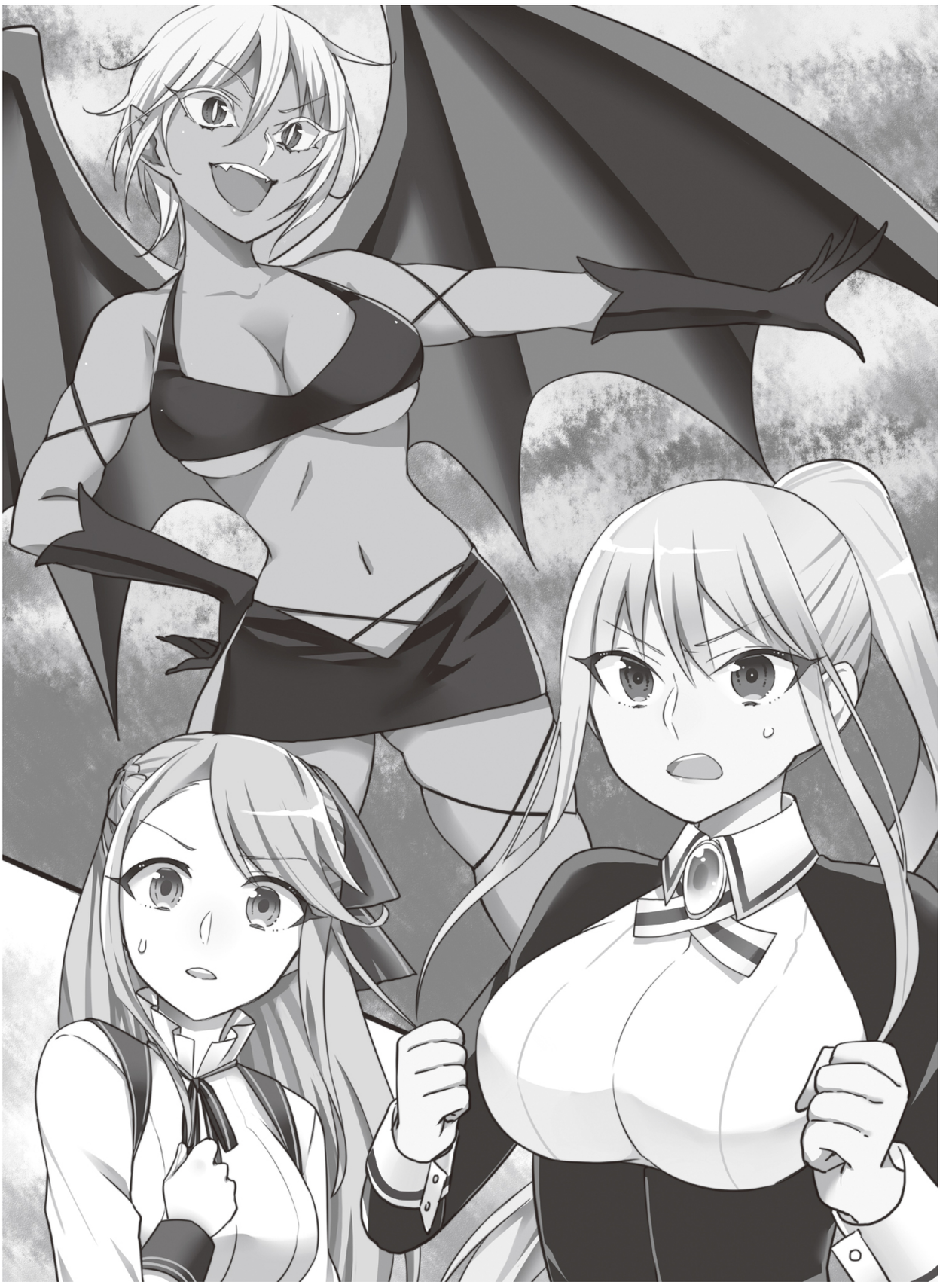
Iris raises her fists. “That’s not the problem right now!”

“It’s a devil. Everyone, stay on guard!”

Marianne braces herself behind Iris, ready to fire her magic at any moment.

Laius, too, joins them and takes a crouching stance.

“Heh-heh-heh. Aww, how cute. That’s right, I’m Vari, the devil born from Lord Lucifyra. But unfortunately, I’m not here to entertain you kids.”



The lewdly dressed woman, Vari the devil, licks her lips and smiles coyly.

“I’m here for this,” she reaches for the treasure chest, “You were searching for it too, weren’t you? What a pity, though. This one’s mine!”

The four freeze and think, *We can’t let her take it.*

Just as they’re about to attack—

CHOMP!

“Hyaw?!”

The chest opens and bites the devil’s hand.

Laius: “I-It really is alive…?”

Iris: “I’ve never heard of such a demon…”

Marianne: “Good thing we didn’t get too close…”

While each of them expresses surprise and relief in their own ways…

“A man-eating treasure chest… I knew it!”

…Charlotte’s eyes sparkle with excitement.

Vari, still ensnared by the box, is furious. “Ugh! What’s with this thing?! Let…go…of…me!”

She gives the container a kick from underneath.

Poof! Cue the airy sound, the treasure chest disappears up in smoke and…

“A tiny one came out!” Char exclaims.

Sure enough, there's a palm-sized treasure chest on the ground.

"Wh-What the hell's this now…?"

Vari eyes it with caution, but the little box doesn't move.

"Judging from the size, a card would fit perfectly in it," Char breezily makes a very valid point.

Suddenly, everyone's scrambling.

"Which means this must be—"

"Not today!"

As Vari reaches her hand to the ground, Laius unleashes a barrage of pebbles at the little chest.

The rocks hit the small container—as Laius intended—and flicks it into the air.

"I wanna say 'good job,' but—" Iris hesitates.

"—you could've damaged what's inside," sighs Marianne.

"Worst case, the chest could've opened, and its content would've been snatched," Char delivers the final blow with an exuberant smile.

"But it worked out in the end!" Laius is practically in tears.

Char summons a small whirlwind with a wave of her magic wand. The chest swirls into the air.

"Ugh, seriously?! This is annoying!" Vari's glowering red eyes turn to the sky.

At that point, everyone's—including Char's—focus is on the treasure chest and how to prevent the devil from swiping it first.

However, Vari's gaze wasn't on the chest…

“You’re all too simpleminded!” she yells.

One of her arms blew up several times in size. She twists her body and squeezes out a massive black cannonball from her hand. It’s shooting straight for Charlotte.

The corner of Vari’s lips curls up.

She’s totally caught off guard! She’s got no time to defend herself or dodge it, the devil thinks.

Gathering cards is merely one of the tasks to complete her true assignment, which is murder the girl who is supposedly the creator of Shiva.

Testing out the defensive powers of that ridiculous outfit is more than worthwhile, thinks Vari.

The black cannonball is zooming into the blonde girl.

Shwiiiiiiing!

A crisp metallic sound pierces the atmosphere.

A magic circle as big as herself appears in front of Charlotte.

The cannonball collides into it and shatters the barrier upon impact.

Hah, that’s all you got? Shiva mustn’t be much of a contender either, I’ll bet.

Just as Vari sneers in reassurance—

“What?!”

Another similar magic circle appears and blocks the cannon’s path.

But like the last one, it too cannot bear the impact and bursts into pieces.

Before Vari could even feel a sense of relief, yet another magic circle appears.

That's when she notices the fourth, fifth… A total of seven magic circles, one behind the other in the line of fire.

"I'm impressed," Char says calmly.

"You've managed to penetrate two layers of Brother Ha—I mean, Shiva's automatic defense system, the Seven Seraph Schilde."

The third shield intercepts the black cannonball and dissipates without a trace.

"You've gotta be…kidding me…"

The two shields that were destroyed did wield intense defensive powers. Vari was confident in her ability to breach them and she, in fact, did.

But the third shield was different.

Even considering the speed lost from the first two blockades, how could her attack disappear completely?

It wasn't just blocked by the shield. It was sucked in.

A variation of teleportation magic? Or could it possibly be something else?

Either way, if Charlotte could activate something like that automatically, no attack would reach her.

Even if the cannonball could penetrate the third shield, the remaining four are sure to be much tougher.

Vari is at a loss for words.

It's the briefest of moments, but right here, right now, the hesitation is detrimental to Vari.

"Miss Iris, here!" calls Charlotte.

Whoosh!

A ribbon of wind encircles the little treasure box and glides to Iris's feet.

"Shit!" Vari glares.

As soon as Iris picks it up, she throws it to her side. "Marianne!"

"Laius, on to you!"

Marianne tosses the box over to him.

"Gotcha! So long, sucker!" The royal prince hollers a classic villain grunt catchphrase and peels off.

Naturally, Vari tries to chase after him—

"Tsk! I'm not letting you get awa—?!"

—but she's barraged from all sides and from above with magic attacks, and she even loses her vision as fog begins to enshroud her.

"I-I can't believe it… I've been defeated…by a bunch of kids… just like that?"

Not only did Vari let her main objective—seizing the treasure box—be obstructed by them, but she wasn't even able to slay a single enemy.

"How am I going to report any of this to Lord Lucifyra…?"

It’d be a blessing if she were to be instantly executed upon reporting.

But the thought of confessing her shameful blunder to her master whom she worships makes her feel as though her insides are being clawed away.

However…

“Huh…? What’s that over there…?”

Between the bushes, she sees a miniature treasure chest gleaming in the darkness.

It couldn’t be, she thinks as she rushes over and picks it up.

Is this one of those gimmicks where you open it only to find a “Wrong box!” note inside?

Despite her skepticism, she opens the box.

“Heh… Hehe… Ah-hahahaha!”

Inside it was a shimmering golden card made of metal. The number 6 was engraved on it with simple patterns printed around it.

“Such overwhelming mana… This must be the *true* treasure chest!”

And the tiny chest that appeared earlier must’ve been a fake.

Charlotte and her friends must be seething right now.

The first thing to do is to verify if this card truly is the item my master is searching for.

She tucks the golden card between her cleavage and flies into the air.

“The next one shall be mine as well!” she cackles as she disappears into the night sky.

Meanwhile, Charlotte and her friends—

“We’ve got it! Our first golden card!”

They, too, obtained a golden-colored metal card with the number 6 and some patterns etched on it.

◆

There’s no need to explain it, but I’m the one who prepared the big and little treasure boxes.

I considered making the big one autonomous, but I really don’t want any unexpected incidents, like the way my copy sometimes rebels, so I decided to remote-control it to behave like a demon.

The magic circle-ish barriers that protect Char are my handiwork, too.

Simulating two of the circles to burst into pieces was quite thrilling. But tossing the cannonball into mystery space-time was a bit unoriginal. I could’ve done better.

By the way, what the heck is a “Seven Seraph Schilde”? I conjured those magic circles then and there for the first time, but Char sounded like she knew exactly what she was talking about.

Her improv skills are astonishing.

Anywayz.

That's that for collecting the first card.

Both parties scored the prize they wanted, and both parties went home satisfied.

Why'd I prepare two cards, you ask?

Simple.

While both sides have different motives, they both share the same mission: to collect seven cards.

Which means if either side gets the card pilfered, it'll turn into a "strike the enemy to win back the card" situation.

When that happens, the contest escalates to surprise attacks, raids, ambushes, and revenge—it'll get out of control. And I don't wanna have to deal with that.

Therefore, I set up two cards so both parties will leave feeling triumphant.

…I wonder if this'll backfire fairly early on in the game.

Nah, I'm sure it'll be fine.

I decide to turn a blind eye to worrying about the future and focus on the present.

"Finally! The card is ours. Now that we have the time to take a good look… It's shiny!" Char exclaims.

I watch her as she's absolutely stoked about the gold card. Adorbs.

Char, Iris, Laius, and Marianne are gathered in the meeting room of Professor Tear's research lab building.

“It appears to be an illustration of…a leg? The left leg, to be precise.”

Aside from the elaborately designed patterns, a bold drawing of what looks like a leg is on the card. The number 6 is etched in the center.

“That’s a crappy drawing,” comments Laius.

’Scuse? You got a problem with my drawing?

Does Laius even need to be a part of the group? No, right?

“I find the style curiously compelling,” my little sister replies.

See? People who get it, get it. She’s such an angel.

Iris, ignoring the vibe as usual, speculates, “If this is the key to reviving the Devil Lord, it’s likely that this imagery is depicting a part of their body.”

“So the Devil Lord’s in pieces right now?” asks Laius.

His older sister answers, “The cards could just be symbolic. I believe the pictures merely indicate the Devil Lord’s powers retained in that body part.”

Iris responds with a stern expression, “If so, we may not be able to prevent the Devil Lord’s full revival just by acquiring this one card.”

Zhoop!

Char’s hand shoots up enthusiastically. As usual, she indicates her intention to speak before she does. What a well-mannered girl.

“On the other hand,” she starts, “if what Princess Marianne says is true, wouldn’t it mean that by securing this card, the Devil

Lord's power in their left leg is restrained?"

Her expression grows even more resolute.

"Regardless, if we go by what Miss Iris just said, we're going to have to collect all seven Lucifer Cards to prevent the Devil Lord's revival and seal their powers."

The plot thickens when I'm not even present.

Iris: "We got lucky this time, but there's no guarantee we'll succeed the next time."

Laius: "Yeah, they've got those freaks known as devils on their side."

Marianne: "We cannot let our guard down."

As the three teens look on gravely…

"However, we must give it all we have to protect the world!"

…Char—not me, but Char—declares loudly and rallies them up.

There's one little thing I'm hung up on.

Char can easily get carried away with her delusions, as she usually does, but I'm surprised to see Iris, Laius, and my older sister Marianne play along in this little card hunting roleplay.

To be honest, I'm sweating bullets.

The new devil woman who appeared at the site of the card seemed…uh, slow in the head, so there's no need to worry about her. At least I hope not.

The problem is the Devil Lord who is literally wearing the Queen's skin…

I take a peek at the surveillance barrier I'd conjured to tail the devil woman. Vari, was it?

In a room in the royal annex…

The she-devil in the lewd outfit is on one knee, graciously holding up the golden-colored card to the queen.

"Behold, Lord Lucifyra. I can sense the ominous mana… This has to be the card you seek," gloats the woman named Vari or whatever.

Looking down at the devil is none other than Queen Gizelotte, who is sitting with her legs crossed and a wine glass in hand like a dominatrix. But inside her is the Devil Lord, apparently.

She stares down with sheer contempt in her eyes.

"I see you've made quite the fool of yourself."

Vari's shoulders jerk at her master's cold-blooded words.

"No matter. You were able to verify that little brat's defensive ability, at the very least. A blessing in disguise. You've gotten results, and how you got them is not an issue…"

Gizelotte/the Devil Lord Lucifyra rises slowly.

"…if that card is real."

Not exaggerating, her eyes actually glinted. Scare-ry.

She inches toward Vari, who is completely intimidated, and scrutinizes the card.

This one only has the number 6 and some patterns on it. Should I have drawn a symbolic doodle on it too?

Well, it's too late for that now.

Just as I'm starting to feel discouraged that my prop isn't fooling the godlike being…

"This menacing, yet lulling quality of mana… Could this lord possess higher powers than that woman? Or even higher—could they be in the same realm as the Three Primordial Gods?"

That woman? Who? Three Primordial Gods? What?

"Altering their own mana into the form of a card—or rather, is it a type of mana conversion? They poured their energy into an inanimate object as a reserve. The purity of this mana is incomparable to that of an ordinary reserve."

The Devil Lord is mumbling things I don't understand.

She widens her eyes. "Muahahahaha! There's no denying the truth anymore. And this narrows down the suspect considerably."

Yeek! I shudder.

She's probably wrong, though. I can tell!

Anywayz!

Team Devil Lord also seems to acknowledge my handmade card as a special item.

Right when I relax my shoulders in relief…

"Strange, though, isn't it?" she continues. "This card is meant to be the key to strengthening the creator's self-defense. To seal such purified mana into an object seems contradictory."

…she starts with some complicated babbling.

I don’t like being scrutinized due to irrational reasoning. I slapped up this card out of a barrier. Why are they making it a bigger deal than it is?

“No, better yet… Perhaps that’s precisely why they need a key… I see. Because their power is too great and unmalleable, they need to strip away the bounds with this purified mana.”

I don’t know what’s going on, but she seems pleased with her complicated rambling.

I don’t mean this in a rude way, but maybe the godlike beings in this world are silly geese?

“Very well, then. Lord Lucifyra, may I continue the card hunt?”

“Go ahead. If toughness is the only aspect of their defense, I have my own means to deal with it…”

Hm? Why’d she just glance at the wall—oh, the Divine Blade is hung there.

“Let us proceed with the most infallible strategy. In the meantime, I must regain as much strength as I can.”

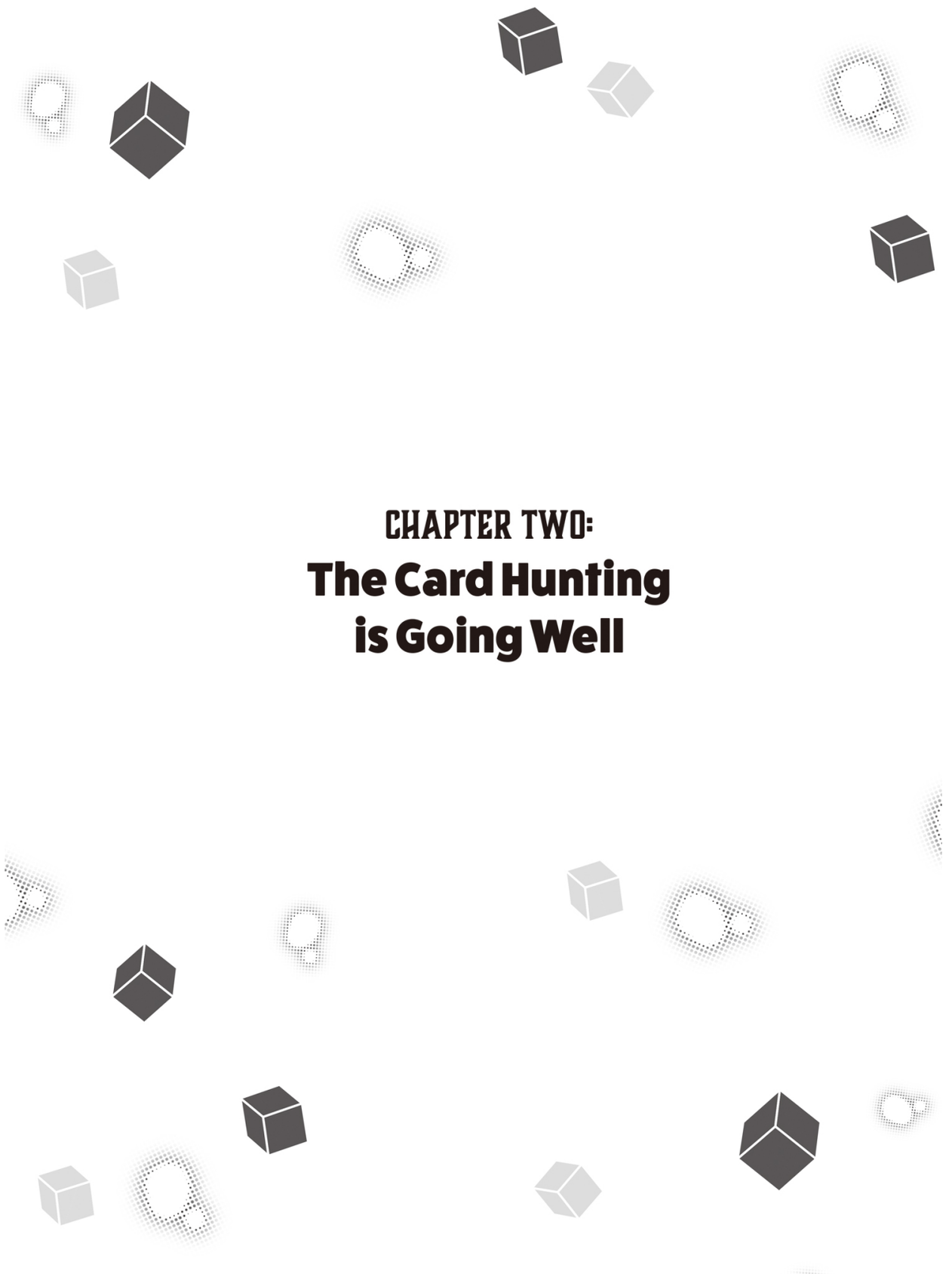
Something about her comment is unsettling, but it looks like Team Devil Lord is dancing in the palm of my hand.

Please keep dancing, I beg you.

Well, then.

What kind of sitch should I arrange next?

As I try to come up with an idea, I watch a magical girl anime series that my sister might like…



CHAPTER TWO:
The Card Hunting is Going Well

A heavy fog is settling over the city—a rare phenomenon in the capital.

On a night like this, you shouldn't walk alone. Especially if you're a young woman.

Why, you ask?

Because *he* might make an appearance. The man who's lately become the talk of the town.

Click, *Click*, echoes the slow and breezy footsteps walking down a backstreet.

Looks like prey is coming.

An unguarded woman is approaching him.

Choosing to walk through this dark and empty alley was her mistake. She's probably just taking a shortcut home, but even still, she is being a bit too naïve.

The man is wearing a hat over his eyes. The lower half of his face is covered with a piece of fabric.

He's wearing an unseemly long coat for the season, and the hand in his pocket is clutching a large knife.

Jack the Nameless Ripper, that's who I am, he gloats.

He doesn't care who his target is.

A young woman would be suitable.

He’s not picky about her appearance, but this broad is quite the looker even from a distance.

Had she been a feeble woman, he’d feel a little guilty, but the one approaching is voluptuous and would be quite a titillating experience.

But…isn’t she a little too *indecently exposed?*

Only her breasts and crotch are covered up.

Do prostitutes these days need to dress that provocatively just to get by?

Setting aside his sliver of uncertainty, Nameless Jack grips the weapon in his pocket and charges straight at her.

Head-on, no cheap tricks.

No word of warning.

That’s his policy.

The grand finale of the young victim’s budding life shall be embellished with his silence and her scream.

The woman stops in her tracks and squints her sharp catlike eyes. Her spine briefly shivers as if to distort her beautiful figure. That’s when…

Slam!

“Bfurgh!”

The man trips out of nowhere.

“Uaaaghhh!”

The knife in his pocket digs into the side of his abdomen—just a little, though. But the man writhes in anguish on the ground.

The lewdly dressed woman looks down in annoyance. “What the hell are you doing…?”

“Urg… Dammit…” The man wobbles to his feet.

He carefully takes out his knife and brandishes it at the woman, who doesn’t seem the least afraid of him.

Huh?

Her fair face clouds with skepticism and she asks, “Are you that indecently exposed flasher who’s been causing problems around here lately?”

“You’re one to talk!”

He certainly didn’t want to hear it from the woman dressed like one.

The man had already let himself get heated up; it was too late to go back to playing his cold and silent persona.

The poor woman is about to be offed; perhaps I should show her a bit of pity.

He decides to give her his name.

“I am Jack… Jack the Nameless Ripper.”

“Don’t you mean Jack the Indecent Flasher?”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Then what are you? I haven’t heard about any thieves or murderers around here.”

“……”

He shifts his gaze uncomfortably.

What she said is true. There’d been no news of thieves or murderers appearing in this area.

The man had recently discovered his thirst for murder, and it's been two weeks since he started wandering the district looking to kill.

He's already made seven attempts just like tonight—he conjured a mist with magic, sought out lone prey, and made his move.

But every single time, he tripped or dawdled with his knife and let his targets escape.

And now I'm being mistaken for a flasher… he mourned.

The woman says to the dejected man, "Never mind that."

She approaches as she licks her lips.

"I can sense exquisite mana coming out of you. Looks like you're the prey I've been looking for."

Her red eyes begin to glow mystically.

"Agh?!"

I'm screwed, the man thinks.

Not in the sexual way, but in the threatening kind of way. Just as the man loses control of his legs and falters to the ground…

"Hiding in the fog to enact your evil deeds?" A little girl's voice resounds out of nowhere. "To the villains who yearn for the darkness: on behalf of the moon, I'm watching you."

"Who's there?!" The she-devil recognizes the voice.

Her eyes dart in the direction it's coming from—above.

“Very nice! I like that reaction. And since you asked, I shall reveal. Even if you didn’t ask, I would’ve anyway.”

The petite figure in the mist leaps up with a “Hi-yah!” and sticks a clean landing on the ground.

“It is I, the Magical Girl of Justice, Immortal Char. I’m here to annihilate your worries away!”

A young girl in a frilly pink outfit strikes a pose with her magic wand.

“You again, you damned brat—oh, whatever. I’m the one who’s gonna dominate again, anyway.”

“Oh, no, no. This time, once again, victory shall be ours.”

“Heh heh heh…” the devil chuckles.

“Tee hee hee!” giggles the girl.

The sadist and the angel.

The smiles on their faces starkly contrast with each other. The man—who’s never met either of them—does not understand what they’re talking about.

But he knows instinctively:

They’re not on the same page.

And little does he know that stuck to the inside of his coat is… a golden card.

◆

First and foremost, I need to make one thing clear.

There was no reason for me to willingly choose the “flasher” case.

If something went wrong and the indecent flasher’s disgusting member corrupted Char’s eyes, it would’ve been a disaster.

But it was Char who found this case. All by herself.

According to the plot I gave (or co-wrote with) Char, if there is a series of inexplicable events, it’s because the people involved are under the negative influence of the cards which seal the Devil Lord’s powers.

As Char was researching such cases, she discovered this one: a flasher appeared seven times in a two-week span. That’s pretty frequent.

Fog rises out of nowhere and strikes at anyone regardless of age or gender.

Thankfully, there were no victims because he’s a klutz and everyone was able to flee while he dallied.

That doesn’t mean he should get off easy.

My little sister declared, “I don’t exactly know what he flashes or how, but I must wipe away the worries of the city’s civilians as quickly as possible.”

Char doesn’t quite understand what a flasher is, but that didn’t seem to stop her from firing up with righteousness.

“This certainly is a peculiar case, which means there is a very high chance that the Lucifer Cards are involved—nay, they *must* be! Without a doubt!”

Well, if you assert it like that, I have no choice but to say, "As you wish," and abide.

I was slightly worried, but I've got ample experience under my belt in censoring grotesque scenes from Char with my Mystery Light.

Things will work out, I'm sure!

Obviously, I made backup plans as well.

Back to the scene…

The flasher in question is still frozen on the ground, gripping his knife.

Why a knife, though? It's a rather big one, too. Does he carry it around for protection? First off, this flasher guy's wearing a full set of clothes under his coat. Do flashers in this alternate universe strip really fast with magic or something? Eh, whatever.

Anyhow, the Magical Girl of Justice Immortal Char has arrived.

You'd expect the usual gang to follow suit at this point…

"Muahahahaha!" A peal of laughter echoes out of nowhere. "So you're the devil or whatever they call it. You dared to show yourself before me, and now you will regret it!"

"Flay, they can't see you from there," Liza calls to the silhouette on the roof. "You're hidden in the fog."

She then trots over to Char and stops beside her. The sight of Liza in a blue version of Char's costume is unexpected. She looks kind of embarrassed in it.

“Hi-yah!”

A figure in a skin-tight rider suit and a butterfly mask—the classic lady-thief look—leaps down. It goes without saying that it’s Flay.

Why not match costumes with the other two? Oh, whatever.

“Wh-What the hell are you guys?”

Vari, the provocatively dressed devil woman, is clearly put off by what they’re wearing.

Allow me to state the obvious: you’re in no position to judge.

She continues, “W-Well, never mind that for now. Now that I’ve gotten a good look, you two appear to be demons. You’d make sufficient opponents.”

From her point of view, while she did technically win the card hunting contest last time, she felt like they treated her like a small fry. This time, she’s seriously serious about blasting Char to absolute smithereens.

But I got that covered!

Char’s safety depends on me. My seriousness isn’t falling short to this devil’s.

Which is why I assigned the two demons as Char’s bodyguards, along with a few other things I’ve prepared.

I hope they’ll do their parts… Before all else, did Alexei-senpai do his part? He did say, “Yes, I did what you asked. Although, I really don’t think it was necessary to delegate *me* as your actor.”

Vari’s crimson eyes gleam.

A gust of wind swirls around them. She's charging up her mana really hard, isn't she?

"Now, fear me!" the devil says. "And perish in despair!"

She raises one hand in the air and pitches it downward.

Char and the gang brace themselves.

But no large-scale magic attack is launched. Instead…*Zoop!* A tiny object goes flying.

Correction: more like *VYOOOM!*—shooting at an alarming speed.

It heads straight for Mr. Flasher, who's still standing in shock.

"Mgh?!"

The object flies into his mouth.

"Gh-Gh… Urr…"

Mr. Flasher starts to squirm.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no!" Char, who's still young and inexperienced in combat, panics.

On the other hand, the woman in the lady-thief costume, Flay, springs toward the choking flasher.

"Whatever that was, spit it out!"

Wait, are you going to make him spit it out by smacking him on the back at full force? You'll kill him, Flay.

"No, stand back!"

Liza grabs Flay by the shoulders, holds her close, and takes a big leap away from the man.

As expected, Liza knows how to read the room.

"Gh, Ough… Aaaaaauuuuuugh!"

Mr. Flasher lets out an ungodly howl as black mist starts to discharge from his body. The dark mist wraps around him as his body expands, tearing his clothes apart.

“What?! He transformed…?!” Flay is flabbergasted.

Which means the situation is quite serious.

“Aaau-ougraaaaaahhh!”

Despite Mr. Flasher’s animalistic roar, his appearance is the exact opposite of a beast.

His head is swollen and jello-y, his eyes have shifted to the sides of his head and are darting around. Each arm multiplied into four arms, with suckers lined along each tapering limb.

“Did he turn into an octopus monster?!” cries Char.

Yup, an octopus.

If you count the legs, it’s technically ten tentacles, so wouldn’t it be more of a squid? I ignore my own snarky comment. The flasher just transformed into a ten-foot giant octopus monster.

“Ah-hahaha!” Vari cackles as she hovers behind the metamorphosed flasher guy. “I’d rather clobber you to pieces myself, but I’ll let you taste a different kind of pain.

“Now, now, little miss ‘Magical Girl of Justice.’ Let’s see if you can murder this monster who still has a human soul.”

‘Uh, uhrr… Help… I-It hurts…’ The voice seems to be coming from the octopus monster.

“Huh? You can still talk?” Vari makes a concerning remark, but Char and the gang don’t seem to hear.

“How cruel…”

Char's face scrunches up in sorrow. Which, by the way, is still adorbs.

It pains me too, though.

At any rate, worry not!

I stand close by—camouflaging myself—and let out a smirk.

All according to plan!

Yep, he may be a crook, but I'm not one to slip someone a pill that'll turn them into a devil—needless to mention it's an inhumane thing to do. I can't say I'd never do such a thing, but it'll never happen when Char is involved.

The pill that entered Mr. Flasher's mouth was teleported away to mystery space-time with my Barrier magic. At the same time, I conked him out.

After that, I made the best use of my funny and nifty Barrier magic to dramatize his monster transformation, voice included.

In other words, he's tucked inside a giant full-body costume.

The coat he was wearing couldn't handle the bloating and tore away. The gold card, which was stuck on the inside of it, is now fluttering through the air.

Isn't that weird considering the card should be made of metal, you say? I'll have to ask you to please keep your thoughts to yourself.

"Hah! All mine!"

Miss Female-Agent—who must've been eyeing the card the whole time—snatches it with glee.

Couldn't you be a little more discreet?

"Looks like I win again. Why don't you girls have some playtime with that thing?"

The devil woman Vari lets out a triumphant laugh as she soars high into the sky and disappears.

…None of which Char and the girls were able to see or hear. I made sure to arrange that. Specifically, the part where Vari catches the card and claims victory.

Moving on.

Now that the Devil Lord's pawn is out of the picture… It's my turn. I summon "Entertain Char with all my might."

Do not dismiss my efforts as mere buffoonery.

If I'm doing this, I'm going to be completely serious.

My keen sister will definitely see through my illusions if I try to cut any corners.

From here on out, it's an epic showdown between brother and sister.

It goes without saying that safety will be accounted for. *And go!*

Just as I psych myself up, three shadows come racing out of the fog into view.

"Don't just start running so suddenly!—Whoa, what the heck?!" exclaims one of them.

The first one to arrive is Laius, followed by Iris and my big sister Marianne. They're bewildered at the sight of the octopus monster.

Char answers from overhead, "I will elaborate later, but for now, that's Mr. Indecent Flasher who was turned into a monster by the devil lady's drug."

"Wuh…" The three newcomers look like they have a lot of questions.

In any case, standing before them is an opponent they must contend with. And in order to get them to acknowledge that fact, I buckle down and puppet the octopus monster.

Spwee!

The monster spurts out black ink from his mouth.

"Ack! Watch out!" calls out Laius.

The liquid hits the ground and melts away the surface with a sizzling sound.

Immediately following the liquid attack is a barrage of tentacle whips.

Fwoo-whoosh!

Its squishy octo-arms lash out in big waves at Laius.

"Me again?!"

Oh no. I'm so focused on Char and the girls' safety that I end up targeting Laius every time.

"What're we gonna do?! He might be a human on the inside, but we're gonna have to defeat him!"

"Uh-rrrh…" whimpers Char.

He may be a bad guy, but all of his criminal attempts failed. He didn't actually do anything to warrant paying with his life. It's no wonder the kind-hearted Char doesn't want to harm him.

Now I feel kind of bad!

I gotta put a stop to all this. Seeing Char grieve is the biggest blow for me.

'*…Cure… Love Cure…*'

Char looks up. "Huh?! I heard a voice just now…directly in my head…? No—this is…my own memory?"

'*Tiny Love Cure*…episode twenty-seven…'

"Episode twenty-seven…? Oh—you don't mean…!"

Charlotte raises her magic wand high over her head.

"Everyone, please stand back!"

The wand begins to sparkle and glow.

"Source of evil, reveal yourself! Marvelous Pretty Darkness Shower!"

The blinding ray turns to pitch black mist and envelopes the octopus monster.

"I see it! Right there!" she exclaims.

The black mist clings around the monster, and a faint red light illuminates the center of its chest.

A blackish-red crystalline object emerges.

"Now!"

Char spins around once and, again, raises her magic wand into the sky.

“I’ll send you to the heavens Marvelous Pretty Love and Peace Death Explosion!”

A streak of light shoots out of the magical item and fires straight for the octopus monster, hitting the red crystal on its chest.

“Gr-Groaaaaah!”

The prism splinters to pieces.

The monster continues to wail.

You can do it! Char’s expression seems to cheer him on. In contrast to her youthful complexion, her expression is that of a loving mother’s. My dear little sister is just too damn adorable!

And soon enough…

Whoosh!

The octopus is wrapped in pure white light, which soon flurries away and disappears into thin air.

“A…auh…”

The flasher—formerly known as the octopus monster—collapses to the ground. His coat was ripped to shreds, but he’s wearing clothes underneath, so there’s no need to censor him with Mystery Light.

“Huh?” ponders Iris. “I thought his body expanded when he transformed. Why are his clothes intact?”

Please stop with your unnecessary comments, Iris.

“So it’s over, right?” says Laius. “Where’s the card? Did we lose this round?”

Oops, almost forgot.

He’s useful sometimes.

“Over there!” Marianne is keen to spot the single card drifting in the breeze.

A card made of metal is floating in the wind—how strange. (Second time mentioning it today.)

Char flies over to the card and catches it.

“Thank you for the hint, Brother Haruto…”

Hm, so she caught on.

But she hasn’t figured out that I staged it from beginning to end… Has she?

Setting that aside, Mr. Flasher will be turned in to the authorities. That concludes this round without any problems. But…

“What the heck is *she* doing now?” I turn my attention to a different surveillance monitor from the one Char is displayed on.

Queen Gizelotte AKA the Devil Lord Lucifyra.

She bolted out of the capital—without even waiting for Vari to return—and now she’s heading deep into the eastern mountains. There stands…

“Grr…”

…it’s hard to see in the dark, but a very large *something.*

◆

While the card hunting event is taking place, I take a peek at what the Devil Lord is up to… And it looks like she's up to no good.

"Whoa, that looks big. As big as a fully grown giant dragon, maybe?" I mumble.

An enormous silhouette is looming in the darkness.

Displayed on the screen—enhanced with a night-vision barrier—is a huge beast, or rather a monster standing upright on its hind legs in a massive cave.

Its torso and arms are that of a muscular, hairy man or gorilla. The head resembles something like a lion with two impressive horns curling out up top. Its tail looks like a scaly dragon's. When you look carefully, its lower half looks like the hind legs of a horse or a deer.

"What is it?" I ask Professor Tear.

We're in her research lab. It's just the two of us, so I'm not in Shiva Mode.

"Hmm… A Devil Lord and a gigantic monster, huh? Hold on a second."

Professor Tear runs this way and that as she picks up books one after another. She skims through one, tosses it aside, and picks up the next.

Can you treat your things a little better?

"Ah! Here it is. This one."

She scuttles back to me with a cheeky grin and shoves the dirty old book in my face.

“This is a personal speculation log that someone wrote after reading a number of ancient scriptures, piecing them together, and compiling them. I couldn’t find their original sources, and the speculation itself was sloppy, so I’d almost forgotten about it—read this part right here.”

I do.

The wording is complicated, but I do notice one phrase.

“Synthetic beasts?”

“It’s what the extraordinary life forms–known as gods of the ancient times—called these monsters. They altered existing monsters, and even literally combined multiple monsters together to create a creature of true terror…is what it says.”

“I see. In other words, a chimera.”

“You always use words I’ve never heard of. What’s that?”

Isn’t it obvious from the context? An animal made from various creatures combined. They’re always in games and fantasy anime, you know?

It’d be futile to explain any of that to her, so I move the conversation forward.

“But Professor Tear, isn’t it a little too big to be a combination of some animals?”

Dragons and bigger monsters are understandable, but some of these other ones mixed in aren’t known to be that large.

“Did you read the latter half of the text?” she says. “During the process of concocting them, the mana of its creators—gods, an existence so magnificent—have a certain effect that enlarges

the monster's size. The fact that it's the only thing written indicates that this author has abandoned their due diligence of investigating, and even the most basic thought experiment. It's practically a bad novel—" The professor dives into a hotheaded rant.

I ignore her and decide to analyze the monster.

Hehehe, my Mija's Crystal (Upgraded Edition) can work from far away, too.

"Its mana level is 68."

"Whua?! That's practically at the Demon King's level—oh, but according to lore, his mana level is estimated to be 80, which is even higher than Glameus, mankind's strongest being."

But he lost his will to fight and was defeated by Gizelotte and her army or whatever…according to Professor Tear's rambling.

Moving on.

Honestly, this dragon's about the same level as Liza in dragon form and Flay in Fenrir form. I'd just recently maxed out their mana levels. Glad I did.

The two of them together shouldn't have much trouble taking it on. I can watch from a distance and help them out with my Barrier magic. There's nothing to worry about.

Professor Tear says in an unusually serious tone, "If something like this goes berserk in the capital, an immeasurable amount of damage could be done."

I'm surprised to hear such a level-headed opinion come out of her. I expected to see her overjoyed for the chance to slide a

knife in, squealing, *“Let me dissect it!”*

“That said, I would love to get my hands on it for a dissection!”

Phew, that’s more like it.

“You’re right. If something like that gets weaponized in battle, it’ll be a disaster…” I say.

Before anything else, the fact that it’s palling around with the Devil Lord is quite an abnormal situation.

I don’t even know the Devil Lord’s mana level and stuff. It’s definitely stronger than this giant mythical creature, right?

Hmm, but…

“Are you thinking of something evil again?” the mad scientist says.

You’re in no position to be asking that.

“Not evil per se, but this could be our chance.”

“Mmhmm?” Professor Tear leans in for my big zinger with stars in her eyes.

Here we have a giant Chimaera that possesses immense strength and an ongoing card hunting competition against Team Devil Lord.

This enormous beast is sure to be incorporated into future battles.

If that ends up being the case, there’s only one thing the Magical Girl of Justice can use to compete:

“A giant robot…” I mutter.

“Huh?”

I know, I know.

It’s not magical girl stuff, but Char watches the tokusatsu shows that are aired before and after it, too.

◇

Somewhere far east of the capital, deep in the mountains…

On the side of a rocky mountain is the entrance to a small cave that leads to a bigger one.

The small cave is a natural formation, but the bigger cave is manmade—made by a god to be more precise.

A woman of bewitching beauty is standing alone. Right under her lustful smile, shackled to her neck is a heavy, rugged prisoner’s collar.

She looks up and gazes at a colossal silhouette.

“Looks like this is the best I could do with the meager materials I was able to scrape up,” she lets out the softest whisper.

Despite her words of discontent, she has a somewhat pleased smile on her face.

In actuality, the synthetic beast she created is full of flaws. It’d barely stand a chance against the wall around the capital, let alone a fight against Shiva.

The capital’s defense is impermeable.

Multiple ley lines intertwine throughout the city, and the capital utilizes them to raise layers of sturdy protective barriers.

Creating a gap small enough for one person to pass through is feasible—and has been successful in the past—but tearing a hole wide enough to send through a creature of this size wouldn't be easy.

I'd have to cleave a wide enough hole myself or have the beast try to pulverize the castle walls.

The former is out of the question. Causing a scene would be too risky; it'd attract Shiva's attention.

"Hmph, I guess I don't have much of a choice to begin with."

The queen only has one role in the first place: to assassinate Charlotte Zenfis—the disguised form of one of the Three Primordial Gods—and to seize her powers as Lucifyra's own.

And in order to do that, she will need to distract Shiva with the beast she created.

Then there will be nobody who'd pose a threat to me… Maybe with the exception of one person.

But even then…

She slowly lowers her gaze as she opens and closes her hand in a smooth motion. The smile on her face vanishes.

But not out of fear or despair or anything negative.

"Not as bad as I thought."

Lucifyra's certainty morphs into joy, and finally to resolution.

The Devil Lord started off in the queen's body as a temporary fix, but she could feel herself becoming closer to what her

original flesh was. The vessel no longer feels like an alteration, but more like absorption.

“Hehehe. It seems like your soul was very similar to mine.”

The woman who was touted as the Flash Princess through hard work and dedication was, in fact, stained in greed and bound in grudges. She deserved to be in the depths of darkness.

Despite that, Gizelotte had spent her whole life writhing to reach the top. And while watching her do that…

Ah, she’s just like I once was.

A faint voice deep inside contests, but Lucifyra ignores it and carries on with her thoughts.

There is one thing that’s been on my mind.

It’s the fact that Shiva hasn’t been actively involved in any of the card hunting so far. On the other hand, Charlotte—who should be the lord’s mainframe—has been standing on the front line, zealously engaging in the scavenge.

The circumstances would call for the girl to prioritize her safety over anything.

There must be a reason why she must gather the cards herself… That’s the only logical analysis.

Alexei likely hasn’t been informed of the reason. Likewise, the other students who are speculated to be Charlotte’s subjects haven’t been told either.

Either way, I have the upper hand right now. I’ll carry on with my task to draw Shiva’s attention to me.

Charlotte will eventually summon Shiva to retrieve the cards that are in the Devil Lord's possession. When that happens, the cards can be used as bait to lure Charlotte and slaughter her with Lucifyra's own hands. The only thing to do for now is to plan meticulously for that moment.

◇

When strange things occur, a secret card that holds the key to the Devil Lord's revival appears at the site.

One time, it was in a cabin deep in the woods.

Another time, it was by a river near the capital.

And in another instance, it was in a monastery far away from civilization.

Starting with the case at a certain noble's estate, followed by the nighttime flasher-in-the-fog incident, Charlotte and the gang have been rushing to the scene of every strange case they've received word of, and wreaking hav—err solving the mystery.

The car-chase—or rather ship-chase down the river against a ghost ship was especially quite the thrill!

Charlotte is strolling down the academy hall with a song in her heart and a skip in her step.

Her days are always fulfilling and she's always in a good mood. But today, she's in a better mood than usual. The reason

for that is because she's been able to accomplish her top-priority assignment without a hitch.

The card we collected two days ago at Miss Iris's former monastery makes our fifth. The remaining two are the left arm and the head.

The seven mysterious cards necessary to prevent the revival of the Devil Lord are known as Lucifer Cards.

So far, her squad has been able to win all of them.

Smooth sailing as can be.

A little too smooth… Charlotte was starting to have doubts.

The Devil Lord surely won't let the situation go on like this for long. They may make a drastic attempt to score and make an epic comeback—nay, they absolutely will!

A feeling of recommitment wells up inside her, along with an indescribable sense of bubbling exhilaration.

But simultaneously, she is feeling another kind of the prickling feeling—almost like a void—deep inside.

Every magical girl has a supporting character, and they strive to boost each other up. But do I…?

She has friends. Irisphilia and Marianne. Flay and Liza. Most of all, her brother's presence is more reassuring than anyone's.

However, there's nobody on equal grounds with Charlotte—someone who can be both a friend and a rival.

Simply put, she wants magical girl comrades.

That said, it's not an easy thing to find. She'd asked Liza to fill the role once. Liza didn't argue, but she did seem very

apprehensive.

Is the magical girl-style an acquired taste?

Just as she slows down, someone calls from behind.

“Char! I’m glad I bumped into you.”

Running toward Charlotte is a female student with long silvery-white hair tied at the top of her head. Her ponytail swishes behind her. It’s Irisphilia.

“Miss Iris, is there something you want to speak with me about?”

“Yes. That is—to be more precise—I want to talk to Haruto. Professor Belkam stopped me earlier to pass on the message: ‘Tell Haruto to come to the headmistress’s office immediately.’”

“Brother Haruto?”

“Yes. But I’m in a rush to go to my part-time delivery job. I’m sorry to trouble you, but can you pass on the message when you see him?”

Haruto is probably at his cabin by the lake—which can be accessed by a teleportation device in Professor Tear’s research lab building.

Irisphilia also seems to be heading in that direction, but the distance is still too great. She must be anxious because she has an urgent commitment she needs to get to.

“I understand,” says Charlotte. “I was just about to go to Professor Tear’s lab building. I will relay the message to Brother Haruto.”

She could easily relay the message with communication magic, but her desire to see her brother won. If he's not at the hermitage, she can always rely on the communication barrier.

"Thank you. I owe you one," says Iris.

The two bid each other goodbye and Char turns around to hurry off. Just then—

"Charlotte, watch out!"

"Wh-Wh-Whua!"

—she almost bumps into someone as they're turning the corner.

Fwah! Charlotte instinctively floats upward and twists herself out of the way.

She makes a firm landing.

"Phew! That was close."

If Irisphilia hadn't warned her, she would've collided with the on-comer. The little blonde girl sighs in relief as she realizes how surprised they must be.

As she turns around to apologize…

"That was amazing!"

"Huh?"

There stands a pretty and cheery girl. Her giggle rings bright like a bell.

"You just flew, didn't you? Not jumped, but flew! You flew!"

She looks about my age, thinks Charlotte. Her long silver hair is styled in a half ponytail. She stares inquisitively with her golden eyes. The girl is wearing the academy's uniform, but Charlotte has never seen her before.

By the way, her chest is bouncing every time she hops up and down. They look about the same size as Flay's…? And she's my age…?

"Oh, I see," the stranger says. "That wasn't a spell that doesn't require an incantation, but a prewritten spell infused in your hair ornament. On top of that, there isn't a single unnecessary part in it; the spell is focused purely on flight. Optimized for maximum efficiency—hold on. That's not the only spell in your hair ornament…?"

The girl inches toward Charlotte, takes a good look at her accessory, and lets out a blossoming smile.

"Really amazing! I've never seen such an advanced magic device!"

Charlotte is at first overwhelmed by the girl's invasion of her personal space, but now she's thrilled to hear those words.

"It's true! Brother Haruto truly is amazing!"

The new girl freezes for a moment, slightly surprised by Charlotte's reaction.

"Brother? Those magic spells are your brother's work?"

"Yes! Brother Haruto is so, so amazing, and by that, I mean he's so incredibly amazing!"

The silver-haired girl stares in befuddlement at Charlotte, who is so elated that the only thing she can utter is “amazing,” but she leans in with enthusiasm.

“I see… And I can also spot various other spells nestled into your uniform and shoes. They’re well-hidden, too—not intentionally, though. They’re merely compressed for optimization. I can’t believe someone so skilled lived in the capital…”

Her golden eyes hazily glow.

I recognize this feeling from somewhere… thinks Charlotte. She notices Iris in the corner of her eye seeming perplexed and hesitant about speaking up.

That’s right. Miss Iris gave off a similar energy, too. But…

There is one more person who she recently realized had a similar atmosphere. Right when she’s picturing their face…

“Stand back, Lady Charlotte!”

…she hears a familiar voice from behind. A figure darts in and stands between her and the mysterious new girl.

The voice belongs to the blue-haired girl, Liza.

Vwoosh!

A gust of wind rises.

“Huh?!”

Liza had swung her lance and sliced through the air with the tip of her weapon.

Charlotte widens her eyes; the silver-haired girl is now standing several feet back from where she was a second ago.

Huh? But I didn't sense any…

Although she was distracted by Liza's sudden appearance, she didn't sense the silver-haired girl's energy shift at all.

The girl had moved backward from her original point without even bracing herself to act. Yet there she is in the exact same stance, only crouching slightly lower. It would be unnatural to jump backward and maintain the exact same pose.

"Teleportation…magic?"

Charlotte uses her brother's teleportation door daily, so she's familiar with the magic, but it's a near-impossible feat for one person to harness alone. Not even the great Demon King was able to pull off such a tremendous spell.

Liza refutes her little master's hunch…

"No, it's different. What *was* that, though?"

…but she couldn't place her finger on the answer.

Irisphilia finally joins the conversation.

"I was able to grasp what just occurred because I was watching from the side. She backed up at the same exact speed as Liza approached. To be more accurate, she maintained a fixed distance from Liza when she reached a certain radius."

The girl with the golden eyes straightens her posture and smiles wide.

"Bingo! Well, it's exactly as you saw, so the answer's easy."

“With that said, I don’t know what combination of magic spells she incorporated to make that possible,” Iris says and turns to the girl. “At what point did you determine Liza to be the point of fixture?”

She would’ve needed to notice Liza approaching even before she warned Charlotte. At the same time, it didn’t seem like she noticed Liza’s presence before she yelled.

“I don’t know. My self-defense magic activated automatically.”

“Automatic? Are you wearing some sort of magic device?”

“Er, more like…”

At the sight of the girl’s hesitation, Charlotte realizes something.

“Never mind that!” she exclaims as she steps forward next to Liza and bows her head deeply. “I apologize for the sudden scare! Liza’s—she just misread the situation and thought I was in danger—”

“Lady Charlotte, please raise your head. I didn’t misread. She is dangerous. This creature is not a demon or a human. She’s more like…something I can’t explain.”

Liza senses a resemblance to Iris, but the young girl with the silver hair is clearly spreading an aura of menace.

Thus, the dragon maid maintains her battle stance.

The silver-haired girl smirks slightly.

Iris is unsure whether she should intervene or not.

“Hua-wa-wa-wa…” Charlotte is completely flustered.

The girl with the silver hair shows a bit of sweetness in her smile and speaks to Liza, “You’re worrying your friend, see? I have no intention of harming anyone. Although I won’t deny your claim of seeing me as a threat. After all, you are a demon. Aren’t you?”

“Huh?!” Liza raises her guard up to the max.

“Stop!” cries Charlotte, “Stop it, Liza. Let us hear her out first.” She turns to the mysterious girl. “How did you know she’s a demon?”

Char manages to settle down Liza, but she can feel the temperature around them dropping significantly.

“Two short things on top of her head, and one long thing growing out of her lower back. They’re horns and a tail, right?”

“You can see them?” asks Char.

“Not quite. I cannot see them physically. But I do see a barrier—just like the ones in your hair ornament—fixed on them.”

She continues with great intrigue, “They’re bending the refraction of light to make the horns and tail blend into the background,” she giggles. “Fascinating. How does one even come up with a spell like that?”

“Indeed! Brother Haruto is so, so, so, sooo amazing!”

Liza almost eases her guard at the sight of her master’s merriment, but she quickly glares at the strange girl. Her doubts aren’t cleared yet.

“There’s no need to scowl at me like that. It’s not a look befitting such a pretty face.”

“Then stop looking at her with bloodlust,” warns Liza.

Charlotte tilts her head.

The silver-haired girl smiles. “I suppose a demon would interpret it that way. But you have it wrong. This isn’t bloodlust; it’s curiosity. I’m just a little excited.”

“Excited…?”

“That’s right. I have no thirst for blood or intention to harm you. Killing and hurting people isn’t any fun. But for some reason, demons and monsters interpret my feelings toward an object of interest as bloodlust. It’s quite a dilemma,” says the girl—although she doesn’t seem troubled at all. Her true intention underneath her smile is hard to read.

She continues, “But I suppose it’s nobody’s fault but my own. I mean—”

Liza, unable to assess what to do next, is baffled by what she says next:

“—I’m probably not an ordinary human.”

“““Huh?”””

Everyone except for the mysterious girl gasps.

“Originally, I was just one human called Yulia Martienna who was feeling small and constricted with who I was. After tweaking my body around here and there, I think I veered off the

classification of man. The spell for the self-defense magic you saw earlier isn't infused in my clothes or accessories—it's etched inside my body. I've got other spells, too."

The girl who calls herself Yulia chirps, "In other words, I'm somewhat of a customized magic device for myself."

Charlotte freezes at the girl's casual deliverance of the rather disturbing confession.

Liza and Iris, too, are speechless and cannot seem to decide whether they should continue to be in defense mode.

Yulia—seemingly blind to their reactions—lets out a little "Oh!"

"I haven't introduced myself. I already said my name earlier, but I'm Yulia Martienna. This is my first day here at the academy as, uh, an exchange student, I suppose."

She smiles as if to say, "and you?"

Charlotte straightens herself. "My name is Charlotte Zenfis. I just transferred into this school the other day, too. I'm a first-year."

"Oh, really? I'm a first-year student, too. I'd love to stay and chat, but I have to meet with someone. It's too bad," she laughs. Again, it's hard to tell if her words are sincere or not.

"It's nice to meet you. Say hi if we have the same class, Charlotte."

"Yes! Nice to meet you!—oh, and this is Liza. She's here as Brother Haruto's attendant."

"Nice to meet you, Liza," greets Yulia.

“Nice to meet you…”

Yulia’s earnest cheery expression doesn’t relieve Liza in the slightest.

Charlotte continues, “And this is Miss Iris. She’s also a first-year student.”

Yulia purses her lips and smiles softly. “I see. You too?”

“Me too? What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. Just that you’re similar to Liza. Your mind understands the situation, but you let your instincts get in the way. All I can do is ask that you get used to it.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that…” says Iris, even though she knows what she means.

She might be a…

“I’ll stop myself now. I do want to be on good terms with you, too. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

Yulia walks past the three girls…

“”””HUH?!”””

That was all Charlotte, Iris, and Liza could say as they watched *two* people walk past them.

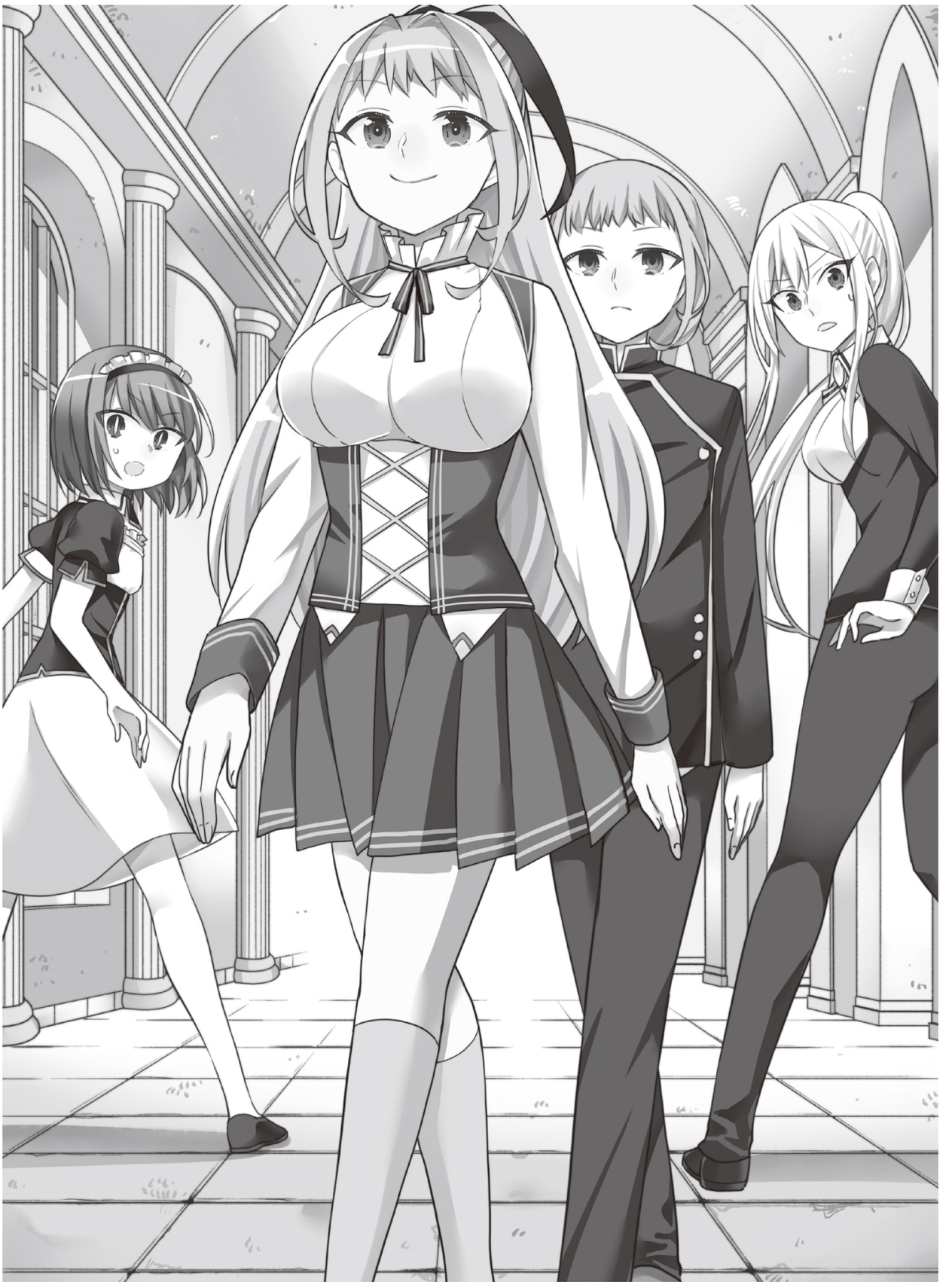
Two.

Following right behind Yulia is a male student.

He’s not a stranger who happened to pass by. He was likely there from the beginning, hiding right behind Yulia.

Their suspicion is confirmed when Yulia speaks to him. “Are we going the right way, Uranis?” she asked without so much as a glance behind her.

But the three girls didn’t even need to hear her to confirm their relationship.



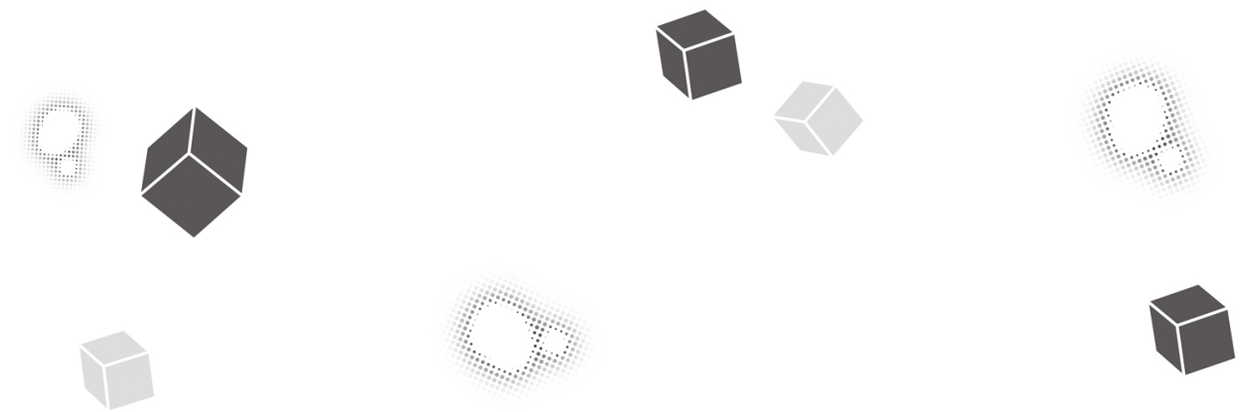
The boy also has long silver-colored hair tied in the back. Not only are his face and his golden eyes the same as Yulia's—

"Yes," he answers.

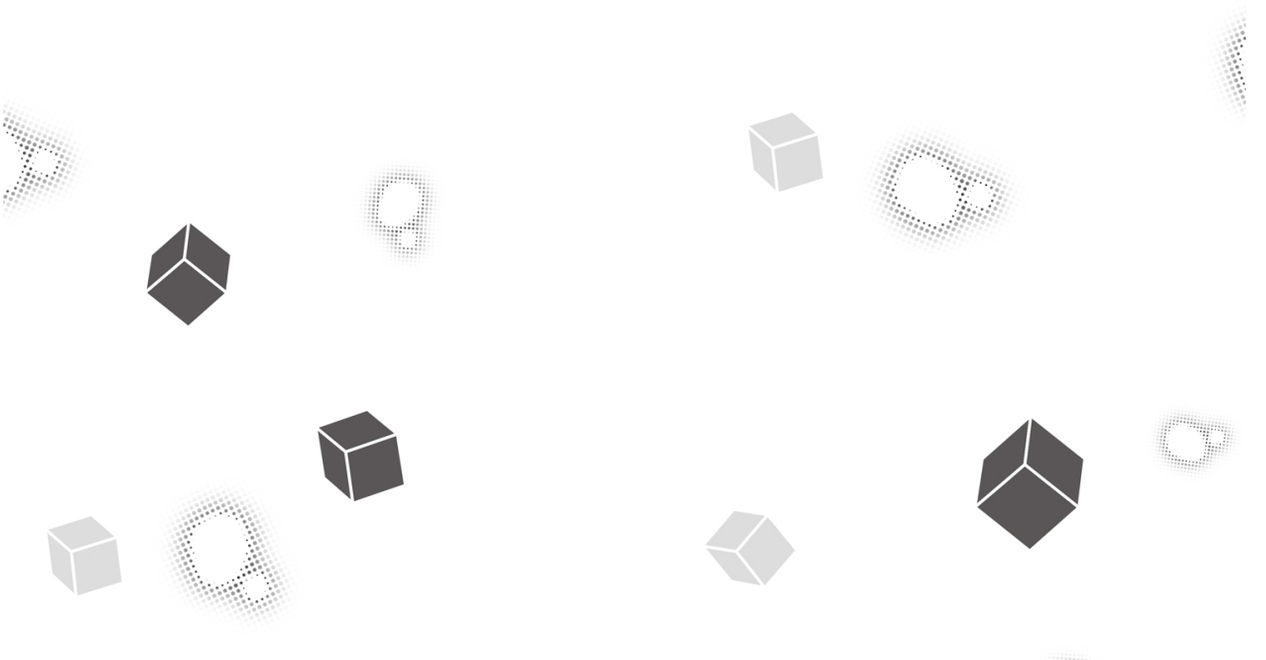
—so is his voice.

They look identical. If you claim that it's Yulia in a boy's uniform, no one will doubt it. The only difference is the complete flatness around his chest area.

One more factor—if you absolutely had to raise one—is the icy cold stare he directs at Yulia. He didn't even glance at the three girls as he walked past them.



CHAPTER THREE:
Participating in a School Event



Here I am at my hermitage by the lake, loafing around on the sofa.

BAM!

The door bursts open, tearing through my hour of bliss.

“Brother Haruto! This is an emergency!”

It’s my dear beloved little sister, Charlotte.

“What’s up?”

Seems like a dire situation, but as an older brother, I play it cool.

“The headmistress is calling for you!”

“For realz?”

Uh-oh, what’d I do?

I manage to hide the panic underneath my straight face. As a big brother, I’ve gotta show some dignity.

“Oh, and also, Brother Haruto—”

“Hm? Something else?”

Charlotte opens her mouth to say something, but her eyes shift for a second.

“Oh, nothing. It can wait. For now, we must hurry to the headmistress’s office.”

I follow Char as she tugs my hand.

“…”

On the other side of the Anywhere Door, Liza is waiting. She seems uncomfortable—no, more like upset at something.

I don't know what's going on, but could it be related to what Char wanted to say earlier?

Oh well. It's not like she's not gonna tell me at all, and it's not urgent. If Char and the gang were in danger, an alarm would ring to let me know. It's probably nothing serious.

More importantly.

I wonder to myself as Char pulls me along.

Why am I being called into the headmistress's office? Absolutely nothing comes to mind…

That would be a lie.

While I did jump through hoops to be exempt from taking classes, I'm still expected to be working on magic research or studying independently.

But I've been out and about taking care of the Devil Lord-related stuff lately. "*What the heck have you been doing all this time?!*" the headmistress is probably going to yell.

She is Ms. Zero Tolerance for Any Kind of Dishonesty, after all.

If I keep lollygagging, she might just revoke my class-exemption privilege.

I've no choice.

It's time to do the *thing.*

I give the headmistress's heavy door a light knock. "Come in," I wait for the voice on the other side to say, and slowly open the door. In the next second—

“Please forgive me!”

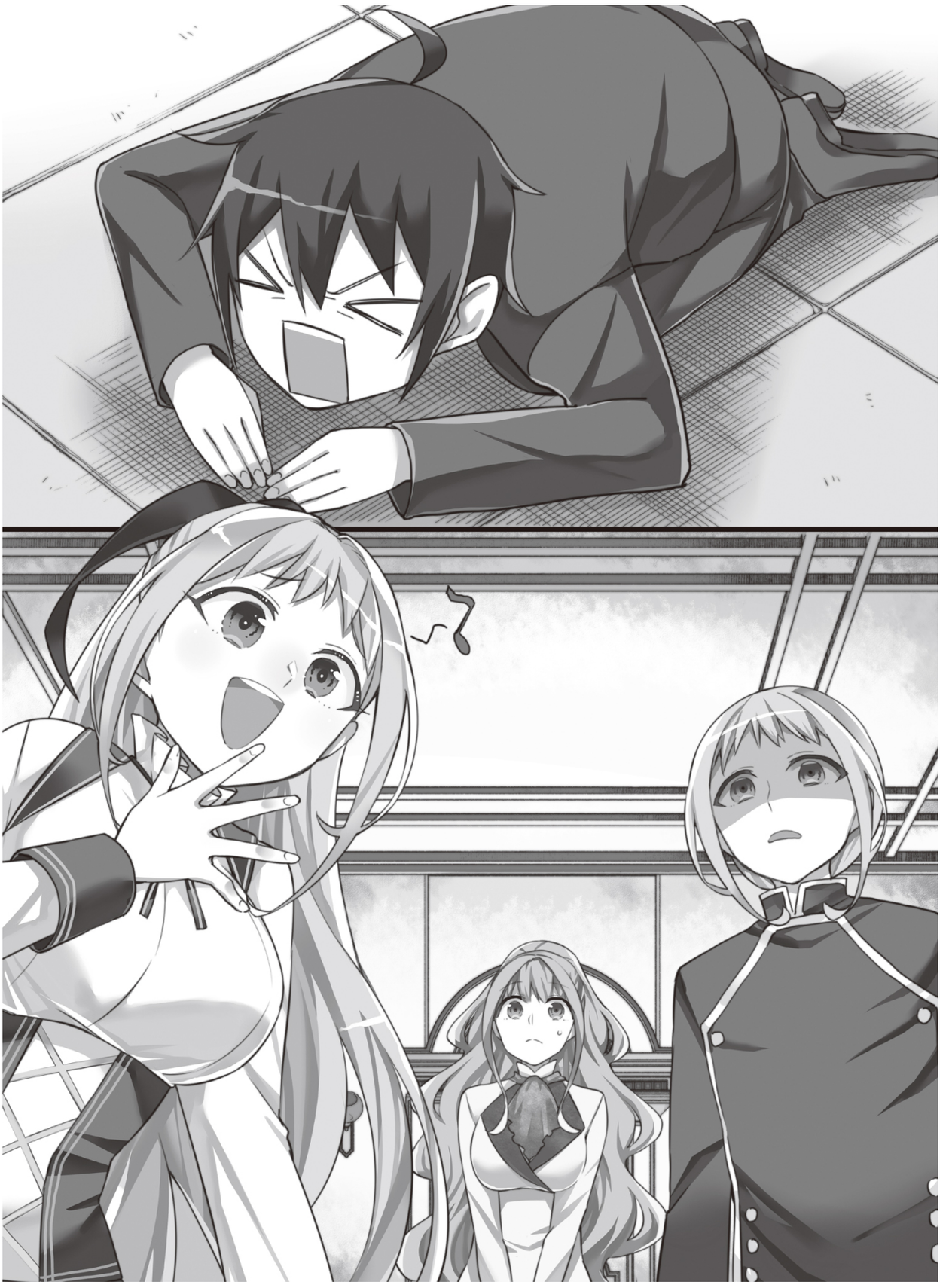
—I leap into the room, slide on my knees, and bow my head.

I daresay that was a perfectly executed acrobatic dogeza (Japanese-style apology).

“…”

“…”

“…”



Silence falls.

As I plant my face into the floor—practically licking it—I notice something unusual in the corner of my eye: a pair of petite feet.

I'm pretty sure I landed in front of the headmistress's office desk, which means her feet should be hidden behind it.

Which means these small feet belong to someone other than the headmis—"Ahah!" I hear a laugh.

Ahah?

The voice continues, "Is it customary in this kingdom to burst into a room apologizing?"

It sounds bright and full of youth. It obviously belongs to a girl about Char's age, and not to the headmistress who's got the mature woman's charm.

What the heck? I raise my head.

"Are you Haruto Zenfis? The boy Theresia was talking about? You are, aren't you?"

There stands an innocent and beautiful looking girl.

At first glance, she looks to be about Char's age based on her height. Her hair is long and silver. She looks down at me with her shimmering and curious golden eyes. She's wearing the academy's uniform, but I've never seen her before.

"Uh, sorta…" I mumble. I look away from her as I rise to my feet the way an introvert would when they meet a new person.

But the mysterious pretty girl comes around in front of me. Her boobs are pretty big for her age; they do a little bounce as she

stops right up in my face.

“I knew it!” she exclaimed. “I’m so happy to meet you this quickly. I sincerely mean it! Theresia told me all about you and I’ve been so curious!”

The headmistress? What sort of ideas did she plant in this little girl’s head about me?

I look across the headmistress’s desk with blame and accusation in my eyes.

The headmistress—Theresia Montpellier, was her name?—is an alluring woman with light pink curls and a gentle disposition.

Apparently, she’s not as young as she looks. My mom and the queen look younger than they really are, too. The women in this world are seriously ageless.

Theresia asks, “Haruto Zenfis? Why are you apologizing all of a sudden—”

“Let’s put that aside for now!” I exclaim.

“O-Oh? Very well, then.”

“What’s the meaning of this?”

I came all this way because she summoned me, and I ended up making a fool out of myself in front of a pretty girl. Yeah, yeah. It’s my fault too for sliding in with a dramatic apology without any warning, but still.

I point to the girl. “Who is she—huh?”

A shadowy figure steps in between her and me.

I can’t believe my eyes.

He looks identical to the pretty girl.

With the exception of three things:

His hair is tied loosely in the back, and he's wearing a boy's uniform. Naturally, his chest is flat. And unlike the innocent and cheery girl, he's giving me an icy cold glare.

Oh, that's four.

"Is it customary in this kingdom to point your finger in someone's face?" he asks.

Even his voice is just like the pretty girl. His word choice isn't, though.

He adds, "Such a gesture is prohibited in the empire because it can cause one to be suspected of exercising magic."

Empire? Oh, right. They were corroborating with Gizelotte to act against my dad a long time ago. Why's he bringing them up now? Eh, whatever.

"I'm sorry about that," I say. "But can't you tell by looking whether someone's about to conjure magic?"

What's going on? Why am I being confrontational? —Something I'd normally never do.

The reason is probably because of *that.*

His golden-colored eyes.

Despite being a guy who has zero talent in noticing someone's hostile or malicious intentions, I can sense the bloodthirsty aura. But if I act sus and try to escape from his stare…

"Brother Haruto?"

…I'll risk letting my sister—who followed me here for some reason—be exposed to it. Something inside me is blaring a warning: avoid that from happening at all costs.

On the other hand, I can't just surprise-yeet him into mystery space-time in front of Char. Not to mention the headmistress is here, too. Mission impossible.

Oh, what to do?

"Uranis, stop interrupting me!"

The boy called Uranis steps to the side at the lighthearted and melodic voice's command.

Once again, the pretty girl is in front of me with the same smile on her face.

If anything, it's starting to scare me.

"I forgot to introduce myself again. My name is Yulia Martienna. Today's my first day here as an exchange student. I'm a first-year, just like you. But I'm twelve years old, so I'm a bit younger. Nice to meet you!"

The pretty girl, Yulia, introduces herself as if nothing happened.

I glance to her side.

The male student is standing as still as a doll.

"And that one's Uranis. He looks just like me, but his personality is the polar opposite of mine… Or not quite? He's just a little too serious."

She gives me a sloppy introduction of the boy with a big grin on her face. The boy doesn't so much as twitch a facial muscle.

Are they…twins? I heard that fraternal twins don't really look alike, but… Oh well, I won't let that worry me.

"Yulia Martienna. May I ask you to stop right there?"

I turn to the exasperated voice and see the exasperated headmistress.

"Haruto's appointment was arranged first. May I ask you to please wait patiently until we are done?"

Looks like they're here because they decided to interrupt my meeting.

"Hmph, fine then. All right, Haruto. Talk later."

Yulia the mysterious exchange student gives me a wink, trots over to the corner of the room…and sits down on the sofa.

You're not gonna leave?!

Plop.

She nestles down and continues to grin at me.

She then opens her mouth and says, "Charlotte, why don't you come sit down? We can continue our conversation from earlier."

How dare she call my dear little sister's name so casually… Wait, "continue"? "Earlier"?

Instead of answering her, Char looks at me with a little smile as if to say, "don't worry," before heading over to Yulia.

"The headmistress and Brother Haruto have something to discuss right now. Perhaps we should wait for them to finish first?"

“You think so? Well, I’m curious about their meeting, too. I suppose I can keep quiet and listen in.”

They seem to know each other already from somewhere. My alarm didn’t go off then, so I guess she’s not dangerous. We’re all in the same room now; if anything happens, I can deal with it.

On the other hand, this Uranis boy is quite a puzzler. He’s standing behind the sofa Yulia is on, spacing out at the air or wall or wherever his eyes are fixed on. What the heck is with him?

Geez, they’re completely identical.

Not just in appearance.

They both have a mana level of 24/48. Their elements, in order, are Darkness, Fire, Wind, Earth—they’re high-quads. These two are probably super skilled. Their max mana levels are higher than the Flash Princess Gizelotte’s.

But they’re nothing threatening. Clearly, Charlotte’s potential is way higher. Just goes to show my little sister is way more amazing!

Nevertheless, I keep my guard up and face the headmistress while keeping Char in my peripheral view.

“And? What do you want from me?” I ask.

I fully intend to leave if she attempts to scold me about my laziness in front of Char.

Theresia calmly states, “You’re the only one left, Haruto Zenfis. We’re still waiting for you to register.”

“Register?”

She sighs dramatically as if she's trying to make a point. What kind of attitude is that for an educator?

"So you haven't heard. I wonder if Professor Luseiannel knowingly kept it from you."

She slumps her shoulder as if to groan, *"Not again."*

"So what do you mean by register?"

My sister is the one to respond to my question with an eager hand up in the air. Obviously, it's not the sketchy exchange student.

When I point to her, she answers brightly:

"It's for the Schoolwide Standardized Magic Proficiency Exam!"

Ah, right. That thing. Right, right. That… What is that?

I sift through my memory, but find nothing.

"What's that?"

I ask honestly.

My sister answers with full vigor, "Every year in the beginning of fall, there's a schoolwide exam—as the name suggests—where the students choose from a set of standardized assignments…"

Uh-huh. I see.

It's an exam where students enrolled in the researcher's course—and affiliated with a research lab—must submit their findings. Students in the knight's course are supposed to flaunt the magic skills they've been honing during their training.

Bigwigs from the House of Lords and the top brass of the imperial sorcerers are gonna be there to evaluate you.

Theresia says, “You’re affiliated with a research lab, Haruto. However, in your case, your grades in the magic skill classes were very high as well. You may choose from either course.”

Frankly, I don’t want to choose from either.

But if I have to, I guess I’d rather go with the research presentation. Not that I have anything to present, but I’m sure if I ask Professor Tear, she’ll help me forge various data and devise a research presentation. I think.

A voice butts in inside my ear: ‘You’re about to ask me for something unreasonable, aren’t you? I can tell.’

But I ignore it.

Before I set out to visit the headmistress’s office, I’d asked Professor Tear at the lab to watch as an advisor through a barrier. Just in case.

“By the way, Char. What are you planning to do?” I ask.

She just transferred to the academy, so maybe she doesn’t have to participate.

“I’ve decided to enter the Four Knights Match.”

“Four Knights Match?”

Apparently, it’s a magic battle that involves two teams of four players.

Why do you have to team up in fours just to show off your magic skills?

My skepticism must be written all over my face because the headmistress answers right away:

“The students in the knight’s course are, literally, anticipated to become knights who will dedicate themselves to this kingdom. In a time of need, teamwork with their comrades will be more valuable than individual fighting skills.”

Therefore making the Four Knights Match the main attraction of the exam.

Which means the school’s toughest students will be gathered. Isn’t that dangerous? Is Char gonna be okay?

I’m starting to get worried.

“Then I pick that one, too,” I say.

The room grows tense—actually, the tension is only coming from Char. But why?

“O-Oh, if, if you’re participating too, Brother Haruto, I must pull myself together and work even harder…”

No need to be so uptight. We’ll make it fun like we did at the Olympius Ruins exploration.

Either way, my job is to support Char from the sidelines as her teammate and showcase her brilliance to the world.

The headmistress says, “In that case, Haruto, may I go ahead and register you in the Four Knights Match as well?”

I don’t want to, but it’s all for my sister.

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

I try to play it cool.

“Haruto’s entering? Then I want to, too. Sign me up!”

The mysterious pretty-girl exchange student leaps out of the sofa and volunteers herself.

“I’m entering, too,” mumbles the other half of the mysterious exchange student duo. I don’t think anyone heard him. *Can you put a little more oomph in it?*

“You two have only just enrolled in the academy—”

“Aww, so we can’t enter?” pouts the girl.

“It’s not that you can’t…”

“Then we’re in!”

The mysterious pretty-girl exchange student—too long. What’s her name… Yulia?—winks at me with such pizazz that you can practically hear a cutesy twinkling sound effect.

“How should we decide our party?” she asks. “It’d be fun to collaborate with Haruto, but battling against him would be interesting, too…”

She looks around the room, deep in thought, and stops at the sight of…my adorable little sister sitting beside her.

Her expression lights up as she proposes, “Charlotte, let’s team up!”

She grabs Char’s hands.

“Huh? Uh, um…”

My little sister—who’s usually outgoing and unintimidated—seems a bit nervous. It might be because it’s rare for anyone to be so assertive with her, being the daughter of a count and also the youngest student to transfer into the academy.

Wait a sec. Don’t I know someone just like her?

“We’ve only just met today, but I have a feeling we will get along.”

“Hua? Y-Yes! Me too, I feel like we already know each other!”

Charlotte squeezes Yulia’s hands with stars in her eyes.

I see. I see the resemblance now.

The complete, yet harmless, lack of boundary.

She’s just like our mom, Natalia Zenfis!

“That Iris girl seems like fun, too. I’d love to ask her to join.”

“Miss Iris is in the same research lab as Brother Haruto and me.”

“Really? Then I want to go and take a look at your lab. Will you show me around?”

“Certainly! Our mentor Professor Tear is a fun person, too. I’m sure you’ll like her, Yulia!”

“Tee-hee! I can’t wait!”

They seem to be hitting it off already. Now that Char’s decided to show the campus around to the newcomer Yulia…

“Well, see you later, Theresia!” says Yulia.

“Thank you for having us,” Char greets.

…they both leave the room.

The other exchange student follows behind them without a word. I tug him by the back of his uniform collar.

“What?” he asks without so much as a side glance at me.

“If you try anything with Char, you’re in trouble.”

“I’m ordered not to inflict harm on others. As long as Yulia isn’t in danger, I won’t lay a finger on anyone.”

What does he mean “ordered”? By whom? Yulia? Or by their dad or a parental figure? Either way, their relationship is hard to grasp.

“Fine, then.”

I let go of his collar. He leaves the room, again, without looking back.

Welp, I’ve got layers of defensive barriers around Char, and the Anywhere Door’s position is secured to where she is.

If anything were to happen to my precious little sister, I can be there in a flash to hurl the culprit into mystery space-time.

As I’m psyching myself up, I realize I don’t need to be here anymore either.

“I’m leaving, too.” I try to make a cool exit, but I’m not quite pulling it off, am I?

Just as I do an about-face and walk off, the headmistress speaks up.

“Haruto?”

I about-face again since she’s stopping me. I’m really not cool at all, am I?

“Yes?”

Her expression looks grim.

“Perhaps you’re mistaken—no, I’m almost certain you are mistaken, so allow me to correct you.”

What? What’s with the build-up?

My heart starts pounding, but the headmistress tells me straight up:

“You can’t be on the same team as Charlotte.”

I can hear my utterly useless advisor snickering in my ear.

◆

I hurry into the research lab building at the edge of the campus and make a beeline to the lab room in search of the very short woman.

“What the hell?!” I wail.

“Why are you asking *me*? You could’ve just asked the headmistress to clarify.”

“Talking with her for too long might lead me to a conversation I’ll regret.”

Professor Tear cracks up in my face.

“The hell are you laughing at?”

This isn’t funny to me.

“Sorry, sorry. I’m sincerely impressed by how you’ve come to understand the headmistress’s nature on such an instinctive level. Yup, good judgment. Had you argued with her on the spot, she most certainly wouldn’t have allowed you to team up with Charlotte.”

Professor Tear starts preparing tea for us to sit down for a talk.

I flump down on the sofa, trying to regain my composure.

She sets down the cups of black tea. Smells great.

The professor begins, “First of all, let’s talk about the Four Knights Match of the Schoolwide Standardized Magic Proficiency Exam.”

She sits across from me and takes a sip of her tea.

“The official name of the match is Magic Squad Battle Simulation Exam. Four people in a team, and the teams compete in a single knockout tournament to the top. Magic attacks are limited to non-lethal spells, since the participants are all teens. The administration is very careful about safety. If you ask me, why even have a battle exam if they’re going to be coddled like that?”

I should take her opinions with a grain of salt.

“Magic spells that are tricky to maneuver or large in scale won’t be used in this game. There’s a different game specifically for those.”

She takes another sip before continuing, “What they want to see is your skill as a magic *knight.* Your situational judgment and ability to cooperate as a team player. For instance, which magic you choose to conjure at what moment in the game, how fast, how many shots. Is the team leader’s instruction accurate and comprehensible? Is it too vague or too detailed? Are the team members fulfilling their roles and understanding the instructions? Are they acting accordingly? Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera…”

“That’s a lot.”

“All to evaluate the skills of this kingdom’s future military leaders. That’s why this game is the most popular among the exams—it’s the main attraction.”

In other words, it’s a pain in the ass.

“In other words, you’re not suited for this game,” she says.

“Rude.”

But the more I listen to her, the more I see how unfeasible a task it is for a shut-in like me.

“Not in a bad way,” the professor notes. “On an individual level, you’re already a master. Even if you were to team up with other members, you wouldn’t even see them as a burden. At best, they’re a bunch of scarecrows.”

Again, rude. This teacher is seriously missing a human soul.

I wish she’d tell me why Char and I can’t be on the same team already.

“Now,” she starts, “since you’re looking utterly bored at the preface I just presented, I will get to the point.”

Stop reading my mind.

“Team members are drafted through a random lottery. But it’s not completely random.”

The professor takes a pause before starting again.

“Among sorcerers, there are those who are proficient at things like mid- and long-range magic or assisting. There are irregulars like the ones who just want to dive headfirst to the front line. On top of that, there are people who possess one or more of these traits—the all-around skilled fighters.”

“I see, I see. So the students are sorted into categories and selected out of those to form a well-balanced team.”

“Yup. You’re quick to grasp the point when you’re presented with all the facts in order.”

So you’re saying I jump to conclusions when I’m not given the facts in order. Well, excuse me.

“Jumping to conclusions is one of your advantages, I think,” says Professor Tear.

Did I let my thoughts show on my face again?

“Now, because this is a team tournament, the leader must be decided first. Typically, it’s the all-around skilled fighter who’d be chosen for this role, but other factors are considered, so it’s not necessarily a requirement. The next to be selected are the players who are good at assisting.”

At this point, only two more to go.

“The remaining two members are purely offense. The mid- and long-range shooters and close combatants are all mixed together and then selected at random.”

There’s a chance you’ll end up with an unbalanced team, but apparently, it’s permissible because it could happen in actual combat.

I ask, “Char’s either the all-around type or the mid- or long-range type. And what about me?”

“Both you and Char are determined to be in the all-around category. You demonstrated efficiency in both the Magical Martial Arts and Shooting classes. You’re even capable at assist-specific

skills like conjuring a durable defensive wall. Furthermore, your grades are exceptionally high. You'd definitely be thrown in the leader pool."

She makes her point loud and clear.

Well, Char can do pretty much everything except healing magic. And even that can be aided with my magic items.

"So you're saying that since we're both sorted in the leader category, there's no way we can be on the same team no matter how I try to cheat it. Ugh…" I let out a sigh.

Oops, I didn't mean to be so negative.

But seriously, I'm at my wit's end.

I figured the random lottery would be a "draw the names out of a hat" type of situation, so I was fully expecting to be able to cheat my way through.

I've been successfully sneaking my way around all this time, and even slipping past the challenging Ms. Zero Tolerance for Any Kind of Dishonesty.

"And there you have it," says Professor Tear. "Had you been having this conversation with the headmistress, you would've given up with your tail between your legs, just like you are now."

I don't like the way she just said that, but at the same time, I can't help but feel a flicker of hope.

"Are you saying there's another way?"

"A rather easy way."

Again, Professor Tear takes a moment to sip her tea. She's probably trying to give me some time to think.

So I do.

…And the solution turns out to be pretty simple.

“I’m a mid- to long-range shooter type. If I absolutely have to, I’ll engage in close combat—which I’m not good at. Since I’m the self-serving lone wolf type, there’s no way I can handle giving orders to a team…”

“Ah, I’m impressed. You spew bullshit like your heart pumps blood.”

She deems me as some sort of natural born bullshitter—so natural that it’s beyond breathing; it’s an involuntary reflex. I’m not happy, but it is a proud moment.

“All right, then,” I declare. “I’ll head right over to the headmistress to advertise myself—”

“Hold it right there.”

Why are you stopping me?

“The headmistress would never change her mind just because you, a student, appeals to her directly. That’s exactly what I was telling you about.”

Was she? Maybe she was.

“Then—”

“Nope, she won’t listen to me either.”

I figured. She doesn’t like you.

“Hey, we’re just incompatible.”

Can she actually read minds?

“Then who’s going to advocate for me?” I ask.

Professor Tear stares straight at me.

I mean, I realized mid-question. But still…

“If Shiva does, wouldn’t she question our relationship?”

Then again, she might already suspect that there’s a connection between us.

If Shiva comes out now declaring, “Haruto isn’t fit for a leadership role!” wouldn’t that deepen her suspicions?

“That all depends.”

She crawls over the coffee table and leans into me. I decide to skip the humorous jab and lend her my ear.

Whisperwhisperwhisper…

“I get it. I guess that’d be a more organic way to bring it up… I guess?”

“The plan seems a bit forced, but Shiva’s been cooperative with us numerous times in the past. If the headmistress still has her guard up against him, it would be your chance to elbow your way through. Trust me!”

Should I? Really?

Professor Tear bargains, “The bottom line is for her to determine that you’re not a leader. You can leave that part to me.”

“You just said you’re incompatible with her.”

“That’s the case if she believes she’s dealing with me. If she thinks she’s facing someone she holds in high regard, I’ve got her cornered.”

So she doesn’t hold you in high regard, I decide not to say. She can probably read my mind anyway.

Welp, it looks like this is my only choice. Let’s give it a try!

◆

“Pardon the intrusion!”

I storm into the headmistress’s office in Shiva Mode.

But my opponent is Madame No-Bad-Behavior, so I made sure to knock first, wait for her to respond, open the door quietly, close it behind me quietly, and *then* shout my greeting as I turned around to face her.

“What an unusual guest,” she says. “I have always wanted to sit down and have a conversation with you. I’m happy you came to see me.”

The headmistress smiles.

To my surprise, she welcomed me (Shiva). I hide my surprise by floating in the air and crossing my legs into a seated position.

“First, may I ask what you’ve come to me for?”

I’m getting a little nervous. I played out the scenario in my head before I came here, but I’m still nervous.

“I hear there’s an event called the Schoolwide Standardized Magic Proficiency Exam.”

“Yes, we hold it every year. You haven’t heard of it?”

“I’m not familiar with the capital or this academy. I also heard that there’s a four-player team tournament in the event.”

“From Haruto?”

Yikes, she’s already trying to snoop. But I expected that.

“Not directly *from* him, per se. He’s one of the subjects I’m monitoring. I’m watching over his actions. Well, to a degree that doesn’t invade his privacy.”

Heh-heh-heh. The headmistress looks surprised.

Haruto and Shiva are connected; there’s no skirting around that fact. But if Haruto is a point of interest to Shiva, surely that won’t make people think of us as the same person.

Is this really going to work? Can I trust you, Professor Tear?

“Someone who harnesses such grand magic as yourself is taking an interest in Haruto…? As I thought, the boy does possess unimaginable talent.”

I don’t know what’s going on, but it seems like I’m getting away with it?

Elated about her praise, I keep babbling.

“I believe the tournament would be a great opportunity to gauge his abilities. However, I do have some doubts about your current game regulations’ adequacy in assessing him. I imagine all the restrictions will only hinder him from exercising his full potential.”

“This match involves individual students. We must take all precautions to ensure their safety.”

“And I understand that, which is why I am here today.”

The headmistress twitches an eyebrow.

“Are you saying you’re willing to cover the safety issue?” she asks.

Keen as always, Headmistress.

“I’m sure my track record from the Olympius Ruins exploration test was enough to earn your trust.”

Huh? Why does she seem disgruntled?

“I’d rather you refrain from putting on a silly spectacle like last time… However, this function is meant to be showcased outside of the academy.”

She lets out a brief sigh before starting again.

“Very well. I entrust you to oversee the safety of my students. But not before hearing out your suggestions and assessing how they could affect the actual operation.”

Meaning she wants to determine how effective my defense barrier is if I were to envelope every single student in it.

The advisor who’s listening in doesn’t say anything in my ear, so I answer, “Of course.”

Thus concludes our discussion…is what the headmistress is probably thinking. But this is where the hard bargaining starts.

“And one more thing,” I say.

She wrinkles her brows and leers. I hear a “go ahead,” but she seems reserved.

“Haruto Zenfis. That boy is categorized as a leader-type, isn’t he?”

“He is. The final decisions are left to the teachers in charge of the member draft, but I recommended Haruto as such. His skills are far advanced across multiple fields. It’s natural to determine him to be suitable as a future leader.”

The flattery is enthralling but I can't let myself fall for it. By the way, the headmistress isn't the one to make the final call? My hopes are getting high.

I say, "Personally, I'd like to measure his magic abilities. He's still a first-year student. Is it truly necessary to ascertain his leadership skills now?"

Headmistress Theresia furrows her brows slightly.

"That is your personal objective. I'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from meddling excessively."

"I won't deny that it's what I want, but I'm also certain that it will benefit him."

The headmistress hesitates before speaking again. "Currently, we are short on leader candidates. Some students are sorted into that pool out of necessity. Removing Haruto from it wouldn't be practical."

Darn, she's a tough crowd.

But as of this moment, I'm no longer speaking for myself. I've evolved into a sound system that merely plays back my advisor's words.

I'm counting on you, Professor Tear!

"Sheesh, I'm disappointed in you," I utter.

Starting it off aggressively, are we? Are you sure that's a good idea?

"In that case, I'll stop beating around the bush and instead be direct with you. The fact that you see him as a leader is your first mistake."

“Excuse…me?”

Her eyes begin to glower. I’ve never seen her like that. This is bad, no?

“The boy is a master of sorcery at an individual level. He’d have no need to rely on others during battle, I can assure you that. Which means he has zero experience as a team player.”

“That’s precisely why he can use the experience as a leader—”

“You still don’t understand what this means? Forcing something unnecessary unto him may nip his future growth. If anything, it could become a huge detour for him.”

“…”

She’s gone quiet. Time for the final blow.

“To force a child with potential to conform to your mold and allow the public to watch his suffering—is that your idea of education?”

Holy crap, Professor Tear is a master troll.

The headmistress clenches her teeth.

“…Very well.”

Oh?

“I shall request the instructors in charge of the draft process to focus on utilizing Haruto’s strengths.”

She actually folded. To my surprise, Professor Tear is really strong as long as she’s not face-to-face with the headmistress. Impressive.

Headmistress Theresia emphasizes, “The final decisions are made by the instructor in charge.” She’s really driving that point home.

Either way, she said what she said. As long as she admits that “Haruto doesn’t have to be a leader,” she won’t find it suspicious if Haruto is removed from the leader pool.

Which means that no matter what the instructors decide on, I can cheat all I want!

“Farewell.” I end the meeting with a simple greeting as well as a polite bow and leave the room. I head back to my personal paradise: my log house by the lake.

By the way…

“Why is Shiva in the headmistress’s office? I need to be nearer to hear their conversation, but they’ll notice my presence if I come any closer.”

I was keeping an eye on my surroundings while I was with the headmistress. That’s when I noticed her: a curvy and erotic looking teacher or something spying on us from down the hall.

She’s wearing a black suit jacket and a cape. Her boobs are practically about to pop a button and burst out of her shirt. She’s showing off her thick thighs under her tight skirt.

The woman had changed her hair color to blonde and made her skin look pale. Despite that, and the fact that she’s wearing glasses, it was obvious she’s that devil named Vari or whatever.

To tell you the truth, I noticed her snooping around a few days ago. She wasn't doing much of anything, so I'd let it go.

After I (in Shiva Mode) leave the headmistress's office, Vari hesitates for a few minutes before heading out of the campus.

Maybe she's off to report to her dear master.

Let me tail her through my surveillance barrier just in case…

◇

Queen Gizelotte is lounging in her room in the royal annex.

Or at least, that's who she appears to be on the surface. Deep down, she's the Devil Lord possessing the queen's body.

And anyone who knows this fact calls her:

"Lord Lucifyra."

Vari the devil kneels and bows her head low.

"I'm here to report my findings upon infiltrating the Royal Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic."

She explains the Schoolwide Standardized Magic Proficiency Exam being held at the academy soon.

And how her target, Charlotte Zenfis, is expressing extraordinary zeal for the event.

These two factors alone wouldn't be anything worth noting. However…

"Shiva the Black Knight and Theresia Montpellier seemed to be meeting in secret."

It happened immediately after Haruto Zenfis had been summoned by Theresia to discuss the proficiency exam.

It'd be impossible not to suspect something was afoot.

"What were Shiva and Theresia discussing?"

"I'm terribly sorry, My Lord. I was afraid of stepping into Shiva's surveillance range. I couldn't get too close…" Her voice is strained with fear and panic.

"Oh well, that's too bad. It'll be a hassle if they find out you're at the academy to monitor Charlotte Zenfis. Your judgment wasn't wrong."

Vari lets out a sigh of relief.

"Besides," the Devil Lord says, "based on that, I can easily predict the situation they're in."

The sight of Lord Lucifyra as Gizelotte giggling like a child has shivers running up Vari's spine.

"U-Um… I don't understand at all. What is the situation they're in?"

"It's simple. They found *it*."

"They found…it?"

"They must've had some idea that one of them would be there. That would explain why Charlotte Zenfis was able to transfer to the academy using methods that seemed a little too suspect."

Vari—still unable to follow what *it* is—looks to her master with a perplexed expression.

Her master playfully continues, “The card in question is most positively somewhere in the academy.”

I see! Vari’s lightbulb finally flicks on.

But if Charlotte and her allies already have some idea of where the card is…

“I’ll infiltrate the academy and conduct a search for the card right away—”

“Wait,” ordered the Devil Lord.

Vari tries to stand up, but she freezes in place at the command of her master. She couldn’t lift a finger if she tried.

“No need to be hasty. There seems to be a reason they cannot act immediately.”

“What do you mean…?” Vari can feel the tension escape her body, and she lifts her gaze.

“There must be a special condition that needs to be met for the card to appear… Perhaps a certain timing.”

The devil asks, “Are you saying the Schoolwide Standardized Magic Proficiency Exam holds the key to that condition?”

“Yes.” The Devil Lord nods with certainty.

“Then what may I do to assist?”

“Let’s see… Charlotte Zenfis will be competing in the Four Knights Match. Based on her abnormal zeal to be a part of it, the card’s appearance must have something to do with the match—like obtaining victory.”

Even if there is another trigger, the loss of Charlotte’s team would drastically lower the odds of the card falling into their

hands.

The Devil Lord says, “You must disguise yourself as a student in uniform, enter the Four Knights Match, and snatch victory out of their hands.”

“Wha?!” Vari lets out a yelp. “I-I mean, excuse me… But disguising myself as a student? Isn’t that a bit…”

Right now, Vari has only changed her hair color and skin tone. If she were to run into Charlotte and her cohorts, she’d instantly be recognized.

“It shouldn’t be a problem. You’d be in uniform,” says her master.

“Um, I mean… The uniform will cover up my figure, but they might recognize my face.”

“The human memory is a feeble thing. Besides, you’ve been altering your mana each time you’ve encountered them. They won’t notice unless they pay close attention.”

Any further rebuttal would be life-threatening.

However, Vari is determined to avoid failing the mission and disappointing her Lord.

She squeezes out her voice with resolve.

“Setting that aside, I am going to be participating in the game. They’ll surely realize I’m not a student there if they’ve never seen me before.”

“I’ll take care of that. Theresia will listen to a request or two of mine.”

Vari gazes up at her smirking master as she pictures herself in a schoolgirl's uniform.

D-Don't you think I'd be pushing it…?

No matter how hard Vari tries, at best, she'd look mid-twenties.

Will I be able to pull off looking like a schoolgirl? the devil wonders.

◆

The magic squad something-something test AKA Four Knights Match—a magic battle involving two teams of four players—is the main event of the schoolwide something-something exam. They're all long names.

That's what Char and I are gonna be entering.

But the teams will be selected carefully in a random lottery. Needless to say, the time, the date, and the draft coordinator are all top-secret information that only a few instructors and the headmistress know about.

With that being said!

I've spent the last few days sending countless surveillance barriers all over the academy campus to gather information.

After learning the time and place of the lottery, I've decided to head over there. Which is where I am right now.

I conceal myself with a camouflage barrier and wait around for about fifteen minutes.

“Mwahaha! My muscles! Are tingling!”

An obnoxious beefcake walks in. It’s the martial arts professor. He strikes a pose in his tank top, showing off his toned biceps. He’s carrying two metal boxes, one in each hand.

An elderly teacher follows. “The first-year students are very promising.” I think he’s the guy who teaches the advanced shooting class. He’s cradling a metal box with both hands.

Another teacher walks in. “We’ve got three new star students who transferred in at the last minute. I’m disappointed that Alexei Guberg won’t be partaking in the exams, but it looks like I’ll still be able to obtain some valuable data from the event.”

This woman—the youngest and also seemingly the bossiest of the bunch—is Ora AKA Oratoria Belkam, I think.

And I believe she’s trying to appropriate the exam for her own personal gain.

She’s also carrying a metal box under her arm.

I knew who the draft coordinators were gonna be beforehand, but sheesh, they’re all quite the characters.

Apparently, three draft coordinators are selected randomly every year out of all the instructors who supervise advanced classes. I’ll bet Professor Tear’s never been selected.

The reason there are three coordinators is to ensure fairness.

One person draws a name and confirms it with the second person. The third person writes it down in the team record. They go around taking turns.

Inside the four metal boxes they brought in are stashes of wooden cards.

Each wooden card is inscribed with the name of the student who signed up for the Four Knights Match.

What the heck?! That means the sorting process for which category you are is already taken care of by some other professors!

…is *not* what I would say. I came prepared.

A different group of teachers oversaw sorting the students by category. On another day at another location, in fact. They're really thorough about this.

Luckily, I already had that information, so I'd snuck into the venue after they finalized their selection and stolen the cards with my and Char's name from the securely locked metal boxes.

For this lottery drawing, I'm going to teleport our cards into the leader pool box and offense player box after the final card is drawn from each of the boxes. This will ensure that Char and I end up on the same team.

"Shall we begin," announces Professor Belkam.

The drawing process starts.

I watch over them quietly.

The procedure goes along smoothly. Silently, steadily. Once in a while, Professor Tank Top flexes a muscle.

Man, this is boring.

After one of them draws, they double check, triple check with each other. Even when they're writing down the names in the

record, all three of them confirm with one another. They're taking their sweet time.

I'm getting slee……. Oh no! Was I asleep for a second?

This is taking way too long.

I decide to wrap it up.

All I have to do is sync the timing of when Char's and my name is drawn from the boxes. I don't have to wait till the end for that.

Why didn't I come to that conclusion sooner?

Welp, let's get this over with—hold up. On second thought, I'd be in trouble if I end up teaming with a complete stranger. Technically, Haruto C will be in trouble, not me. I have to oversee the exam in Shiva Mode.

I use my X-ray vision to see through the box and check the names on the cards.

This box is for the assist pool. Let me see… Mmhmm… Oh? This one's the mysterious exchange student (younger brother). So he's an assist type.

I don't know any of the other names, but I don't wanna be on the same team as this guy—eh, assists don't really contribute much, so I guess it doesn't matter who I get.

Where's his older sister's card?

I scan the other boxes and find her name in the offense player's pool. Written below her name is the phrase "close combat." To my surprise, she's a fist-fighting go-getter.

What should I do?

A part of me thinks I should keep an eye on one of the siblings. Since the sister's getting along with Char, I should put her on our team. It'll be easier to monitor her that way.

The next team's drawing is about to begin. I grip Char's card.

Professor Belkam slips her hand inside the hole at the top of the box. Without missing a beat, I slide Char's card through the side of the box and into her fingers.

"Hm?"

She seems dubious for a second, but she grasps the card I hand her. The card was camouflaged too, so I also undo that.

"Oh…? Now we're talking."

The professor's monocle gleams.

"Oooh! Charlotte Zenfis, is it? Her sharp-shooter skills surpass those of Alexei Guberg's. I believe she may be the best—along with Haruto, her brother—since the academy's started."

"I agree. Her physical agility, like Haruto's, is unique, yet refined to the highest grade. From far away or up close, she doesn't allow an inch for the enemy to slip through."

"On top of that, her written test scores were the highest in not just her grade, but the entire school. Her proficiency in leadership is the only thing that is unknown, which we'll soon find out from this schoolwide exam."

As her big brother, I am chuffed by all the praise Char's getting.

Next is the lotto drawing for the assist player position.

Not gonna bother with this one.

And finally, it's time to choose the two offense players.

Professor Tank Top is the one doing the drawing.

While he's busy doing unnecessary muscle poses, I prepare myself. I remove all the other cards from the box temporarily and stand next to it with my own name card in my hand. I slip it into the box from the side.

His thick, muscular right hand reaches into the box.

"Hm? Hmmmm?"

Dammit, he keeps shuffling his hand around inside the box, making it hard to hand off the card. And he's getting suspicious since he can't feel any cards at all.

I'll throw it in his hand if I have to!

"Oh?"

He instinctively squeezes his hand when I force the card into his palm.

The macho teacher draws his arm out in slo-mo—as if to exaggerate the drama—and peers at the card.

"What's this?! The moment I grabbed this card it felt like god was playing a trick on me, but who would've thought I'd pull *this* name!"

As usual, his reaction is over the top. He shows his card to the other two instructors.

"Haruto Zenfis?!"

"I figured he'd be in the leader pool…"

They're super paranoid right now!

But yeah, in reality, I was sorted in the leader pool.

That headmistress didn't do her job at all!

Grumbling over it now is pointless, though. I'd swiped my card out and tossed someone else from the offense pool in my place.

Silence falls over the three instructors.

The first one to break the silence and calm my nerves is Professor Belkam.

"The sorting was done with the headmistress's preference in mind, but ultimately, the decision is finalized among the teachers who were selected for the role. If this is what they determined, we must abide without any dispute."

I like the way you think!

Apparently, these three didn't have any prior discussions with the sorting coordinators. Their strong commitment to secrecy backfired. It's a blessing for me, though.

Moving on.

Yulia is selected as the last member. And that's that for my team.

I've no business here now.

Assured of my victory, I let out a peal of laughter—inside my soundproof barrier—and leave the premises.

◇

Haruto has left.

A while after the sun had set, the draft process finally…did not end.

The three coordinators are standing before the team roster.

“And now we begin the final adjustments.”

This declaration is made by Oratoria Belkam.

“I believe this year’s players are much more evenly distributed than the previous years’. Except for…”

“I agree. *This* particular team stands out. The members are much more advanced than the others.”

Their eyes all fall on Haruto’s team with Charlotte as the leader.

“I recall that these two went pretty deep inside the Olympius Ruins, as well as Irisphilia.”

“We can safely assume all three are skilled enough to pass the graduation exam.”

You may be wondering: what is this “final adjustment”?

A random drawing heavily relies on luck, which means there is a possibility that the results may lean heavily in one way or another. In order to prevent that, the coordinators are permitted to make any changes to the team formation at their discretion.

Of course, if the headmistress questions their decision, they’ll need to earn her approval by defending their judgment and reason for change, but that in and of itself is rare—unless there is a severe disparity in the team’s skill level.

“Should we separate these three?”

“There’s also the pair of exchange students who came from the empire. Shall we separate them from the three as well?”

“While their skill levels are still unknown, that’s reasonable given their mana levels. I have no objection.”

The three instructors continue their debate while taking the compatibility and mana levels of the other candidates into account.

“All right. Looks good.”

They write down the team roster in a separate logbook.

Haruto has already left the room. He was so assured by the results that he hadn’t even left a surveillance barrier behind.

Normally, there’d be an advisor to warn Haruto of the possibility of such occurrences, but Tearietta’s lack of knowledge about the draft process led to this misfortune. She doesn’t socialize with her colleagues, so none of this information was passed on to her. Needless to mention she’s never been appointed to any of these roles.

Thus, the players have been grouped in disfavor of Haruto.

Finally, it’s over. That took forever.

In the corner of the classroom, a woman is leaning against the wall with her arms crossed.

Blonde hair, fair skin, and she’s wearing glasses, but it’s Vari the devil in disguise. Her breasts look like they’re about to burst

out of her schoolgirl uniform.

After the solid barriers around the classroom disappear, Vari waits a bit before sneaking inside.

Not even the instructors of a top-ranking academic institution could detect the Devil Lord's pureblooded vassal when she uses her full power to conceal her mana. They don't even notice as she's stepping away.

There's no way I can let Charlotte Zenfis win this team tournament.

In order to do that, Charlotte's team must be debilitated.

Having her be grouped with students of inferior skill should make it easier to cheat in the game.

Likewise, Haruto Zenfis and all her other cohorts need to be teamed with mediocre students.

Vari's plan was to separate them and manipulate them into going against each other.

That would put her own team at an advantage and lead her to victory.

"Well then, shall we head over to the headmistress to deliver the team roster?"

The elderly teacher places the book inside his briefcase. All that's left to do is to seal it with a magic spell and carefully transport it to the headmistress's office. On the off chance someone attempts to steal the book, there will also be a spell to incinerate it along with the briefcase.

Their safety measures are flawless. Despite that…

Clink…

The three draft coordinators all look to where the faint sound came from.



It only takes a few seconds.

More precisely, the teachers direct their attention to their surroundings for less than one second.

That's right. No matter how flawless their safety measures are…

Vari sneers.

…it's useless if the roster is switched out before it's implemented.

Vari had prepared her own fake team roster.

In her book, Charlotte, Haruto, and the others are all in different teams. Each person is grouped together with players who have low grades, lack a sense of teamwork, or only have skills that are difficult to utilize in a team game.

In the end, this is the easiest and most efficient method, she thinks.

If anything, the possibility of the headmistress having qualms with the results and confronting the three instructors directly was the only thing to worry about. From there, they'll discover the team roster has been swapped.

But her worry would very likely be in vain.

Vari's team selection is well-balanced in its own way. The strongest players are dispersed, and each of them are grouped with players who are on the lower end of the skill level.

And in my team, I'm considered one of the weaker players.

Her teammates are all talented students. Two of them are a part of Numbers.

Perfection!

Vari is assured of her victory after witnessing the elderly teacher secure his briefcase with magic spells.

Lord Lucifyra might even commend my deed!

She leaves the classroom giddily.

But in the end…

“Careless much?”

“Huh?!”

At the exact moment Professor Belkam and the other two instructors step out of the empty classroom, a petite female student with golden-colored eyes appears out of nowhere to block their path.

“Oh, but in this case, it’s more about lack of imagination than carelessness. The thought that maybe they’re not the only ones with the same idea didn’t occur to either of those two. They eased off a little too early.”

She sounds disappointed, but her face blossoms with a bright smile.

“Funny, though, isn’t it? I can understand a *student* wanting to give himself an advantageous team. But why would *he* meddle with student exam affairs?”

Belkam speaks up. “You’re…the exchange student from the empire? Your name is…”

“Yup. Yulia Martienna.”

The two male teachers can’t help but loosen their expressions at the sight of her innocent look. Belkam, too, almost lowers her guard, but looks down at her sharply.

“Why are you here?” asks Belkam. “Even if you’re lost, I see no reason why you’d be all the way out here in the first place.”

Yulia doesn’t look the least bit intimidated.

“I’m not lost. I came all the way here because I have business with what’s inside that luggage you’re carrying so preciously.”

She points at the elderly teacher’s briefcase. The team roster for the Four Knights Match is inside.

Belkam’s expression stiffens well as the two male teachers’.

“I don’t know how you obtained the information, but we will not allow any fraud. Whether you’re here out of sheer curiosity or not, you’ll be severely—”

“I figured maybe—”

“…?!” Belkam can’t seem to utter a sound.

“—maybe leaving it to luck would be fine, too. But this event is such an exciting attraction. The more fun, the better. Don’t you think?”

The professor seems to have lost control over not just her voice, but her body as well.

The same goes for the two male teachers behind her.

“But I’m not trying to pressure you. This isn’t a request or a suggestion—and it’s most certainly not an order. All you have to do is accept me.”

Her golden eyes begin to glow softly.

N-No… I mustn't stare into those eyes… Belkam's instincts warn her so, but she can't even close her eyelids, let alone look away.

"Come now. Accept me. Don't worry, it's not scary. Besides, if you try to resist for too long, your brain might get fried. That's not something I want to do. So, please?"

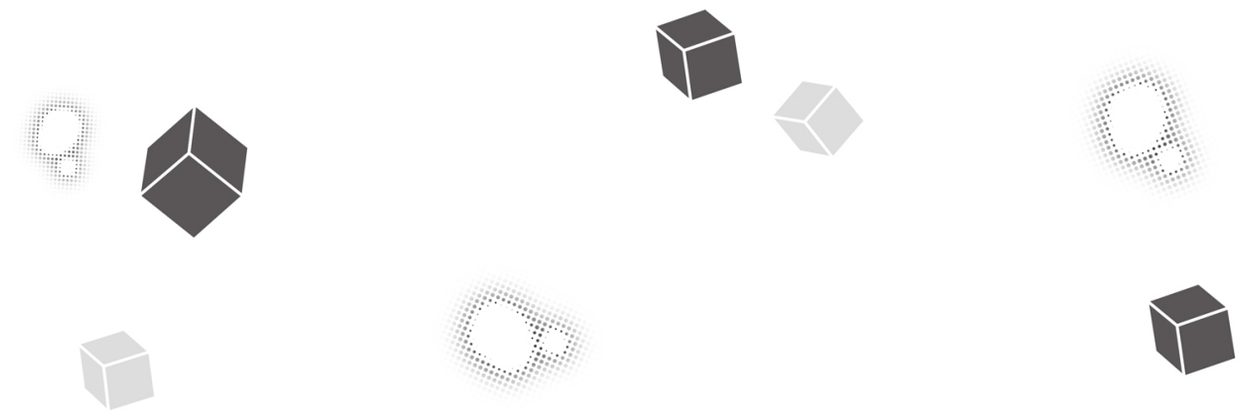
Step by step, the three instructors begin to walk back into the room as if they're being pushed inside.

Yulia inches in slowly. The door closes by itself.

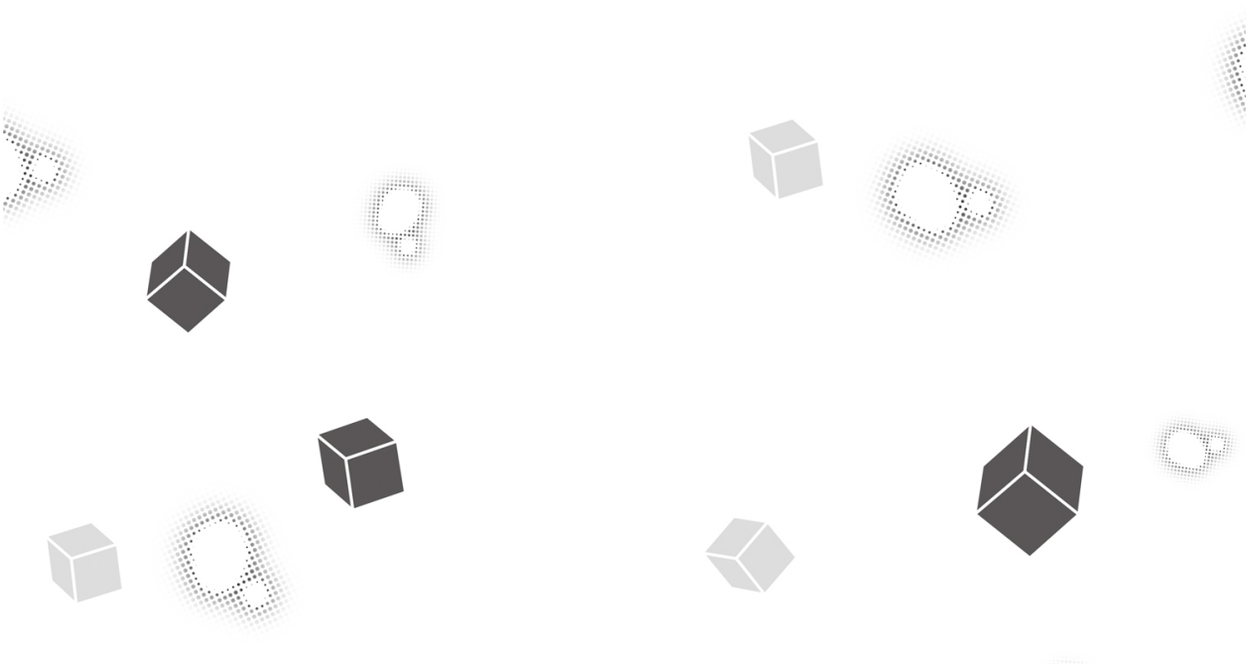
"Good, very good. Now, everyone…"

She looks at each hollow-eyed teacher as they sway side to side.

"Shall we redo the draft?" the girl chirrups.



CHAPTER FOUR:
This 'n That Before the Main Attraction



After finishing up an exhausting task, I return to the log house by the lake in my dad's region, AKA my hermitage, to take a nap.

I wake up to the sounds of giggling coming from the next room and trudge out of my bed.

I open my bedroom door that leads to the living room.

The first thing to pop into my sight is a dark-skinned little girl right by my feet. She's lying on her stomach and doodling something. This is Mel, the mysterious little lost girl we found in an ancient ruins site.

"Oh, hi, Mama!"

She calls me Mama for some reason, but don't let that bother you.

I crouch down and pat her on the head as I take a peek at her sketchbook.

"What's this…?"

"Giant robot," she answers right away.

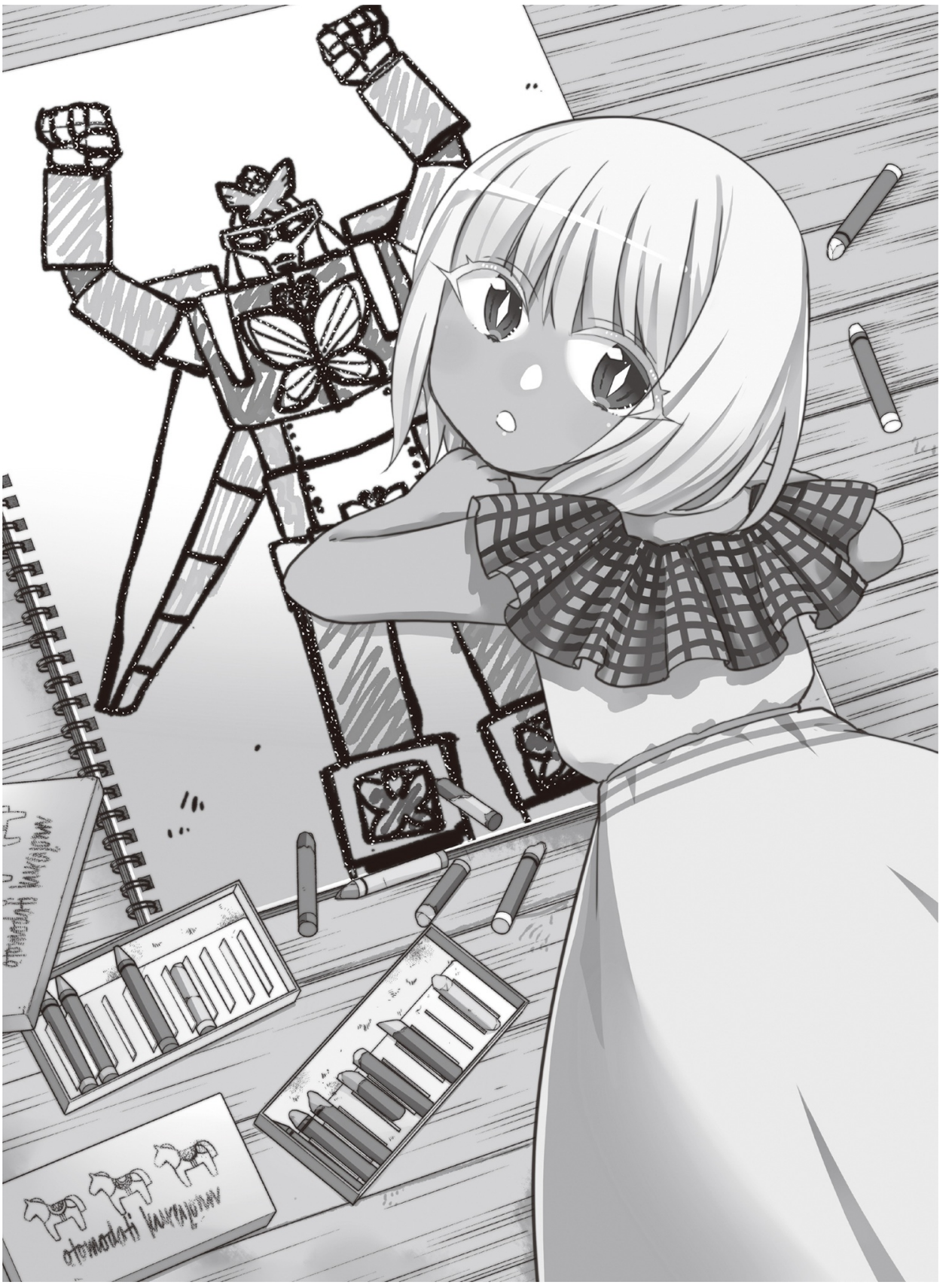
It is, in fact, an extremely detailed illustration of a blocky and bulky looking robot—the kind you'd see in a superhero TV show. It most certainly doesn't look like it was drawn by a small child. *Is she a master artist?*

"You like robots?" I ask.

"I heard you're going to make one, Mama."

I haven't even told Char yet.

Oh well. I know exactly who she found out from. The information was most likely leaked by Professor Tear. I'll have to give her a thorough lecture on how severe the consequences could be if this secret gets out.



“All right, then. Can I leave the design up to you?—Oh, but don’t let Char or anyone else know until the time comes.”

Maybe it’s too much to ask of such a little girl, but Mel gives me a hearty grin and nods, “Okay!” She seems happy.

I did a good thing, I think as I glance over at the sofa.

“Oh?” says a stranger. “I didn’t know you were here too, Haruto. Haha! You have terrible bed head!”

Who is this bubbly and pretty girl?

“Oh yeah,” I mumble, “the mysterious exchange student, Yulia or something.”

“What do you mean mysterious? The Martienna family is an old name in the empire, and I’m the next head of the household. I’ve been in the public eye from a young age—not that I’m high in rank or anything.”

Whoops, was I thinking out loud? First of all, I don’t know squat about the nobility in the empire. And that’s beside the point.

“What are you doing here?” I demand.

She’s even watching some magical girl anime on my big screen.

“I heard about something called ‘anime’ from Char. It made me curious, so I asked her to bring me here.”

You’re already using her nickname? Gee, you guys must be close. I’m a bit jealous.

“Brother Haruto, I’m so sorry! I should’ve consulted you first…”

“Oh, don’t worry. If you trust her, it’s fine by me.”

If there’s anyone I should be worried about, it’s Liza and Yulia’s brother. What’s his name again? Who knows what they’ll do when they think nobody’s looking. I look over to them both in the room and see sparks flying… Seriously, I rarely see Liza like this. She’s really giving him the death glare. Little bro on the other hand is staring blankly at Yulia.

What’s going on?

I beckon Liza.

She marches over to me, still fierce, and I ask her what’s wrong.

“Those two… They’re no ordinary humans.” She leads with quite the unsettling statement.

By the way, I conjured a soundproof barrier around us so they can’t hear our conversation.

Liza continues, “The older sister claimed that she’s ‘somewhat of a magic device.’ Her brother is probably something similar.”

She elaborates, but I still don’t understand. What does she mean by tweaking her body around?

I scan them with my own mana level measuring gadget, which is stuck to my eyeball—Mija’s Crystal (Upgraded Edition)—but I don’t see anything particularly odd. My Mija’s Crystal doesn’t really differentiate demons and monsters, anyway.

If they're non-human and dangerous, they could be a Devil Lord or devils. I have a vague idea of how to distinguish them.

Yulia is watching anime on the sofa with her back turned to me.

While I stare intently at her backside, I can faintly feel someone's gaze on me. I ignore it, though.

"Yup, she's got all of them."

I have the ability to visualize the conceptualized forms of one's mana level if I try really hard. They look like threads that grow out of the person's back. The number of threads on their back is their maximum achievable mana level. Out of those, the threads attached to the ground represent their current mana level.

I don't know about the Devil Lord, but devils don't have these threads. Or maybe they do, and I just need to try harder to see them. I'm not gonna bother. It's too exhausting.

But I'm able to see Yulia's clearly.

Next, I look at her younger brother who's facing me. I need him to turn around in order to get a look at his back.

"Hey, can you turn around for a second?" I ask.

He completely ignores my request.

His sister says, "Uranis, turn your back to him."

She goes ahead and orders him before I even ask her. Her brother turns around without saying a word.

Fine, then.

Without further ado, I get a good look.

Yup, this one's normal, too. He has the exact same number of threads as what my Mija's Crystal displays.

"Thanks, you can turn back around," I say. He ignores me. Yulia tells him, "You're good, Uranis," and he faces this way again.

What the hell, man?

"He's not a devil, to say the least," I conclude.

If he were a devil in disguise, that'd be a whole other story. But I see no reason to disclose what these kids are. Just like Flay and Liza, they may not be human, but they're the type you can have a rational conversation with.

"I guess it's fine if you say so, Sir Haruto."

Liza lets out an expression of genuine relief.

Just in case my judgment is wrong, I increase Char's defense with two more layers of barriers.

Moving on.

The way Yulia's eyes dance and sparkle as she watches anime reminds me of Char.

I doubt she's a bad kid.

"Hey," I address Yulia, "do you understand what they're saying?"

"Yes, I'm finally getting used to it."

"Is understanding a foreign language a matter of getting used to?"

"Once you grasp the characteristics of the language, the rest is just a matter of getting used to. I can infer what the vocabulary

means based on the context. But there are certain nouns I don't understand as a concept, so I'm still struggling."

I don't know what she means by that, but I gather that she's quite something.

Yulia exclaims, "Oh! Here comes the transformation scene! I love this part! I wanna try it."

Char responds, "To be honest, I've always wanted to reenact it, too! I'll ask Brother Haruto later—oh, I mean, if he has time, that is."

"Is this something Haruto can do upon request?"

The two girls turn to look at me.

I mean, I probably can.

"Wow, Haruto. You must be quite skillful. Not even I could pull off something like switching costumes while conjuring lighting effects."

"Making lights go *fwaaah* might be something we could manage," says Char.

"Given my affinity, I'd have to rely on Fire magic. But my Fire magic skills are substandard. Char, you're good at Light magic, right?"

"I may be able to do it if that's the only thing I have to focus on… Oh! I could simply infuse the spell into a magic device."

"Like the armband on the girl who's transforming right now?" Yulia points to the screen.

Char nods, "Yes. All magical girls have a special item to transform with."

Well, aKsHUaLly, there are some exceptions… I decide to keep my mouth shut.

In any case, these two are really hitting it off.

“Ooh, transforming is so cool,” sighs Yulia. “Going from an ordinary girl to an extraordinary magical girl at the switch of a costume—my spine is tingling!”

“Indeed, it’s invigorating!”

Yup, I agree.

Yulia seems like an extrovert, but she loves her some otaku-targeted content. I never imagined I’d see one in an alternate universe: the popular cheerleader girl archetype who’s kind to geeks and otakus. Not sure if she’s a popular cheerleader type, though.

“Char, don’t you think it’ll be fun if we do this in the Four Knights Match?”

“You may be right!—Oh, but I don’t know if we’ll be on the same team…”

“We will! Look how wonderfully we get along.”

I’m sorry to burst your bubbles of hope, girls, but there’s no way you two will be on the same team. It’s sad, I know, but that’s the reality.

Just as I’m feeling sorry for them, I remember that it’s too dangerous to mess around with the team roster at this point. It’s already in the headmistress’s hands.

The least I could do to alleviate their disappointment is to start working on their transformation kit.

“For now, I can start preparing the costume for the two of you,” I offer.

“Brother Haruto!”

Char leaps up in surprise and joy. She warms my heart.

“Can you make that four?” asks Yulia. “One for Uranis. And another for Iris.”

Iris? Why her? Did you befriend her, too?

Not wanting to sound like I’m probing, I decide not to ask. *And one for your* brother*?* I eye him with utter displeasure.

“I… I have to do that…too?” he whispers.

For the first time, I witness his expression change to a look of utter despair.

◆

Something’s wrong.

This isn’t right.

“What the heck is this team roster?!” I scream as I do a mental table-flip.

In the corner of the research lab building, I sit in a fully soundproofed—with my barrier—room. Displayed on the giant screen is the team roster sheet for the Four Knights Match.

Professor Tear responds exasperatedly, “Don’t ask me. Maybe you screwed up?”

That’s impossible. I completed my mission perfectly.

“Hmm, then maybe the headmistress changed the final decision?”

“Even if that were true, this is overkill!”

Iris and the two mysterious exchange students are on Char’s team.

What about me? Where’s my name?

“Yeah, well… A leader can’t team up with another leader,” says the professor.

That’s the problem.

“I removed my name from the leader pool.”

…and put it in the team that Char is leading.

“On top of that, what the hell is this grouping?” I moan.

The two offense players are Baulde Gettel (fifth-year) and Adelle Zonne (fourth-year).

Their names alone would have you asking “Who?” but you might know them as the following:

Number 4 and Number 12.

That alone is a hassle. The remaining assist player is a second-year female student I’ve never met, but I can imagine who it is from the name.

Vari Lucia.

Come to think of it, this she-devil has been snooping around the campus cosplaying as a student—her boss must’ve been making some unreasonable demands.

“I suppose there is something fishy about this team roster. Frankly, these two teams are exceptionally skilled compared to

the rest. If they were decided completely by luck, one would want to make some adjustments."

"I thought you said *this* was the result of making adjustments."

"Even so, the headmistress makes the final call. She determined that this is fair, and thus we have the result. But still, it does make one want to ask what her intentions are."

Exactly. I don't even have to say it out loud.

How could there be such inequality? Only *my* chicanery is allowed here!

"Then I'll go and ask her what those intentions are," I say.

In a situation where all the blood's gone to my brain, I suddenly turn into a real go-getter. I switch to Shiva Mode.

"Huh? Wha—Wait!"

I ignore Professor Tear and sprint out of the room.

"I demand an explanation!"

I barge into the headmistress's office—after I did all the knocking and polite stuff.

"I knew you'd come. Please, have a seat on the sofa. No need to be sitting in the air like that."

I uncross my legs in the air and trudge over to the sofa.

Feels like she just killed my enthusiasm.

The headmistress pours some tea for two and sits across from me.

“This player allocation was decided from a lottery drawing, which makes this; a coincidence.”

Whaaa…? What kind of coincidence is that? First of all, that drawing was fudged by me. So what really happened?

“As you noticed, Shiva, two teams in particular are exceptionally high-level. In such instances, the instructors who coordinate the lottery drawing are usually permitted to change the team configuration.”

Oh, so they *do* have a rule like that.

Which means they very likely changed it after I left—huh? The way she said it made it sound like no changes were made, though.

“Obviously, I asked the draft coordinators why they didn’t correct the disproportionately strong members of these two teams.”

I’m curious about that, too.

“They all agreed on one thing. ‘We want to see them compete against each other,’ they said.”

What? No, no. no. This isn’t a game show for your amusement—oh, but it’s also on display for the higher-ups outside of the academy, right? Still, though…

“Of course, I wouldn’t approve if that’s their only rationale. However—”

Their reasoning went as follows:

Haruto Zenfis is so overpowered that his team members need to be at a high level in order to evaluate his performance.

Likewise, his opponents must also be above-average in skill.

Can you guys stop trying to use a schoolwide magic exam to size me up?

The headmistress says, “I did have some reservations, but in the end, I accepted their decision. It is an understandable argument.”

It’s not understandable to *me.*

There’s something really fishy going on.

Professor Belkam acknowledged that I’m not the leader type. The other two agreed with her. Not only are the results puzzling, but what the headmistress just said doesn’t make sense either.

I’d like to interrogate the three instructors on their true intentions, but the headmistress hasn’t said who they are. If she were to find out that I’d already identified who the three are, there’s a chance that she’d suspect I cheated somehow.

Besides, I doubt pestering them would change the finalized results; the headmistress already approved it.

Checkmate on me.

I leave the headmistress’s office with my head in a haze.

What do I do?

Not that forcing myself to stay upbeat is gonna solve my problem.

As I roll around my bed at my hermitage and wallow…

Wham!

…the door swings open and my illogically adorable little sister Char enters.

“Brother Haruto! Have you seen the rosters for the Four Knights Match?!”

“Y-Yeah… I know.”

“We ended up on different teams…”

Sorry, I said we’d be on the same team… Did I say that? Maybe I didn’t. Oh well, it was one of those unspoken understandings. So, yeah… I’m sorry.

As I apologize in my head, Char looks at me with a fierce gaze.

“This must mean…the destined sibling rivalry…”

Hm?

“The colossal and indestructible obstacle which towers before me…”

Huh?

She continues to mumble, “We strike each other down over and over again. But each time we rise, we grow.”

Char widens her charming eyes and exclaims, “When the final battle against the Devil Lord is nigh, I shall come to you for your tutelage, Brother Haruto. I fully intend to face you with all seriously serious seriousness. Brother Haruto, I trust you will face me with everything you have—hold nothing back!”

She gracefully bows and leaves the room. I guess she spoke everything that was on her mind.

“So… I guess this means…she’s okay with it?”

If Char's fine with the team roster—if anything, she seems hyped about the situation—then that changes my role.

Well, in that case, I'll start laying the groundwork so we can end up sharing a fiery battle in the final tournament.

Meanwhile…

I sneak a peek at a certain female student that crossed my mind.

The token female agent Vari gapes speechlessly at the team roster posted on the bulletin board.

◆

The Schoolwide Standardized Magic Proficiency Exam is not just a routine test. It's being trumpeted like it's practically a school event—a major one at that.

Because of that, preparations are being made all over the campus.

"Wow, look, Brother Haruto! There's a big cube thing over there, too!"

"It's white as snow. But who'd make a snow sculpture at this time of year?"

The two girls giggle as they walk ahead of me.

It's the all-too-adorable Charlotte and the mysterious exchange student Yulia.

Classes have ended for the day, and now we're exploring the campus.

The students in the knight's course are training for their exam outside. Char and her team (minus Iris) were just doing the same, but they're taking a break to look around. What's the point in taking a break if they're gonna walk around everywhere?

On the other hand, the students from the researcher's course are all scrambling out of the labs and into unused classrooms to prepare their presentations.

And whatever presentation that doesn't fit in a classroom is being worked on outdoors.

"What do you think their thesis is about?" asks Char.

"Now that you've asked, we *have* to go check them out," answers Yulia.

Gee, she sure has a can-do attitude. She's the complete opposite of me, but Char's eagerly following right behind her. I'm a little jealous.

By the way…

"You're not going?" I ask the mysterious pretty-boy exchange student who's staring off lifelessly next to me.

"There's no hindrance to guarding her from this range. Besides, my being in her field of vision may spoil her enjoyment. This is the best position."

He's saying something eccentric.

"Do you guys not get along? It doesn't look like it, though."

“Whether we get along or not is not a value that affects our relationship.”

Is he trying to derail me with nonsense?

Oh, my little angel Charlotte is waving this way. They reached the odd white monument.

“Brother Haruto-o-o-o! Come over heeereee!”

What’s up? I head over to her.

“Hwah?! Haruto’s here too?!”

I hear a voice I recognize.

As I get closer…

I know her.

“Ha-Ha-Ha-Harwutryuo?!”

The girl who’s tripping all over her tongue is the student council president, my big sister Marianne. Don’t tell anyone, but she’s my paternal half-sister.

On top of that, she’s the princess of this kingdom. She’s got her sleeves rolled up and it looks like she’s in the middle of a project.

“I-I’m sorry…for the way I’m dressed today…”

“Oh no, I’m sorry for interrupting you,” I say. “Are you preparing for a research presentation?”

“Yes, but it’s not mine. I’m not participating in the event; I’m just helping out a younger student who’s in the same research lab.”

From what I’ve heard, students who already earned a certain number of credits don’t have to take part in the schoolwide

something-something exam.

Alexei-senpai was the one who told me that. He's already gotten all the necessary credits to graduate. As a result, he doesn't have to play a role in this exam either. I envy him.

Setting that aside, the princess running errands for a younger schoolmate? That's quite a sight.

Marianne says, "The truth is, this was a project I proposed; my juniors are taking over it for me. I have some emotional attachment, too, so I'm hoping to see it succeed."

She should be the one to govern as queen instead of my crappy father. Although, personally, I'm rooting for Char to be the next queen.

Anyway…

I ask her, "What is this thing?" as I look at the giant white monument. It's about ten feet in height and length.

"This," Marianne proudly puffs her big chest, "is a magic device that washes your clothes automatically!"

I'd hate to interrupt her while she's boasting, but…

…that's a washing machine.

"This?" I gulp.

It's a little too…gigantic, wouldn't you say?

But I get it now. From where I'm standing, it looks like a simple cubic monument. When you look at it from the other side, however, there's a door at chest-height that's about twenty square inches in size.

“First, you put the laundry in here,” Marianne says, then skips over to the next side of the structure, “and pour water through this hole.” She runs back to the first door. “Then you cast your hand here and activate it with magic. The device will do the rest!”

Once again, she beams. It’s rare to see her brag. I can’t help but feel warm inside at the discovery of a whole new side of her.

“I figured maybe Water magic would be enough to maneuver the water, but that alone isn’t powerful enough. Paired with Wind magic, the laundry would be struck by strong water currents—”

Seeing her smugly deliver a lecture is another sweet sight to see. However…

“But it doesn’t look like it’ll hold a lot,” Yulia, who’s been wandering around this way and that way, finally comes over to hit my big sister with the brutal truth. “The size of the magic device is way too large for the amount of clothing it can wash.”

“Y-You’re right about the size. The current spell used to run it is complicated, so we had to use the finest material possible, which is why it’s so big. But this is still a prototype. With this as the base, we can make improvements—”

Yulia counters, “You can do laundry without a magic device, can’t you? If you’re gathering a large volume of water, you may as well just do the rest with magic. Conjuring a water current can be done in the air; that would save space.”

“Huh?”

Charlotte pipes up. “Speaking of which, I recall seeing Liza using magic to do laundry. She washed dozens of sheets all at once using the same method you just described, Yulia.”

“Oh, err…” whimpers Marianne.

Uh-oh. This is getting bad.

Their candid critiques are like daggers scraping off the sunlight in Marianne’s eyes.

“Uh, but,” I start. “People with a low mana level would surely appreciate it being in the form of a magic device.”

“Haruto…”

Whew. The light in Marianne’s eyes is coming back.

One more for good measure.

“A magic device for cleaning clothes—that’s a very grounded approach. I think it’s important for a member of the royal family to be mindful of the working class’s perspective.”

“D-Do you think so?” she blushes.

Phew, I pulled it off.

Yulia cuts in out of nowhere. “You’re a member of the royal family?” She leans in.

Charlotte is the one who answers. “Yes! Marianne is the royal princess!”

Turns out they haven’t introduced themselves yet. Probably because Yulia was wandering all over the place.

“Princess…? Of the kingdom?!”

The exchange student’s golden eyes light up. Do daughters of noble families ever visit the princesses in the empire? Not that I

know if there are any princesses in the empire.

However, Yulia's interest wasn't in Marianne's royal status.

"Direct heirs of the royal family have something called a royal insignia, right? Where's yours? I'd love to see it!"

The royal insignia—a peculiar seal that appears only on those with pure royal blood. Peculiar indeed, but there's no real use for them other than as proof of ID.

"They're meant to enhance one's magic," explains Marianne. "Even the littlest of mana can be expanded greatly. Because the effects are so tremendous, I must only use it sparingly. I do apologize, but…"

What?! Seriously?! I didn't know it had such a significant role…

"Huh?! What are you—?" yelps Marianne.

Yulia makes a bold move by grabbing Princess Marianne's left hand and tugging it toward her. Turns out she's not the type to give up so easily. The golden-eyed girl stares intently at the back of the princess's hand. It's an unusual sight to see her without a smile.

"…What a unique spell," she breathes. "It was passed down from your ancestors. I can see why so many generations were able to inherit this. There's hardly any deterioration—no, there's a spell to regenerate when any defect or damage occurs. Amazing."

Her tone is eerily monotonous, but maybe she's just really focused. She gives off a similar impression to Professor Tear

when she's concentrating.

Meanwhile, Marianne looks shocked. "How do you know so much…?"

Yulia continues to examine Marianne's hand. "But if the legacy is so assured, the number of heirs should increase with each generation… Oh, you can shut it down with a special ritual. Marianne, if you were to accede to the throne, what would happen to the insignia on the other heirs? Do they lose their power?"

"Y-Yes. Their royal insignia would disappear…"

"Hm, I see. And then if the ruler on the throne dies, the insignia takes effect again. It's well thought out. The spell itself is quite sloppy work, though." Yulia switches back to her usual smile as she makes the rude comment. "Marianne, I want to see it in action. Can you show me? Just a little? Please?"

"Uhm…"

Oh, Yulia's good. Looking up with those doe eyes as she pleads—she's really good.

And Marianne is easily swayed when someone younger depends on her. She's wavering.

"J-Just a little, okay…?" she says, red-cheeked.

The princess clears her throat and focuses.

She casts her left hand up, palm faced down, and whispers an incantation.

A slight breeze stirs around us.

"Wow!"

A glowing pattern appears on the back of her left hand, illuminating brighter and brighter, and then disappears in a flash.

“Phew… How was that?” asks Marianne.

Her forehead is slightly damp with sweat. She didn’t conjure any magic. I guess it takes a mental load just to focus.

“That was amazing. I’m very satisfied. Thank you for showing me!”

Yulia flashes her innocent grin, bringing a soft smile to Marianne’s face as well. Even I can’t help but let my lips curl up.

Just as I’m letting myself relax…

“I knew it. It’s just like Brother Haruto’s—?!”

As soon as she says it, Char clamps her hand over her mouth.

Marianne turns to her in disbelief.

Yulia’s eyes light up. “Haruto has one, too?!” She’s practically pouncing on Char.

“That can’t be…” gasps Marianne. “They only appear on members of the royal family. Not even extended family could—wait, Haruto is not related by blood to begin with…”

She’s starting to swirl down a drain of confusion.

“Where? Where does yours appear, Haruto?!” exclaims Yulia. “Is it hidden under your clothes? Take them off!”

She’s asking for a lot.

“Hua-wa-wa-wa-…”

My adorable sister flaps around in panic.

This is becoming unmanageable. I have no choice but to…

Fight chaos with chaos!

That's my motto when I'm in a pinch—I came up with it just now. I discreetly conjure a bunch of barriers.

◆

The fact that I'm actually a prince cannot be revealed to anyone. Especially because even I totally forgot about that fact.

Since Yulia seems to be an intuitive girl, I take advantage of this moment when she's focused on my body. Or my royal insignia, rather.

I stick a bunch of barriers onto the huge magic device behind her.

Rrrrrrumble…

I make the earth tremble beneath us.

"Huaaa! The ground is shaking!" Char exclaims.

"Wh-What's going on?" says Marianne.

"…"

Yulia's still fixated on me, but there's no going back now.

"Grooouuughnnn!"

A heavy roar reverberates around us.

“Wh-What’s that?!”

“Nooo! What happened to the laundry magic device?!” shrieks Marianne.

“Huh?”

Finally, Yulia turns her attention to Char’s and Marianne’s voices and shifts her gaze toward them.

Standing there is the ten-foot cubic monument…with hands and legs, as well as big blinking eyes. The small door looks like a tiny mouth.

“Could it be…the Lucifer Card?!”

Just as I’d hoped, Char is taking the bait. And it’s her quickest reaction yet.

“What’s a Lucifer Card?” asks Yulia.

Excellent, she’s completely turned her attention to them and away from me.

Char explains, “Lucifer Cards are magic items in the form of seven cards. They’re needed to revive the Devil Lord who’s been sealed away for doing bad things a long time ago. Dark energy seeps from the cards, which leaks onto its surroundings, and makes mysterious incidents occur!”

“The Devil Lord…” Yulia’s smile vanishes.

She seems to be taking it more seriously than I thought. Well, she *is* around Char’s age. Maybe all young girls are like that.

“Are you saying those special magic items turned the clothing washer into a monster?”

“Possibly—no, most likely!”

Char’s so valiant.

“Why did it have to happen to our research project…?” Marianne is teary-eyed.

I’ll return it to you in one piece, I promise! I vow to myself.

Now all I have to do is let it thrash around a bit and have Char defeat it. And then everything will be happily ever after.

The card event occurred abruptly. (On my whim, actually.) It’d be a huge hassle if the she-devil who’s been sleuthing around the campus makes an appearance. I conjure a barrier around us so we can get this over with before Vari arrives.

“Ah-hahaha!” cackles a voice out of nowhere. “I *knew* I’d find that card here on campus!”

What is she, a bloodhound?!

Speak of the devil, Vari’s already here. And still in uniform, too. Why didn’t she change out of her disguise before she got here? It’s just more work for me.

But fret not.

“Blegh?!”

I chuck a transparent barrier at the back of her head and knock her out. Then I trap her in a camouflage barrier so she’ll be invisible from the outside.

Of course I didn't forget to soundproof it.

"Did you just hear someone laughing in a high-pitched voice? Along with the sound of them getting run over or something," wonders Yulia.

"It sounded like the token female agent devil's voice…but I don't see her anywhere."

Phew. I managed to pull it off before they noticed.

I can't help but feel a pair of golden eyes staring my way in discontent…

Focus on dealing with the peril in front of us, guys!

"Char!" I holler, "I'll ensure the safety of everyone around us. You guys go find the Lucifer Card!"

I cast one hand in front of me and scrunch my face like I'm in anguish. It costs me nothing to maintain the barriers, but I do it for Char; it makes her happy.

"Yes, Brother Haruto! I shall not let your aid go to waste!"

"Um, I do ask you to please—" Marianne tries to get a word in.

"Char, the Lucifer Card is hidden somewhere on this magic monster device, right?" Yulia asks.

"—try not to break it."

"Yes, I believe so."

"Are you listening to me?"

"In that case—"

Um, why is Yulia crouching low?

"We should stop it from moving around!"

And now she’s leaping toward it—why is she so happy?!

Kliiing!

She throws her right fist at the monster with incredible strength.

That punch could’ve left a crater in the ground.

“I just said don’t break it!” yowls the princess.

Rest assured, Princess Marianne. I armored it with a defensive barrier at the last second. It really was a close call, though…

Yulia, can you please refrain from making any sudden movements?

“Oh? It’s tougher than I thought.”

The new girl turns out to be much more aggressive than I imagined. Come to think of it, she was sorted into the close combat-type for the Four Knights Match.

While I’m thinking that, the silver-haired beauty continues to throw a barrage of punches and kicks.

Marianne keeps clutching her stomach and letting out a groan with each blow.

I should do something soon.

But I can’t let it end *too* soon. You know, from a theatrics perspective.

I raise the giant washing machine’s arm and swing it around randomly.

Yulia leaps over it and lands on the ground.

I swing the other arm and thrust it down where she lands.

Surely she can block it or dodge it.

“Watch out!” Char cries.

Yulia plants her feet, but she’s not even looking at the giant fist swinging down into her head.

Should I stop?

The next second—

Boom!

The massive fist falls and shakes the earth. Yulia is nowhere to be found.

She isn’t crushed, though. Nor did she block it. But it didn’t look like she jumped out of its way, either.

She simply vanished…

…and appeared behind the giant washing machine.

“Was that…teleportation magic?” gasps Marianne.

Was it? It seemed different, somehow. It’s hard to explain, but I didn’t feel a waver in the atmosphere like when I link my barrier to mystery space-time.

Then again, I’ve never seen anyone else use teleportation magic and it may be a feeling that I only get when I use my own Barrier magic. Either way, what she just did seemed more like…

“An afterimage! Right?” exclaims Char.

Yup, yup. What she said.

It’s an effect I often see in anime. Come to think of it, I’ve never tried it myself. I’d like to one day.

Char continues, “We watched it together last night! Episode sixteen when the master coached the Love Cure girls on how to

create an afterimage. That same one?!”

“The image alone wouldn’t be stable, so I affixed the atmosphere around it in place, too. How did I do? Was it smooth?”

“Yes! I didn’t even notice!”

“Great, I’m glad. But what I did was lower my presence and move at a high speed. It’s easy to see through my gimmick if one were to look carefully. There’s still room for improvement.”

Ad-libbing an anime move on the spot? She’s amazing. And most of all, it looks like so much fun.

While I’d love to hang out and enjoy the moment, I’m getting tired. So…

“Char!” I call out. “Now’s the chance to do your *thing*!”

What is the *thing*? To be honest, I don’t know what I’m talking about either.

But I’ll leave it up to my little sister and her colorful imagination; she’ll know what to do.

“Wha?!” Char gasps. “You mean the *thing*?!”

Yup, her lightbulb just flicked on.

“Miss Yulia! It looks like we’re going to have to do the *thing* with zero rehearsal!”

“The thing…? Oh, *that* thing?”

Yulia seems clueless at first, but her expression quickly changes to one of comprehension.

You two have gotten really close, huh?

I can’t help but feel my emotional health bar taking a hit from being left out, but I’ve got a lot of things to do; I need to focus. For now, I should fortify the washing machine monster so it won’t get damaged. I don’t know what these girls are about to do.

Yulia takes a big leap backward.

Char meets her in the same spot.

They stand back-to-back at an angle and face the giant washing machine.

“Are you ready?” Char holds out her magic wand.

“Yup, tell me when,” Yulia also extends her hand.

“Here we go!”

An enormous magic circle appears in front of their arms. Soon there are two, and then three of them, one behind another.

““Twin Satellite Buster!””

At their signal, two rays of light—a black one and a white one—spiral out of the magic circles and head straight for the giant washing machine.

“—?!”

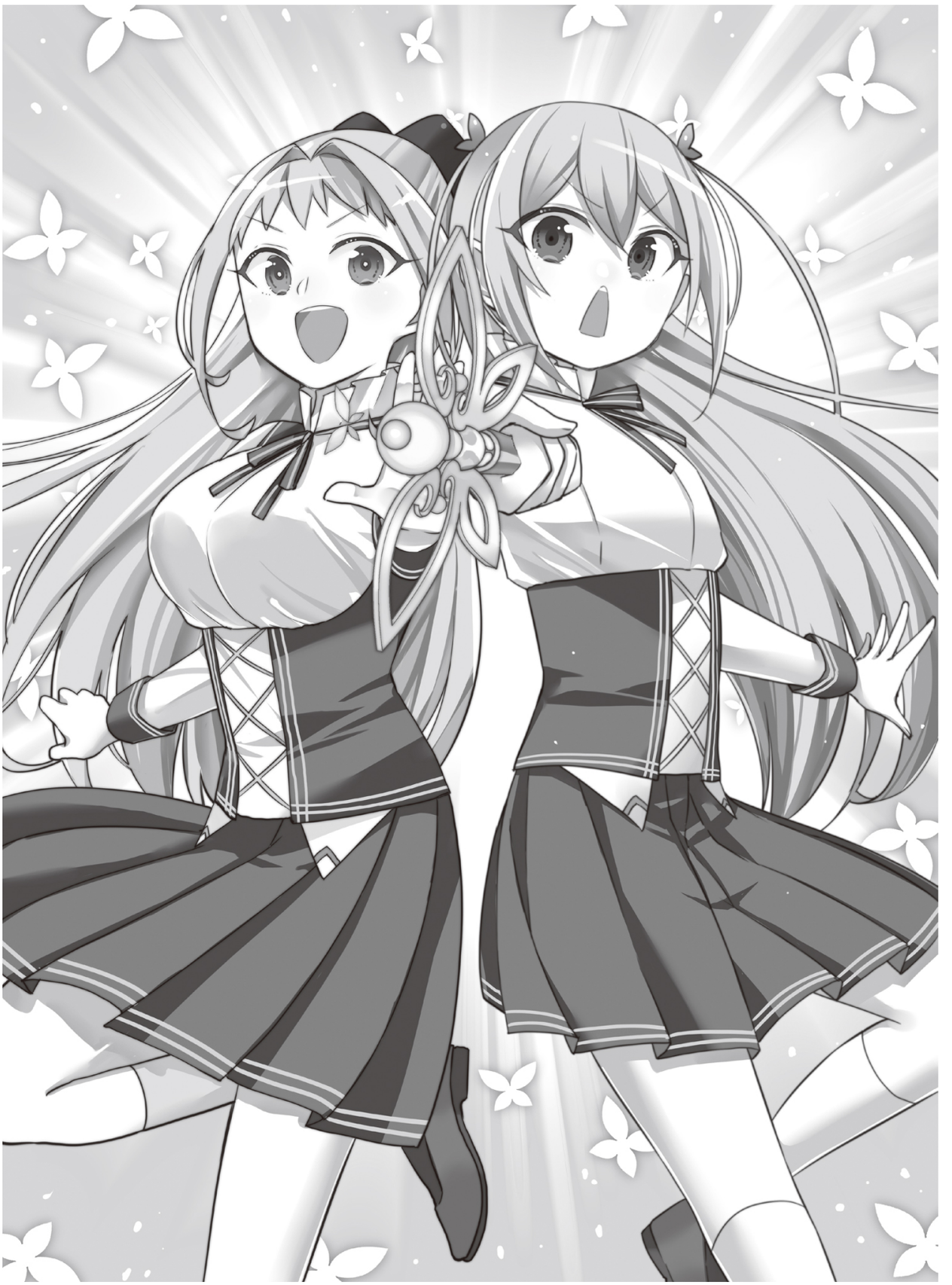
Marianne opens her mouth to let out a cry, but no sound is released.

The black and white rays intertwine and merge into one big spiral and collide into the washing machine monster.

A blinding flash engulfs everything around us.

When the brightness slowly fades, the giant washing machine comes into sight. Its limbs have disappeared, and steam

is rising from its surface.



Sidenote: The flash of light was my doing.

While everyone was blinded by it, I sucked the light into mystery space-time and erased the monster's arms and legs. The steam was just a visual effect to indicate that the washing machine is back to normal. There were a few cracks on the surface—likely from all the rough handling—that I had to repair. I also had to wipe off the dirty spots…

Oh, and can't forget to leave a card behind.

In a split-second, I got a lot of work done. I'm exhausted.

"We did it, Yulia! Success!"

"…"

While my sister springs up and down in delight, the mysterious exchange student stares intently at the giant washing machine with a slightly pleased look.

Big sis Marianne races over to the girls.

"I-Is it all right? Is anything broken? Are there any chips in the spell?"

I'm pretty sure all of that is good, but if it isn't, I'll fix it tonight. I swear, I promise.

"Calling out the attack name alone just doesn't cut it," says Yulia. She seems disappointed.

"Are you saying we need something to build up to it?"

"Yes. It's a two-person magic attack. I think it should be more—huh? What's this thing?"

Yulia spots the stub of gold on the ground and picks it up.

It's a metallic card with an illustration of a left arm.

“That’s the Luficel Card that can revive the Devil Lord.”

“I see…”

She gives it a good look, but she doesn’t seem too interested in it. “Here, it’s yours,” she hands the card to Char—“I don’t really know what just happened, but it was fun!”—and gives her a grand smile.

By the way…

I look toward Yulia’s brother, who’s been quietly watching from a distance.

Did he really do absolutely nothing all this time?

◇

“Huh?! What was I doing? I can’t remember…”

Vari wakes up in a desolate field.

She’d been surveying the campus when she sensed a sudden surge in mana and had flown to the site. That’s when she saw a supersized monster(?) in hysterics.

The card will definitely appear here! she rejoiced, but before she knew it, she lost consciousness.

“My head is throbbing… What the hell happened?”

She gazes down from the field and sees the royal castle in the distance.

Whoever knocked her out must’ve brought her here, but she can’t feel the presence of a single soul around her.

Apart from the headache, she's physically unharmed. Her clothes are a little dusty, but nothing else has changed.

What in the world is going on?

There's one person present in the field who may be able to answer that question.

"You're finally awake," he says.

His blond hair flows in the wind. She recognizes the handsome young man looking down at her. Her master had given him a piece of its power—it's Alexei Guberg.

"Did you…bring me here?"she asks.

"Don't you remember? While you were concentrating on searching for the card, they attacked the monster, and the explosion blasted you away. I fetched you amid the havoc and brought you here."

Vari has no recollection of any of this. All she remembers is spotting the monster and thinking she was just getting started. None of that matters at this point, though.

"What'll I tell Lord Lucifyra…?"

The card must be in that wretched little girl's hands by now, Vari thinks. Everything was going so well, but now her success will be null and void all because of one mistake.

"I can see that your memory is still hazy," says Alexei. "Although I must say, I'm impressed by your tenacity."

"Watch who you take that tone with. You may have received a piece of Lord Lucifyra's powers, but you're still just a knockoff who should've been—"

As she braces her hand on the ground to stand up, she feels something under her fingers. Something cold and smooth. It feels like a piece of metal.

“I-Is this…?!”

The palm-sized golden piece gleams in her hand. Without a doubt, it’s the magical card needed to strip the rival Devil Lord, Charlotte, of her defensive powers.

“Did you—?!” Vari exclaims.

Alexei shrugs.

“Like I said, I’m impressed by your tenacity. I didn’t see it for myself, but I believe you calculated where the card would appear from the monster and—with no concern for yourself—grabbed it as you were being struck by the magical attack.”

Is that what happened?! Good job, me! Vari gloated.

“That means all the cards hidden in the academy have been retrieved, right?” she said. “Which means I don’t have to socialize with teenagers anymore, right? Like smile awkwardly when they say things like ‘Haruto’s cute, isn’t he?’ Or say things like ‘forreal tho’ when one of my classmates starts a conversation with ‘school’s lame.’ More than anything else, I won’t have to mix with lousy humans and compete in their team sport while being ogled at by the masses, right? Right?”

“Uh…don’t ask me.”

Nobody can understand a person’s truest emotions except for that person. Alexei can’t relate to Vari, but she doesn’t even care; the joy of being freed from all these things wins.

“Time to report to my master!”

She lifts off the ground and soars toward where her creator awaits.

◇

After Alexei sees Vari fly off, a man dressed in black from head to toe appears out of thin air.

“Nice work,” he says frankly.

“Shiva, there’s only one more card left. Please tell me you have a good ending in mind for this narrative,” says Alexei.

“Hm? Yeah, kinda. It depends on the circumstances, though.”

At times, Shiva’s manner of speech switches to a more candid one.

It’s not that he trusts Alexei, but more like he simply lets his true self slip when he’s at ease.

This must be his true self.

Shiva usually acts pompous and dramatic. It was obvious he was putting up a front.

If his intention is to conceal his true identity, his acting is very poor.

What is even more odd is the fact that he doesn’t attempt to save face even after he’d let his real side show. Not only that…

“Oh yeah, depending on the circumstance, we’ll have to come to a head with that wench. I should eliminate any uncertainties

as a whole. Yup, I should do some research on that thing and that other thing. Geez, what a drag.”

His speech and mannerisms are just like his.

The fact that his skill level is unknown—and unmeasurable—is identical as well.

All circumstantial evidence points to one fact: the two are one and the same.

The only reason to deny it is the fact that they both exist in the same space at the same time.

But that, too, could be rationalized with his inexplicable skill level.

Alexei says, “By the way, Count Gold Zenfis visited my estate the other day.”

Let’s see if he’ll take the bait.

“I see…”

Shiva’s tone changes immediately.

“He pressed for me to clarify what the Gubergs’ political standing is. It seems he’s putting his foot down to revolt against the queen.”

“And what did you answer?”

“It goes without saying that the queen’s tyranny is reprehensible. But given the current situation, with the Devil Lord Lucifyra magnifying their power inside her, publicly expressing opposition to the queen would put my life in danger. I refrained from making any firm statements.”

Alexei isn’t worried about losing his life.

If anything, he's enjoying the thrill of the position he's placed in.

"With that said, my stance can be changed if you've already got a plan in motion. If you and Count Zenfis are collaborating, you have my full support."

"…"

"Looks like I hit the nail on the head. You and the count seem to have a strong relation—"

"You should stop right there," interrupts the Black Knight. His voice is calm, but there's crushing pressure underneath it. "I don't mind you directing your curiosity at me, but if you intend to get involved with the Zenfis family…"

Alexei didn't have to hear the rest to know what he meant.

"Very well. I'll take heed."

He isn't worried about losing his life.

But never has he felt so intensely alive; he doesn't want to lose the feeling. However…

Alexei stands in place for a while after he sees Shiva off.

Expressing opposition to the queen would put my life in danger, huh?

Truth be told, he has no idea how much strength the Devil Lord has been able to regain in their current vessel.

Lucifyra's and Alexei's connection has been severed since their conception. They may have branched off from the same

entity, but there's only so much speculation Alexei can do when he has no grasp of the main entity's situation.

If, for instance…

Alexei begins to picture the worst-case scenario.

A pinch of doubt crosses his mind, but only for a split second.

Whether it's Lucifyra or Queen Gizelotte…both of them have tremendous tenacity and a never-ending stroke of the devil's own luck. They mustn't be taken lightly—?!

His thoughts are suddenly interrupted by a stabbing pain deep in his head.

"Could this be…?"

A muffled voice begins to say something. He cannot make out the words…

"I didn't think it'd come this soon—"

…but he understands immediately what's about to happen to him.

This is it for me, I suppose. At the very least, I deserve to watch from the sidelines, don't I? he wistfully prays.

He could barely utter a croak.

All right…then. I give you…my gratitude…

Fog envelopes his consciousness—*plick*—and finally, a sound resonates deep within him.



CHAPTER FIVE:
The Devil Lord and the Mother

This vessel is starting to grow on me.

Lucifyra caresses her—or Gizelotte's—arm.

She's far from back to normal, but one function at a time, she's been able to regain her powers.

Repossessing the piece of herself that was once discarded was easy as well.

Alexei Guberg is now under full control of the main entity.

His psyche was plunged deep inside, and a new psyche took its place—one that's loyal to the Devil Lord Lucifyra. He's now essentially a devil.

The information gained from probing his mind had been invaluable as well as infuriating.

Who would've thought that collecting the cards was all a ruse.

"Buying time," is what Shiva called it. But Alexei wasn't informed of the game's true purpose.

I shouldn't take his words at face value. This game is much too elaborate to be just a way to stall for time.

The so-called ruse is orchestrated to put a spotlight on Charlotte Zenfis, the Devil Lord herself.

There's likely—no, there *must* be a good reason as to why she's trying to draw attention to herself.

But by doing so, what is she trying to distract me from?

From Gold Zenfis who's rallying the nobility to admonish Queen Gizelotte?

No, that's not it.

Once Lucifyra is fully revived, a kingdom's politics is the least of its problems.

The kingdom's leaders could easily be quashed when Lucifyra regains her full powers.

Hold on. What if the card hunting ruse itself is a ruse?

Alexei was susceptible to double-crossing Shiva and Charlotte at any time. If they were acting on the assumption that he'd betray them…

That means there must be some significance to running the card hunting race… It's no use. I'm going around in circles.

If the intention was to confuse the Devil Lord—as it's doing now—Charlotte's strategy is working annoyingly well.

There's no way I'll let her have me dancing like a puppet on strings.

In any case, "Assassination of Charlotte" is the first item on the list. Deducing what to do with the cards can wait once all seven of them are in Lucifyra's hands.

And if the Devil Lord's full revival can be achieved in the meantime, her chance of triumph will increase significantly.

There's no use mulling it over.

Heh, laugh while you can, Charlotte Zenfis. In the end, victory will be mine.

Gizelotte's sharp gaze veers to the gargantuan monster. Its head almost touches the ceiling of the cave.

The torso of a humanoid, the head of a lion with two horns growing atop it, the scaled tail of a dragon-like creature, and two gigantic hind legs of a horse.

Aside from the obvious ones in its appearance, other various animals have been merged in the colossal synthetic beast. Each of their features is enhanced to its maximum potential.

If I send this creature out to the capital for it to trample over the civilians…

A vortex of unresolved grudge that had been brewing inside Lucifyra is trickling into a magic circle—a spell that was once meant to be used for her revival.

Despite losing all contact with Melcuemenes, the spell tied with her is still intact. If she's able to connect the spell with the synthetic beast, not only will it complete her revival, but she will achieve a level of mana that far surpasses what the original entity ever had.

However, that's not what the hybrid beast was created for.

I'm sure the Black Knight is aware that my beast is complete, and the fact that I'm preparing to invade the capital. It's Shiva, after all.

Lucifyra had been analyzing each of Shiva's actions so far and had drawn a conclusion.

I still haven't grasped what type of Devil Lord that girl is, but I'm almost certain she possesses the Divine Eye.

The Divine Eye is a variation of communication magic. The wielder can see things that are far away as if they're watching from above. It can only be used by someone who's adept at spatial manipulation.

Which gives me an idea of which lord Charlotte Zenfis is possessed by—one of the Three Primordial Gods.

A risky opponent, to say the least.

But if their identity is known, fighting them isn't an impossible task.

And my preparations to do so are on track.

Lucifyra closes her eyes and focuses her mind to travel to the capital.

The downtown area of the capital is usually bustling with people in the evening. But take one turn into an alley and you can spot a drunkard passed out on the side of the road.

For those with a proper job, this is when the fun hour begins. A group of men are laughing and talking as they walk down the main street. A thin man is walking in their direction.

He's swaying and trudging this way and that way.

The thin man is dressed conventionally, but he's clearly unwell.

One of the men in the group doesn't notice him, and bumps shoulders with the wobbling man.

"Oof, my bad," he apologizes, hoping it's not an aggressive drunk.

The thin man keeps walking. He doesn't look back or react in any way.

"Wh-What's with him?"

"I saw someone acting like that just the other day."

"Me too. The one I saw was an old lady. There are a lot of those around here lately, huh?"

There is, indeed, a growing number of individuals, regardless of age or gender, like the thin man being spotted. Many people have been noticing, but none were concerned because nobody has been harmed.

The civilians have no idea—let alone Haruto—what the lifeless lurkers in the city actually are.

Although they're far frailer than the average human, they're all devils meant to serve one function.

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And the day of the Schoolwide Standardized Magic Proficiency Exam is here.

Just like its ceremonious name, it's an exam to square up the students to judge their magic talents.

Presentations by researcher's course students are being held all over campus. Bigwigs who dress like they study too much are walking around, peppering students with questions that begin with "Pardon my lack of knowledge, but," followed by

complicated queries that have the researchers fumbling for a response. It hurts to watch.

The knight's course exams are all about striking magic attacks. Compared to the researcher's exams, the pressure on the students is silent. The examiners would scoff or walk away without a word after the student confidently fires a large-scale attack—the kids are left inconsolable.

Looks like hell.

Finally, it's time for the main event: the Four Knights Match.

The participants in this exam are the best in the Academy; tons of people are flooding in to watch the top-scoring students show off their skills.

This match is being held at the outdoor arena.

The sun is shining as if to fuel the contestants' vigor. However, not a single seat in the stands is filled—scratch that. There's one person in the commentary booth: Headmistress Theresia Montpellier. I daresay she looks a bit peeved.

As for where the audience is, they're gathered in the school yard, which is a much bigger space than the stands.

Unlike the previous years, the game this year allows much more lethal magic attacks to be used thanks to it being under Shiva's supervision. In order to ensure the audience's safety, the match will be available for viewing in the form of a public screening.

I’ve gotten the hang of how to run it during the Olympius Ruins exploration contest against Numbers. There shouldn’t be any problem.

“And now we begin the Four Knights Match!” a man dressed in all-black announces the start of the game. His voice is amplified with a megaphone-ish barrier.

Sup, Mr. Shiva.

Surprise! I’m here today as Haruto-Mode (my usual self), looking up at the commentary booth from the arena entrance.

Why, you ask?

Because as per usual, Haruto C expressed his reluctance:

“The two people from Numbers? You mean that loud, burly guy with the big attitude and that sadistic whip-girl? You expect me to communicate rationally with them? And what do you mean the third teammate is a devil? Hell no. I don’t wanna do it!”

I don’t wanna do it, either!

I could’ve just dumped the chore on him, but he’s my copy; he knows all my weak spots.

“Char wants to battle against you, the original. Are you going to make her fight against an imposter? Char’s a very keen girl; I’m sure she’ll notice.”

Would she? I’m sure I can think of some way to deceive her.

“Even if she doesn’t notice, would your moral conscience be all right with that?”

Honestly, no. I normally wouldn’t care who I deceive, but with Char… Yeah, weak spot.

I can’t help but feel like he’s coaxed me into doing what he wants, but forcing a task onto someone who’s reluctant will probably only result in problems.

That’s why I have Haruto C wearing the all-black costume and sportscasting as Fake Shiva.

Which means I’ll be acting as Haruto Zenfis, a regular student at the Academy.

Wait a minute—I also have to covertly take on the responsibilities that are expected of Shiva, too.

Lethal magic is free to use in this game *because* Shiva’s here to supervise. I’ll have to shield everyone with my defensive barriers.

On top of that, I’m facilitating *and* setting up the public streaming station.

I’m working way too hard!

“Now for the first match! Both teams, enter the areeenaaa!” Fake Shiva is really getting into his role.

Look who’s having all the fun. Screw you.

The electrified cheering of the audience echoes from the public screening venue far away. I lead my team into the arena.

“Fwahahaha! My blood is coursing!” The burly guy and his obnoxious laughter follow close behind me.

“Finally! My whip can get some action.” The dom-girl smirks and licks her lips. She scares me.

These two are the people underneath the headdresses numbered 4 and 12. I don’t know if it’s because they’re a part of

that silly after-school club, but they look like dopey peons.

In contrast with these two, who are hopped up to fight, the fourth teammate slogs behind us in silence.

It's Vari the devil.

"Why…? How…?" she mumbles. "I collected all the cards on campus, didn't I? Yet I still have to romp around with a bunch of humans in a team game? But Lord Lucifyra instructed that I do… There must be a meaning for this, right? Still, though…"

She can't seem to stop complaining. Her voice is low, but I'm able to pick it up.

"Get readdyyy… Begin!" Fake Shiva declares with gusto.

In spite of my reluctance, the game commences.

"Whoooaaa!"

"Haaah!"

The two Numbers students yell out their battle cries as they pounce forth like predators who've found prey.

The offense players on the other team are your typical mages; they abstain from getting physically close, and instead, conjure magic attacks from a distance. Despite that…

"Hyaaw?!"

"W-Wait, they're fast?!"

…they're wigging out.

"Ghbah!"

"Hyeek?!"

Immediately KO-ed.

The opposing team's leader and assist player have completely lost the will to fight. But that doesn't stop Number 4 and Number 12 from merrily hunting them down and decimating them, too.

Show some mercy, geez.

Gotta admit, though, they're incredibly strong. I guess members of an underground student council or whatever have to really work for their positions. It's too bad they have zero self-awareness or shame about their cringy teen blunders.

I think I'll stand back and let them do all the work.

While it looks like I'm doing nothing, I've secretly been shielding the opponents with my barriers so they won't get hurt.

With multiple people on the battle ground, I gotta be on high alert. If I guard them too well, it could give them a window to counterattack. Tweaking my defense barrier to provide the right amount of protection is tricky.

Do I have to keep this up until the finals?

First game in and I'm already drained.

◆

I need therapy.

I need emotional support to quench my exhausted, dried-out soul.

That's the only thing motivating me to carry out all the grunt work I'm doing.

And now! Finally!

Whooooooaaaaaa!

Cheers like you've never heard before fill the air immediately after Fake Shiva announces the next team's entrance.

The first person to enter the arena is a super cute girl.

Oh my god, my freaking angel Char.

Walking and chatting next to her is Yulia. They both seem relaxed and look like they're having fun.

Uranis follows behind them, stone-cold as usual. Iris is the last of the team's members to enter.

The four of them are heading to the center of the Arena. They're wearing their school uniforms instead of the standard gym clothes.

The opposing team is a bunch of people I don't know.

Both parties finish up their self-introductions and take a few steps back to face each other.

The rivals look intimidated from the start. I don't blame them; the difference in their abilities is stark.

Char and Yulia's eyes are glistening with excitement. Uranis, on the other hand, looks glum. A look of determination glows in Iris's eyes.

"Um, Miss Iris. You really don't have to force yourself if you don't want to," says Char.

"I'm not forcing myself. I just want a clean slate for my reputation—my terrible reputation for being the girl who can't

take a hit!” She widens her eyes as if she’s declaring a catch phrase.

Surprise, surprise. I didn’t know she was bothered by that.

“Come on, you guys! Let’s go!” Iris calls out with resolve as she raises her arm high above her head. Still, her cheeks are a little red.

“Friend Power! Explosion!” she yells.

There’s a bracelet around her raised wrist. A gem-like rock in the center of the accessory twinkles.

A flash of blue light sparks from her wrist and spreads out to outline her silhouette. It looks like she’s wearing a skintight bodysuit now.

I didn’t realize this while I was developing the spell, but it’s super dicey when you put it into practice.

Especially with Iris. She’s got curves in all the places where a woman should have curves. Would she get scolded—particularly by a certain “No falsehood or immorality lady” AKA the headmistress?

Which leaves me with no choice.

“Why is it so bright? I can’t see anything,” says a male student.

“Oh, Iris… She’s stunning…” a female student breathes.

Accessible for female viewers only.

Moving along. The cluster of light bursts and…

“Soldier of Friendship, Iris is h-here!”

The magical girl in blue takes a pose. Her face is bright red. She hasn't quite gotten over the shame.

My face is getting flushed, too. This must be what they call "secondhand embarrassment."

The public screening venue is roaring so loudly that you can feel the ground quiver. Guy or girl, everyone is in a frenzy. Iris keeps saying she has no friends, but she's actually pretty popular all around.

"Go on, Uranis. Your turn," Yulia directs.

"…"

Uranis, too, begins to transform reluctantly—or more like bitterly—but I couldn't care less, so I'll skip to the results.

He turns into a magical *girl* whose theme color is black. He's still a boy, though, so I gave him booty shorts under his miniskirt. Total femboy vibes.

He goes back to his usual deadpan face; what's done is done, I guess. A handful of spectators who are into that niche are cheering wildly for him.

Next.

"My turn." Yulia steps forward exuberantly. She raises a magic wand that looks similar to Char's over her head.

"Purity Power! Explosion!" she shouts as she leaps…and rises high into the sky. Bright yellow light shoots out of the gem-like thing embedded in her magic wand.

The ribbons of light wrap around her wrists, chest, waist, and ankles, until her body is cocooned.

Yulia's height and facial features are visibly that of a child's, but her chest area is much more developed for someone her age. Again, a very sensitive matter to televise. Should I really be airing this?

In the end, the lights—*poof*—burst and disappear. Out comes a yellow-gold magical girl.

Again, you can hear and feel the reverberating cheers from the spectators.

Wait a minute—nobody's even questioning the transformation sequences. These students adapt way too quickly to their situations.

And finally, the time is now adorbs-o'clock!

"Immortal Power! Explosion!"

Char waves her magic wand as she hovers in the air. A colorful mist in shades of pink sprinkles out of the wand, and a mysterious backlighting appears around her. Her sequence looks way more lavishly produced, but you've gotta understand; she's adorable.

She closes her eyes and lets her arms and legs extend. Her silhouette blacks out, and images of sparkling stars and swirling galaxies paint her figure like a projection mapping show.

Tiny pink particles gather around her mystical form to obscure the stars and finally burst away to reveal a frilly outfit.

"Immortal Char is born!"

Shwink!

Yes, I added the sound effects. Is that a problem?

The Magical Girl of Justice Immortal Char leaps and quietly lands next to Yulia. They stand back-to-back as Iris and Uranis race to catch up to them.

“We’re here to annihilate your worries away!”

“And purge your troubles clean!”

BA-BOOM!

Explosion effects go off behind them.

Yeaaahhh! The crowd grows even wilder.

In contrast to the overjoyed students, the dignitaries who are visiting the academy are agape. The headmistress, too, looks like she’s questioning the meaning of all this production.

I need you to understand that this is a form of classical art.

That wraps up the preparation.

“And now, will both teams step up and…begin!” Fake Shiva announces the start of the game.

Char’s team immediately gets into action.

“Ah-haha!”

“Hiyah!”

Iris and Yulia, the two brawlers of the group, dash to the forefront and start throwing punches at the enemy team.

So much for magical girls.

The opponents are highly skilled, but they’re cornered into defense-mode.

Fake Shiva flies over to the arena and lands at the commentary booth next to where Headmistress Theresia is stationed as the presenter.



“How’s it looking, Headmistress Theresia?”

“The two offense players are proficient in mid-range combat. But by allowing their opponents to come within arm’s reach, they’ve made the battle much more challenging for themselves. The other two are assisting from behind, but Charlotte and Uranis are nullifying every move.”

As she appraises, the enemy side’s two defense players are trying to back up the two offense players, but Char’s magic attacks and Uranis’s weird magic are smashing their every attack.

“What’s that weird magic he’s using?” Fake Shiva asks in earnest.

He’s breaking out of character.

“Antimagic, perhaps. The opponent commands magic that buffs his comrade’s defense and debuffs his enemy’s speed. The fact that Uranis is able to nullify both effects at that speed is astonishing.”

The headmistress answers in a nonchalant tone. But I hear another voice in my ear responding to the question.

‘Antimagic…’

“Do you disagree, Professor Tear?” I ask so only she can hear.

‘No, it is antimagic, technically. It *is* nullifying the opponent’s magic, after all. But the standard antimagic uses a spell that is specific to the magic it is countering. In his case, he seems to be only using one type of magic.’

“So a versatile antimagic?”

‘If so, that would completely turn modern-day magic theory upside down. But his seems like something much simpler. To cut to the chase—’

She says that, but I really just want her to cut to the chase.

‘He’s just smashing one big chunk of mana into their magic.’

“Is mana something you can physically smash things with?”

First time hearing of this.

‘You sometimes do it too, Haruto.’

“I have no recollection of doing such a thing.”

‘You give your barriers mass and crash it into things. What that is, is a large amount of mana materializing inside a confined space—a barrier.’

I-It is? I’ve been doing it all this time without even thinking about how it works.

‘I don’t understand its principle in detail either. Why won’t you just let me probe around your head already,’ she mumbles.

Uh-oh, she’s starting to complain about something.

‘Regardless, the fact that he can pull off such a feat means he’s able to wield an inconceivable amount of mana. You said his current mana level is 24? Sheesh, that’s hardly enough for a skill like that.’

Level 2 right here. Which could only mean one thing: mana levels aren’t reliable.

I turn my attention back to the match.

“Char!”

“Yes, Yulia!”

The two pretty magical girls soar high into the sky in a spiral motion.

“Tell me when!” says Yulia.

“All right! Let’s do this!”

They begin to recite as they hover in the air:

Char: We’re here to protect the weak and crush the hostile.

Yulia: When our two hearts overlap,

Char: Venus shall flicker in the clear blue sky.

Yulia: Behold the destruction we command!

Together: Twin Satellite Buster!!!

They point their magic wands in a crisscross in front of them. A coiling beam of black and white rays plunges into the earth.

Fusion attacks are so cool.

The astronomical energy attack irradiates and gouges a chunk of the ground. The sound and impact are unbelievable.

“”””Are you trying to kill us?!”””””

The four opposing team members are wailing in tears. Don’t worry—I temporarily evacuated them to safety before the impact.

“If I hadn’t saved them in the nick of time, that would’ve been a clean hit! Which means Team Charlotte wins!” Fake Shiva jumps out of the commentary booth and declares loud and proud.

I (Haruto, the ordinary student) am hiding in the shadows, cleaning up the arena (while making it look like Shiva’s doing it).

Sheesh, did they gouge the crap out of it.

I don't think even I could win against that if I tried, I think to myself.

As I'm trembling at my little sister and her partner…

'Shiva, may I have a word with you?' I hear.

The voice on the other end of the communication barrier belongs to Alexei-senpai.

"Is something the matter?" I try to answer with gravitas.

'Oh, nothing. I'm just bored. I'd be happy to take on some menial tasks if you have any.'

Huh? I didn't know he was such a good guy.

But menial tasks for him? Do I have any—oh yeah.

"Not at the moment, but there's something I'd like for you to do soon. I've come up with a good finale for the card hunting game."

'Hm, you mean what to do after Charlotte and her friends collect all seven cards?'

"Right. It'll require making some preparations. That should help pass the time." But it's not something I could relay verbally.

I ask him, "Do you have some time to meet after the next game?"

'……'

Huh? He isn't responding. Bad reception?

'Yes, I do.'

Weird pause. Alexei-senpai usually doesn't go completely silent even when he's thinking of what to say next. Usually, he just fills the pause with small talk. Oh well.

We decide on a time and place to meet and hang up.

Speaking of Alexei-senpai, there's something I've been wanting to try with him. It's the perfect chance to test it out. Actually, now that we're so close to the showdown with the Devil Lord, I really don't have much time left, I think as I look at the restored arena ground in satisfaction.

◇

While the academy is in the midst of its heated schoolwide tournament, Count Gold had just left the mansion of a certain noble family.

He meets his vassals at the gate and they exit the estate.

"Hurry up! We're going to miss Sir Haruto's game!" Flay, the red-haired maid, demands. Her ears and tail are hidden.

"If the finals are all you're planning to watch, we still have time," said Gold.

"Hrr… I suppose there's no need for Sir Haruto to even step in to fight other than to go against Charlotte's team. Setting that aside, why didn't you let me inside the mansion?"

"I asked you to change your clothes. This was a formal meeting; it'd be improper of me to take along a vassal in maid's attire."

"Hmph! This work uniform is the one outfit Sir Haruto praised me in. I refuse to wear anything else!"

The truth was that her presence would've stirred unnecessary quarrels, so he'd used the clothing excuse as a cover.

"And? How'd it go?" asks Flay with her arms crossed.

Count Gold chuckles at her haughtiness and answers, "Very well. The information Shiva provided was very helpful in cornering them into submission. Their lips turned blue and they spilled everything."

"Yup, my master is amazing as always."

Gold lets out a smile at Flay's triumphant grin, but quickly grows stern.

"The groundwork has been laid. All that's left is to lure out that she-fox."

The fact that Queen Gizelotte had been funneling illegal funds to the Church of Lucifyra had been confirmed. Plus, she was one of the masterminds who staged the insurrection in the capital in hopes of overthrowing the government.

He'd learned about her long list of crimes, both major and minor in scale.

Count Gold was considering forcefully removing her from power, but given her countless acts of villainy and the evidence linking back to her, he'd be able to drive her to the wall with a more straightforward approach.

"Although, I know firsthand how strong that woman is. Even worse, she's obtained the powers of…the Devil Lord, was it called? Seizing someone like that would result in great loss."

"…"

Flay can't find any words. She must have some resentment toward the queen who'd defeated the Demon King. Despite that, she doesn't volunteer to face Gizelotte.

"I may have to rely on Shiva again," sighs the count.

"My master had his mind made up from the start. There's no reason for you humans to feel any guilt."

She speaks as if to imply Shiva and the queen have history.

So Haruto knew about his origin… That boy is very sharp, after all.

Whether Flay told him or he figured it out on his own…

Either way, Haruto knew and accepted the fact that he was abandoned at birth, yet he grew up to be a very positive boy. Gold couldn't be prouder to be called "Dad" by him.

The day of the battle is nigh. Worst case, it could even be today.

"Well, then, I'm heading to the royal castle. I trust your protection. Not for me, but for Haruto and Charlotte."

He'd gathered more than enough evidence to drag down Queen Gizelotte from her throne. Even if Gold himself were to be eradicated, there'd be no way to stop the floodgates that are bound to open, which is why the ones who need protection are the youth of the next generation.

My two children must live on.

"Hmph, Sir Haruto and Charlotte need no protection. Just let me do my job, Gold. Although it is unfortunate that we'll have to miss out on the tournament finals."

Gold smiles at Flay's boldness.

She continues, "Now that that's settled…"

Gold tilts his head in confusion as Flay spins around and says, "Child, what are you doing?"

The little girl with the white hair and dark complexion had been squatting and staring intently at the ground.

She's the child who was discovered wandering deep in the ruins. I believe her name is Mel, thinks Gold.

Haruto had rescued her during his Olympius Ruins expedition test. Today, she's chosen to follow Flay around for some reason.

"What is this…?" Mel asks, pointing to the ground.

Flay looks at what's under her finger, but only sees the cobblestone road.

"I don't see anything?" says Flay.

"I know this," responds Mel.

"If you know what it is, why'd you ask—what do you see, anyway?"

Mel, uncertain of how to put it into words, furrows her brows, and grows quiet.

"Urh…" she groans.

She then picks up a rock and uses it to scratch the spot she was just pointing at.

"What are you doing?" asks Flay.

"Leaving a mark."

"For what?"

“To tell Mama. So she can erase it.”

“If you’re going to erase it, why mark it in the first place?”

Flay’s question doesn’t stop Mel from scratching the pavement.

Gold, who’s been watching their interaction from behind, realizes something.

“Perhaps it’s not the mark itself that she wants to have erased, but what’s under it,” he suggests.

“Which now begs the question of what *that* is,” says Flay.

He ignores Flay while he ponders.

Something that can’t be seen… A magic circle of some kind.

The hunch quickly sinks into Gold’s mind as a heavy weight.

Mel is sensing something so dangerous that she feels the need to tell Haruto immediately and have him destroy it—although Mel herself doesn’t seem aware of its gravity.

A spell so well-hidden that not even Flay’s sense of smell or mana detection skill can pick it up… It’s highly likely to bear a dangerous effect, Gold surmises.

A magic circle that summoned Elder Ghouls had appeared in the capital previously.

This one could be something much more terrifying than that… A tinge of fear shoots up Count Gold’s spine. *We must destroy this circle immediately—no, wait. This can’t be the only one, and here of all places…*

“—Hey, wait! Where are you two going?” he calls out.

Flay unleashes her nails and marks an X where Mel is scratching.

Seeing the help the red-haired maid has offered, Mel stands up and wanders off.

Flay replies to Gold while she chases after the little girl, “Seems like they’re all over the place. It’s a hassle, but we’re gonna have to mark each one.”

Despite her whining, she marks each spot Mel points to with an X.

“Have you figured out what they are?” asks Gold.

“Nope!” Flay answers. Her nonchalance is almost admirable.

She continues, “I don’t know what these are, but if this is what the child wants, I shall oblige. Sir Haruto has ordered me to ‘care for her.’”

Flay gestures toward Mel and says to Gold, “The child appears to be having fun, does she not?”

Mel is, in fact, giggling and prancing this way and that. Each time Flay marks the spot she points at, her smile blossoms even brighter.

Gold looks at Flay, who’s grinning at the little girl.

“Having fun, indeed,” he chuckles.

◆

Round one of the tournament, which was taking place only one match at a time, had just finished. The next round will take place

in two different arenas, and two matches will be conducted at a time.

The first round was solely for the purpose of judging each team. The rounds following, people will get to decided what match they want to watch.

Naturally, that means more work for me. Help.

With no one to lend me a hand, I carry on my battle of solitude.

The only fuel that gets me going is watching Team Char's glorious fights. One after another, her team crushes it. And one after another, the battle arenas are filled with massive craters, which I patch up.

After this 'n that, Char's team and my team make it to the final round. I demolished Laius's team on the way up.

"And now for the finaaals… Let's begiiinnn?!"

Fake Shiva is so amped up, he's starting to sound a bit weird.

In fact, everyone is getting weird. My team included.

"I've been waiting for this moment!" belts Number 4. "Bring it on, freshie—no, Irisphilia. Let's pick up where we left off at the Olympius Ruins!"

Number 12 titters, "Heh, hehehehe… Our last match was cut short due to interference. But this time, I'll take you down, baby girl… Hehehehe…"

"I get it now, Lord Lucifyra!" Vari exclaims. "My master has granted me a second chance through this game. A chance for me

to decimate that little girl with my own hands. I knew there was a good reason for wearing this humiliating outfit!”

I can’t overlook that last sentence, but it’s hard to watch Vari’s eyes swirl around as she lets her drool dribble down her chin. I decide to let it go for now.

“Hey! Haruto Zenfis! Don’t go easy just because the opponent is your sister, ya hear?” says Number 4.

“Yeah, I hear you’re a real softie when it comes to that little sister of yours,” chimes in Number 12.

Now who the hell would say that?

“I’m not a softie. I just cherish my little sister, so there’s no way I’m gonna put any effort into this match.”

“”That’s exactly what we’re talking about!””

Meanwhile, Vari’s really starting to lose it.

“There’s no way we’re gonna wait around for the opponent to make the first move. I’m going all out from the beginning—no, I’ll just ambush that little runt before the game even begins and slash her—”

She’s hopeless. Gotta take care of her.

“Pygyaw?!”

“Hm? Did you hear something? It sounded like a small animal being smushed,” says Number 4.

Number 12—full name Adelle Zonne—asks Vari, “H-Hey! Are you all right?”

Klonk, thp.

Vari nods silently and gives a thumbs-up.

Adelle doesn’t look quite convinced, but she doesn’t pry any further.

That’s one concern crossed off the list.

I knocked Vari unconscious. I need her to stay asleep until the end.

Although, I’d still have to maneuver her like a string puppet during the game, so that’s more trouble for me. Oh well.

Cheers roar from the public screening venue in the distance.

Team Char has just stepped onto the field.

“Brother Haruto, I shall pour every skill passed down from your gallant hands to mine,” Char whispers with resolve.

My hands aren’t that gallant, I don’t think.

Obligatory transformation scene. I bask in her adorableness.

Adorbs, I sigh.

And finally!

“Now begins the final round of the tournament! Ready-y-y-y Go-oh-oh-wow!”

I don’t think Fake Shiva even knows or cares what’s coming out of his mouth at this point.

The audience doesn’t seem to care about his silly announcement either.

“Hi-yah!”

The first person to bolt into the battle is Baulde Gettel AKA Number 4. He’s jumping straight toward Iris.

“Haaah!”

Iris dashes to face him as if she’d been anticipating his strike.

Klaaang!

A metallic clash resounds as their fists collide.

K-K-K-K-Kla-Klang!

They exchange punches so fast that the naked eye can't capture them.

"I see you've made some progress, commoner!"

"Social rank is irrelevant when it comes to hard work."

It's true—Iris has shown significant growth since the standoff against him in the Olympius Ruins. She surpassed him in speed that time, but struggled in power, so she was mostly on the defensive.

Today, she's overpowering him.

Under normal circumstances, I should be assisting Baulde-senpai, but I decide to stay out of it.

Instead, I turn my focus to Uranis, who just launched a barrier-like attack on me.

Shwiiiiing!

I shoot one back and destroy his shot.

"Ah—!"

I prop up Vari's arms to make it look like she was the one who cast the attack.

Uhhh, why's he glaring at me?

The back and forth between Iris and Baulde is growing more relentless.

At the same time, my and Uranis's attacks are heating up.

"Hya-hahahaha!"

Meanwhile, Adelle is keeping her distance as she swings her whip around. She's having way too much fun.

"Whoa! Hah! Whee! Oop!"

Her opponent is the mysterious exchange student Yulia. She nimbly swats away the thorny-tipped lash with a series of punches and kicks.

"Quite impressive of you to counter my whipping with your bare hands."

"Well, I've gotta hype up the crowd, right?"

Yulia glances at me mid-combat.

What? Why me?

"I take it you're not going to help…" she mutters.

Is she talking about me? It's not like she has Uranis's help either.

"I'm not really pleased with that…" she continues. "Oh well. I'm not the headliner today. I'll just focus on stalling the show," she mumbles to herself.

Adelle probably can't hear her.

Wait, is she talking to me?

Yulia continues to close in on and step back from Adelle, who's using her whip to keep her at bay.

The exchange student girl uses a different maneuver each time. She'd try to go around from the right, from the left. Sometimes she'd stumble and barely escape by a hair.

"Very nice! Not bad! But in the end, I will be the winner. I! Will! Defeat! You!"

Adelle's motivation is skyrocketing. If Yulia's purposely provoking her, she's doing a great job.

Wouldn't wanna mess with her.

I decide to let them do their thing.

And now…

"…" Char faces me with determination in her eyes.

Her serious face is adorbs, too.

But her glaring at me is making me uneasy.

"As always, Brother Haruto… Not an inch unguarded…"

That's odd. I'm completely unguarded, ready to face her marvelous magic attacks whenever she wants.

"However!" she declares.

The Magical Girl of Justice Immortal Char raises her magic wand in the air.

"It would be discourteous of me to cower in fear forever. Here I go! If you don't mind!"

She focuses all her energy into one shot.

The magic wand flashes.

"Emotional Death Shower!"

She yells a slightly unsettling attack name.

A band of rainbow-colored beams scatter out of the gem-like thing on the wand. If you look carefully, you can see that the beams are made of tiny mists of light that fall like rain, as the name suggests.

Oh, I remember this now. She'd asked me to create this effect a while ago. Unfortunately, it's nothing more than a shower of

light. It hardly has any damage capabil—

THUDTHUDTHUDTHUDTHUD!

Um, the flecks of light are exploding as they hit the ground?

“I modded it! Secretly!” Char says.

Aww, shucks. She modded it. I should talk to her about its lethality at some point, but I doubt she’ll use it to actually hurt anyone. It’s Char, after all.

Wait, she just used it on me. And I’m her big brother…

I let myself get glum for a second, but now’s not the time.

Explosions are going off around me nonstop. *Is this how I die?*

That said, I prioritize myself before anything. My defensive barriers are not double- or triple-layered; they’re in the double digits. There’s no wear or tear on my shirt.

Anyone else would be in smithereens.

I know I’m safe, but my heart is racing. However, I’m not about to get worked up. Not in front of Char.

The explosions eventually cease. I conjure a soft wind and let it sweep away the cloud and smoke.

“Amazing as always, Brother Haruto. The obstacle towering before me is much taller than I imagined… But!” Char looks up intensely.

“Yulia! Miss Iris!”

What? Are they about to start something? I look around, feeling puzzled as Iris answers her solemnly.

“Char… Are we doing the thing…?! Right here, right now?!”

She says it as if she's about to betray someone she considered a friend.

"Come forth! Pile Catastrophe!" shouts Iris.

Who's coming? Or what's coming?

Iris raises one arm high in the air. And behold! Sparkles of light appear all around her and envelope her arm.

Shweeeng!

She's wearing a really cool-looking weapon?!

Oh, now I remember.

It's that thing. The fake sublime weapon I forged for the ruins expedition assignment. Come to think of it, I gave it to Iris. And I tweaked it to materialize on voice-command.

Yulia takes flight and heads to where Char is. She looks down toward Iris and says, "Iris, I'm leaving you with those two."

Adelle-senpai, who's been scuffling with Yulia until just a moment ago, stays frozen in place as she glares beady-eyed at Iris's bizarre outfit.

Baulde-senpai, too, is vigilantly looking out for Iris's next move.

Which is why Yulia is easily able to escape the battle and line up with Char.

"We're here to protect the weak and crush the hostile."

"When our two hearts overlap…"

The crowd in the viewing stand goes wild when they see and hear the two pretty girls stand back-to-back, delivering their lines.

I hear ya, we've all been waiting for this momen—no! This is bad!

This is bad, bad, bad, extremely bad.

The force of their magic powers combined is enormous. I could use my cheat card "hurl it into mystery space-time" to defend myself, but what would happen if I did that?

'Huh? That was lame.'

'We wanna see some dramatic clashing of forces.'

'He split? What a coward…'

Frankly, I don't care what the public thinks of me. I really don't. But!

'Brother Haruto… I see. So we're not worthy of your best efforts…'

No. No, no no. I absolutely can't let that happen. I don't wanna see a sad Char!

Still, though.

Every time I saw those two do their combo magic, they seemed to be getting stronger. Would I be able to block it now?

Even if I could, wouldn't that leave Char and her friends discouraged?

A dozen worries wash over me all at once. Just as I'm about to give in and accept my fate—

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP—an alarm sounds. How convenient for me.

Fake Shiva shouts from overhead, "What in the world! A giant hybrid beast is heading for the capital?!"

A big screen appears in the air and displays a massive beast that looks like a mix of creatures—the Devil Lord's creation—slowly making its way.

Boom, boom, its footsteps shake the ground.

It'll be a matter of minutes before it reaches the defensive walls that protect the capital.

◆

Chimaera—the giant bipedal hybrid beast—is inching in on the capital as we speak.

The beast has two horns at the top of its lion-like head and a tail that looks like a dragon's. Its hairy primate torso has gotten even more muscular, as well as its legs that resemble a horse's or deer's hind legs.

Look at those swole arms…

There is a reason why it arrived at such a conveniently perfect time for me.

To give the truth away, the big guy had left the underground cave quite a while ago to set out for the capital. It was supposed to be at the walls by the time the final tournament began, given there weren't any obstacles.

But I'd been using my illusion Barrier magic—the same kind used for my camouflage magic—to distort the beast's surroundings and have it walk around in circles to stall its arrival.

Thus, timing its appearance at the most opportune moment for me.

That would leave our showdown up in the air, but that's too bad. The battle between Char and me is destined to go unresolved.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What should we do?! The capital is in trouble!" Char is in panic mode.

I didn't give her a heads up. Sorry to startle you, Char. But fear not.

Shiva says, "I prepared something for you guys in case something like this happened." I'm Shiva, by the way. I switched places with Fake Shiva while everyone was distracted by the giant beast.

Phweee! I whistle.

Six little stars twinkle in the sky.

Zwoop!

They're flying in our direction. The six flying objects are all unique in shape and size. They come to a sharp stop before us, and slowly land upright in the arena.

"I-Is this…? Could it be?!"

As always, Char's quick on the uptake.

There are only four people on Char's team when there are six units. Out of nowhere appears…

"Kyah?! Huh, are we…at the arena?"

"Blgheh?! Wh-Why am I here?"

Welcome, Princess Marianne and Laius.

You guys have been helping Char with the card hunting quests so many times; I'd never let you miss out on the fun.

The two extra members could've been Flay and Liza, but Flay's on bodyguard duty for Dad, and she'd throw a fit if I invited only Liza and left her out. Hence Marianne and Laius this time. I hope Liza can catch a break today. She deserves it.

I recite my line in an authoritative tone: "I need you guys to get in that robot and save the capital from the Devil Lord's creation—Chimaera, the giant hybrid beast."

The hell am I saying, you ask? Please keep those reactions to yourselves. Char seems to be ecstatic, though. Yulia, too. Her eyes are lighting up. She sure is quick to adapt.

I conjure Anywhere Doors in front of each of the six people.

"Go on! You can enter the cockpit through those doors there, hurry!"

Sorry to rush, but chop-chop, guys.

The two girls walk excitedly through their doors. One by one, the others follow dubiously, defeatedly, apathetically…

"Wh-What the heck is this place?" Laius looks around, baffled, but proceeds to sit down.

The cockpit is equipped with a simple joystick.

"Is this what you use to steer the carriage…?" Marianne hesitantly puts her palm on it.

I tell them, "There's no time to explain how to operate it. For those of you who aren't familiar with gaming, don't worry. You're on autopilot."

My explanation does nothing but leave Iris and the others with more question marks over their heads.

Now that everyone's seated, let's get this show started.

"Take off!"

Vroooooor!

The six mechanical units slowly float up into the air vertically, turn to face the same direction—

Vwhoosh!

—and race off into the sky.

Since Char already knows exactly what's going on, allow me to explain.

The six flying mecha units are parts of a giant robot. If you already knew, keep it to yourself, okay?

Each unit is a part of the mecha: the head, upper torso and arms, lower torso and thighs, right leg, left leg, and the special parts on its back.

Char's unit is small and round. As you'd expect, she's the head of the robot.

"Oh no! The beast is already so close!" she shouts.

Char attempts to halt the advancing giant with the mecha's machine gun feature, but it doesn't stop its course.

"It's a bit early, but we're going to have to combine forces!"

Char's joystick has a button at the tip that says "Combine."

Click!

What's about to happen next?! Yulia is eager to find out. Everyone else is also wondering the same thing, yet their expressions are bleak.

"Wh-Wh-What's happening?!"

First, Iris's unit extends the long way and rises to become the upper torso and arms.

"Oh… I'm getting nauseous…"

Marianne's unit, the lower torso and thighs, chases after it.

Cla-shing! The two units dock into place. The shoulders protract and the legs stretch down as the two leg components connect to the thighs.

""……""

Uranis is quiet as usual, but what's wrong with Laius? Is he knocked out?

"Oh, is mine next?" says Yulia.

K-chunk. Her long and flat unit fastens to the robot's back.

The robot ended up soaring higher in the sky than intended. It casually descends as Char's unit also dips into the shoulder part.

Ga-chang. Her unit locks into place.

The robot lands on the ground with an earth-shaking rumble.

Sh-Sh-Shwoo… Shweeeng!

The head of the robot appears out of the mist and the backlight illuminates its final form.

"Magical Girl Robot of Justice has arrived, pardon our disturbance!" Char delivers the finishing touch to the

combination sequence.

The giant robot looks blocky, and the arm, waist, and leg joints don't look very mobile. But I guess combined robots in a sentai series are more or less like that.

Besides, the robotics designer (Mel) was so thrilled when she showed me her idea. I didn't have the heart to complain.

"Wh?!" Iris gasps, "Char…? What are you doing here? Yulia and Marianne, too!"

After the merging, the three girls' cockpits have been relocated to the torso section.

"It's customary to gather in one unit after combining," points out Char.

"What about me? I'm stuck down here?!" yells Laius.

"…" Uranis is silent.

Due to layout issues, six was a bit much, so I had them stay in their units.

I thought you were out cold, Laius. Did you wake up just to make a jab?

Anywayz, they're ready for action.

"Let's go!" commands Char.

"Go-o-o-!" Yulia cheers on.

The giant robot starts running—although nobody seems to be operating it—as its footsteps clash loudly.

"This baby's fast!" Char exclaims.

"It's surprisingly nimble for its appearance!" agrees Yulia.

Yeah, well, it needs to be dexterous if it's going to be put to use. Otherwise, it'll get knocked out pretty fast. Its agility is by design. *Let's not get into the physics of it, okay?*

"It's shaking! It's shaking! It's shaking?!"

Ah, I totally forgot about Laius down by the foot. Oh well, hang in there.

"Punch!"

Blonk!

They deliver a straight punch into the beast.

Clean hit!

The Chimaera stops in its tracks.

"Kick it over!"

Bloing!

A series of roundhouse kicks hit the enemy as it begins to stagger…and fall. However—

"What?!"

The Chimaera rolls over on its side, rises to its feet, and continues to march toward the capital's walls.

"It's completely ignoring us—oh no! It's running!"

And it's fast. The beast is sprinting at an unbelievable speed compared to its sluggish trudge earlier.

At this rate, it'll tackle the walls and demolish them.

I relay the information that Alexei the spy had given me earlier to the gang: "That thing's intention is to go on a rampage in the capital."

An icy tension falls upon the pilots.

Iris says bitterly, “If that’s the case, it would achieve its goal the moment it penetrates the wall. Even if we tried to stop it, the capital would be devastated just by it fighting against us.”

“Which only means one thing,” Yulia grins. “We gotta settle it before it reaches the wall.”

Char looks on with determination and exclaims, “Then we must give it our all to stop its advance. It’s a bit early, but it’s time to use our special attack!”

By now, everyone’s gotten used to the course of events.

“Of course there’s a special attack,” their faces seem to say.

“Everyone, please press the button at your side,” Char instructs.

There’s a console-ish thing next to each seat, and a rather big button in the middle of it.

“Ready? Press!”

Yulia is the only one to call it. The team could use some work on their coordination. That’ll be their homework.

Everyone, including Laius, who’s woozy and disoriented, presses the button at once.

The next moment, the giant robot raises both arms in the air as the unit on its back shoots upward.

As it slowly ascends into the sky—*schwing, shling*—it shapeshifts.

“Balmung—the Cursed Sword of Justice!” Char calls out.

The golden weapon shimmers.

Cursed…sword? I would've figured the Holy Sword, being Camelot and all… Oh well, it's all good!

The massive Holy Sword, or Cursed Sword rather, descends from the heavens and locks into the robot's hands.

A gust of wind rises from underneath the robot's feet as it begins to hover. It bolts toward the Chimaera at an alarming speed. Before you know it, the robot is inches away.

"Hi-yah!"

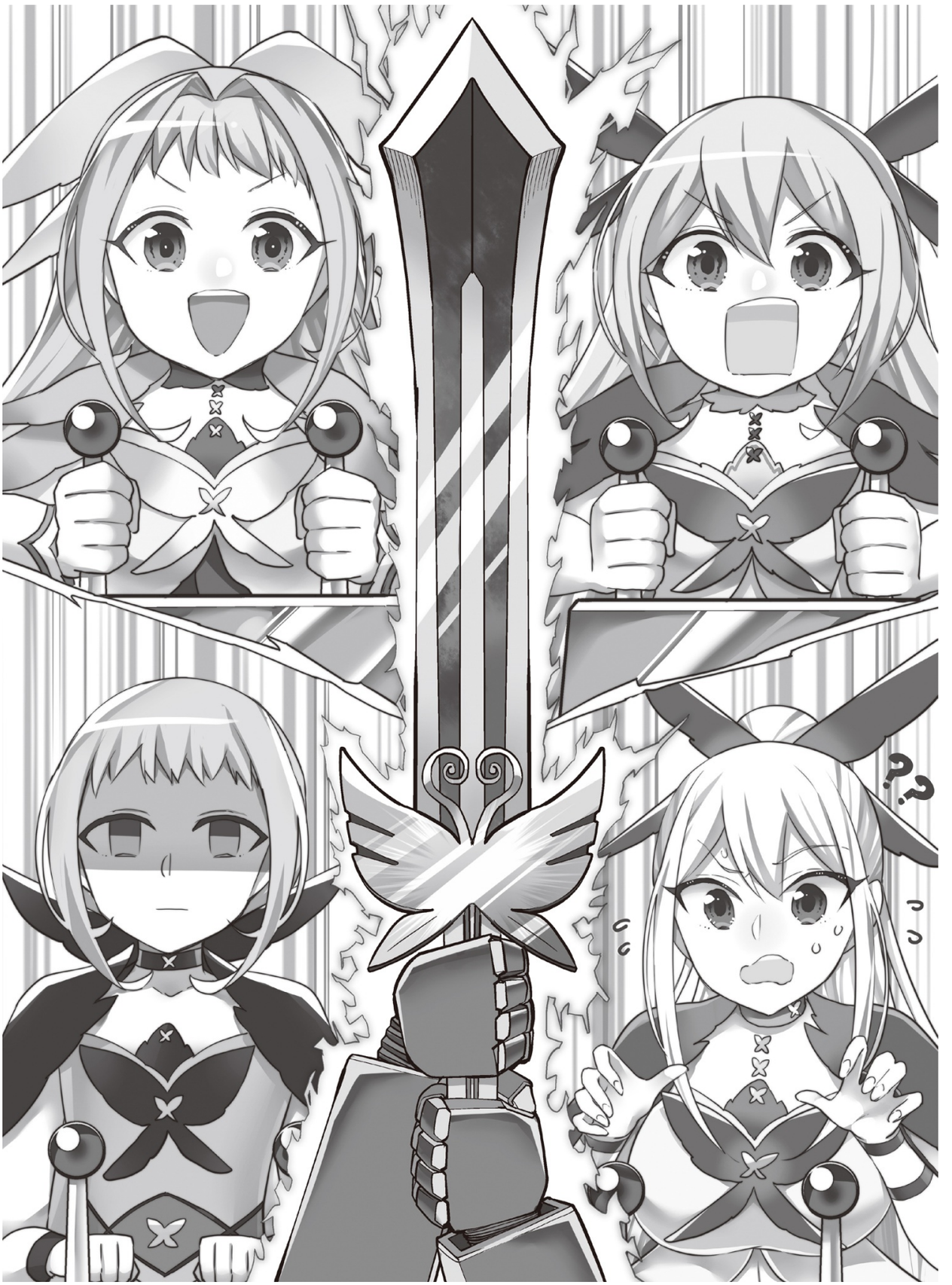
In the next second, the sword emits an ominous black mist as it slices into the beast's back.

Grooouuuaaah!

A distorted howl echoes throughout as the Chimaera crumbles to the ground. It was a hair's breadth away from reaching the stone wall.

Did they defeat it?

There's no time for a dramatic buildup. Even if they didn't defeat it, their special attack had been launched. That's the cue for the bad guy to exit stage left.



Flash! Bang-g-g!

I sink its colossal form into mystery space-time—

◇

Lucifyra, in Gizelotte's body, stands on a boulder in a desolate field. The Divine Blade of Light—one of the seven sublime weapons—rests at her side.

What on earth is going on?

She shudders as she stares at the capital walls in the distance.

What…is that thing? A bunch of metallic objects…conjoined together? And they became a…humanoid… Is this some sort of joke?

The beast was successfully developed enough in size and strength to devastate the impermeable capital wall. The plan was to ram down the walls and rampage through the city.

Charlotte and her comrades' interference was well anticipated, but not to this extent.

Why was Charlotte the one to face the beast and not Shiva?

Lucifyra had surmised that the girl had transferred most of her powers into Shiva to hoodwink the God-Killer.

Charlotte's powers are, in truth, nothing exceptionally out of the realms of man.

Which was why Lucifyra was so certain that Charlotte would determine Shiva to be the suitable contender for the synthetic beast.

The fact that Charlotte's firm defense can only be stripped by collecting special cards has been disproven. Her protection would've been lowered while Shiva was dealing with the beast.

It would've been the perfect opportunity to assault her and put her—and by extension, Shiva—away for good. Everything was supposed to work out.

That wretched humanoid structure… Charlotte and her comrades must be inside it. I just know it! I'd figured Charlotte would be safeguarded inside some sort of magic item during Shiva's battle, but this is beyond…

Had Charlotte's only means of defense been an ordinary magic item, there would've been ways to get around it. Gizelotte's weapon, the Divine Blade of Light—which has been passed down since the mythical ages—could've worked.

But who would've thought that humanoid structure would have offensive capabilities too…

There's no chance of winning.

Nobody could pull off such a feat except for…

"This must be your doing, Shivaaaaaa!!!"

Lucifyra looks up to the sky with murderous spite. Her eyes fall upon…

"That's right," replies Shiva. "And I'm here to settle the score with my own hands. Are you ready to meet your fate, Gizelotte—no, Lucifyra the Devil Lord."

Snap!

With a snap of his fingers, the scenery goes white.

All white. They're standing in a blank space.

The only thing that exists are the gridlines beneath their feet. They seem to stretch on for miles on end.

Teleportation magic…? No. This appears to be nothing more than a barrier with color added in. Impressive how he could've kept a barrier of this scale hidden all this time.

Lucifyra almost loses her cool, but she's instantly able to compose herself.

Which means he's made extensive preparations. He's not to be taken lightly.

However, that doesn't mean she's at a disadvantage.

Shiva says, "Well, we'll settle things soon enough. You wanted me to remove that collar, didn't you?"

She can't see through his black helmet, but she can imagine his expression underneath is a condescending grin.

The prisoner's collar—the spell that Shiva had ensnared Gizelotte with.

Its purpose is to keep her head connected to her body. Without the collar's magic, her head would detach from her neck and repel each other.

Victory may as well be Shiva's. She was entirely under his control.

"Heh, heh heh heh…"

Lucifyra knows that, too. However…

“You thought I didn’t take any countermeasures?” says Lucifyra.

She draws the sword from her hip and tosses its sheath aside.

“You and your imbecilic Ancient Magic!” She presses the platinum blade to the collar on her throat.

Silently, the crude collar splits into two. *Clank.* A dry sound echoes as the two metal pieces hit the floor.

“Wh-What…?” gasps Shiva.

Lucifyra’s body is still intact.

Now this *is the true power of the Divine Blade of Light. There’s no magic spell that my blade cannot break.*

The hidden powers of the divine sword that not even the great sage Granfelt—let alone Gizelotte—knew about.

The original wielder of the blade is none other than Lucifyra. At the time, the sword wasn’t referred to as “divine,” but the Devil Lord was familiar with all of its functions and ways to unlock them.

Shiva appears to be dumbstruck, but there’s no need to explain any of that to him.

The Devil Lord says, “You’ve made so many preparations, yet they were all in vain. It must feel like cold water to your face.”

The Black Knight isn’t the only one who came prepared.

I still have a few cards up my sleeve. Quite a few, actually.

The table is set.

One against one. The chance to come out on top is now.

Clang!

The sound of breaking chains is ringing from deep inside Gizelotte's body.

Cla-Clang, cla-clang!

Breaking one or two links wouldn't be enough. All of the chain links have just been shattered. Lucifyra only needs Gizelotte's body to hold out for a few minutes.

"AAAUUUGHHH!!"

The intensity of the mana emanating from Lucifyra distorts her surroundings—mana so dense that an ordinary person would be knocked to their feet if they came close.

During mythical times, legendary mages whose mana levels were in the triple digits would go to war to contend for supremacy. Lucifyra, too, had faced the Three Primordial Gods at some point. Her powers have since declined, but she's still able to maintain eighty percent of what she was once capable of.

"Very well, let us settle this once and for all!" the entity says in Gizelotte's voice.

Focusing her mana to gather into her fist, the Devil Lord takes her first swing.

As a declaration of war, she destroys the playing field Shiva conjured.

A sneer spreads across Gizelotte's face, forming a crack in her cheek. Such an intensive maneuver of mana is too much for a human to handle.

"You're next," she says, indicating the crumbled ground.

Without missing a beat, Lucifyra conjures countless magic circles in the air and unleashes magic projectiles from every single one.

They fire at the man in black from all sides. Each attack is destructive enough to blow a hole in the castle wall. Their explosive power multiplies when they collide into each other.

Surely even Shiva won't stand a chance against a force that could disintegrate a mountain.

Not a spatter of flesh would remain.

Did it work?

The explosions subside, and the wind clears the smoke.

"Im…possible…"

What she saw was just that.

Shiva can wield teleportation magic. The Devil Lord was confident that launching its attacks before Shiva gets a chance to use a spell would ensure victory. The bombardment could only fail if Shiva acts before it. And yet…

She breathes, "After all that… Not even a scratch…?"

The Black Knight hadn't moved an inch.

He's still in the same pose in the same spot. Not even a smidge of dirt on his collar, let alone a scratch.

Another one of Shiva's specialties is his defensive magic, which is a derivative of his teleportation magic—one that could open a "hole" that connects to another dimension and suck the magic attacks into it.

He was using it just now, for sure. But he was only able to block some of the attacks. The majority of the shots were deflected by a different defensive magic.

Lucifyra was able to witness the defensive magic in action from breaks in the smoke.

Was it an illusion that all of his blocks appeared to be a beginner-level defensive spell?

But that's impossible!

Impossible, indeed. Elementary spells like defensive magic, in theory, have no limit to their durability. However, the higher the defense, the more mana would be needed to maintain it.

Such a feat is truly impossible, even for the Three Primordial Gods.

The Black Knight must be wielding a special kind of defensive magic. If so, penetrating his protective force would be infeasible.

"In that case!" shouts Lucifyra.

There's no time to let her spirit falter. If one method doesn't work, on to the next!

The Devil Lord in the queen's body grips her sword and charges head-on.

No matter what kind of defense the Black Knight wields, no matter what kind of trickery he uses…

As long as it's within the realms of magic, my sword will slash it!

She darts at the quickest speed her vessel can manage and swings the blade down with all her might.

Whsh…

She feels no impact, but she sees Shiva standing before her, evenly sliced in two from head to toe.

I did it! This time, for sure!

What an underwhelming victory. Shiva was a tough opponent, but she only believed so because of his bizarre appearance and mannerism.

This outcome should've been expected after giving her all—no, more like eighty percent—of the Devil Lord's full strength.

In the end, the man dressed in black was nothing more than…

"Wait, I didn't feel like I struck anything solid…"

That's just odd.

If it were a magic circle that she severed, not feeling any physical impact would've made sense.

But here Shiva is, split in two without her even tasting the sensation of flesh being cleaved apart. How could that be?

"Mwahahahahaha!"

Lucifyra looks past the halved opponent to where the irksome laughter is coming from. There stands another Shiva—

"It's an afterimage!" he says.

The two halves of the Black Knight disappear.

“Hmm, now I get it,” he says. “I didn’t quite understand what ‘Magic Circle Severance’ meant, but apparently, it’s something that could even nullify the collar’s effect and sever the gateway to mystery space-time. I gotta say, I wasn’t expecting that. Glad I played it safe and dodged out of the way.”

“H-How do you…know that…?”

“It’s always a good idea to do a little research about your opponent. Especially when you’re up against some Devil Lord.”

Shiva then gives a brief explanation of how he’d snuck into the queen’s room earlier and assessed the divine sword’s magic and functions.

“If I’d switched out your sword for a dupe or tinkered with it, you would’ve noticed something was off. Besides, I’ve always wanted to try the ‘It’s an afterimage!’ stunt, so it all worked out for me.”

Shiva crouches low.

“And now it’s my turn.”

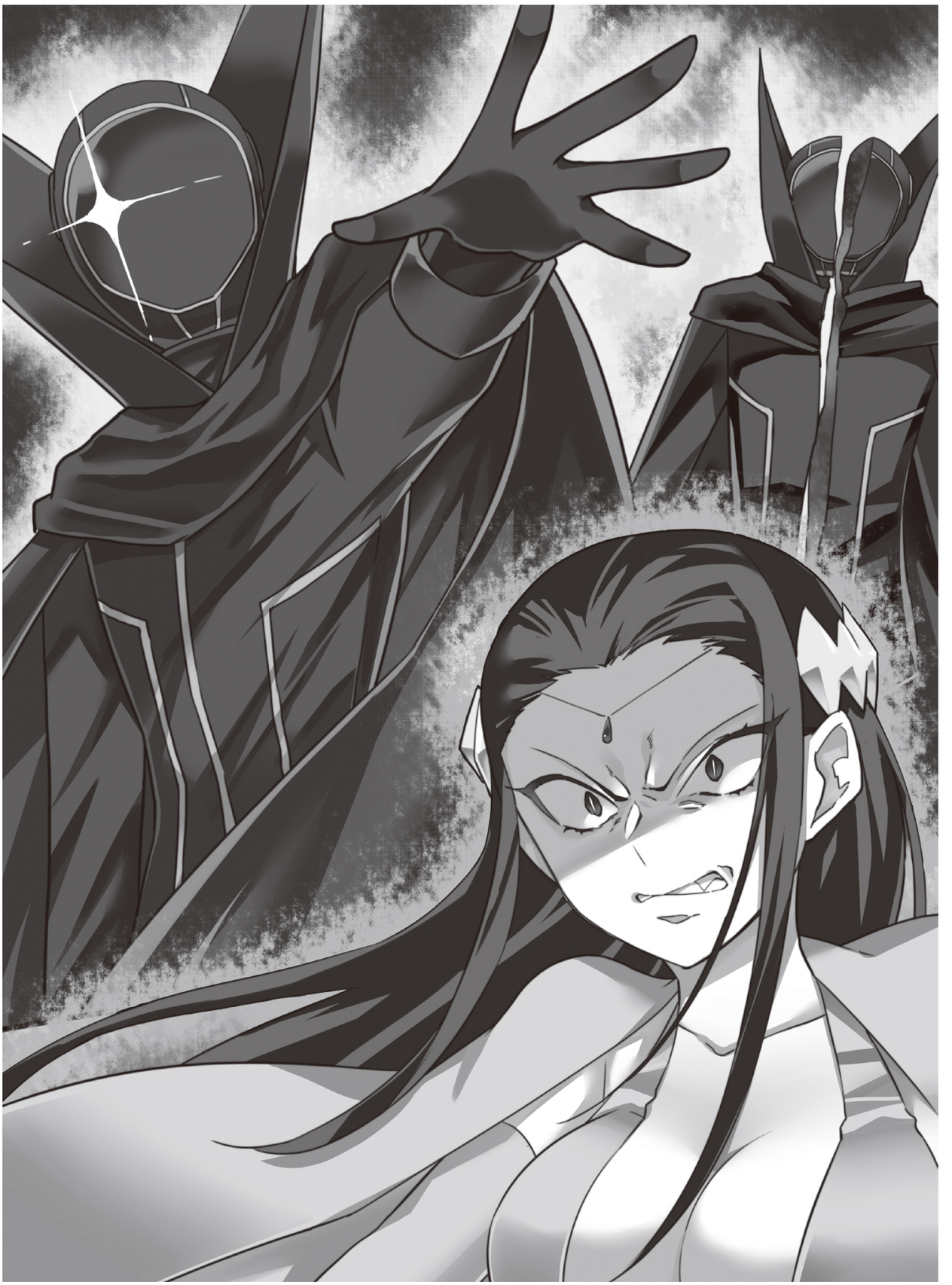
“Wh…” The Devil Lord raises both arms as if to cover her face.

Fwhp, Spurt!

Her skin splices, and bright red fresh blood spatters out of the gash.

This vessel won’t last any longer, the Devil Lord thinks. *In my current state, I wouldn’t be able to block any sort of attack at all.*

Amidst her despairing defeat…



“Huh? What are you laughing about?” asks Shiva.

…the Devil Lord is certain of her victory.

◇

The enormous bipedal beast had disappeared without a trace. A deep crevice is left in the ground, perhaps from the explosion that destroyed the creature.

The beast was merely a few yards from breaching the capital’s walls.

“That was close! But we managed somehow.”

Inside the cockpit, Char lets out a sigh of relief. Irisphilia and Marianne also look pleased.

Just then, they notice a figure standing along the gorged earth.

“Is that Mr. Alexei?”

A slim male student is waving his arms in the air.

Charlotte, realizing she hadn’t given him a communication magic device, decides to call out to him.

“Mr. Alexei, is something the matter?”

“Shiva entrusted me to deliver a message, as well as this.” He holds up a metallic card.

“Is that the Lucifer Card?!”

“Yes, I found it right here on the ground. Sorry I went ahead and collected it,” he says.

“No, not at all. Thank you so much. And what is the message?”

“His message is, ‘I discovered how to seal the cards. With this method, you can completely seal the Devil Lord Lucifyra’s powers.’ Do you mind coming down here to take the card? I’ll explain in detail when you’re down here,” he says as he waves the card around with a mischievous grin on his face.

Charlotte is surprised; she’d never seen him make that expression before. *Brother Haruto must’ve left me with a final assignment,* she figures, and doesn’t hesitate to answer.

“Okay. I will be right there.”

Once she decides on something, she doesn’t hesitate to act on it. That is one of Charlotte’s positive traits, and at the same time, a recipe for disaster.

The Devil Lord may as well be a sitting duck at this point. It’s only a matter of minutes before Gizelotte’s body completely collapses.

Yet Lucifyra is smirking as if she’s assured of victory.

In the distance, she can see a colossal humanoid object looming by the capital walls.

It must be some sort of highly efficient magical device Shiva conjured to protect his master and main entity, Charlotte.

With Charlotte taking shelter in its core, there’s nothing the Devil Lord could do.

It could probably be destroyed with the Divine Blade of Light, but that’d be difficult in her current position—standing face to

face with the Black Knight.

But Lucifyra was prepared for such a situation; she had made a few modifications to Alexei Guberg.

Alexei's soul had been completely seized, and his memory of his connection to Lucifyra was erased.

Right now, Alexei is simply acting on Lucifyra's order to lure Charlotte into coming in contact with him, dangling Shiva as bait.

The Devil Lord had embedded a spell in Alexei's body. When Charlotte touches him physically—even through a small object like a card—a huge explosion would occur.

Charlotte is guarded by a strong defensive barrier, and even has a spell that could relocate an attack to another location, which is likely a derivation of teleportation magic.

But that was just proven to be permeable.

Lucifyra had utilized one of the unique functions of the Divine Blade of Light—the holy sword that could cleave through any force of magic—by engraving a spell directly on Alexei's body.

A spell that would cancel all defensive magic and cause an explosion.

Alexei has no malicious intent or rivalry toward Charlotte; she wouldn't think twice about approaching him. When the spell activates once she's within arm's reach…

The plan is flawless, no doubt. Shiva is right here, preoccupied with me. He couldn't possibly act to defend her.

Lucifyra keeps her gaze on Shiva while focusing on Charlotte and Alexei's situation in her peripheral view.

Alexei extends his hand to pass the card to Charlotte.

She takes it carefully.

"Ah-hahahaha! Looks like I win, Shiva!"

Now! A massive explosion—a condensed version of all the attacks she had launched at Shiva earlier—is about to go off…

H-Huh?

The card is in Charlotte's hand. The Devil Lord catches a glimpse of Alexei happily chatting with her.

"Wh-Why…?"

The preparation was perfect, yet nothing is happening. The Devil Lord attempts to manually activate the spell, but there's no response.

Shiva speaks up. "What the hell are you—oh, are you wondering what's going on over there?"

He turns around to look at where Charlotte and the others are and utters the unbelievable.

"Alexei-senpai is back to normal. Sucks for you."

"What…?"

"I was gonna ask him for a favor after the first round ended, but he was acting weird, so I knocked him out, probed around, and found a dangerous explosion spell," explains the Black Knight. "I found some other spells, too. Like the one you

transferred from your sword. They all looked unsafe, so I removed them all."

The spell engraved in his physical body isn't something you could simply deactivate, let alone remove. Not even the caster could completely erase it.

"By the way, that little piece of yours, or residue or whatever that was infesting him—I peeled that off, too."

Shiva keeps talking, but Lucifyra is no longer listening.

Why does every move I make get nipped in the bud? Every single one…

The man dressed in black says, "I'm sure you know by now that I'm aware of all of the tricks you set up. And I have an idea of the scope of your strength as well."

He looks down on the Devil Lord—literally, although the metaphorical distance between them feels much greater.

"You're like a book with a misleading cover—wait, that's not quite what I'm trying to say. It's more like you're only pretending to give me your best shot. It's all a bluff, right?"

"Wh-What…?"

What the hell is he saying?

"Let's see… My best guess is… What you've shown me so far is only twenty percent of your full powers when you were in your prime. No, wait, you're supposed to be a god-like being, so maybe not even ten percent…"

What Shiva is saying is definitely not the case. The current Devil Lord is able to wield almost eighty percent of her full

potential. For just a few seconds when she bombarded Shiva earlier, that number was close to one hundred. The magic missile attack was so intense, it could've flattened not just the capital, but a whole mountain.

"Welp. I'd like to finish you off before you're fully revived."

Hypothetically speaking, had Lucifyra, in her fully revived form, accounted for every possibility and made every preparation to combat every scenario…

No… I couldn't… Not even an army of us Mythical Rulers could…

It'd hardly be a fight.

I never should've gotten involved with him…

He's beyond what anyone could ever imagine.

This man can't possibly be defined as something so weak as a devil. That raises the question of what exactly his relation to Charlotte is, but she couldn't care less about that anymore.

Right now, surviving is all that matters to Lucifyra.

"Shall we negotiate a deal?" the Devil Lord cries.

"The heck? Why the hell would I do that with you?"

That's an expected reaction.

But it's not like Lucifyra has no bargaining chips at all.

"I've embedded numerous magic circles that emit poison all across the capital."

"…"

The Devil Lord can sense the overwhelming mana seeping from Shiva.

“The spells will be activated the moment I perish.”

It’s not a lie. Normally, the spell could be activated manually from afar, but in the worst-case scenario, the spellcaster’s death would be the trigger.

“I’m sure you’d be able to find each one if you take the time to look for them. Go on and do so. I will take my leave for now,” says Lucifyra. Pride and shame have gone out the window. At this moment, leaving Shiva’s field of view is all she can think about.

“Uh, no?”

Yet another expected reaction. However, there’s still a chip left.

“That little girl will be sad, no?”

“Well, yeah, if you scatter poison all over the capital, the citizens will be in pain. That’ll make Char sad,” answers Shiva.

That should buy me some time.

The man dressed in black would probably stalk Lucifyra relentlessly. However, if she’s able to escape this current vessel, and if Shiva doesn’t notice, perhaps she still has a chance of surviving.

It looks like my new vessel, Vari, is still alive. Good.

They hadn’t lost their connection. She appears to be knocked out, but her physical functions are still intact.

It seems I’ve gotten myself into the worst-case scenario after all. How could I, the Devil Lord…? Still, as long as I’m alive, there’s still hope for recovery…

“But that’s not an issue either,” says Shiva.

Vr-Vrrn.

Countless translucent screens appear before the Black Knight.

At this point, witnessing an outlandish form of communication magic that not only displays visuals but also plays sound is nothing for Lucifyra to be surprised by; the X marks on every single screen, however, leaves her at a total loss.

“You’re talking about these, right?” asks Shiva.

Her lifeless eyes are fixed on the screens, and she’s unable to even nod.

“I haven’t touched them because I didn’t know what you’d do if you discovered them broken, but…”

Kli-Kli-Kli-Kli-Kli-Kling!

Lucifyra gapes as each spell in the magic circles dissipates. She has no more chips left.

I… I must…escape…

She turns around, showing her back to her opponent. *I’ll let Shiva have me and immediately take shelter in Vari’s body. Recovering my mana can wait.*

For now, I must escape…and stay alive. I must survive—

“Ah…”

The scenery changes.

It’s the same blank white space as before. Such a large-scale barrier would’ve required some preparation to conjure.

“This one’s sturdier than the last one. I’m not letting you get away again,” warns Shiva.

He was able to conjure a completely closed off space in an instant. His powers exceed the realms of gods.

Before Lucifyra realizes, she’s lost all connection to Vari.

◆

I trap the Devil Lord Lucifyra inside my barrier.

This one is the seriously serious kind, so I successfully cut her off from everything on the outside world.

Even if I forgot to pluck out a spell or two in the capital, she won’t be able to activate them. Probably.

“It’s time to end this.” I stroll toward her.

“Hyeah…?!”

The Devil Lord turns to face me, but she falls flat on her butt and inches away. Looks like she’s lost the will to fight.

I pity thee.

Who knows what would’ve happened if the Devil Lord was as strong as she was in her prime. Please don’t call me a coward—winning the fight before giving the opponent a chance to charge to full power is a legit strategy.

“What are you…going to do…?”

Ask you to politely bow out, of course.

Except, there’s one problem.

I don’t give a hoot what happens to some Devil Lord, but Gizelotte’s death is going to cause a huge headache later.

Queen Gizelotte absolutely needs to stand trial in public and be judged accordingly.

And a mysterious man dressed in all black executing her is bound to make her supporters revolt. This hag is surprisingly still popular among a small community.

For that reason, I can’t just off her.

At the same time, it’d be too dangerous for my dad or anyone else to deal with her while she’s still under the Devil Lord’s control. She seems pretty weakened now, but who knows when she’ll regain her mana.

Which only gives me one option.

I gotta suck it up and work a little harder.

Sheesh, I can’t see her face clearly with this helmet.

Plop!

I remove my headgear.

“Wha?! Wh-Who are you?” the Devil Lord exclaims.

Oh yeah, this might be the first time we’ve seen each other since I was born.

“I’m the guy inside Shiva, duh. Anywayz—”

I can’t be bothered to carry a conversation with her, so I get straight to the point.

I stare at Lucifyra. I give the being inside Gizelotte’s body a good hard look.

“Found ya.”

I can see it in the center of her head. Or wait, more like inside the brain. It's a bug-like creature nestled, not really in the physical body, but more like in her soul. Its form is blurry and hard to describe, so I'll just call it a "bug."

I conjure numerous microscopic barriers.

Operating in the third dimension might damage her brain, so I surround the bug with my barriers from a couple dimensions above…

B-glunk!

Gizelotte's body jerks wildly. I don't know if that was the trigger, but the bug enveloped in my barrier flies out.

I catch it with my right hand.

"Blegh!"

Hm, I just heard it make a noise. I wonder if it could still talk in this form.

I listen carefully and hear a tiny voice yammering endlessly about sparing its life or something.

What should I do?

For the time being, I could leave it trapped in my barrier and show it to Professor Tear—

"Achoo!"

Splat!

Oops… Did I smush it?

I open my hand and inspect it carefully. There's nothing there. I look all around, but there's no Devil Lord in sight. In fact, I can't feel anyone's presence other than my own.

“Urh, Ugh… Shiva…?”

Gizelotte looks up at me, still in a daze.

I could just hand her off to my dad… But before I do that, I should give her a gift: an impending sense of despair and a chance to self-reflect.

I tear open my fitted black uniform to reveal my chest.

“……” After a long pause, “Wh—” she barely lets out a gasp.

“That insignia… Could it be…? Are you…?” Gizelotte chokes, and slowly musters her words. “N-No… How…? You couldn’t… You couldn’t be…”

Apparently, she doesn’t want to accept reality. Not that I want her to be like, “My oh my. What a strong boy I gave birth to!” or anything.

For now, I just wanna make one thing clear to her.

“I’ve risen from hell to seek revenge on you and the king,” I say as I take a step toward her for intimidation.

Whoa, she’s shaking like a leaf.

“N-No, it wasn’t my idea. It was Jilq’s… It was the king’s orders. I didn’t want—”

“But you agreed to it, didn’t you? I heard you saying so.”

I’m just bluffing. In truth, I don’t know what she said. But—

“?!”

Gizelotte widens her eyes, flabbergasted. Judging by her reaction, it’s indisputably a fact. She’s so easy to read.

“Either way, you’re not even worth laying a hand on at this point. Watching you—the woman who once controlled the powers of a god—be convicted by the people might be entertaining, though.”

I land one final blow to the quivering woman before me.

“You might as well spend all that time in jail coming up with every excuse to save yourself. After all, you’re the master of self-rationalization, aren’t you?”

“W-Wait—”

Nope, don’t wanna hear it. I conjure a hole right below Gizelotte and let her fall. She passes through mystery space-time and…

THUD!

“Ack!”

…falls into my room.

“Did you just hear the queen’s voice?”

“Yes, from that way!”

Multiple footsteps stomp closer.

“Over here!”

A crowd of muscular soldiers and high-level sorcerers storm into the room.

“Gizelotte, you’re under suspicion of committing treason. You’re coming with us. It’s best you do not resist,” Count Gold Zenfis states coldly.

“N-No, it’s not what you think! It wasn’t me. The Devil Lord was controlling me!”

“…”

The count—the only one in the room who knows that she’s speaking the truth—looks down at her gravely. The others, however, stare blankly for a moment before letting out snickers.

“I have witnesses who can testify!” bawls the queen. “Alexei Guberg and Zara Yessel have been possessed by the Devil Lord, just as I have.”

Silencing those two shouldn’t be too difficult. I’ll just kindly ask for their cooperation in Shiva Mode.

Gizelotte continues to shriek with her hair in disarray.

“And there’s even Shiva—the Black Knight! He was the one who defeated the Devil Lord and pried it off me. That’s right—that man deserves to be rewarded by the queen later.”

Oh, hell no. I don’t think so. No way she’s trying to cling to me for help. I’m gonna deny everything.

She’s freaking out quite dramatically; I don’t think she even knows what she’s saying anymore.

“I saw his face,” she sputters. “He looked very much like me—fine, delicate features with black hair like mine. H-He saved me… Saved…me? B-But wait, we killed… Eek! No! I didn’t abandon him! It was the king who ordered—”

Her mental breakdown is reaching the zenith.

My dad, or Count Gold Zenfis, speaks up in a low, apathetic voice, “We’ll hear your excuses at the specialized court.” Then, he

turns to the soldiers and orders, “Restrain her and take her away.”

The tough-looking soldiers obey my dad and tie her hands behind her back. They lift her up by her arms.

“Wait!” Gizelotte begs. “There’s more! There was another person who met the Devil Lord, and he was with me even after I became possessed. That man, um… His name was… Huh? Why can’t I remember his name?”

She’s being weird again.

Oh well. The whole plan couldn’t have been a bigger success.

My dad knows about the whole Devil Lord thing, but to the public, it’s a far-fetched tale that’s hard to take seriously. I’ll bet even Gizelotte’s supporters would roll their eyes once they see how deranged she’s become.

It was worth revealing my true identity to get a rise out of her.

All her crimes will be brought to light, and she’ll be convicted and shamed by the masses.

…And happily ever after. Yup.

After watching Gizelotte get dragged away, my dad looks up to the ceiling. His gaze does not meet mine.

“I’m sorry…” he says.

I’m not bothered at all.

I never considered that wench to be my parent in the first place. Besides, my only family in this world is the one that’s always looking out for me. That’s for sure.

◇

Theresia Montpellier is on the sofa in the headmistress's office. She lets out a sigh.

I've lost all connection with Lucifyra.

Across from her, a female student is lying fast asleep on the couch.

It's Lucifyra's loyal subject Vari, a devil. She's disguised herself by changing her hair color and skin tone. Although she looks a bit mature to be a student, she's enrolled in the academy as Vari Lucia.

I cannot even feel Lucifyra's presence. Shiva must've…

…completely erased its existence.

One of Vari's functions is to act as the Devil Lord's vessel in the event of an emergency. If they had lost connection with her as well, it's hard to believe that Lucifyra is still alive.

At this moment, Theresia is still under the assumption that the Devil Lord has perished along with its vessel, Gizelotte. It's a little after that she learns the queen had been imprisoned for treason, which is baffling to her.

Just in case, though, Theresia had taken measures to ensure that Gizelotte will remain in the dark of what's going on in the headmistress's office.

Setting that aside…

Shiva… What in heaven's name are you?

There are only a few possible answers to that question. For example, he could be one of the pillars of the Three Primordial Gods.

They weren't the confrontational type. If anything, they sought peace and cooperation among others.

However, among the three, their power was extraordinary and disturbing.

No one had been able to harness the pillar gods, and once they bared their fangs at you, they were unrestrainable. They truly were hard to interact with. And at the same time, they had a deep desire to enjoy their life as they pleased.

Should I continue to keep an eye on Shiva? Or should I initiate…?

Either way, she'll need to tread with caution.

While she's contemplating to herself…

"Hm… Urgh…?"

Vari stirs and slightly opens her eyes. Before she could even get a grasp of her surroundings, Theresia smiles softly.

"You have nothing to fear," she says as Vari's eyes shift color to a glowing crimson.

"Huh… Ah?!"

"You've been freed."

Theresia rises from the sofa and walks around the coffee table toward Vari.

The devil begins to sweat profusely, unable to get up or even lift a finger.

“Don’t be scared. I won’t kill you. That’s not my intention.”

Theresia grabs Vari by her face and continues, “However, I cannot allow you to spill anything. In that sense, Alexei Guberg is also a risk, but he’ll be fine.”

Vari’s mind slowly sinks into darkness.

“From now on, you’re just a simple female student at my academy. Just a poor, poor girl who’s lost her memory. Let’s keep it at that, shall we?”

Plick.

Finally, Vari hears the sound of her mind being snipped off from something.

Yulia Martienna is on her bed in her dorm room.

Her “brother” Uranis is standing next to her.

Normally, male students aren’t allowed in the female students’ dorms, but Uranis is always at her side. In fact, he hasn’t stepped foot in his own room in the boy’s dorm since he moved in.

“What do you think?” she asks.

Uranis answers her vague question:

“Shiva and Haruto Zenfis are the same person.”

Yulia dangles her legs over the edge of the bed.

“Aww, that’s no fun.”

“I’m relieved, frankly. Two people with that kind of talent would’ve been an immeasurable hassle.”

“That’s true, I guess. But still, it takes away the fun of finding out who’s stronger.’”

She leaps off her bed.

“I want to do a little more investigating.”

“I don’t recommend that. He possesses the Divine Eye. He acknowledges us as allies for the time being, but if we snoop around him incautiously, he’ll perceive us as threats.”

“Hmph… That’s too bad. Oh well, it’s not like we’re trying to take up arms against him. If anything, I want to be friends with Char,” Yulia says with a sincere smile. “On the other hand,” her smile fades, “*she* will suspect something and probably keep a close eye on us. What should we do? Should we keep it to ourselves?”

“You mean Theresia Montpellier? If we do tell her what we know, she will certainly make the wrong assumption that Haruto is one of the Three Primordial Gods. In fact, she may already be thinking it. If we tell her anything, her misapprehension will turn to firm belief. At the same time, she’ll identify what we are as well.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s keep quiet, then.” She comes to her conclusion rather flatly and is already beginning to think about something else.

Uranis notices and pulls her back into the previous conversation topic.

“What do *you* want to do?” he asks.

Yulia seems to understand what her taciturn other half means by that.

She responds, “I want to enjoy this world the way it is for a little longer.”

The sunny smile on her face looks fake, but her words are from her heart.

“Enjoy how?” the boy asks, although he already knows the answer.

But by voicing those words, Yulia would reaffirm her feelings. That was one of the roles of her other half—Uranis the magic device.

“Let’s see… I want to keep playing Magical Girls with Char. And in order to do that—” She smiles broadly.

We’ll need to make some arrangements.

We’ll need some bad guys for the Magical Girls of Justice to beat up. Lots of them.

AFTERWORD

The anime! Is! Starting! (Or did it already?) Whee!

The day has finally come. I'm 澄守彩 (Sumimori Sai). Also known as すみもりさい (Sumimori Sai).

I believe the anime adaptation of *Am I Actually the Strongest?* has begun just as this volume is hitting the store shelves in Japan. I think. I hope.

All of this was made possible because of your support. Seriously, sincerely, thank you from the bottom of my heart!

The content of volume 6 is, in short, "chaos."

Chaos is the premise of this whole series, so you could say it's business as usual.

In this volume, too, the main character Haruto must set aside his lazy shut-in life to entertain his adorbs-loaded little sister Char. And he's really giving it his all.

Yup, he sure is working hard. What ever happened to him being a "shut-in"?

Another highlight in this volume is that Charlotte makes a friend her own age. They do magical-girly stuff together. Seeing Char happy makes Haruto's heart fuzzy.

Meanwhile, we enter the final showdown with Haruto's archenemy. Compared to Char's feats, this arc may look like a side story, but I assure you it's not. Or not not.

The manga adaptation that's being published in Nico Nico Seiga's magazine, *Wednesday's Sirius*, is on a roll, popping out one volume after another. It's gonna catch up to the light novel soon! I'll try to work harder so it won't…

I'd be truly grateful if you could continue to support both.

Finally, some words of thanks.

To Ai Takahashi, who did the illustrations for this book and the manga series. Thank you so much for creating such cute friends for Char. I look forward to our continued collaboration.

To all the editors at K Ranobe Books, and to my editor, Mr. M. I am so sorry this one took so much time. Please don't abandon me. I hope to continue to work with you!

Lastly, I want to thank my readers from the bottom of my heart. The light novel, the manga, the anime—all of this happened because of you. Thank you so much!

Whether or not you follow the web version, I hope very much that you enjoy this series!

Sai Sumimori

Am I Actually the Strongest? 6

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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