So I'm a Spider, So What?
6
OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU

A Four-Person Journey / "Gifted Child Education" Begins
That's right. I'm in charge of educating Vampy now.
At a glance, it seems like she could fall at any moment, but she doesn't stop toddling along.
She can't.
Because my thread is wrapped around her limbs, forcing her to keep walking like a puppet.

When the strongest human mage enters the Great Elroe Labyrinth...
A swarm of white spiders as far as the eye can see.
More tiny spiders emerge from eggs, set off to hunt, and return with monster corpses.
In the process, no doubt some of those spiders become prey instead of predator, but it matters not, for more spiders are hatching far faster than their kin could possibly die.
It's not merely hellish.
This cannot be anything but hell itself!
* This image is an approximation. Please see the illustrations in the main story for more details.

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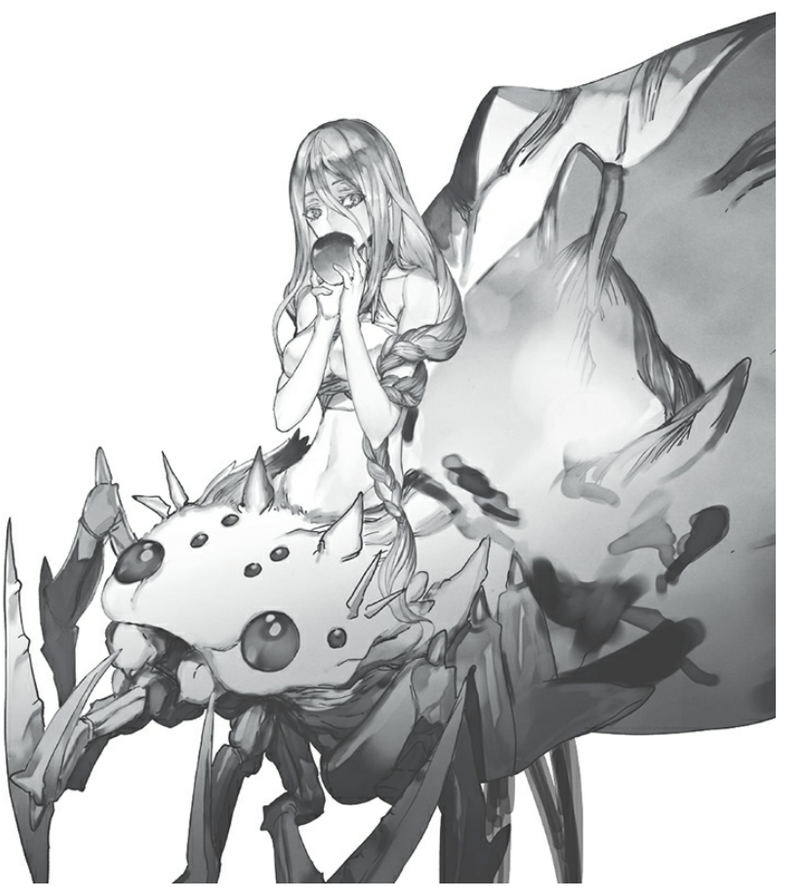
6



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So I’m a Spider, So What?, Vol. 6

Okina Baba

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by Tsukasa Kiryu

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KUMO DESUGA, NANIKA? Vol. 6

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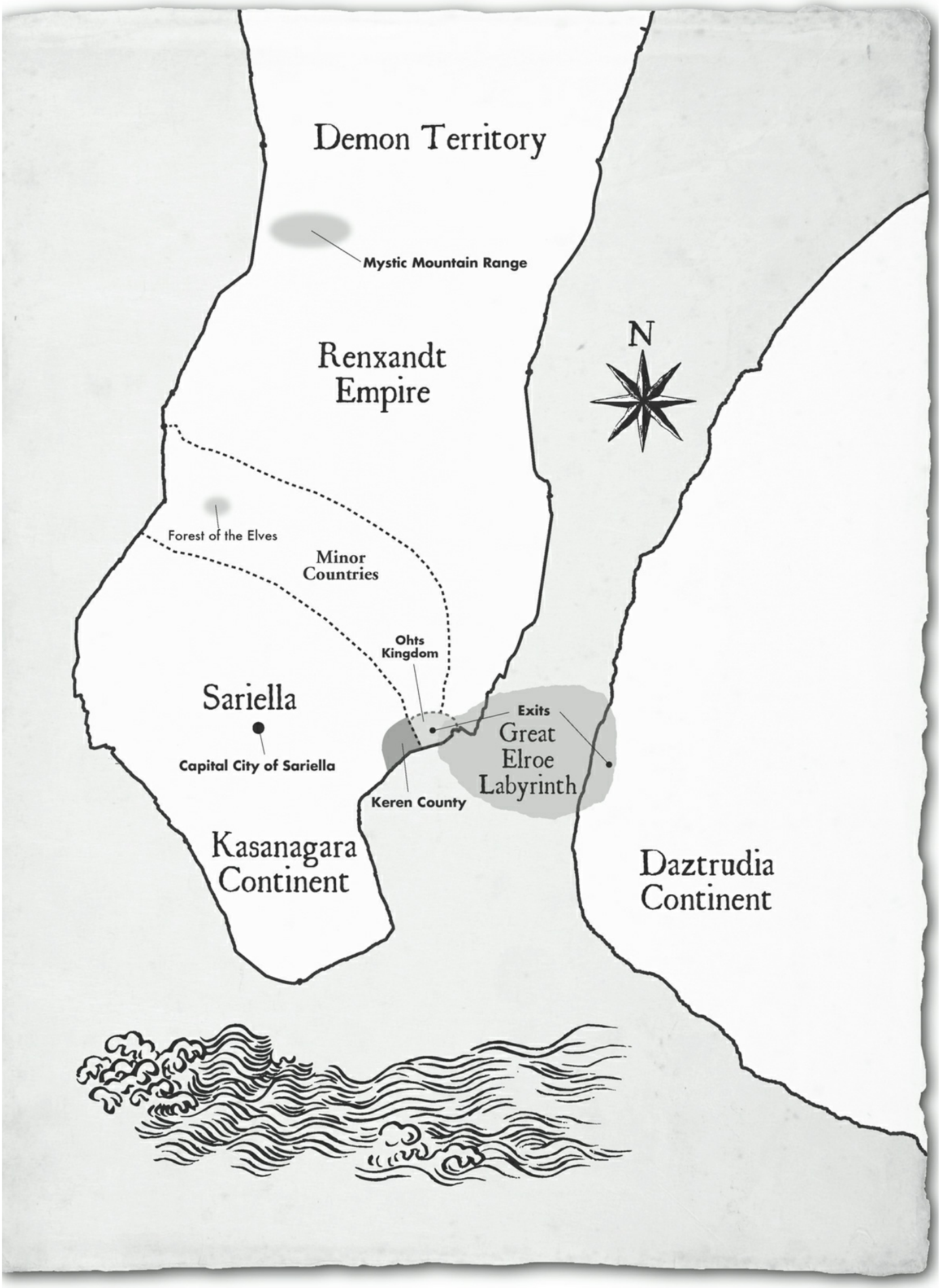
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Report on the Nightmare of the Labyrinth

The Nightmare of the Labyrinth (henceforth referred to as “the Nightmare”) is a dangerous spider monster estimated to be legendary-class.

The first reported sighting of the Nightmare was in year 841 of the Kingdom Calendar in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

When abnormal behavior broke out among the monsters in the labyrinth, Ohts requested the help of their allies in the Renxandt Empire in finding and resolving the source of the problem.

Accepting the request, the Empire sent a group of knights into the labyrinth to investigate, where they happened upon the Nightmare.

Based on a judgment call made by the labyrinth guide and the knight captain, this force immediately retreated without engaging in combat.

Not long after, the knight captain called for reinforcements.

In response, the Empire dispatched an elite squad, led by the summoned knight Buirimus.

The team engaged in battle with the Nightmare, leaving only Buirimus alive.

Later, the Nightmare appeared outside the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

It destroyed the Elroe fortress in Ohts.

For some time after that, its whereabouts were unknown.

Right around this period of time, a queen taratect broke through the bedrock and emerged from the Great Elroe Labyrinth as if summoned by the Nightmare.

The queen taratect destroyed Mt. Uine with a single breath attack, then returned to the labyrinth.

The exact connection between this queen taratect's actions and the Nightmare is unknown.

The next sighting of the Nightmare occurred the following year, Kingdom Calendar 842, appearing in what was Keren County of Sariella.

After creating a nest near the town at the center of Keren County, the Nightmare resided there for some time.

During its stay, there are accounts that claim the Nightmare healed sick or injured villagers, culled the robbers who were running rampant at that time, and chased away nearby monsters.

The humans who benefited from this likened the Nightmare to the Goddess's Divine Beast, a mythical spider of legend, and began to spread praise of the monster throughout Sariella, possibly as a form of propaganda.

This behavior was a complete turnaround from the Nightmare's obliteration of the Empire's elite force and the destruction of the fortress in Ohts.

However, based on the fact that the citizens who lived near the Nightmare for so long were not harmed, combined with the existence of official statements by the former lord of the territory, most believe this account of events to be true.

It was around this time that Ohts took issue with Sariella.

Ohts stated that it was inexcusable for Sariella to worship the Nightmare as a divine creature after it had caused direct harm to Ohts and demanded they hand over the monster.

Sariella rejected this demand.

Tensions between the countries mounted.

Being followers of the Word of God, the Ohts Kingdom always held enmity against the Goddess-worshipping Sariella, but this incident caused their relationship to worsen all at once.

To make matters worse, the diplomat who had been sent to negotiate regarding the Nightmare suddenly died of unexplained causes.

There are those who believe the Nightmare was responsible for the death, but the veracity of this claim cannot be determined.

Others suggest that Sariella assassinated the diplomat.

With this incident as the final straw, the countries went to war.

The battle took place at Zatona Plain and is now known as the Tragedy of Zatona.

Sariella had a force of forty-two thousand soldiers.

Ohts had backup from the Empire and other countries that follow the Word of God, for a total of fifty-three thousand soldiers.

On this occasion, the Nightmare followed the Sariella Army to Zatona Plain as an ally and launched a magical attack against the Ohts Army.

It is said that this attack obliterated 10 percent of the Ohts Alliance Army.

As they were literally “obliterated,” no corpses remained, indicating the scale and power of the Nightmare’s attack.

This single attack crushed the morale of the Ohts Alliance, putting them in an unfavorable position.

However, no further records exist in our land of what occurred at the Tragedy of Zatona.

The battlefield was in chaos, and more importantly, there are so few survivors who know what truly happened, so it is impossible to record the truth in our history.

Some say the Nightmare began attacking indiscriminately, while others say it was fighting something or someone else, but the reality of the situation is unclear.

All that is known for sure is the Nightmare’s rampage resulted in massive losses for both armies.

Misery Loves Company

Not a single cloud in the sky.

The sun beams down warmly, while a gentle breeze keeps things from getting too hot.

Weather can't get any better than this.

It's the perfect day for a picnic!

"Wooo… Wooo…"

But sadly, reality isn't so kind.

In spite of the perfect weather, the dense forest all around keeps the sunlight from reaching us.

And then there's the infant—or rather, baby—who's already knocking on death's door.

Her wheezing breath is starting to sound a little weird, but we shouldn't pay that any mind.

While we're at it, let's ignore the fact that she's toddling along this mountain path despite being a literal baby.

A baby walking along with a deathly look on her face sounds like something out of a horror movie, right? I mean, it's not exactly the kind of thing you'd normally expect to see.

But of course, this baby who's currently marching along to rave reviews is no ordinary baby.

She's a reincarnation like me, and as a bonus, she's also a Progenitor vampire.

By the way, her stats look something like this:

<Human Vampire LV 1

Name: Sophia Keren/Shouko Negishi

Status:

HP: 23/37 (green) (details)

MP: 3/62 (blue) (details) : 19/86 (red) (details)

SP: 0/86 (yellow) (details)

Average Defensive Ability: 41 (details)

Average Offensive Ability: 34 (details)

Average Resistance Ability: 61 (details)

Average Magical Ability: 59 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 33 (details)

Skills:

[Vampire LV 2]	[Undying Body LV 1]	[HP Auto-Recovery LV 4]	[MP Recovery Speed LV 2]
[MP Lessened Consumption LV 1]	[SP Recovery Speed LV 3]	[SP Lessened Consumption LV 3]	[Magic Power Perception LV 3]
[Magic Power Operation LV 3]	[Presence Detection LV 4]	[Magic Warfare LV 1]	[Mental Warfare LV 1]
[Stealth LV 4]	[Silence LV 2]	[Kin Control LV 1]	[Telepathy LV 7]
[Concentration LV 5]	[Arithmetic Processing LV 2]	[Memory LV 3]	[Parallel Thinking LV 5]
[Prediction LV 2]	[Appraisal LV 3]	[Water Magic LV 1]	[Ice Magic LV 1]
[Rot Resistance LV 1]	[Status Condition Resistance LV 5]	[Fear Resistance LV 5]	[Night Vision LV 7]
[Five Senses Enhancement LV 4]	[Life LV 2]	[Magic Mass LV 3]	[Instantaneous LV 4]
[Persistent LV 4]	[Strength LV 2]	[Solidity LV 2]	[Technique User LV

3]

[Protection LV 3] [Running LV 2] [Spite LV 4] [n% I = W]

Skill Points: 73,800

Titles:

[Vampire] [Progenitor] [Originator] [Foul Feeder]

>

She’s still a baby, yet her stats already rival that of a weak creature.

She has tons of skills, too.

Probably not enough battle-focused ones to actually beat a monster in combat, but still.

That’s a pretty astounding rate of growth!

I guess maybe this is proof that the sooner you start educating a gifted child, the better.

That’s right. I’m in charge of educating Vampy now.

First of all, I want to make it clear I’m not doing any of this to be mean.

At a glance, it seems like she could fall at any moment, but she doesn’t stop toddling along.

She can’t.

Because my thread is wrapped around her limbs, forcing her to keep walking like a puppet.

Heh-heh. She might be at her limits, but with this method, she can bust right through them and continue training!

Do you want to get stronger but lack the willpower to stick with it when the going gets tough? Then this is the perfect training method for you!

If you sign up now, your first lesson is free!

So yeah, I'm walking her like this to raise her physical stats and skills.

Physically, she's still a baby, so even simply being puppeted around is pretty significant exercise for her, which means her stats and skills will go up at a decent rate.

After all, she normally wouldn't even be able to walk at this age.

It's possible only because she's a reincarnation, plus she has the benefit of extraordinary stats.

That covers the physical aspect, but of course I've got magic on lock, too.

I had her use skill points to acquire Water Magic and Ice Magic for something to practice on. Plus, she's also using Magic Warfare as she walks to improve her magic stats.

Why am I training Vampy in the first place, you ask? Because I'm bored as hell on this journey, of course.

Currently, we're making our way toward the capital of Sariella.

But given the fact that I'm now a half-human, half-spider arachne and all, I'm sure my arrival is going to cause a huge racket.

Also, Vampy's faithful servant, Mera, is a vampire, too, so there'd be trouble if people figured that out.

To top it all off, the elves seem to be after Vampy's life for some reason.

That should explain why we're trying to escape unwanted attention by traveling through the forests and mountains and whatnot.

If you were stuck traipsing through trees and stuff every waking moment, you'd be bored out of your mind, too!

As a way of killing time along the way, I'm mentoring Vampy.

All I have to do is make her walk, so it's pretty easy!

Unfortunately, she looks like she might really hit her limit soon, so I'd better stop for now.

Her MP, SP, and even her HP have started to drop.

I release the thread that is holding her up. Immediately, she collapses, exactly the way a puppet would tumble down if someone cut its strings.

Yikes, she landed headfirst, too. Is she all right?

The baby bloodsucker lies facedown without so much as a twitch, and Mera rushes over in a panic. “My lady?! My lady! Can you hear me, miss?!”

Mera lifts her tiny body, faces her upward, and shakes her a little.

No response. She’s totally passed out.

He quickly checks to see if she’s breathing.

Come on. She’s alive, okay?

I stopped right before crossing the line that would actually kill her, ya get me?

I mean, yeah, maybe her eyes have rolled back and her mouth is frothing a little, but she’s fiiine. Don’t worry so much.

As Mera continues to administer emergency care, I carry on.

Next order of business: preparing food!

I gather up some sticks lying around, add my thread to the pile, and start a fire.

Unless its resistance is boosted, my thread burns very easily.

That caused me a lot of trouble in the Middle Stratum back in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, but depending on the situation, sometimes a weakness can also be a strength.

Once the fire is lit, I use Spatial Magic to pull a frying pan and some ingredients out of Spatial Storage and get ready.

Heh-heh-heh. Now that I’m an arachne with human hands, I can finally cook for real!

Unfortunately, all I knew how to do in my old life was heat things in the microwave or boil water, so I can’t make anything too fancy.

There aren’t any microwaves or cup ramen in this world, so my old cooking techniques aren’t even useful here.

What’s that?

Using a microwave or boiling water isn’t a proper cooking technique, you say?

That’s just, like, your opinion, all right?

As far as I’m concerned, those are the fundamentals of cooking.

By the way, the cooking supplies are things I’ve borrowed from Vampy’s former home.

The place was burning up, so I helped myself to some ingredients and other household goods.

That might sound like looting to you, but the lord and lady of the house were dead, and their next of kin—the baby—allowed it, meaning no problem here.

I got permission from Mera and Vampy, all right?

And yet I still wound up getting some skill called Usurp.

It’s unreasonable, if you ask me.

Anyway, putting all that aside, I produce some meat from Spatial Storage, pop it on the frying pan, and start cooking.

Just don’t ask what kind of meat it is, okay?

I know it looks, like, super-poisonous, but don’t think too much on it.

I add seasoning more or less at random and serve the cooked meat on some plates.

Voilà.

Vampy wakes up right as I’m finishing, so I hand her a plate.

I offer Mera a plate, too, then get back to cooking.

This time, the meat I’m cooking looks like proper food, not the poisonous kind.

As it starts to smell pretty good, Vampy’s eyes dart between the meat in the frying pan and the gross-looking stuff on her plate.

Cut it out. This one’s for me, okay?

You’re not supposed to stare at other people’s stuff so enviously.

“Lady White, might I ask you to produce some proper food for the young miss as well?” Mera asks politely.

“White” is a nickname the Demon Lord gave me of her own accord.

Kind of a weird name, but it feels pointless to complain about it now, so I’ve just kind of been letting it happen.

Forget that, though. Right now, I should be responding to Mera.

Ummm…

Hang on a minute.

Just a moment, please!

I wish people wouldn’t talk to me out of nowhere like that.

My communication skills are so low that I never know how to respond!

Oh boy. Seriously, what do I do now?

Okay, calm down.

At times like this, you’re supposed to count prime numbers, right?

One, two, three… Argh!

That’s all wrong!

One’s not even a prime number!

Uhhh, what did he ask me again?

Right, he wants me to share some poison-free food with Vampy, right?

But I’m not giving her poisonous food to be mean-spirited, you know.

As they can probably tell from the color, Mera’s and the baby’s food does indeed contain poison.

But that’s just to raise their poison resistance.

If they keep eating it, their resistance will go up, and they’ll even get the Foul Feeder title.

The one little downside is that it tastes pretty bad, but that’s it. So there’s no

reason not to eat it!

Although I already have the Status Condition Nullification skill, so I'm not going to!

Okay. So. I just have to tell him "no."

Here I go.

I'm gonna say it.

I'm gonna count down from ten, then I'm gonna say it.

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.

"It's all right, Merazophis. I'm sure she's not going to listen to you."

Just as I was starting to open my mouth, Vampy cut in with Telepathy.

Mera seemed to give up, too, and looked away from me with a sigh.

Ah, dang it.

All that tiny amount of effort for nothing.

Yeah. That's pretty much how these things tend to go.

It takes a comparatively large amount of time and effort for me to say even a single word.

But nobody seems to understand that.

In the end, even if I try to say something, I usually get shut down like this.

As a result, I have yet to manage a proper conversation.

I finally have a human mouth, but I never get the chance to speak!

But if I can get by without speaking, I guess it's no big deal.

Mera and Vampy are looking the other way now, so I go back to my cooking.

The meat is ready, so I put it between two slices of bread with some vegetables and hand it to my other fellow traveler.

"Thanks." The Demon Lord, Ariel, accepts the sandwich with a guileless grin.

Can you believe this?

This girl who looks like she's in her early teens is actually a demon lord?

And she's so strong that she could wipe me out with a single punch?

Not long ago, we were playing a pretty deadly game of tag, where I would've died if she caught me.

Why am I traveling with someone like that?

It's a mystery.

I make a meat and vegetable sandwich for myself, too, and start eating it.

Mmmm! Juicy!

This oddball little group started traveling together after a revolt in the town that Vampy's dad was running.

To sum up that situation, her father's territory lost a war against a neighboring country, and the town fell.

Then a bunch of other stuff happened, and the four of us ended up joining together.

Yeah, I know. It doesn't make any sense, does it?

I don't get it, either!

How did this happen?!

I mean, I understand Vampy and Mera coming with me, I guess.

To be honest, I am just a tiny bit to blame for the fact that those two lost their family and home.

But the town, or rather the whole country of Sariella, had always been at odds with their neighbors, the state of Ohts.

As it turns out, though, Ohts just so happens to be the location of an entrance to the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Which also makes it the place where I totally blew away a fortress when I first escaped from the labyrinth…

Sariella, on the other hand, follows a religion that worships a certain spider as a Divine Beast.

Yeah, I got *super*-worshipped and stuff.

So then Ohts was all like, *Excuse me? You guys are worshipping a monster who blew up our friggin' fortress? You wanna go or what?*

And Sariella was like, *Shut up, losers! Let's go—we can take this outside!*

Something like that anyway.

I still can't believe they actually went to war, though. This world is crazy!

Ha-ha-ha. It's really not funny, is it?

Unreal.

It's like, I dunno, dude.

I guess the truth is, I feel bad that my moving into the neighborhood wound up causing that town so much trouble.

I mean, Sariella and Ohts were already kinda at each other's throats, so I get that they sorta used me as an excuse to finally go at it… But at the same time, it's not like I don't feel any guilt over it.

All this means that I can't exactly turn my back on the baby and Mera when they've lost everything.

It's not as if the blame lies squarely on my shoulders or anything, but I'm still willing to look after them a bit.

But then we have our other fellow traveler, the Demon Lord, Ariel.

I *really* don't understand how I ended up traveling with *her*.

She's a demon lord, and we used to be mortal enemies, so why are we working together?!

It doesn't make a lick of sense!

But no. To be fair, I guess I do actually know how it happened.

We had finally reached what was essentially a stalemate where neither of us could touch the other, so we figured this way, we could keep an eye on each other.

That's right. My battle with the Demon Lord isn't really over.

We're both watching and waiting for our chance, so it's more like a temporary truce.

Or I guess you could call it a cold war.

For my part, I simply can't beat the Demon Lord unless I get much, much stronger.

On the other hand, the Demon Lord doesn't know the secret behind my quasi-immortality, and she wants to prevent her army from taking more casualties.

In the end, we reluctantly agreed to a cease-fire.

Although when she originally proposed this agreement, my quasi-immortality was sort of restricted, so I didn't really have any choice but to agree.

See, the secret to my "immortality" is a combination of the actual Immortality skill and my egg-revival technique, in which I use my Egg-Laying skill and then transfer my consciousness into an egg as a sort of pseudo-reincarnation.

As a result, I basically can't be killed.

The Immortality skill, as the name implies, makes it so that I can't die within the system of this world.

However, there are a few loopholes to that rule.

That's why I've supplemented it with egg revival.

Even if something bypasses the Immortality skill and destroys my body, I can abandon that body and be revived.

With this combo in place, I pretty much can't die, period.

Buuut when the Demon Lord suggested the truce, I'd already used up all my eggs at the time, so I couldn't actually use egg revival.

Moreover, the Demon Lord has a way to get around my Immortality skill.

I didn't really have any choice but to say yes!

Luckily, I managed to set up some new eggs after that, so I don't have to worry about getting killed anymore.

Nonetheless, there are certain advantages to working with the Demon Lord.

I'm looking forward to having her on my side in battle.

Battle against the elves, to be exact.

See, the reason I started hanging around Vampy's dad's town in the first place was that I found out the elves were targeting the baby.

Or, to be exact, because apparently every one of my Parallel Minds hates elves for some reason.

They were all eating Mother's soul a while back, and it seems like they wound up absorbing some of her thoughts and memories, too.

At any rate, I wound up in a fight to the death against this elf called Potimas, who was attacking the baby bloodsucker.

Things got crazy, for various reasons.

He was wicked strong, and also turned out to be a robot, and he deactivated my skills and stats somehow.

Man, I seriously thought I was gonna die there.

If the Demon Lord hadn't barged into the middle, I might've been in serious trouble.

And since I'm now traveling with Vampy, who'll potentially be targeted by that Potimas guy again, I can't say I mind having the Demon Lord around to protect us.

She seems to hate the elves, too, or rather, it's probably because she hates the elves that Mother hated them, so if Potimas shows up, she'll most likely fight him of her own accord.

But even besides that, there was no point in continuing my fruitless fight against the Demon Lord.

Neither of us really has a reason to fight each other anymore, to be honest.

The only reason I was revolting against the Demon Lord, or rather her subordinate Mother, was because Mother used her Kin Control skill to try to manipulate me.

In the end, once my Parallel Minds had eaten away at her soul instead, I was able to finish her off myself.

The Demon Lord came to deal with me in response to Mother's distress call, but when one of my Parallel Minds—formerly body brain—started leeching her soul, too, she got her own personal reason to fight me.

But now, she seems to have fused with my former body brain somehow.

It's apparently a result of her fighting against the threat of assimilation as her soul was eaten. So now, while she's basically still the Demon Lord deep down, she's a new being who's inherited the thoughts and wills of two entities.

Since they fused, she doesn't have to fear being taken over anymore, so that means she's got no more reason to attack me.

That being said, we still hold grudges against each other.

But put another way, aside from those little grudges, we don't have any reason to fight anymore.

There's nothing in it for either of us if we keep going at it.

I guess we could actually turn this truce into a full-blown alliance.

But there's no need to rush the decision.

As long as the Demon Lord doesn't figure out the secret to my Immortality and come up with a countermeasure, my life isn't in danger.

That's not the kind of thing you can pull off in a day or two.

Actually, can she do it at all?

Even I can't think of a good way around it.

Besides, Immortality skill aside, how would she ever figure out my egg-revival method?

This means I have plenty of time.

I only have to decide what to do at some point.

That doesn't mean I plan to take it easy the whole time, though.

I'm still working on my skills and stats every day so I'm ready to deal with the

Demon Lord and Potimas at any moment.

In fact, my Spartan training of Vampy started out as part of that plan.

See, I was thinking, it'd be nice if I could get the same Puppet User skill the Demon Lord has, but I don't have any puppets and… Oh wait, there's a good one right there!

This led to me moving Vampy around with my thread.

When I did that, the baby's skills and stats started going up like crazy, which was amusing to me, so I kinda started turning it into a raising-sim-game type of thing.

It's like, oh man, our little girl's getting so strong! Let's keep it going!

Of course, both the baby herself and her guardian, Mera, strongly objected at first, but the Demon Lord generously gave them a very optimistic explanation that managed to convince them, so they go along with it now even if they'd really rather not.

From their perspective, I'm currently raising Vampy's stats and skills because it's the best thing for her future!

How could I possibly admit that it started simply because I wanted to earn a title, and then I kept doing it because I'm bored and it's sorta fun?

But ever since the Demon Lord convinced them, I'm happy because I can amuse myself, and Vampy is happy because she can get stronger. Isn't that a win-win?

I'm too tongue-tied to ever talk them into it, so I'm grateful for what the Demon Lord did. I never thought I'd say that, especially in a situation like this.

It almost makes me think that maybe she really does want to make amends.

I guess fusing with my former body brain means she's totally devoted to me now!

"Huh? That's weird. For some reason, I suddenly feel annoyed."

The Demon Lord frowns and tilts her head uncertainly as she stuffs her face with the sandwich I made.

She’s a real mystery.

Thus, our less-than-friendly lunchtime comes to an end.

Ahhh, that was tasty.

Not for Vampy and Mera, who look pretty unhappy after enduring their nasty poisoned meal, but never mind them.

“Oof!”

Now that break time is over, we can get back to our super-fun death march!

I attach thread to the baby’s body, stand her up, and start forcing her to walk again.

If you really want to get strong, you can’t waste a single minute.

You won’t get anywhere unless you’re constantly building yourself up!

Theeere you go. Coochie-coochie-coo. Good baby.

Her little face looks incredibly displeased as I walk her, but I know for a fact that doing this will improve her skills and stats.

A little pain and suffering is worth it if it means you’ll get stronger, right?

Incidentally, I’m training all the time to improve my skills, too.

Or rather, my Parallel Minds are.

That’s right. Since they got kinda weird after devouring Mother’s soul, I used the egg-revival method to kick them out of my body into brand-new ones, where I guess they’ve been training and improving our skills of their own accord.

That’s all well and good, but it seems like they’ve been spending my skill points to acquire new skills, too.

I keep discovering new skills I’ve never seen before.

For instance, the spell I used to light that cooking fire was Fire Magic, which one of my Parallel Minds acquired without even asking.

Fire Magic. Fire’s my biggest weakness, so I’m sure that must’ve cost tons of skill points…

Sure enough, I check my stash of skill points and it has gone down a whole lot.

I want to complain, but our souls don't seem to be connected to the same network anymore, maybe because they have their own points.

Also, I acquired the Telepathy skill at some point, so I'm guessing they can't communicate among themselves via their souls anymore, either, right?

That means the only way to lodge a complaint would be to go see them directly, but I don't know exactly where they are right now.

They're probably somewhere in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, but I have no idea beyond that.

It's not like I want to take my eyes off the Demon Lord just to go see them anyway.

I can't really complain, and they *are* improving my skills, so I guess we'll call it even.

The improvements they make to their skills seem to reflect back on mine, too. The more they train, the more my skills go up.

If I can improve my skills without even lifting a finger, I assume that's a good thing, right?

I don't exactly love that they're deciding stuff on their own, but I guess I'll be the adult here and give them a pass.

Mm-hmm. As long as they don't do anything crazy.

They won't, right?

Of course not… I hope.

I'm getting a bad feeling about this, but I'm sure it's only my imagination.

Yeah, let's go with that.

Meeting of the Parallel Minds #1: We've Got Skills!

"Let's get some skills!"

"All of 'em! Gimme every skill!"

"Erm, well, we can't get *all* of them."

"Well, let's at least pin down the different magic skills."

"Agreed."

"Wait a second. Fire Magic costs ten thousand skill points?!"

"Ten thousand? LOL!"

"Goes to show how bad we are with fire."

"Boop!"

"You did it anyway?!"

"Never give up! Never surrender!"

"That's the kinda line people say right before dying!"

"Well, we've got it now. But what are we gonna do with it? The level-one spell is just 'Ember.'"

"And I bet it's gonna take a looot of work to level it up…"

"Never ask questions!"

"I don't think that's part of the quote…"

THE OLD MAN GOES ON A JOURNEY

I try to refine my magic power.

But it amounts to nothing more than a pittance, a far cry from what I am picturing.

In my mind, of course, I am imagining that being.

The spider I saw in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Compared to that wondrous creature's mastery of magic, which bordered on artistry, my skills are crude and inadequate.

Is this all the strongest mage in the Empire—the world, even—amounts to in the end?

I cannot accept that.

I must be the strongest.

My magic must go further than anyone else's.

Otherwise…

"Ronandt, you are the world's strongest mage and I the world's strongest swordsman. If we are together, especially with the hero in the mix, we need fear nothing. Certainly not the likes of demons. You and I have the strength to protect the Empire and the world."

It was the previous sword-king who had spoken those words.

He was my dear friend and comrade.

From a young age, we swore to protect the Empire together.

And yet, one day, he vanished. Without a word, even to me.

The disappearance of the man said to be a god of swordsmanship cast a shadow of fear not just on the Empire but on all of humanity.

Which is why I must…

“Master Ronaaandt. My butt hurts.”

“Mind your manners, child. You are a girl, technically speaking, are you not? You mustn’t talk that way.”

As we clunk along in the rattling carriage, the girl sitting next to me, Aurel, shamelessly complains.

Still, I suppose it’s only natural that she would become sore after sitting in this uncomfortable carriage for so long. I have the Pain Nullification skill, so it matters not to me, but Aurel is unlikely to enjoy the benefit of anything similar.

“Whaddaya mean, ‘technically speaking’? Sure is a rude thing to say to such a lovely lady, if you ask me, pal!”

“Foolishness. There is little difference between man and woman, especially at such a young age. That is what makes it a mere technicality. If you wish to be treated as a lady, perhaps you ought to act accordingly.”

“Hmph!” Aurel grunts irritably.

Aurel is a child who is meant to be my attendant.

Her age is seven, or perhaps eight?

Either way, it matters not. She is still but a child.

As she puffs up her cheeks sulkily, I suppose there is indeed something endearing about her, but that is no different from any child.

It certainly does not make her a “lovely lady.”

But I suppose I am not one to bully a child.

I cast Healing Magic on Aurel to dispel her pain.

“Ooh, thanks! Damn, nice one, Master Ronandt! They don’t call you the world’s strongest mage for nothin’!”

Aurel’s mood improves immediately. Further proof that she is indeed a child.

“Flattery will get you nowhere. And I am not the strongest magic user in the world by any means.”

“There you go, being all modest again.”

No, this is beyond the concerns of modesty.

Seeing that great being’s strength made me realize how far I still have to go.

The spider monster known as the Nightmare, whom I think of as the true master of magic, thoroughly put me in my place.

When we fought that great being with a squad of knights behind us, only Buirimus and I survived.

No, I cannot even call it a fight.

That was nothing more than a one-sided slaughter.

Even I, the so-called world’s strongest mage, had no option but to run.

My mistake was to vainly assume that no monster could possibly be a match for me, and carelessly set fire to that great being’s nest.

Had I proceeded with more caution, perhaps the outcome would have been different.

Instead, my foolishness brought about disaster.

Yet for some reason, all of the blame for the loss of the entire squad was placed squarely on Buirimus, the other leader.

He was demoted and essentially exiled to the harsh environs of the Mystic Mountains, a region home to many powerful monsters.

My laughably minor punishment was house arrest, and yet Buirimus was practically ordered to die.

It seems that no matter what blunders I commit, the Empire will not lay a hand on me.

Even if the only reason I survived was Buirimus.

At any rate, as a fellow survivor, I wish for Buirimus to keep living as well, but all I can do is have faith in his ability to protect himself.

“Guh?!”

The carriage gives one last violent bounce, and Aurel lets out a cry as she lands sharply on her bottom. We must have arrived at our destination.

“It is time to disembark.”

“M-Master Ronandt? My butt hurts too much to move.”

Aurel clutches her backside and whines, leaving me no choice but to cast another Healing Magic spell on her.

When we disembark from the carriage, we are met with a smell so rank, my nose nearly withers away.

It was certainly somewhat smelly while we were aboard the carriage, but now that we are standing in what appears to be the source of the stench, it becomes that much stronger and fouler.

“Ewww…” Aurel pinches her nose, looking quite the fool.

I pay the driver of the carriage for bringing us all this way.

We were the only passengers.

There are few who would voluntarily come here on a whim, and scarcely a stagecoach to be found, so I had to procure a carriage.

As thanks for his trouble, I pay a little more than the necessary fee, and the driver smiles happily before heading back in the direction we came from.

“Come now—let us be off.”

Aurel continues standing there, frozen in horror, so I start walking away without her.

I can sense her hurriedly catching up to follow me.

It’s hard to blame her for hesitating, though.

Despite her attitude, Aurel is in fact a born and raised aristocrat.

Though she is the daughter of a relatively poor noble family, it is no doubt unusual for a girl of a decent upbringing to spend time in a place like this.

After all, this is a town that was overrun and destroyed by an enemy army.

This is a settlement lying at the center of Keren County in Sariella.

No, I suppose I should say *former*.

This town fell in a recent battle against Ohts and is now under their control.

“Stop!”

A soldier shouts at us from outside the wreckage of a gate.

Ignoring the command, I continue to approach, and the soldier panics and readies his spear.

“Stop, I say!”

“You had best take a good look at who you’re speaking to before you go around giving orders, boy. Do you know who I am?”

The soldier and his comrades look at one another, unsure how to deal with my haughty attitude.

“You are soldiers of Ohts, yes? Did your superiors not inform you of my coming? I am Elder Ronandt, the court sorcerer of the Renxandt Empire. I have come in great haste to investigate this town’s connection to the Nightmare.”

The soldiers all freeze when I introduce myself.

They might not know my face, but they should certainly know my name.

Even if by some small chance they do not, they still can’t risk disrespecting anyone associated with the court of the Renxandt Empire.

Officially, the country of Ohts has an alliance with the Renxandt Empire; in reality, though, Ohts essentially serves the Empire as a vassal.

These soldiers wouldn’t dare be rude to the royal court sorcerer of the Empire that rules their country.

“Don’t just stand there. Go and call your commanding officer and give me a tour at once!”

One of the soldiers hurries into the gate building, probably to get confirmation from their superior.

I stand with my arms folded, waiting imperiously.

Meanwhile, I can feel someone's eyes boring into me.

It's Aurel, who is still behind me.

I don't need to turn around to know that she's staring at me with her mouth hanging open.

You see, despite me arrogantly sweeping in here and boldly declaring my name, Ohts has not actually been informed that I was coming here!

I am currently under house arrest, after all!

My presence is a secret not just from Ohts but even from the Empire itself.

Thus, even their superior officer won't be expecting me, never mind the soldiers themselves.

However, a confident demeanor can get you a long way.

As I continue to wait, the soldier reappears with two people in tow.

Seeing one of them makes me flinch mentally.

"How kind of you to visit us today, Master Ronandt."

Behind the man's gentle smile and words, I can practically hear him demanding, *What are you doing here?*

"Indeed. You seem to be in good health, Tiva."

I smile in turn and give the man a handshake, but inside I am beginning to panic. I was not expecting this man to be here.

Tiva is one of the knights of the Empire who holds court rank.

A serious man in the prime of his life, he is highly trusted by the current sword-king.

Most likely, he is here as the supreme commander of the coalition force arrayed against Sariella, a severe miscalculation on my part.

It was certainly a possibility that the commander would be someone I know, but for it to be the most troublesome person possible is truly terrible luck.

"I must apologize. It seems there was a miscommunication; Ohts failed to inform us that you would be coming, Master Ronandt. Forgive my haste, but

could you draw up the papers permitting Master Ronandt to stay?”

In addition to being excessively diligent, he is highly adaptable to unexpected situations like this, making him all the more dangerous.

With a few smooth words, he’s sent away the Ohts official who came with him to make papers for me.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I shall give Master Ronandt his tour. Let us go, Master Ronandt.”

Guided by Tiva, I step into the town.

“Well then, Master Ronandt, why have you come here?”

As we walk, Tiva glares coldly at me, the gentle smile vanishing as if it had never been there.

“Hmph. I have come to seek information about the Nightmare, which reportedly appeared here.”

“Ah yes. A creature on which you wish to exact revenge, correct, Master Ronandt? Oh dear—I suppose that is meant to be a secret.”

Officially, Buirimus and his men are the only forces who did battle with that master of magic in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

According to the Empire, I was never there.

It’s best that no one finds out that the strongest mage in the Empire was defeated, after all.

“However, while the official stance may be that you are unconnected to that incident, you are nonetheless under house arrest at the moment. I would prefer that you refrain from this sort of independent activity.”

Tiva’s manner of being seemingly accepting of others while browbeating them with technically correct arguments has never sat well with me. This is why I do not get along with him.

I wish Aurel would stop looking at him with eyes full of admiration as he scolds me.

“As such, I would appreciate it if you would entrust this town’s supervision to

myself. I shall contact the Empire, so please wait quietly until someone comes to fetch you."

"I shall do no such thing!"

Tiva heaves a sigh, making no effort to hide his irritation with my response.

"Master Ronandt, the Nightmare was killed by a massive magic attack on that battlefield. It did not leave a single trace or a corpse, which means there is no point in searching for it."

"Don't be foolish. Such a thing could never have killed a being as great as that. Anyone who witnessed that battle would undoubtedly reach the same conclusion."

Tiva falls silent.

At the battle between Ohts and Sariella, that wondrous creature appeared and unleashed its fury.

As the commander of the Empire Army in this area, Tiva would surely have been present.

If he saw the power of that great being with his own eyes, then he must realize as well as I that no mere human power could ever come close to harming it.

No, that being is undoubtedly still alive somewhere.

But I know not where it went. That is exactly the reason why I have come to this town in search of clues.

"Master Ronandt, even if the Nightmare was still alive, what do you hope to accomplish by looking for it?"

"It is obvious, is it not? I wish to become its apprentice!"

Yes, that is my goal.

I once believed I was the strongest in all matters of the occult.

But before the power of that master of magic, my skills were nothing more than child's play.

If I wish to pursue such power, the fastest way would be to learn directly from

that master.

Tiva freezes for a few moments after hearing my response.

“Are you a complete fool?” he asks at last. “Ah, excuse me. I must beg your pardon. I shouldn’t have phrased that as a question: You *are* a complete fool.”

How rude!

“You would ask a monster to make you its apprentice? And a monster that nearly killed you, no less. I have wondered this for some time—are you quite right in the head?”

How very rude indeed!

That’s when a soldier comes running up.

He reports something to Tiva, who turns back toward us.

“I do apologize. Something urgent has come up. If you stop by the Empire station later, we will gladly prepare a room for you. At any rate, Master Ronandt, please do not leave this town. As long as you stay within its borders, you are welcome to investigate the Nightmare or whatever you wish. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

With that, Tiva promptly sprints away with the soldier.

Since their occupation of this town is recent, no doubt there are at least a few problems to work out.

Still, it is startling to think that the Ohts soldiers broke the unspoken agreements of war and turned their weapons on the innocent inhabitants of this town.

On every street, there are signs of houses that have been burned to the ground, while the stench of smoke and death hangs over what little remains. It’s all too obvious that what happened here was extremely cruel.

Averting my eyes from the awful scenes, I begin walking through the town again, seeking any clue that might point toward that great being.

Ideally, I should like to find something that might indicate its next destination.

Using techniques such as Magic Power Perception while combing through the

town, I eventually discover a particularly mysterious spot.

As I approach the area in question, I notice a conspicuously large mansion.

However, it seems very bare. In contrast with its impressive appearance, traces of magic power or presence here are exceptionally sparse.

Something about that feels very out of place.

In front of this unusual mansion stands a soldier dressed in a different uniform from the Ohts soldiers I saw earlier.

“Stop right there. I have strict orders not to let anyone past this point.” The soldier holds up a hand firmly.

“Is there any way you could make an exception?”

“I am sorry.”

“Are you aware that I am the royal court sorcerer of the Empire?”

“I am sorry.”

Hrmph!

It’s as I feared. Even my social standing will not budge this soldier.

He is not from Ohts.

His white uniform with its rather elegant designs indicates that he is a soldier of the Word of God.

The Word of God is a massive religious organization based out of the Holy Kingdom of Alleius.

The influence of the Empire will not help me here.

“This appears to be the home of the former lord of the county, no? What happened inside?”

“I am not at liberty to say.”

Hrmph indeed!

Even if I can’t get inside, I had been hoping to at least gather some information, but the guard is far too curt.

This doesn’t bode well.

However, the fact that a Word of God soldier has been stationed here is a clear sign that there is something important about this place.

Though I have no idea what the significance of that might be.

“Is something the matter out there?”

Right as I start entertaining the dangerous thought of knocking out the soldier and entering the mansion, a gentle, elderly sounding voice calls out from inside.

Sure enough, a seemingly good-natured old man emerges from the building entrance.

He has a warm smile, the sort that would put most people at ease.

However, the moment I see him, I feel something indescribable.

“No, sir! I was just explaining to this gentleman that he is not allowed inside, sir.”

“I see.” The old man turns to me. “And who might you be?”

“I am called Ronandt.”

“Oh? Might you be the famous Master Ronandt? It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Not at all. If anything, I am quite surprised to find the Word of God’s pon—”

Before I can finish, the man puts a finger to his lips. “Shhh! I am but a humble old man. Albeit one with a minor connection to the Word of God. Yes?”

“Very well. If that is what you say, then so it shall be.”

I see no need to poke at the hornet’s nest.

“Well, you are free to look inside the mansion if you wish.”

“Are you sure?”

“But of course. After all, you will not find anything here.”

The old man strolls away with his soldiers in tow.

I watch them leave in silence.

It was surprising enough to run into soldiers of the Word of God, but this is

even more of a shock.

Without using Appraisal, I cannot know that man's stats for certain.

However, my instincts tell me that they would be nothing special.

If it came to a fight between that man's group and myself, I would win for certain.

But there was something about the old man that put me on edge.

Something beyond mere stats.

"Who was that old guy?"

"It's better that you do not know."

Nothing good can come from associating with such a mysterious figure who clearly holds sway at the highest level of authority within the Word of God religion.

What would someone so influential be doing in a place like this?

Clearly, whatever happened in this mansion was very much out of the ordinary.

I wait a long while after the old man leaves before I enter the mansion, but just as he claimed, I find nothing.

However, I do notice faint traces of a battle, as well as parts of the wall and floor that have been excavated to hide them.

That, and the unusually weak flow of magic energy in the place, makes it clear that something occurred here.

But in the end, I am unable to find out what.

"Hrmmm."

I came all this way to a place that I cannot even teleport to from the Empire, but I have yet to find a single piece of information regarding that great being's whereabouts.

This may be the end of the road.

The only fruit of my efforts is a chance encounter with the pontiff of the Word

of God on the first day of my search.

And since Tiva has been monitoring my actions around the clock, I cannot even move freely.

There may be no point in my staying in this town any longer.

Perhaps I should go back to square one and return to the place where I first encountered that being?

If so, now would be the perfect chance, while Tiva isn't watching!

"Aurel. I am going to visit a rather dangerous place now. You stay here and continue to gather information."

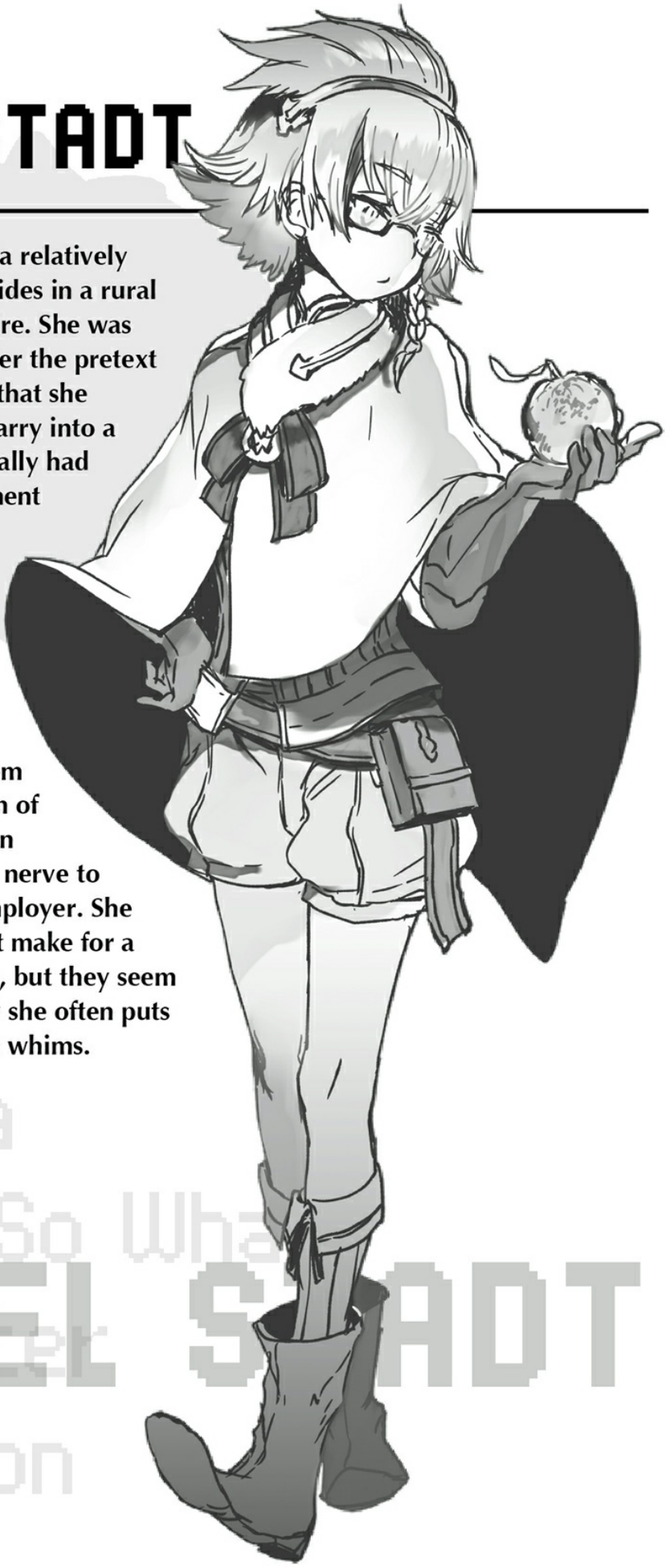
"Huh?! You're gonna leave me alone in this smelly old place?! Besides, Mister Tiva told you not to leave town!"

Ignoring Aurel's complaints, I activate Teleport.

My destination is the largest labyrinth in the world: the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

There, I would soon learn that I was half-right and half-wrong.

AUREL STADT



The youngest daughter of a relatively poor noble family that resides in a rural part of the Renxandt Empire. She was sent away from home under the pretext of learning housework so that she could have a chance to marry into a richer family, but she initially had difficulty finding employment because of her crass mannerisms. That was when Ronandt happened upon her. Aside from her rudeness, she's actually a rather intelligent and talented young woman. The problem is that she has no intention of reforming her behavior. An impudent girl, she has the nerve to be blunt even with her employer. She and the eccentric Ronandt make for a bit of an odd combination, but they seem to get along, which is why she often puts up with Ronandt's strange whims.

So I'm a Spider, So What?
AUREL STADT
Character Collection

Fortune, Misfortune

My first impression of the person called Hiiro Wakaba was that she was “winning at life.”

My nickname in my old life was Rihoko.

It’s short for “Real Horror Girl.”

No creativity. No appeal. Just a nickname concocted purely to make fun of me.

That was my nickname in high school, by the way. In middle school, they called me “the vampire.”

Maybe those nicknames were just easier to remember than my real name, Shouko Negishi.

At any rate, I think it was inevitable I’d get called things like that.

My old appearance couldn’t be considered attractive by any standard.

Extremely pale skin.

A scrawny, bony body.

When I looked in the mirror, I was greeted by a deathly face with sunken cheeks and vacant eyes.

My teeth were crooked and uneven, with a single canine tooth prominently jutting out.

I was ugly, plain and simple.

In that life, I hated the way I looked.

Wouldn’t you?

I hadn’t done anything to deserve it, and yet I was constantly bullied or the target of some gossip solely due to my awful appearance.

For someone like me, a girl like Hiiro Wakaba seemed blessed beyond belief.

Namely, her looks.

The first time I saw her, I was amazed that someone so beautiful could actually exist in real life.

That’s how pretty she was.

That’s why she was “winning at life.”

At the time, I thought if only I looked like that, I’d have it made for the rest of my life.

I was jealous, to be honest.

This girl had everything I didn’t, at least in terms of good looks.

And so, I spent a lot of my high school days watching her.

She hardly ever spoke a word.

She never said anything unless it was absolutely necessary, and she certainly didn’t make any attempt to communicate voluntarily.

So conceited, I thought.

It wasn’t really fair of me to think that, but compared to how others avoided me because of my appearance, her case was more like she wouldn’t let anyone near her.

The end result was the same but for completely opposite reasons.

People bullied me from a distance, but they seemed to worship her from the same distance.

Perhaps you could describe her as “aloof”?

Whatever you want to call it, she had a certain air about her that made her easy to admire but hard to approach.

The main difference between Hiiro Wakaba and me was our appearance.

But that one factor was enough for people to treat us totally differently.

The better you look, the better people will treat you.

The worse you look, the worse people will treat you.

It's a disparity we're all born into, a distance between our starting lines that can't be changed with any amount of effort.

Hiiro Wakaba was born with all the blessings I lacked, yet for some reason, she always seemed bored.

I don't know what was bothering her, but not once did I ever see her look like she was having fun.

She always wore the same unimpressed expression.

It was as if those inscrutable eyes weren't staring at the world around them.

Yet despite this apparent detachment, her gaze seemed to pierce right through everything.

As much as it galled me, I understood why everyone worshipped Hiiro Wakaba.

There was something about her that was beyond any normal person's comprehension.

Coupled with her good looks, it gave her a certain mystique in everyone's eyes.

Hiiro Wakaba had all kinds of things I didn't.

I nursed a one-sided jealousy toward her and, at the same time, hated myself for feeling such an ugly emotion.

But how could I help it? What should I have done? If I had a pretty face, would my life have been different? Does that mean my life was on the wrong path from the moment I was born? Being ugly on the outside makes you ugly on the inside, if you ask me. That's just how life goes.

If you have good looks, then you've already won at life.

That was my conclusion.

"Okay, we're gonna spend the night in that town. You wait around here, 'kay, White?"

Yet my prime example of a winner—Hiiro Wakaba, now known as White—is currently shouldering some heavy misfortune herself.

We've been avoiding drawing human attention to ourselves for various reasons, but we can keep that up for only so long.

Thus, we've decided to stop in the nearest town to buy food and miscellaneous supplies, but White can't go in because of her current form.

So we're leaving her behind out here.

Let me be frank about my feelings at the moment.

Serves her right!

No matter how pretty you might be, obviously a nonhuman can't go into a town!

You see, Hiiro Wakaba isn't a human anymore.

Aside from being pure white, her upper half looks pretty much the same, but her lower half is the body of a spider.

In other words, she's a monster called an arachne.

I'll admit, I always wondered (rather rudely) whether she was even really human in our old world, but I never expected her to actually stop being one.

Although it's irritating that she's somehow still as beautiful as ever.

But that's not the reason I'm gloating over her misfortune now.

No, my issue is how she's been treating me on this awful journey!

I'm still a baby, you know?!

I shouldn't be able to stand, let alone walk, so why does she have to force me to hike along these mountainous paths?!

Doesn't that seem wrong? It seems wrong to me!

If Ariel hadn't explained the reasoning behind those little training exercises, I probably would've snapped by now.

But according to her, it's to increase my skills and stats.

This world has a strange setup where things like skills and stats actually exist,

and the more you train them, the stronger you become.

Ariel says that White has been putting me through the gauntlet to improve my skills and stats.

Supposedly, she's thinking of my future, but I don't know if I buy that.

Incidentally, the nickname "White" came about after the following exchange:

"Why don't we call you 'Princess'? Do you want me to put a ribbon on you? You won't be able to transform into a magical girl, though."

"No."

"How about 'White,' then? Although that one kinda sounds like a pet cat."

"…Do what you want."

If you ask me, "Princess" is a much better name, but whatever.

And what was all that about a ribbon?

There was a lot to unpack in that little conversation, but at any rate, Ariel really did start calling her "White" after that.

I'm pretty sure Ariel picked a weird name on purpose just to annoy her, but her would-be victim doesn't seem to particularly mind, so even Merazophis and I have jumped on the bandwagon and started calling her White.

Considering how she's treated me so far, I like to think I'm allowed to be a little petty.

"Awww, poor White. You won't get to eat any tasty food at the inn or sleep in a nice comfy bed. It sucks, but what choice do we have, right? But don't worry! I promise I'll enjoy it twice as much in your honor!" Ariel grins, clearly aiming to add fuel to the fire.

White is expressionless as always, but she's exuding even more intimidating energy than before.

There are practically sparks flying between these two.

Scary.

Just like that, my dark little "Serves you right!" celebration is over.

This is it.

This is why I can't stand up to these two, no matter how unreasonable their actions get.

They both hold overwhelming power.

Either one of them could probably take on a whole army alone.

That strength is granted to them by stats, a concept that would be unthinkable in our old world.

Merazophis and I aren't even close to comparable.

Whenever I think about what would happen if I made one of them mad enough to turn that power against me, I can't help but go along with whatever they say.

"That is quite enough, you two. You are upsetting the young miss."

And yet, Merazophis tells them off without a second thought.

"Oopsie daisy! Sorry about that. All right, let's go. Don't sulk too much, White. I promise we'll bring you back a souvenir."

Ariel's overwhelming aura disperses at once, and she waves lazily as she turns to walk away.

Watching her leave, White emits a small sigh before sitting on the ground.

Flanking her on either side like guards are two puppet taratects, mannequin-looking monsters summoned by Ariel.

"Now then, excuse us."

As I absently gaze at White and the puppet taratects, my body is gently lifted into the air.

Looking up, my eyes meet with Merazophis's under the shadow of his hood.

Since White's been forcing me to walk all this time, it's been a while since Merazophis carried me like this.

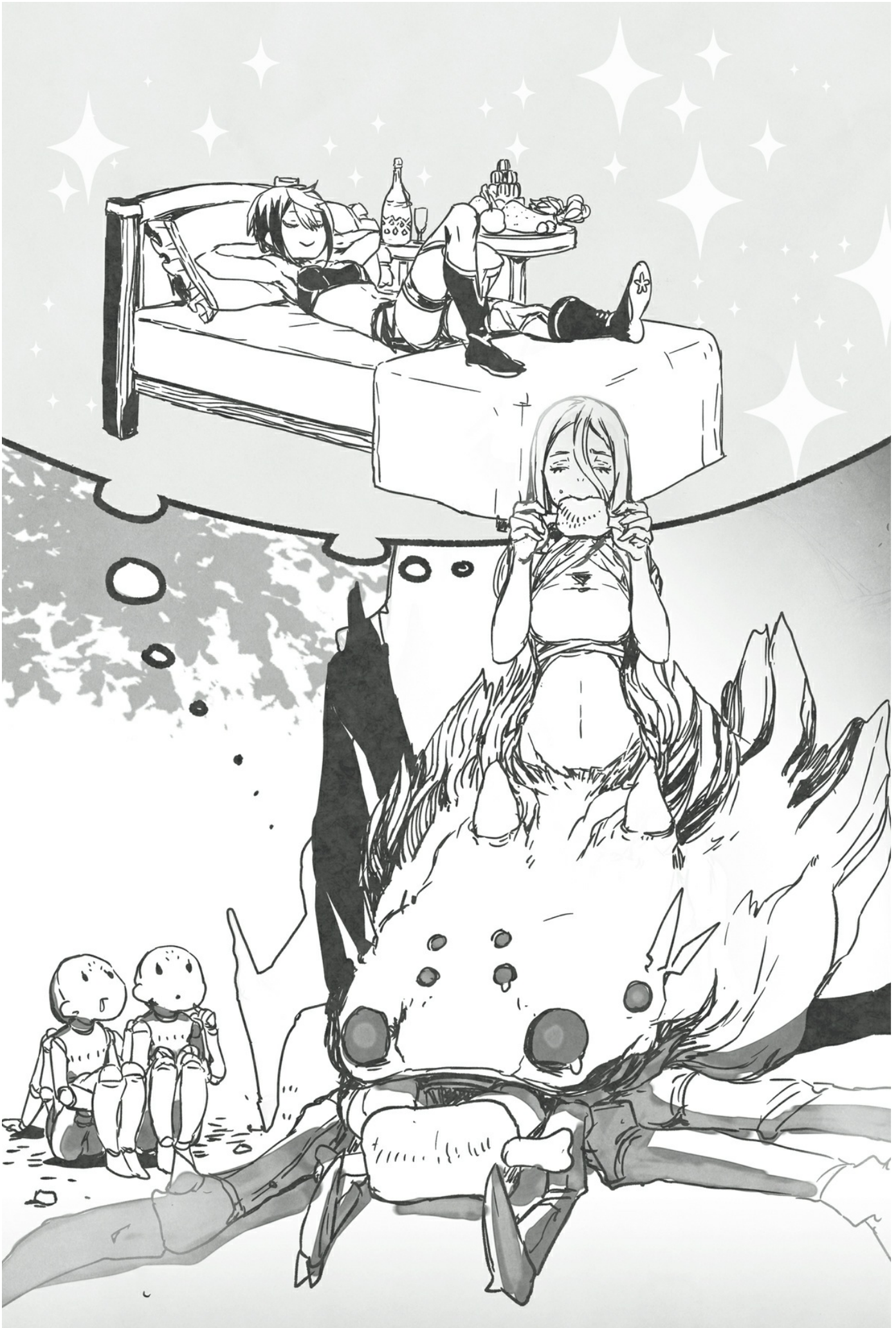
Right, I suppose it's more natural if he holds me when we go into town.

I was about to try to follow after Ariel on my own two feet. Maybe this

indoctrination is really starting to get to me.

Merazophis quickly catches up to Ariel.

Since she’s so short, especially compared to Merazophis, it’s an easy feat for him.



My legs might not have been able to catch up at all.

“Are you certain it is wise to provoke her like that?” he asks, matching her stride a short distance behind her.

I don’t know how Merazophis can speak so boldly to such frightening characters.

He very strongly protested the way White was treating me at first.

Although she silently directed such a murderous glare at him that he was forced to shut up pretty quickly.

“Hmm. I’ve got a lot of mixed feelings toward White myself, y’know. Can’t I be at least a little unfriendly toward her? Don’t worry, though. It’s not like we’re actually gonna start trying to kill each other or anything. Neither of us would be *that* stupid.”

I understand that Ariel and White have a complicated relationship.

Whatever she might say now, they really were trying to kill each other not too long ago.

They agreed to a truce when they realized that neither of them stood anything to gain from fighting anymore, so now they’re supposedly allies, but that doesn’t mean they’re suddenly going to be super-close friends.

Apparently, Ariel still has a grudge against White for killing a bunch of her subordinates, and White still seems cautious of Ariel’s immense power.

If anything, things are so tense between them that it’s a miracle they can work together at all.

Then there’s Merazophis and me, stuck in the cross fire.

Traveling in such a strained mood is rough, if I’m being honest.

And if that wasn’t bad enough, there are times like before when their efforts to intimidate each other affect me, too.

Really, this trip is bad for my heart.

We were able to get into town without a problem simply by paying a toll.

I was worried there might be some trouble, what with Merazophis's appearance, but nothing happened.

Right now, Merazophis is completely covered from head to toe in a robe to keep away from the sunlight.

The hooded robe, which White made especially for him, makes anyone wearing it incredibly suspicious.

However, since people in this world fashion equipment and armor from monster parts on a regular basis, this sort of getup is more common than I thought.

In fact, it might be a perfectly acceptable outfit, and it seems suspect to me only due to memories from my previous life influencing me.

Whenever I experience a discrepancy like this, I realize all over again that I'm still not accustomed to this world.

Maybe that's why, in spite of the circumstances, it doesn't feel real enough for me to be sad about what's happened.

I've lost my parents, lost my home, and have now been forced to basically live on the run, yet I don't seem to feel a thing.

In this world, I've been blessed.

I was born into a high-class family, so while some day-to-day things weren't as convenient as they were back in Japan, my quality of life was comparatively high for this world.

And most importantly, my parents were both good-looking.

Good looks equals "winning at life."

I continued to hold on to this theory from my old world.

Since both my parents were good-looking, their child—me—was bound to be good-looking in the future, too.

In that case, my new life should have been happier than my old one.

Yes, I really did think that.

However, part of me felt like I had no choice but to hang on to my old ways of

thinking.

After all, I suddenly woke up as a baby in a different world, you know?

I had to be optimistic if I wanted to go on.

There was an awful lot of inner turmoil to deal with before I managed to reach that point, but let's not talk about that.

In the end, despite my resolve to be optimistic in my new life, everything fell apart in the blink of an eye.

The happy future I'd imagined for myself crumbled away.

All I have left is this body of mine and Merazophis.

My new parents who showered me with affection, that elegant mansion, the social status, wealth, political power…all gone.

Honestly, it's such a complete fall from grace that you almost have to laugh.

But I think the reason I don't have the capacity to react to what's happened is because I've already died and lost everything once before.

It's true that a lot was taken from me this time as well, but compared to my previous life, I wasn't nearly as emotionally attached.

I spent far longer in my old world than I have in this one, after all.

If you ask about my parents, the first people who come to mind are my original mom and dad.

My parents, who were as dull-looking as I was, who had only their kind natures going for them.

My dad, eternally stuck in his dead-end job.

My mom, a housewife who totally sucked at cooking.

Sure, my parents in this world were superior in pretty much every way, but I still feel more affection toward my previous life's family.

I mean, they always treated me with love and care, even when I grew up to be a sullen and twisted person.

I cursed them out for making me look the way I did, yet they only became

even more tender and gentle.

That kindness was the only thing about them that deserves praise, but to me, that's what was worthy of admiration.

By comparison, I never quite managed to accept my parents in this world as my real family.

They also showered me with affection, but death came for them before we could form a real parent-child bond.

Maybe it's more that I never fully accepted that I would be living in this new world now.

There's just so much that I never managed to let go, both in my old life and this new one.

We pass through the gate, enter the town, and secure a room at the inn.

After that, Ariel and I stay in the inn while Merazophis goes out to buy supplies.

We came to this town for the sole purpose of buying things we need for the journey, so once Merazophis is finished, we could theoretically leave without a problem.

I have no doubt that we're staying at the inn only out of Ariel's spite toward White.

Although I can't say I have any complaints about getting to relax for a night.

As I sigh quietly, Ariel rolls around happily on the bed.

…She really is enjoying herself, just like she told White.

This behavior wouldn't be that unusual for a young teenager, which is exactly what she looks like, but isn't this person actually a demon lord?

She's quite the mystery.

"Hmm? What is it?" Noticing my gaze, Ariel half sits up on the bed.

"*Oh, nothing…*" I falter, since I obviously can't tell her what I was actually thinking.

“Not what you pictured, huh?” She manages to guess what’s on my mind anyway. “Yeah, I’m sure it’s hard to believe that a little girl like me is a demon lord.”

I panic on the inside, but she smiles as if it doesn’t bother her at all.

Her smile makes me waver a little.

Ariel never stops smiling.

She’s always cheerful and sociable, and she’s been looking out for Merazophis and me throughout our journey.

Not only that, but she even covers for White, who barely speaks.

To be honest, I don’t think we’d have been able to go on for long without her.

It’s true that her thoughtful, considerate nature doesn’t exactly fit my image of a demon lord.

“It’s not the easiest thing to get used to. I would’ve imagined a demon to be more of a creepy and terrifying sort. To be completely honest, a nice person like you being a demon lord is a little hard to swallow.”

“Thought so. Though I dunno if I’m all that nice or not.”

Ariel nods in response to my honest assessment.

“Personally, I’m pretty aware I don’t exactly fit the part. Especially looking like this.” She shrugs.

“I suppose your appearance is part of it, but I think it’s your personality that seems out of place for someone with that title. You’re very kind, Miss Ariel.”

Again, that’s my honest opinion.

It’s true that her appearance isn’t what I would have expected, but it’s what’s on the inside that seems especially unfitting for a demon lord.

A demon lord is supposed to be a being of pure evil who doesn’t bother with the concerns of others.

That’s how humans here conceptualize demon lords, too.

A king of demons, determined to destroy humanity at all costs.

But here Ariel is, blending into the crowd while visiting a human town, and she doesn't seem terribly evil, either.

"Ah-ha-ha, I guess. But I'm on my best behavior right now, y'know. And I guess I'm being kind to you partly out of sympathy, but it's also out of self-interest, Sophia."

Her tone is indifferent, but her words catch me by surprise.

"Looking out for you guys will help me get on White's good side, right? I dunno how things are gonna turn out in the long run, but I'd rather earn some points to stay in her good graces. And no one can live as long as I have without learning a thing or two. Playing the part of a nice person or mingling with humans is no sweat."

At this point, I'm openly gaping at her.

I already knew that Ariel is a lot older than she looks, so it stands to reason that she has enough experience with human interaction to put up a good front, but should she really be admitting that so readily?

I would think she'd make a better impression if she didn't come out and say it.

"*Um, are you sure you should be telling me this?*" I can't resist asking.

"Heh-heh, might as well. I figure people will be suspicious of any kind of free service anyway. Your people even have a saying about it, don't they? 'Nothing in life is ever free.' Isn't that right?"

Ariel looks over her shoulder.

Merazophis is standing in the doorway, having returned from his errands.

"Welcome back."

"…Thank you." He responds to her greeting stiffly.

Judging by his demeanor, I'm guessing that last part was directed at him, not me.

Which means Merazophis already suspected there was some ulterior motive behind Ariel's kindness.

Not that he could do anything about it regardless of the truth, considering her

strength.

Honestly, even though she just claimed otherwise right to my face, I can't help thinking that she really is helping us out of kindness.

"You guys get my help, so that's a win for you. And being nice to you makes White think better of me, so that's a win for me. It's a win-win for everyone involved, so what's the problem?"

Merazophis still doesn't look happy.

I suppose I can't blame him.

She's saying it's a win-win, but we get a lot more out of this deal than she does.

She wouldn't look after us like this if her only goal was to improve White's opinion of her.

The only explanation I can think of is that she's helping us out of the goodness of her heart, not because of whatever advantages it gains her.

Merazophis, perhaps coming to the same conclusion, sighs in exasperation and seems to put his doubts aside.

I'm sure that even if he understands Ariel's actions, he still feels that he has to stay on guard to keep me safe.

And I think Ariel realized that, which made her go out of her way to say those things for his benefit, to let him know that he doesn't need to be so cautious of her.

Being on guard all the time has to be exhausting.

That's why Ariel came up with an excuse that would assuage his suspicions.

And Merazophis is accepting her words.

I think that's what happened during that short exchange.

I suppose she really has learned a thing or two in her long life, like she said.

How else would she be able to handle a situation like this so delicately?

But Merazophis still has one last barb.

“If that is the case, then should you not be kinder toward Lady White herself?”

“Ah! It hurts! Don’t point that out; it’s too painful!”

Ariel reels back dramatically, slapping herself on the cheek.

Although she’s being playful about it, I think I caught a glimpse of more complicated emotions in her eyes.

Maybe even Ariel, for all her expert understanding of other people’s feelings, can’t navigate her relationship with White so easily.

THE SERVANT'S HESITATION

I can hear the young miss's quiet, steady breathing as she lies on the bed.

Though she may be a nocturnal vampire, no doubt the journey thus far has tired her greatly.

Now that she can finally sleep in a proper bed again, falling into a deep slumber is only natural.

This comes as no surprise to me.

As a reincarnation, the young miss has a mind that's older than she seems, but her body is still that of a young babe.

Truth be told, she should not be able to endure the journey we find ourselves on.

At her age, she should be under the care of her parents, sleeping safe and sound like this every day.

How did it come to this…?

Merely thinking about her late parents devastates me, though I do not shed tears.

I take a deep breath, trying to bring out the hellish depths of my despair and rein in my feelings.

No amount of mourning will bring them back to life.

Instead of growing despondent over the past, I should be thinking of the young miss's future.

Although that depends on her wishes, of course.

No matter what choices she might make, I will simply continue protecting her

with everything I have.

That was my lord and lady's final request to me, after all.

Since they are gone, I must look after the young miss in their stead.

And yet, in order to do so, there is a certain obstacle I must surmount.

Quietly, I withdraw from the young miss's side.

When I step out of the bedroom, I find Lady Ariel relaxing in a chair in the living room.

"Is little Sophia asleep?"

"Yes. Given how much time has passed since she last slept in a proper bed, it is only natural for her to be sleeping soundly."

"That's good. So you're going back out now, right?"

It takes me a moment to realize the meaning implicit behind her casual remark.

"Huh? Wait, you're not? Don't you need blood?"

At that, I freeze in place.

I can sense that my face has tensed up.

Lady Ariel is telling me to go acquire blood.

In other words, she is telling me to attack humans.

"I mean, it's no skin off my back if you don't go, but won't that be a problem for you? Since Sophia's a Progenitor, she doesn't need to drink blood, but I'm pretty sure you do, don't you? If you don't get some soon, you're gonna be in trouble."

No words are forthcoming as she prods at my painful secret.

I became a vampire when the young miss drank my blood.

I have no regrets about that.

That was the only way the young miss and I could have survived that situation.

However, while I do not harbor any regrets, I do have concerns and certain difficulties.

Namely, the weaknesses of vampires.

Now that I am a vampire, my body cannot survive without consuming blood.

Not only that, but my skin burns when exposed to the sun, among other weaknesses.

As a Progenitor, the young miss does not suffer from any of these.

But I, her servant, do not possess the same level of resistance.

On the journey thus far, I have avoided the light of day by donning the robe Lady White made for me, and I have subsisted on the blood of any monsters Lady White hunted.

However, monster blood does little more than delay the inevitable.

What my body truly craves can be found only in humans.

Monster blood can likely sustain my life, but it will not give me the strength I need in the event of a crisis.

As it stands, my body is already becoming heavier and my senses are growing weaker with each passing day.

Becoming a vampire has increased my stats greatly, but if I do not partake soon, I will likely become as weak as my human self, if not even more so.

I cannot protect the young miss like this.

I know this, but I cannot help shrinking back from the idea of attacking someone and drinking their blood.

The terrible conflict between my sense of duty to protect the young miss and my revulsion toward what I must do to fulfill my duty has left me at a standstill.

“If you’re not gonna go, I dunno why we stayed in this town to begin with…”

Lady Ariel’s grumbling strikes my ears painfully.

I had already suspected that she brought us to this town so that I could supply myself with blood.

Even the goods and supplies I purchased were a detour, since this has always been the main objective.

It certainly did strike me as strange.

Both Lady Ariel and Lady White can acquire food on their own, and given our situation, there was no need to risk entering a town.

But Lady Ariel insisted on it, and it was really for my sake.

“But to attack an innocent person…”

Even knowing that she has done all this for me, I still cannot be decisive.

“Hmm. I guess I kinda get how you feel, but you gotta grit your teeth and get down to it or it’s only gonna get worse, y’know? The more you put it off, the harder it’s gonna be in the long run, right? Better to just get it over with.”

Lady Ariel is right, of course.

If I keep dragging my feet, I will never be able to move forward.

I am not human anymore.

I am a vampire, and I must live as one from now on.

Lady Ariel has been kind enough to guide me out of genuine concern for my well-being.

But the conscience I carried with me as a human being rejects a vampire’s way of life.

This stubborn feeling that I cannot quite dispel is refusing the generous guidance of Lady Ariel.

If I open my mouth, I fear I shall say something I do not mean. Instead, I flee into the night, my mind still in turmoil.

I wander aimlessly through the dark village.

How pathetic I am.

Despite my resolution to watch over the young miss, I have been preoccupied with my own misgivings all this time.

I am in no state to protect anyone now.

Not only that, but both the young miss and I are now being kept safe by Lady Ariel and Lady White.

I have sworn to protect her, and yet it is I who needs to be cared for.

And that burden has not fallen on only our two companions.

Even the young miss herself has protected me.

Not becoming a vampire would have meant dying that day.

I cannot have any regrets about that.

To do that would be tantamount to being ungrateful for staying alive.

Besides, if I reject myself for being a vampire, then I would be rejecting the young miss as well.

That is the one thing I will never do.

No matter what anyone else says, I must always support the young miss.

That is part of my duty if I am to watch over her as her parents asked of me.

I must protect not only her body but her heart and mind as well.

There is no path forward besides accepting that I am a vampire and living accordingly from now on.

Even if that means committing blatantly criminal acts like assaulting someone and stealing their lifeblood.

Right as I harden my resolve, a woman passes by before my eyes.

She is young.

Even as she walks in the dead of night, there is no fear in her stride, only confidence.

At her waist is a sword that, at a glance, seems to be well used.

Judging by her garb, she must be an adventurer.

And she has the air of an experienced fighter, far removed from a mere novice.

She walks unhurriedly down an empty alleyway.

Without even thinking, I follow behind her.

My throat swallows, catching me by surprise.

Whether I like it or not, I am already thinking of her as my prey.

The realization shocks me, but I do not stop.

My instincts are telling me that this young woman's blood is of the highest quality.

The sight of her healthy neck, tanned by the sun, makes me want to sink in my fangs and drink deeply.

The impulse is overpowering.

But my sense of reason fights against those urges.

That would be criminal, it tells me.

However, a separate, calmer part of me is whispering over all that.

It says that my conscience is nothing but a remnant from when I was human.

If I am to commit to living as a vampire, I must not let human morals hold me back.

"Excuse me."

Pushing down what little conflict remains inside me, I speak to the girl.

"What is it?" She turns around calmly, evidently aware that she was being followed.

Though her attitude is casual, her hand is ready to draw her sword at any moment.

…How foolish can I be?

To choose an obviously seasoned fighter as my first prey goes beyond recklessness.

I seem to have gotten ahead of myself.

However, I cannot turn back now.

If I do, I doubt I will ever be able to attack another human.

I look her squarely in the face and activate Magic Eye.

Magic Eye is one of a vampire's powers that applies a hypnotic effect; anyone who makes eye contact when this is activated will temporarily do whatever the user says.

"What the—?! You've got some nerve, attacking me out of nowhere like that!"

Unfortunately, the woman quickly looks away, shaking off the effect of Magic Eye.

Not only that, but she draws her sword and slashes at me.

I quickly dodge to the side, but my body moves faster and farther than I expected, sending me crashing into a wall.

Damn it all!

I'm still trying to move as I did when I was a human!

Now that I am a vampire, my stats are far higher than they once were. If I jump with all my strength, as I might have when I was a human, of course it would end up like this.

"Guh?!"

As I panic, the sword pierces my shoulder, effectively pinning me to the wall.

"What's up with you? Your movements are all over the place—but for some reason, my gut is telling me you're big trouble. I don't get it."

She twists the sword in my shoulder.

Pain assails my senses, but I don't take as much damage as I expected.

But of course.

I am a vampire.

I can regenerate far faster than humans.

"Huh?!" the young woman cries in surprise.

Still pierced by the sword, I take a step forward to reach for her neck.

She likely thought me trapped, but of course she did not expect me to come

at her if it meant pushing the sword farther into my own body.

She quickly lets go of the sword and tries to back away, but my hand reaches her neck first.

Grabbing hold of her, I whirl around.

Now I am the one holding her against the wall.

Seizing the opportunity, I look into her anguished eyes.

“Wh…ah?!”

I use Magic Eye at full force, at the same time tightening my hold on her neck.

The girl tries to resist, but the pain of being strangled combined with the hypnotic power of Magic Eye is too much for her to fight.

The light of reason vanishes from her eyes.

Upon seeing that, I sink my fangs into her neck without a moment’s hesitation.

“Welcome back.”

Lady Ariel greets me, but I have not the willpower to respond.

The most I can manage is a silent nod as I keep walking.

“Good work out there,” she murmurs as I walk by her.

I cannot answer that, either. Instead, I flee silently into the bedroom.

The young miss is still sleeping peacefully on the bed.

As soon as I see her, all the strength drains from my body, and I slump to the floor.

Without rising, I clasp my trembling hands as if in prayer.

My lord, my lady, Goddess.

Please watch over the young miss.

And please forgive me for the sins I must commit to protect her.

My first taste of human blood was intoxicatingly sweet.

I was nearly overwhelmed by the urge to drink every last drop.

When I pierced my fangs into that woman, I felt the dark thrill of having total power over her.

I managed to control myself, but I shudder to think what might have happened if I had given in to my instincts.

I am afraid of myself.

While the young woman was still in a daze from having her blood taken, I used Magic Eye to induce her to forget what happened tonight, but I did not stay to find out whether that worked.

All I could think of was getting away from that place as quickly as possible.

If I had stayed, I might have succumbed to the urge to drink her dry.

My hands are shaking. No, the trembling is coming from my entire body.

This is how a vampire is meant to live.

Attacking humans, drinking their blood.

I have no choice but to live that way from now on.

Am I really capable of that?

I have no regrets about becoming a vampire.

Not a single one.

I must force myself to have none.

Otherwise, I cannot save the young miss.

No one else can keep the young miss safe.

I must be the one to protect her.

I will never break that vow, no matter what.

However…just for this one night, please forgive me for showing weakness.

As my body trembles, I continue to pray.

2 THE CLOTHES MAKE THE SPIDER

Leeeft aloooooone, ooon my ooown.

Whaddaya know—I'm a poet.

Damn that Demon Lord, though.

The rest of them get to relax at an inn while I'm stuck sleeping outside?

Right now they're enjoying nice soft beds and, most importantly, a proper meal!

Unbelievable!

Dammit! I want some home cooking, too!

Hmph! Whatever. I'll have a monster-meat party all by myself.

I take out a whole bunch of meat, grilling and eating the pieces one after another.

Between my human mouth up top and my spider mouth down below, I can eat twice as fast!

The two puppet spiders sit quietly, watching me stress eat.

The Demon Lord summoned them to keep an eye on me. But is it just me, or do they look super-jealous of my one-man meat-eating contest?

The puppet spiders are mannequin-shaped monsters that are actually controlled by a palm-size spider inside.

Of course, they literally look like dolls, so their expressions don't change or anything.

Still, I can kinda tell somehow.

Using Clairvoyance, I examine the spider inside the puppet and wave a piece of meat back and forth experimentally.

The puppet's head doesn't move, but the real body, the spider, shifts back and forth in time with the movements of the meat.

Interesting. You want some, too, huh?

Hmm. Well, we did get left out in the cold together.

I suppose I can be generous enough to share some of my food.

I hold out some meat to the two puppet spiders.

They seem excited, but they don't reach for it right away, apparently torn.

Maybe they want the meat, but they're not sure if they should accept a gift from the person they're supposed to be monitoring?

Come on! I'm trying to be nice here. Take it already.

I push the meat into their hands.

The puppet spiders still remain frozen with uncertainty, so I leave them alone for a while, making a show of eating my own share.

Delicious.

By draining the blood from my kills and being mindful of how I store it, I've been able to enjoy meat far tastier than any of the unprocessed stuff I used to eat.

The Demon Lord taught me these techniques.

She's lived for a long time, so she has a lot of knowledge about all sorts of things.

It had never even occurred to me to drain the blood before, but now that I think about it, that does seem pretty standard.

I used to eat those monsters straightaway, so it's no wonder they always tasted gross.

Although even with this method, I can't say the monsters I hunted in the Great Elroe Labyrinth are all that delicious.

Most of them are poisonous, for one thing.

By comparison, the meat of monsters living outside is far tastier.

It's delicious even without additional processing, so if you take the time to do that, it only gets better!

Draining the blood gets rid of the smell, and if I set up the environment in Spatial Storage to preserve it just right, I can draw out the meat's best flavors.

All this time, I had been using Spatial Storage's default settings without customizing anything. In fact, I didn't even realize that on top of keeping things in a separate dimension, you can actually change the conditions of that dimension.

Since I'm storing stuff in there, it makes sense that sometimes changes are needed.

After learning how to change the temperature, humidity, and other settings to appropriate levels for storing meat, I can slightly cure whatever I put in there!

Only slightly, though.

If you're not careful with the temperature, the meat can go bad, so don't expect an amateur like me to do anything too fancy.

Just maintaining Spatial Storage's settings on anything other than the default is already kind of a pain.

But the results are totally worth it!

My catches are so tasty now, I don't even want to think about the old stuff!

I'm currently whole roasting some meat over a fire.

Once it's ready, I grab the cartoony piece of meat by the bone, slather it in seasoning, and dig right in.

Ahhh, this is what it means to treat yourself!

And it cost me a grand total of zero yen.

Cheap, delicious, and plentiful—this grilled meat hits all the right notes!

I wouldn’t want to eat this masterpiece in front of someone on a diet, but right now it’s only two puppet spiders and me.

Plus, it’s not like I have to worry about getting fat.

Cook and eat, cook and eat. I repeat the process over and over.

Finally, unable to simply stand by and watch any longer, one of the puppet spiders starts eating, too.

Right as I’m wondering how exactly it’s going to do that, it unhinges around where its jaw would be, then shoves the hand holding the meat up to the elbow into the puppet’s mouth so that it reaches the spider within.

It’s a little scary to watch, to be honest.

Seeing how its friend has surrendered to the meat’s temptation, the other puppet spider is quick to raise the white flag, too.

This one opens its mouth timidly, then stuffs the meat inside like the other one did.

…Why do I suddenly feel a strange sense of defeat?

Seeing a doll-like creature open its mouth unnaturally wide to shove its own arm into its mouth is surreal, but up until that point, they were actually pretty cute.

Are these things more girlie than I am?

Damn. That’s quite a feat, since they don’t have anything that even remotely points to a specific gender in the first place.

Now that I think about it, they must have been made by the Demon Lord’s Egg-Laying skill, right?

The Egg-Laying skill is essentially asexual reproduction, so it’s more like making inferior clones rather than giving birth to children. I guess they’re probably female like the Demon Lord.

Still, they can use weapons and stuff, plus they can understand and obey the Demon Lord’s orders, so I assume they must be pretty smart.

I shouldn’t have let their appearances fool me. These two are the ideal

maidens!

I never expected to lose to them in terms of feminine appeal.

Oh come on! I can't help it!

I put in some effort whenever I left the house in my old life, but at home I was always just lounging around in whatever was comfortable!

And I wasn't exactly concerned about my appearance after I was reborn as a spider, so you can't blame me for being a little behind!

If I wanted to, I could totally look not-half-bad, I bet, maybe!

Okay, so what should I do first?

I chomp away at my meat as I start formulating a plan to be cuter than the dolls in front of me.

Yeah, I'm not gonna win with my table manners, that's for sure.

Greedily shoving meat into my mouth isn't exactly cute, and it's not like I'm going to stop now.

So I just have to win with my appearance!

I look down at myself again.

All I'm wearing is a pathetic scrap of cloth around my chest, like some kind of Neanderthal.

Gah! I mean, I might be able to go the sexy route with this, but if I'm not careful, I'm just gonna end up flashing someone by mistake!

I gotta do something about this, and fast!

Gobbling up the rest of the meat, I quickly clean things up.

The puppet spiders have finished eating the meat I gave them, too.

I wasn't sure if one piece would be enough for them, but I guess the spiders themselves are only about the size of my palm. They probably can't eat that much.

If anything, I guess the real surprise is that they managed to polish off chunks of meat the size of their own bodies.

Must be nice, being small enough that you don't need to gather much food.

Forget "bigger is better." These days, it's all about miniaturization.

Hmm…? But didn't I used to eat a lot even before I evolved, back when I was smaller?

Forget it. Not worth thinking about.

Gotta leave that all behind and move on to the next plan.

Namely: making myself some clothes!

I produce some thread and use Thread Control to weave it into cloth, using my human hands to cut it into the shape of clothing.

Normally, you wouldn't be able to do this kind of thing without tools, but this material is thread I made myself.

With Thread Control, I can shape it however I want.

Plus, I've maxed out the Divine Thread Weaving skill.

That means making clothes is a piece of cake!

In fact, I could probably break into the fashion industry with skills like this.

Mother even used this skill to give her thread camouflage that blended in perfectly with the labyrinth walls and floor, if I remember correctly.

Now I'm using that incredibly grand skill to create a single piece of clothing.

Talk about a waste of talent.

Anyway, once I'm done wasting that talent to make my clothes, they'll be way better than any old scrap of fabric.

In no time at all, I've completed a simple one-piece dress.

It's white, without much in the way of frills or decorations.

Sticking with the KISS principle, I kept the sleeves and waist tapered while leaving the bust loose enough that it won't emphasize my chest too much.

Pretty impressive work, if I do say so myself.

I also pumped in SP and MP while I worked, giving it more defensive power

than the design might suggest.

Maybe that's why it has a certain mystical air about it.

Anyway, I try it on right away and promptly show it off to the puppet spiders, who applaud with all six of their hands.

I know, pretty impressive, right?

That's right—keep it coming. I enjoy praise.

I get the feeling they're applauding how quickly I made the dress rather than complimenting how I look wearing it, but whatever!

They're staring at my clothes in clear admiration, so it's all good.

I keep posing for a while, but one of them is starting to look fidgety.

It's the one who ate the meat first.

Then, unable to resist any longer, it starts imitating me to make clothes of its own.

The other one watches on hesitantly for a bit, then starts doing the same thing.

Despite being of the same make and model, they seem to have different personalities. The one who started first is definitely more proactive.

The two puppet spiders keep making clothes, but their work's going a lot more slowly than mine did.

Their real bodies might just be palm-size spiders, but since they use their thread to manipulate the puppet from within, their thread-related skills are up there.

Still, they haven't reached Divine Thread Weaving just yet, so their abilities fall short of mine.

Thinking it might help them out a little, I start making another piece of clothing. This time, though, I do it slowly enough for them to follow along more easily.

Since the puppet spiders have six arms, I choose a design without sleeves this time.

Slowly, with occasional help from me, the puppets embark on their own fashion journey.

Eventually, rather late into the night, they wrap up.

With obvious excitement, the puppet spiders try on the clothes that took so long to make.

Well, shoot.

They're still just mannequins, but wearing clothes makes them immediately cuter.

After adding a dress to their genderless bodies, they're perfectly ladylike now.

What is going on?!

I thought clothes just made the person wearing them look better.

For someone who already looks good, what they wear wouldn't make that much of a difference.

But now I see how wrong I was.

Those lifeless-looking mannequins have been totally transformed by putting on clothes!

Maybe I was too dismissive of clothes and fashion as a whole.

But now that we've come this far, it makes me want to fiddle around even more.

Sure, putting clothes on them changed their overall impression quite a bit, but they're still mannequins.

As things stand, at best they resemble a display in the window of some department store.

But wait just a damn minute!

If simply adding clothes changed them this much, couldn't we make them even cuter and more feminine with some more adjustments?

I want to test my theory.

No idea why, but I'm super into this idea.

And there’s no time like the present.

Luckily, the puppet spiders and I all have Status Condition Nullification.

It’s an evolution of the Exhaustion Nullification skill, which means we can get by on zero sleep without a problem.

Our night is just getting started!

“Well, that’s weird. Did we always have this many cuties in our party?”

The Demon Lord is the first to speak when the others return from the village.

The baby bloodsucker, too, is staring in bemused wonder.

Only Mera, holding the baby, looks relatively indifferent.

I’m a little disappointed at his lack of reaction, but it was all worth it to see the Demon Lord looking completely flabbergasted.

Of course, she’s talking about the puppet spiders.

They’ve transformed overnight to the point of being nearly unrecognizable.

In addition to their new clothes, they’ve got cute hairstyles now, and their new lifelike faces help them seem more human.

The hair is actually thread made to replicate the look and feel of real hair, which I mass-produced and affixed to their heads.

That was the easy part. It was everything else that really gave me trouble.

If I wanted to take it any further, I would have to rebuild their very bodies.

I mean, their puppet bodies are clearly just that: puppets.

To make them more feminine, I would have to do some touch-ups on their figures.

That sure as hell stumped me, let me tell you.

But that didn’t stop me, and when I carefully Appraised the puppet spiders’ mannequins, I realized that the puppets themselves are constructed from thread.

I had assumed that it was wood or something, but it turned out to be layers of super-fine thread wound together, hardened, then shaped into parts before

finally being connected together to form the puppet spiders' bodies.

Man, thread is amazing.

And if the puppet bodies are made out of thread, that opens up a world of possibilities, right?

I mean, I've got the super-pro Divine Thread Weaving skill.

There's practically nothing I can't do with this stuff!

So, after a ton of trial and error, I managed to create thread that comes insanely close to the feel of human skin.

I mean, all matter in the world is a bunch of atoms lined up in a particular way.

From that perspective, it should be possible to replicate just about any matter with thread.

And since Divine Thread Weaving allows me to create and manipulate thread however I want, theoretically, I have the ability to re-create any substance.

Thus, by twisting this rather dubious theory and forcing my way through, I managed to accomplish my goal.

Now that I've done it, I can't exactly take it back.

Thread really is amazing.

Once it was finished, I also stuck some of the skin-like cloth over their faces and attached some facial features while I was at it to make them look extra human.

Still, they're far from perfect.

Their noses don't actually have nostrils, and their eyes are basically glassy balls that I developed while trying to make skin out of thread.

And I can't get the lips right at all. I have a long way to go on the details.

Plus, their skin might feel like a human's at first, but since it's really just stuck on the surface, pressing too hard makes it very obvious it's not real.

If I want to improve that, I would have to literally create new bodies from

scratch, redoing everything that should be under the skin.

But if all I do is dwell on minor imperfections, there'll be no end to it.

What's important is how pretty the puppet spiders are now!

It's obvious from the Demon Lord's and baby bloodsucker's expressions that my efforts were a huge success!

These puppets are still a far cry from passing for human, but it's a considerable improvement from the textbook mannequins they were before.

Now they've been upgraded to ball-jointed dolls.

Pretty damn impressive, if I do say so myself.

…Hmm?

Wait a second?

They're all so focused on the puppet spiders that they haven't noticed my new dress?

That's strange.

Is it just me, or did my plan to make myself cuter morph into an elaborate project to help the puppet spiders look better instead?

I don't get it.

Argh! What's going on here?!

It's all because those stupid puppet spiders are so cute!

But the moment I turn to glare at them, I find them already gazing at me with respectful admiration.

Somehow, it's almost as if those glass eyes of theirs are sparkling.

H-how am I supposed to stay mad at you if you look at me like that?

Argh… How did this happen?

Unreal.

THE OLD MAN SEEKS AN APPRENTICESHIP

“What in the world?!”

Arriving via Teleport in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, I am greeted by an astonishing sight.

This is the very same place where that great being destroyed my squad.

The large cavern, which the guide said connects to the Middle Stratum, is crawling with an innumerable amount of creatures.

A swarm of white spiders as far as the eye can see.

They vary greatly in size, both large and small.

The smallest could likely fit in the palm of a human’s hand, but even the largest aren’t quite tall enough to reach my waist.

These large ones are just about the same size as a young taratect might be.

Indeed, the monsters bear a strong resemblance to taratects but with one major difference: Their two front legs are shaped like scythes.

They are the spitting image of the master of magic.

But while they may be similar in appearance, the power of these monsters pales in comparison.

Their size appears to directly correspond to their strength; the smallest ones seem so weak that I could likely crush them beneath my foot without resistance.

The large ones, however, are decently strong. The power I sense from them is enough that a greenhorn adventurer would likely struggle to defeat even one.

I can scarcely begin to count how many of them are crowded in here.

There must be hundreds at the very least.

Not only that, but their numbers are still increasing.

Countless small, round objects are scattered on the floor, and it almost seems as if the endless tide of spiders is protecting them.

Eggs.

As I look on, some of the eggs hatch, and a small white spider emerges from each one.

The freshly hatched spiders quickly devour the eggs from which they have just emerged, then scurry off to leave the cavern.

I have hidden myself with the Stealth skill and Illusion Magic, so the small spiders stream right past me.

As they do so, other spiders scuttle back into the room, carrying the corpses of monsters.

I stand there in amazement as the constantly flowing streams of spiders move past me in either direction.

My blood runs cold, though not as much as it did when that great being directed its magic at me.

That I hid myself right away is a lucky thing indeed.

I could take them one at a time quite easily, but taking on all these spiders at once and walking away in one piece is unimaginable.

I have refrained from Appraising any of them lest they notice me, but I would imagine that the large ones have stats that average somewhere in the 300s.

Still, I would probably be able to handle them. It would not be an easy fight by any means, but I would stand a decent chance of emerging victorious.

But I doubt there is any way I could deal with the creatures in the center of this madness.

In the middle of the room stands a group of spiders who look the same as the rest.

However, the similarities end there.

On the inside, they are different beasts entirely.

There are nine of them, no less.

And every one of them is intently focused on laying more eggs.

The nine in the center eat the monster corpses brought back by the other spiders, and they continue to lay eggs.

More tiny spiders emerge from these eggs, set off to hunt, and return with monster corpses.

In the process, no doubt some of those spiders become prey instead of predator, but it matters not, for more spiders are hatching far faster than their kin could possibly die.

And of course, the spiders who survive gain experience for the monsters they've killed, and they level up.

That is the spectacle currently unfolding before my eyes.

Terrifying.

Absolutely terrifying.

And yet, it is exhilarating!

Look at them! These tiny, trifling spiders who have only just hatched!

So weak that anyone could easily crush them underfoot!

And yet, if these weakling spiders grow, they can become strong enough to overwhelm a rookie adventurer.

And in a considerably short period of time, too!

When I tasted miserable defeat here at the hands of that great being, I saw nothing like this happening.

At the very least, that means this mass production can only have started at some point after that battle.

In such a short span of time, these larvae have somehow become strong enough to threaten human adventurers!

Just what kind of hellish experience would they have to go through for that to

happen?

No, no, no!

It’s not merely hellish.

This cannot be anything but hell itself!

It’s exactly as I theorized before: The rate of eggs being laid simply has to exceed the rate of young spiders dying.

That means these spiders are being put through a literal hell that goes beyond metaphor, where their lives may as well be forfeit.

I see. That must be it!

That’s the cause of this exponential rate of growth!

It’s hell.

They must survive hell in order to grow.

How did that great being acquire its strength?

How did it ascend to a state of mind that no amount of effort has allowed me to reach?

I didn’t realize the answer would be so simple.

I simply wasn’t making enough effort.

Merely training my skills and mind in a safe, secure place was far too tepid an attempt to elevate me to new heights.

Pathetic!

Oh, how my eyes are finally open after seeing all this for myself.

The effort I have put forth until now was wildly insufficient!

Compared to the intense experiences these spiders have packed into their short existences, risking life and limb all the while, my life has been absolutely meaningless!

Overcome by this realization, I begin to weep.

My sobs ring out as the tears start to flow.

But of course, that causes the nearby spiders to notice me.

Several surround me, preparing to attack at any moment.

They're acting on the command of one of the nine unique spiders in the middle of the cavern.

"Ooooh! P-please wait! I…I mean you no harm! Please have mercy and hear me out!"

I hurriedly wipe away my tears and somehow choke back the sobs.

"You are surely connected in some way to the master, the one they call the Nightmare! Please arrange for me to become the Nightmare's apprentice! I beg of youuu!"

The moment I finish speaking, my sobbing begins again.

As I prostrate myself before them, still shedding tears, the white spiders stare down at me as if in utter bewilderment.

Alas, my request was not to be granted.

The spiders seem to have decided to leave me alone.

No attacks are forthcoming, but neither is acknowledgment.

They simply act as though I do not exist, in accordance with the orders of the nine in the center.

Yes, orders.

The nine converse with one another via Telepathy.

They communicate not with any human or demon language but a strange one I have never heard before.

Though I was able to hear their conversation, I could not understand the words they used.

Judging by their tone, it seemed as though they were debating something, but I haven't the faintest idea what was said.

I suppose they must have been discussing how to deal with me and reached the conclusion that they would ignore me.

However, even if they pay no attention to me, I cannot give up.

It is clear these spiders are connected to that great being in some way.

The nine in the center have a presence that feels especially similar to the Nightmare's.

At a glance, it would be easy to mistake them for the real thing.

Yes, they must be closely linked to the master.

I have no doubt that they are expanding their forces like this on that master's orders.

In which case, surely the Nightmare will come to visit this place eventually.

When that happens, I can negotiate with it directly.

For now, I must wait for my chance.

No matter what, I will have that master take me on as an apprentice, that I might someday catch up to its strength!

That being said, I cannot simply stand around and wait.

Instead, I must learn from these spiders and undertake a hellish training of my own.

First to consider are the youngest spiders who venture out to hunt monsters.

Fighting monsters to the death is certainly a form of training in itself, but the spiders I must learn from are in fact the grown spiders who remain here in the cavern.

You see, they are not simply resting here on their laurels.

They have in fact broken up into groups, each tasked with their own training regimen.

This, too, is so intense that they could easily die if they were to err in the process.

A wild gale blows through the cavern.

It builds to a whirling channel of destruction, assailing all the spiders in its path.

Yet the apparent victims take it head-on without attempting to dodge, accumulating wounds on their bodies.

But these injuries close up almost immediately.

One of the spiders is using Wind Magic to attack the group, while a different spider uses Healing Magic to repair the damage.

They repeat this process again and again.

In a different part of the cavern, another group is undergoing a similar process with Earth Magic.

The purpose? It must be to raise their resistance skill levels.

At the same time, the attacking and healing spiders are improving their magic skills.

They repeat the process until they are nearly out of MP, at which point another spider takes over. Then the spider who has relinquished that role joins the ranks of those working on their resistance while waiting for its MP to recover.

Once the rotation is complete, all the spiders will have leveled up their magic and resistance skills.

Not only that, but their automatic recovery skills and the like benefit as well.

Even the time spent waiting for their MP to recover is used to build up other skills.

What incredibly efficient training.

Since the spiders immediately switch to an attacking role the moment they fully regain their MP, all kinds of spells are flying around the cavern.

Any spiders who are not occupied with this are sparring with one another.

Or perhaps the bouts are too intense to be merely called sparring: The trainees assault each other with genuine intent to kill.

However, even the most dire wounds are immediately healed by other spiders with Healing Magic, keeping them alive.

Without that, the battered spiders would surely die.

Sparring matches where every participant fights with the intent to land killing blows… This is scarcely different from a real battle.

This is how they build up combat experience and sharpen their techniques.

When I follow one group of spiders into the rear of the cave, I discover that it leads to a long downward slope, at the end of which is a world of fire and flame.

Simply standing in that heat is enough to sear the skin.

This must be the legendary Middle Stratum!

There in the midst of that incandescent heat, the spiders frantically cast Healing Magic on one another, evidently trying to cancel out the damage from the heat.

They're training to build up their Fire Resistance skill!

Incredible.

I have no other words for it.

Each and every hellish training exercise undertaken here is likely too dangerous for a human to attempt, not that any would ever think to try.

One wrong step would mean certain death.

And yet they train like this constantly, without rest.

Truly, this is hell.

What else could I possibly call a training regimen that is the stuff of nightmares, bordering on madness, beyond the grasp of any human?

This is it.

This is the path to greater heights that I have longed for my whole life.

I had assumed I was already making my best effort before, but it is clear to me now that I was deeply mistaken. It wasn't nearly enough.

Training within the realm of sound reason was a foolish error.

If I am not putting my life on the line, it's as if I was making no effort at all!

I must cast aside all reason, give in to madness, and fling myself into the very abyss if I wish to truly exert myself for the very first time.

Ah, my existence up until now has been such a pathetic thing!

Now that I have borne witness to this training from hell, my feeble attempts seem like naught but a game!

I shall begin following their example at once, committing everything to my training.

To start, I cast Attack Magic on myself and allow the blow to land cleanly. Pain pierces my body.

Then I immediately cast Healing Magic, restoring my HP.

And yet, I am already on my knees.

After only one attack…and I must repeat this continually?

Truly, this is torture beyond belief!

There is only one of me, so I must assume the role of both attacker and healer.

If I fail, I will surely die on the spot.

Physical agony and the fear of death both assail me at once.

Surely no one of ordinary mind and body could imitate this. Even I am terrified of continuing down this path.

But if I can overcome this, then the heights I yearn for await me on the other side.

If I ever wish to reach them, I must not stumble now!

I loose another spell at myself.

This is the magic I have cultivated in my pathetic life thus far.

Though feeble it may have been, I at least have the advantage of many years on my side.

My magic is stronger than these spiders. But I will still use their methods.

If I am stronger than they, then surely I will grow quicker as well!

But alas, I cannot avoid this frustration bubbling up.

If I had been undergoing this sort of training throughout my long life, then I would surely be far closer to the pinnacle of magic by now.

If only I could have met the master sooner.

I wish I had experienced this environment since I was a child…no, perhaps even when I was a babe.

Then I might have strength comparable to the master's by now.

But no, surely it is not too late!

Abandon all common sense and reason!

The training I thought was testing my limits is child's play compared to this hell.

Which means the boundaries I've struggled against my whole life stand on little more than my own assumptions!

If I can reach a point where the torments of this hell feel like lukewarm bathwater, then surely I will far exceed my own limits!

I will pass through this circle of hell into the next one, where that great being will surely guide me to never-before-seen heights and uncharted depths!

"Heh-heh… Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

A laugh spills from my lips unbidden.

Perhaps I have truly taken leave of my senses.

But if madness is what it takes to survive this hell, then I will happily cast away my sanity.

I devoted myself to this purgatory for several days, but as I did not bring any means of sustenance with me, my stomach is reaching its limits.

I contemplated returning to town temporarily, but I cannot take things so lightly anymore.

Besides, there is no way of telling when the master might return here.

I cannot risk leaving if there is any chance that the Nightmare might visit while I am away.

Thus, I follow the spiders' suit once again: namely, defeating monsters nearby and consuming their flesh.

I first defeated a frog monster, cooked its meat, and consumed it.

The thought of eating it raw turned my appetite so much that I decided to allow myself that one small compromise.

But the monster was poisonous, and it wreaked havoc on my stomach.

I thought I might truly die.

But in the process, my Poison Resistance level rose.

To think that even the food the spiders consume is part of their training!

In the Great Elroe Labyrinth, simply living from one day to the next is enough to raise one's skills.

Attempting to see in total darkness raises the Night Vision skill.

Staying vigilant against monsters that might attack from that nigh-impenetrable gloom raises detection-related skills.

Fighting those monsters raises combat skills.

And exposure to their poison raises resistance.

Simply surviving in this unique environment helps to cultivate many skills.

And if one adds hellish training and study on top of that harsh day-to-day existence…

I am beginning to catch a glimpse of the secret behind that great being's strength.

The master must have constantly faced death in a struggle of life or death here in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, all while ceaselessly striving to grow better, in order to reach such heights.

It is no wonder that one such as me, residing within a mansion in the safety of a town, was no match for its power.

To live in this place, one must cast aside even the most basic human necessities.

My clothes were ripped to shreds by the end of the first day of attacking myself with magic, and now I go about fully in the nude.

This is truly what they call living in the wild.

And it is the only way to cultivate my skills to their greatest potential!

Meeting of the Parallel Minds #2: Creepy Old Geezer

“That old dude who popped in here is super-weird.”

“First of all, don’t say *popped in*. Secondly, nothing that weird could occur naturally. It must be some freaky thing born of totally unique circumstances that’s just wearing the skin of an old man.”

“What kind of ‘unique circumstances’ would create a creature that spews liquid from every part of its face?”

“Beats me. There are probably lots of things in the world that we’re better off not knowing.”

“Wait a sec. He’s setting his own clothes on fire and cackling like a maniac. What should we do?”

“Uhhh… What’s that all about? Seriously, what the hell?”

“What are we even gonna do about that? Anyone?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t see or hear anything. There’s no such thing as a naked old geezer running around here. Right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“No objections here. For real.”

“Yeah, I don’t want anything to do with whatever that is. We just gotta *seriously* pretend it’s not even here.”

“Terrifying. My Fear Resistance skill isn’t even helping now. Talk about scary.”

Misfortune Is a Funny Thing

She must be crazy, right?

I mean, I suspected it for a while, but now I'm certain.

She's a little—no, *extremely* detached from humanity.

I am referring, of course, to White, who's currently looking at me with an expression of genuine puzzlement.

You see, she's just made a completely impossible request of me.

And yet, she clearly doesn't understand why I'm not going to do it.

Even I can't help getting angry.

"Of course it's impossible! Why would I use Attack Magic on myself*?!"*

Yes, her absurd request was that I hurt myself with magic.

Until I'm nearly out of MP, no less.

It's been over a month since this journey began.

In that time, my stats and skills have shot up at a remarkable rate under White's training, and now she's asking me to take the next step in her little regimen.

She even demonstrated by attacking herself with Dark Magic.

Something that looked like black lightning struck her body, but White didn't even react.

She looked so calm about it that I figured it must not hurt, so I reached out and touched the lightning.

In that instant, much to my horror, my hand went flying off.

That’s right. My hand. Came off.

Do you understand what I’m saying?

As soon as I touched the lightning, my vision went black, and the next thing I knew, my hand was no longer attached to my wrist.

I’ve never passed out from sheer terror before, not in this life or my previous one.

When I woke up, my face was a mess of tears and snot, and Merazophis was holding me.

And my missing hand was back where it belonged.

I guess it was fixed with Healing Magic right away, but I had been in too much of a panic to realize it.

Even once I returned to my senses, I still couldn’t stop my crying, and Merazophis had to cradle me reassuringly for a few more minutes.

When I noticed that Merazophis’s clothes were now soaked and snotty, I almost wanted to die.

And the moment I finally calmed down, White spoke up, completely oblivious to the mood.

“Okay, now you try.”

I’m not going to do that!

That’s…that’s hardly any different from telling me to die.

How can she demand that so calmly?

The only explanation I have is that she’s crazy.

And yet, she has the nerve to cock her head at me like she’s confused that I’m against it.

Her expression hardly ever changes, but she gets her emotions across a little with gestures like this. She often did the same thing in our old world, too.

As if she has no other way of expressing her feelings.

Normally, that would seem disingenuous, but somehow when White does it,

it’s almost charming. Beautiful people have all the luck.

After considering my reaction, White assumes a pose like the *Thinker* statue.

Immediately, an uncomfortable feeling assails my body.

I know now that it’s the feeling that comes with being Appraised; I’ve felt it quite often since this journey started.

Since it means someone else is reading your status, your personal information, it’s only natural that it would feel strange.

I think White wants to figure out whether I can actually do what she wants.

Then, evidently concluding that I should be able to do it, she tilts her head a little, still in the *Thinker* pose.

She doesn’t get it.

Whether I’m physically capable and whether I’m actually willing to do it are two entirely different things.

I mean, anyone can jump off a cliff, right?

But that doesn’t mean most people would do it simply because they were told to.

What White’s saying isn’t far off from that, but she can’t fathom why I would refuse.

Something’s wrong with her.

I certainly don’t enjoy it when she trains me by walking me with her spider thread, but I accept it because there’s a fairly good reason for it.

Although even then, it’s not like White was the one who told me the reason. Ariel had to explain it to me for her.

White would rather either force me to do it without explanation or give a demonstration and then order me to do the same, just like this time.

Either way, she never explains the logic behind her demands.

“Listen, White. I think you’re gonna have to explain it this time or she’s not gonna do it, okay?”

As usual, Ariel steps in to reason with her.

But White doesn't answer or explain.

"Oh, all right. I'll explain, then. Hitting yourself with Attack Magic is meant to train both your magic skills and resistance skills. Your magic skills will improve because you're casting the spell, and your resistance skills will improve because you're enduring the hit. Two birds with one stone, right? Of course, your resistance technically goes up anyway when you use magic or other skills of the corresponding attribute, but it's seriously an itty-bitty amount, so it makes sense to try to actively raise both at once. That being said, most people aren't crazy enough to train by harming themselves."

Thanks to Ariel's explanation, now I understand the point of the training.

But, exactly as she said, I doubt most people would be crazy enough to try this.

Causing yourself massive, near-fatal injury to raise a resistance skill that's meant to reduce the amount of damage you take? Isn't that putting the cart before the horse?

"Ah, that explanation isn't really cutting it for you, is it, Sophia? I'm sure you're wondering why anyone would put their life on the line just to raise their skills. But what happened earlier was only because White's magic is so strong—normally, you wouldn't use such an intense attack. Since you're the one casting the spell, you can make it as strong or as weak as you like, really."

My eyes widen at that.

When I think about Ariel's words for a minute, not to mention the strength of my own magic, it finally makes sense.

Of course. It's not like I'd actually have to use magic so strong that it could blow off my hand like earlier.

In fact, I'm not even capable of that in the first place.

And even if I could, of course I wouldn't use it on myself.

I was under a mistaken assumption the entire time.

So all I have to do is use magic weak enough that I can bear it, right?

When I finally figure that out, all my panicking suddenly seems pitiful.

It's so simple, but I was blathering away that I couldn't do it.

No wonder White was tilting her head at me!

I'm so embarrassed!

"I'm sorry."

I made a huge fuss based on a wrong assumption. The least I can do is apologize.

"Nah, I can't really blame you after what happened, especially since White didn't explain a damn thing. She should've at least waited for you to calm down a little before she started going off. But she doesn't really know how to be that tactful."

Ariel half glares at White, who seems to recoil a little.

Maybe she actually feels bad?

I thought she might even apologize for blowing off my hand and all, but in the end, White didn't open her mouth.

Our journey seems to be going well.

That being said, our destination, Sariella's capital, is still far away.

Keren County, where we once lived, is at the very edge of Sariella.

The capital is somewhere in the middle, but Sariella is a rather large country, so of course it's a considerable distance away.

And since our group has to match its pace with mine, we're not getting anywhere fast.

I'm somehow walking with the help of the mysterious power of stats, but that doesn't make my legs any longer.

Naturally, the distance I can travel is a lot shorter than an adult.

It doesn't help that, since we're trying to keep from being seen, we're traveling through harsh mountains, dense forests, and so on, not anywhere with nice, easy paths.

I've even gotten used to sleeping outside, although it helps that we get to stay in a town once in a while.

Yet for some reason, every time we visit a town, Merazophis always looks unhappy.

I've asked him a few times what's the matter, but he only ever says that "everything is fine."

I'm sure he just doesn't want to worry me, but it only makes me even more certain that something is definitely wrong.

I wish he would talk to me about it, but Merazophis feels an obligation to protect me at all times. He doesn't want to trouble his "master" with his own personal problems, so instead, he bottles them up inside.

But seeing him suffering on his own still ends up troubling me…

Isn't there anything I can do for Merazophis?

He's helped me so much, I'd love to return the favor at least a little.

Without Merazophis, I'm sure I'd be done by now.

And I mean that both physically and mentally.

If Merazophis hadn't put his life on the line to protect me, I would've been killed that day by Potimas the elf.

And even after finding out that I'm a reincarnation and a vampire, he's still continued to put me first in everything he does.

I can't even say how much that has helped me.

Merazophis is the only reason I've been able to get through these circumstances without breaking.

Because of him, I've been able to accept this world for what it is without trying to escape.

When I first reincarnated here, I told myself that this world was just a dream or something.

After all, it clearly wasn't Japan, had strange things like "stats," and most of all, I was a vampire.

It wasn’t easy to accept that this is my new reality.

Surely, having my old self reset and being forced to start over in this bizarre new world was just a bad dream.

But no matter how long it went on, I didn’t wake up, and I had to acknowledge that this was reality.

I vowed to start a new life in this new world, with my new parents.

And then they both died.

Right after I’d vowed to put aside my feelings about my old life and move forward, I lost nearly everything all over again.

A reset after a reset.

It’s no surprise I really wanted to run away from reality this time.

But Merazophis is the one who saved me from that.

I lost everything else, but Merazophis stayed with me.

He became the proof that there was a time when I lived in that mansion and was loved by those parents, no matter how short it might have been.

Because he is here to remind me of that, I can keep my eyes on reality.

Merazophis saves me simply by existing.

I can’t ever thank him enough.

Which is why I want him to put aside his worries about our roles and let me help him.

“But no matter how many times I ask him, he just won’t answer. Do you have any idea what might be troubling Merazophis, Miss Ariel?”

“Uh… Hmm.”

I’m asking Ariel for advice.

It’s the middle of the day, and the sun is shining brightly.

But Ariel and I are the only ones awake.

As vampires, Merazophis and I are nocturnal, so other than when we visit a

town, we've naturally started doing most of our travel at night.

Thus, Merazophis is now resting in the shade.

White is resting, too, in a cocoon of sorts made from white thread.

Apparently, it's a "simple home" made of spider thread.

White has Status Condition Nullification, which includes Exhaustion Nullification, so technically she doesn't have to sleep.

However, that really just means that not sleeping doesn't have any negative effects for her; she still gains the benefits of sleep, like physical healing.

Most of all, sleeping still feels good, so she does it when she's in the mood, as far as I can tell.

Since the two of them are asleep, it's the perfect chance to get advice.

I can't talk about it in front of Merazophis himself, of course, and I don't want White to hear it.

Besides, given how silent and expressionless she is, I doubt she'd understand such a delicate topic.

Despite Ariel's youthful appearance, she has countless years of experience, and she always looks after us like our elder, so I feel safe consulting her.

"Hrmmm."

This time, however, she only frowns after listening to my question, not giving me a clear answer.

Does she not know what's bothering Merazophis?

Or is it that she does know, and it's so serious that she's hesitant to reveal it to me?

"*Miss Ariel, is Merazophis's problem that serious?*" I ask nervously.

"Yeah, I suppose so," she responds frankly. "But it's not like his life is in danger or anything. It's not the kind of thing that's going to cause immediate problems. But it's not the kind of thing that can be *solved* immediately, either."

I seriously can't tell if she's trying to reassure me or make me worry even

more.

After a moment of silence, Ariel opens her mouth again.

“To be perfectly honest, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

That’s hard for me to accept.

But I think Ariel knew it would be when she said it. I don’t normally hear her speak so firmly.

“In fact, if you try to get involved, it might only make things more complicated. And by ‘might,’ I mean ‘definitely will.’ So I understand you’re worried, but all you can do right now is give him space.”

Me getting involved would make it more complicated?

What does that mean?

“I’m sure it’s frustrating, but the best thing you can do for him is nothing at all. Sticking your nose in it will only make things worse. I understand that when someone you care about is suffering, you want to help them, but this is one situation where you’ll have to pretend like nothing’s wrong. I think you acting normal would be the best thing for Merazophis right now. He’ll likely figure it out on his own, little by little, so try not to worry.”

I don’t really understand what Ariel’s saying.

Since I don’t know what’s bothering Merazophis so much, the whole thing is very vague.

But I do get the gist of what she wants from me: don’t do anything.

Part of me does want to reject that, of course, but her statement that I would only make things worse stops me in my tracks.

I want to help, but I’d make things more “complicated.”

So all I can do is stay quiet?

“Can’t you at least tell me what’s bothering Merazophis so much? Please?”

Knowing would make it easier to accept that I can’t help.

“Sorry, but I think you’re better off not knowing, sooo…nope.”

It sounds like she's mocking me.

"Please don't joke about this!"

My tone via Telepathy gets angry, but her response is surprisingly serious.

"I'm not really trying to," she says simply. "It's just better this way. Like I said before, it's best if you don't get involved in this situation, both for Merazophis's sake and your own."

For my own sake?

"That's all I can tell you. I'm sure that doesn't make you feel much better, but you gotta trust Merazophis and wait for now."

Despite my stubbornness, Ariel doesn't seem willing to say any more.

"Or do you not trust Merazophis, Little Miss Sophia?"

…That's playing dirty.

Ariel can be very unfair sometimes.

I don't know if it's because of her age, but she has a tendency to say things in a way that makes it impossible to argue.

"*Of course I do*," I answer reluctantly.

What else am I supposed to say?

I do trust Merazophis.

Since she put it that way, it seems like I really do have no choice but to trust him and wait.

"Glad to hear it. To be honest, I didn't know what I was gonna do if you kept bugging me to tell you. I don't *want* to tell you, of course, but you can be almost as awkward as White when it comes to dealing with other people, y'know? I'm afraid if you find out, you won't be able to hide it, and that'll make things awkward between you and Merazophis for sure."

Her serious attitude vanishes, and Ariel snickers as she teases me.

"*Please don't compare me to White. Her issues go far beyond being 'awkward,' don't you think?*" Getting annoyed, I respond crossly without

thinking.

It’s true that no one would say I’m good with people.

But I’m not like White, who doesn’t make any effort to interact with others in the first place.

I did try to connect with others; it just never worked because of my appearance.

“Yeah? Hmm. I’ve been wondering for a while… Why are you so hostile toward White anyway?”

Ariel tilts her head at me, not unlike White’s pose when she doesn’t understand something.

“What do you mean, ‘why’? Isn’t it obvious?”

Ariel just tilts her head even farther.

“Uh, I don’t think it’s as obvious as you think it is. I mean, White saved your life, didn’t she? Why do you hate her so much?”

That makes me stop and think.

She’s right.

White really did save my life.

But instead of being grateful, I just hate her.

From Ariel’s perspective, I’m the one being unreasonable!

“But, well, she’s been so awful to me during this entire journey…”

“She’s not doing it for no reason, though. We don’t know what might happen in the future, so she’s trying to train up your stats and skills while we have the chance. I mean, yeah, her Spartan methods are a little over-the-top, but her intentions are still in the right place—she’s just a bit weird, that’s all. You know that, right? There’s no reason to be so dead set against her.”

Ariel counters my excuse without missing a beat.

“I think her training is a good idea, too. There’s a lot more fighting in this world than the one you guys came from. Bulking up now is a good move. That’s

why White decided to train you and why I didn't stop her. Frankly, I think that makes White a lot nicer and more thoughtful than I am."

That's definitely not true.

I want to say that, but I manage to swallow those words.

Is that really what White is thinking?

If I look back objectively on everything White's done, like Ariel says, it does seem like she's simply trying to help me.

My stats and skills really have grown at an incredible rate.

But somehow, I can't accept it.

"I can't deny that it's been hard on you, though. Guess it's just one of those things, eh? Like when a mother is harsh on her child to make them stronger."

"*Don't compare her to my mother!*" I shout via Telepathy without thinking.

The first person who came to mind was my mother in my old life.

Then my mother in this one.

Both of them were admirable people.

I can't bear to think of White as being on their level.

"Sorry, sorry. Bad example." Ariel apologizes meekly. "But I do think it's a bit cruel to denounce the person who saved your life. What kind of person would do that?"

Those words hit me like a slap in the face.

Part of it is that I've never heard Ariel's voice sound so cold before.

But most of all, she's so right that I have no choice but to acknowledge that I'm the one in the wrong.

It doesn't really take a lot of deep thinking to figure that out, does it?

From a neutral point of view, openly despising the person who saved me just makes me seem incredibly ungrateful.

Like a terrible person.

I've been arguing with Ariel because I didn't want to admit it to myself, but that's only made me seem even worse.

People often idolize someone who saved their lives, but who ever heard of hating them?

So why have I been harboring such anger toward her?

I already know the answer.

"I'm sorry."

"Not sure what you're apologizing for, but shouldn't you be saying it to White, not me?"

"Yes, I suppose so…"

I have to admit it.

The ridiculous reason for my hatred toward White.

"I was…jealous."

That's the only reason I hate her so much.

I was jealous.

No, I still am.

In my old life, I was incredibly jealous of Hiiro Wakaba's stunning good looks.

And I carried that jealousy into this world, causing me to hate White, even though she saved my life.

That's all. A simple, terrible reason.

It's not like Hiiro Wakaba ever wronged me.

Aside from being in the same class, we barely had any kind of relationship at all.

Nonetheless, I harbored a one-sided jealousy and hatred toward her.

And when I was reincarnated, just as I vowed to turn over a new leaf and literally start life anew, I was reunited with the very person I hated so much.

Right when I was losing everything I had, no less.

Not to mention, she was one of the main catalysts that caused the battle that took it all away from me, wasn't she?

My feelings from my old life and my fury at losing everything.

I took it all out on the nearest scapegoat.

Even if that happened to be someone who saved my life.

I'd lost it all, yet White still had the same beauty as in her old life, while also being incredibly powerful.

It just didn't seem fair.

But from White's point of view, it must seem like I'm lashing out for no reason.

"Even after being reborn, I'm still an awful person."

Little by little, I tell Ariel about my old life.

Since I'm just saying whatever comes to mind, I'm sure it's pretty incoherent and hard to follow.

But Ariel still listens quietly until the end.

Perhaps that's why I hold on to hope that she'll have words of comfort for me.

The scathing remark that comes out instead sends me into shock.

"Sophia, are you stupid?"

"What?!"

"Rather, you don't seem to have any imagination when it comes to other people's situations. Although I should've known that already from the fact that you don't know what's bothering Merazophis."

Ariel looks down at me like a teacher staring at an incompetent pupil.

"You only really think about yourself, Sophia. You think you've got it worse than anyone, which is exactly why you don't think of other people. Even right now. You're boo-hooing about how you're awful or whatever, but that kind of fake self-loathing is just a way of shirking the blame for your own actions. You

think just because you acted sorry, you don't have to do anything else. That's how you try to justify it, right?"

Ariel's assessment is merciless.

Her words devastate me. I can only stare in shock, not even trying to defend myself.

"That really is awful, just like you said."

I turn pale when she delivers the finishing blow.

If Ariel hates me, I'm doomed.

If she abandons Merazophis and me, what are we going to do?

I've been so terrible to White, I doubt she'd help us.

It's only then that I finally realize.

When I think about it, I really am being awful.

Like it or not, I finally accept that everything Ariel's said is true.

Now I really am starting to hate myself, not just in the artificial way Ariel accurately described.

"Still, that doesn't change the fact that you've gone through some really horrible circumstances. Don't worry—it's not like I'm going to dump you now."

Somehow, Ariel guesses at my worries and reassures me.

I'm relieved but also disgusted with myself for being so easy to read.

I guess my thoughts are so shallow that anyone can figure them out.

Ariel sighs. "Maybe I said a bit too much, huh? You're still just a kid. I guess I can be a little childish myself."

Evidently realizing that I really am depressed now, she scratches her head awkwardly.

A kid? I suppose I am a kid compared to Ariel, and I am still technically a baby, but it nonetheless hurts to hear it out loud.

It's like she doesn't think of me as my own person.

To Ariel, I must be no more than a difficult child.

“Putting yourself first isn’t necessarily a bad thing, y’know. In fact, I think most people are the same way. But you can’t let yourself get so self-obsessed that you look down on other people. There’s bound to be some folks you don’t like, of course, but the adult thing to do is just suck it up and try to get along anyway. So try thinking about your relationship with White from a neutral point of view, why don’t you? Not that I’m one to talk, since I don’t exactly have the easiest relationship with her myself.”

That last part is said with a wry tone, but the rest is more like a scolding.

I obediently review my relationship with White without taking my emotions into account.

In our old world, we frankly didn’t have any relationship to speak of.

Our first interaction in this world was when she saved me from attacking bandits.

After that, she built a nest near the town where I lived, and she stayed there.

Although she hasn’t said so herself, I suspect she did this to protect me from the elves. For one thing, Ariel once made a comment to that effect.

Most importantly, when the elf called Potimas was about to kill me, she saved my life.

And even now, she travels with me and keeps me safe.

…She’s been doing nothing but helping me all this time.

And I haven’t done anything in return.

Without thinking, I voice the question on my mind.

“Why do you think White would do all that for me?”

“Not sure. I don’t really understand her, to be honest. She might have some reason behind it, or there might be no reason at all.”

The tone of her response is joking, but it seems like she really doesn’t know.

Thinking back, White’s been doing things for me this whole time without ever expecting anything in return.

All in spite of my bad attitude.

In fact, she's been so devoted, it's almost creepy.

It's exactly like Ariel said: When someone receives some kind of free service, they can't help suspecting an ulterior motive behind it.

White's kindness toward me has been so excessive that I find myself wondering what her motive is.

Ariel even said herself that the reason she's been kind to Merazophis and me is because White seems to like us.

I do think that Ariel's genuine kindness as a person has something to do with it as well, but it's not like she was lying about that, either.

The fact is that White is the reason Ariel decided to look after us.

If White didn't care about us, even the kind Ariel might not have considered helping us out.

So why does White seem to care about our well-being so much in the first place?

Because of our old lives?

Is that a good enough reason to do this much for us?

We were nothing more than classmates. Why would she do all this for someone she hardly ever interacted with?

If our roles were reversed, I doubt I would have done the same.

In fact, I couldn't have.

I would have never risked my life to take on an opponent like Potimas for someone I barely knew.

If she really did do that for no other reason than the goodness of her heart…

Well, the word *saint* comes to mind.

At the same time, I remember that she healed the ills and injuries of the townspeople for free and wound up being worshipped for it.

Before she was an arachne, when she looked like nothing more than a spider

monster, she was accepted and admired by the townspeople.

Of course, the fact that they happened to follow a religion that worships a spider as a Divine Beast of the Goddess probably had something to do with it, but I think White's humanity played a big part, too.

I always thought that looks were everything.

But if that was true, how could White get accepted?

In this life and the last, was White really admired only because of her appearance?

No.

Our old world aside, in this world, White was admired even when she was a spider monster.

She certainly wasn't welcomed because of her appearance.

It was her character and actions that made the people of the town acknowledge and worship her.

I've been in her good graces all along, yet I hated and envied her for no good reason.

Ariel was right. I really am just a stupid kid.

"I'll start working on changing my attitude from now on."

"Yeah. I think that's a good idea. Change like that doesn't happen overnight, right? You gotta get used to it over time."

I breathe a sigh of relief at Ariel's affirmation.

I can't completely change right away, but I'll try to be nicer to White from now on.

I thought having good looks meant you were a winner at life, but no matter how good you might look on the outside, you'll always be ugly if that's how you are on the inside.

I still think people who say they don't care about appearance are lying, but I was going too far in the other direction, caring only about how people look.

If someone is beautiful both on the inside and outside, that's when they really start to shine.

But I never realized that.

If I'd gone on without ever noticing that truth, I'm sure I would've kept getting uglier.

"I'll try to become the kind of person who thinks of others, like you and White."

"R-right…"

For some reason, Ariel's expression turns strange.

"Does White think of other people? Uh… Hmm? But I mean, thinking about everything she's done so far… Hrm. I don't know."

What is she muttering about?

"Ugh. I just don't understand her! But as far as you're concerned, I figured she just helped you because you're a reincarnation, too…"

"But would she really go this far if that was the whole reason?"

"Who knows? You'd have to ask White herself. Ah, but I dunno, maybe she was just excited."

"Excited? About what?"

"Well, she had just survived hell when she met a fellow reincarnation. Maybe she got so worked up that she saved you without thinking."

Doubts fly through my mind as I try to understand what Ariel is saying.

"White is a spider monster, remember? And she was born in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, the biggest and most dangerous dungeon in the world. She had her work cut out for her just surviving in a place like that. Didn't you ever wonder how she got so strong in the first place?"

I suppose it is strange now that I think about it.

"Well, to put it simply, she had to be strong if she wanted to live. It's not like she was born with all that power. She needed to get stronger to survive, so that's what she did. Even if it meant attacking herself with magic to raise her

resistance skills. No normal person would think of that, let alone actually do it, but she had to do crazy things if she wanted to live in there. That's it."

I remember the sight of her covered in magic so powerful that it blew my hand off.

My first thought at the time was that she was crazy.

But after that, Ariel explained my misunderstanding, and I felt embarrassed about my mistake.

When I actually tried it out, though, my opinion changed again.

I know I'm flip-flopping here, but I really do think that method is crazy.

Even using weak magic on myself sent me writhing on the ground in pain.

Of course it did.

These spells are meant for attacking.

The goal is to harm the target, so of course it's going to hurt, even if the target is yourself.

White seemed crazy for being able to do that to herself without her expression changing in the slightest. Why would anyone ever resort to such extreme measures to raise their skills?

I certainly wouldn't have done it if I wasn't essentially being forced.

But what if I was in such a dangerous environment that I had no other choice?

"When she escaped that place and met a fellow human from her old world, she was so excited, she decided to do you a favor. It's a possibility, at least."

Ariel doesn't sound entirely certain.

White is the only person who would know what she was thinking, of course.

But now I know with certainty that White went through some really hard times.

"So White's life has been at least as hard as mine, maybe even worse."

She worked herself to the bone to obtain all that strength, and here I am whining that it's unfair.

It never occurred to me what White might have gone through to become that powerful.

“Well, it’d be pointless to debate who’s had it worse. I just want you to know that White’s life hasn’t been easy, either. I’m not asking you to share her excitement about finding a fellow reincarnation, but I wouldn’t want you to be on bad terms forever, y’know?”

“Of course.”

I agree, because I can’t help imagining it.

Escaping from hell and finding someone from the same world as me.

What if that person wound up being cold toward me?

If I was in that position, my heart might break.

It’s all too clear to me now how awful I’ve been toward White.

I repaid her kindness with hatred and thought I was in the right? How could I be such an idiot?

If I’d thought about it at all, I would have realized how wrong I was.

That just shows all I ever thought about was myself and I never wondered about other people.

Does that mean if I give a little thought to Merazophis’s problems, I might figure that out, too?

“All right. You should get to sleep. Otherwise, you’re not gonna make it through your next round of hard-core training with White.”

Ariel’s words dispel the idea before I can think about it any further.

“All right. Good night.”

My mind is churning with so many thoughts that I’m not sure I’ll be able to sleep, but soon exhaustion takes over and my consciousness slips away.

My last thought as I drift off to sleep is that I’ll apologize to White for my behavior when I wake up.

THE DEMON LORD'S SOLILOQUY

I gaze at Sophia, now sound asleep.

"She looks just like any other normal baby now. I mean, even on the inside, she's still a kid."

She might be a reincarnation and all that, but considering what her age was before, she's still very young.

Considering what she's been through so far, it's no wonder she still gets emotional and makes mistakes.

"Kids are supposed to make mistakes—it's part of growing up. What's important is whether they find their way back to the right path afterward. They need an adult to help them notice their mistakes and guide them to what's right. A guardian to teach them, admonish them, and lead them…"

This kid has lost her parents.

Which means someone else has to fill in the role of guardian for her.

"But that doesn't work if that adult is wrong themselves. That's where it gets tough, though. I mean, what's 'right' changes all the time depending on your situation and stuff. An adult has to constantly think about that and have confidence that they know exactly what's right. If you're worried or hesitant, you can't teach a kid at all."

If an adult can't say with confidence whether something is right, no one will respect them, not just kids.

Without that respect, an adult can't lead.

That's why an adult should always be able to explain why they're right.

“I don’t think he’s quite convinced himself of what’s right yet. But if you’re not confident, I don’t think you can do anything for anyone else. That confidence can’t be half-baked, though. You have to be totally resolute, or that mask of certainty will peel right off eventually. I’m sure that’ll make things even worse. So you have to make sure you’ve really got it figured out.”

A decision arrived at in a state of panic is never a good thing in the long run.

If you’re going to worry about something, better to worry about it for all you’re worth.

Once you’ve worried and worried and finally reached a conclusion, that’s when you know you’ve got it right.

“I guess I played the role of guardian this time. Now she’s taken a step forward. If she keeps growing, she should figure out a certain someone’s problem soon enough. I have no idea how she’s going to deal with it, or how he’s going to react. But if he wants to serve as this girl’s guardian, his best bet is to come up with a good answer so she won’t worry. Although, I do think that walking by her side and thinking about it together is an option, too. In that case, someone else would have to take on the role of her guardian, but… Well, I suppose I can do that. From my point of view, they’re all nothing but young kids anyway. Whatever they choose, I just hope they don’t regret it. Okay, that’s the end of my soliloquy.”

“…I shall take that to heart.”

Although I was talking only to myself, a voice answers me at the end.

I’ll pretend I didn’t hear anything.

Liquor Is the Best Medicine

One day, Vampy suddenly became super-duper docile.

She woke up and apologized to me out of nowhere, although I wasn't really sure what she was apologizing for.

But it meant that she stopped being so rebellious about my super-fun training plans, so I was all for it.

I feel like the protagonist of a raising simulation game.

I'm gonna raise this bloodsucker into the finest young lady (LOL) you ever saw!

So, I've been improving her skills in training mode every day.

I'm working on my own skills at the same time, of course, but that part isn't going as well.

Since so many of my skills are really high-level at this point, it makes it a lot harder to get them to go up any further.

Their levels raise on their own once in a while, which I think must be thanks to the Parallel Minds I transferred into their own bodies.

But even if I work as hard as they are, my growth rate is awfully slow.

And that's with the effects of my cheat skill Pride.

Without it, I probably wouldn't be growing at all anymore.

But if I just accept that and stop trying, I'll never catch up to the Demon Lord.

For now, I've decided to mostly put the harder-to-raise skills aside for now and focus on the really important ones.

Especially Warped Evil Eye.

As far as I know, that's the only skill that can deal with Potimas.

Inside that barrier that cancels out stats and skills, my main specialties of thread and magic are practically useless.

Warped Evil Eye is pretty much the only long-distance attack I can still use in there.

I'd prefer never to see that guy again, of course, but it can't hurt to be prepared.

And judging by what the Demon Lord said, the Potimas we fought was actually just some kind of remote-control puppet, so there might be plenty more where that came from.

If Potimas really is after Vampy, I might end up having to fight him again.

I managed last time because the Demon Lord came crashing in, but who knows what'll happen next time?

To be honest, if she hadn't shown up, I think my chances of winning were less than 5 percent.

I don't know if my Immortality skill would've even worked in that barrier or if I could've used egg revival.

In the worst-case scenario, I might've actually died for good.

Can you really blame me for wanting to be fully prepared in case he shows up again?

That's why I've been training up Warped Evil Eye, but I don't think that's enough.

Potimas has seen my Warped Evil Eye once now. For all I know, he's preparing ways to counter it just like I am for him.

If he finds a way to prevent me from using even Warped Evil Eye, I'll be totally screwed.

Which means I'd like to find a few more countermeasures besides Warped Evil Eye.

So far, I've come up with only one good way to do that.

Namely, leveling up so I can beat him physically.

The Demon Lord defeated Potimas by simply destroying his metal body with sheer brute strength.

That certainly seems like the most practical idea to me.

Potimas's barrier nullifies any skills and stats that affect things outside the body.

In other words, skills and stats that function inside the body still work, so even if your physical abilities go down a little, you can still move in accordance with your stats.

That means the most effective method is to boost my physical stats so I can beat the crap out of him next time.

Sadly, though, it's not that simple.

See, my physical stats are already pretty high.

They're not as impressive as my magic stats, but they've gone up so much that I could probably fight Mother without magic at this point.

But when I faced Potimas, it still seemed like my only chance of winning was Warped Evil Eye.

If I want to be truly, devastatingly powerful, then I really need to get stats on par with the Demon Lord's.

And yet, my growth has slowed down dramatically.

Raising my stats now takes a huge amount of effort, and they've only gone up ever so slightly since we first began this journey.

On top of that, my level isn't going up, either.

It's been a fairly long time since I evolved into an arachne, and I've been hunting a pretty significant amount of monsters along the way, but my level refuses to rise.

The amount of experience it takes to level up at this point is so huge that just killing whatever monsters are around isn't gonna cut it.

I need to kill either some really strong monsters or some humans.

But it's not like really strong monsters are that easy to find, and I can't go around killing humans indiscriminately.

I don't really mind if they're robbers or whatever, but since we're avoiding people by traveling through forests and mountains and stuff, we never run into any humans in the first place.

Even robbers and bandits and the like don't hang out deep in the forest or on some inaccessible mountain.

We're never gonna meet anyone if we stick to this path!

Heh, I sound like a loser who can't get a date.

Anyway, I'd love to just run off somewhere to work on this, but the Demon Lord's always watching, so I'm better off staying in line for now.

Besides, if I stick by the Demon Lord, she can deal with it if Potimas comes back.

At any rate, I guess my only option right now is the slow and steady route.

Then I remember about the existence of weapon skills.

I got a skill called Shieldsmanship before that came with a title.

The one that was like, "Good things will happen if you're using a shield!"

I hadn't evolved into an arachne yet then, so I was just like, "I can't equip a shield, dumbass!" and dismissed it as useless.

But now that I'm an arachne, with a human-shaped upper body, I can totally equip weapons!

Which means I can use a shield or anything else!

But to be honest, that's still pretty useless.

I mean, sure, I can hold a shield now, but it's gonna be softer than my body.

Like I said, my stats are really, really, reeeally high.

To the point where my defense is higher than a metal shield would be.

If the shield is softer than I am, what's the point in using it at all?

And weapons would be pretty much the same way.

I got the puppet spiders to lend me their equipment, but I couldn't even put a scratch on myself with it.

When I think about how those same weapons once sliced me up to the verge of death, it makes me realize all over again how strong I've gotten.

But forget that for now.

In other words, even the weapons the puppet spiders carry can't hurt my flesh.

Frankly, hitting someone with my fist would have more impact than any weapon.

You might think that means there's no point in me having any weapons, but there are exceptions, you know.

For instance, if there was a weapon that was stronger and more destructive than my own body.

But it's not like I'm gonna stumble across a weapon like that randomly.

I mean, the puppet spiders' stats average higher than 10,000, which is crazy strong, and their weapons still didn't work on me.

Unless I happen to get an ultrarare drop of some legendary item or other, weapons are of no use to me.

But wait!

If I don't have one, why not just make one?

Huh? You don't think it's that easy to make a legendary-class weapon?

Tsk, tsk, tsk.

Sure it is. It's actually quite simple.

'Cause I've already got the materials.

The materials of my own body, that is!

If most weapons are more fragile than my body, why not just use my body to make a better weapon?

And as it happens, there's a particular part of my body that just screams "weapon."

That's right. The two front legs of my spider body, which are shaped like scythes.

If I cut one off, I can just grow it right back with Healing Magic, so there's no reason not to use it as a weapon.

With that decided, I lop off one of my front legs at the base, use that to cut off the other one, and then tie it all together with some handy thread.

And just like that, voilà! It's done.

Da-da-da-daaa!

You've got the Giant Spider Scythe!

It looks like a weapon fit for the grim reaper.

Since it's made from my own body, it's not gonna be softer than I am, and it's guaranteed to be destructive.

And perhaps because of that, it fits very nicely in my hands.

It fits so well that taking a light swing with it nets me the Scythesmanship skill.

Now I've got one more technique I can use in a physical fight.

So far, my physical stats besides speed have been bonuses that I never had a chance to use, but from now on, things will be different.

If I rely on magic all the time, I'll be in huge trouble if I can't use it. Besides, I need to be better at close-quarters combat.

To make that happen, I've added practice swings to my daily training with Vampy and Mera.

The baby let out a scream when she first saw it, but that's not my problem.

Our journey continues as I train myself and Vampy.

It's been about two months since we left, but we still haven't reached our destination.

In this world, though, that's pretty standard for a journey.

Unlike my old world, which was full of planes and cars and stuff, it takes a very long time to get around here.

Since I've walked through the Great Elroe Labyrinth, I know that very well.

I never realized how amazing Earth's technology was before.

I've got a way to cheat around travel in the form of Teleport, but that works only for places I've been before.

Since I've never been to the capital of Sariella, of course I can't teleport there.

If it takes this long to get from one part of the same country to another, wouldn't it take years to travel to another part of the world?!

Even the towns we visit once in a while tend to be at least a week's journey apart.

Aside from those, every day is pretty much the same.

Right now, the rest of my party is in one of those towns.

That's right—I've been leeeft alooone, ooon my ooooooown, again.

Although, I'm not as bummed about it as I was the first time.

The Demon Lord must have felt bad about ditching me, because starting the next day, she took over cooking duties.

And her cooking is crazy, crazy good.

How good, you ask? So good that I actually started crying the first time.

So good that it actually made me think, *Hey, maybe joining up with the Demon Lord won't be so bad if it means I get to eat like this.*

I guess that's another benefit of her long life.

She is the grandmother who raised Mother and the rest of the spider army, after all.

Anyway, she picks up fresh ingredients when they go to town, so the food she cooks the next day is always extra good.

That makes being left on my own a little more bearable.

In fact, stopping by towns is becoming one of my favorite little events.

Although it’s always hard waiting for the next day to come.

Also, there are other folks who happen to enjoy these events, too.

Namely, the puppet spiders.

They’re beginning to look more and more human.

In fact, I’m starting to think of them as people myself.

I’m working on my modifications to their doll bodies using Divine Thread Weaving right now.

Technically, the skill itself is already maxed out, but the more I use it, the more ingenious uses I can come up with.

As part of my research, I’ve continued my progress on the puppet spiders’ makeovers, and now they’ve reached the point where you would easily mistake them for humans at a glance.

Although if you look too closely, things are slightly off, so it’s still possible to tell that they’re not genuine.

My end goal is to make it so that even if you examine them closely or even touch them, you won’t be able to tell they’re dolls.

Right now, I’m refining some of the minor details to make the bodies seem more natural, and trying to re-create what goes under the skin so they feel properly squishy to the touch.

The puppet spiders are more than happy to help, so my research is going along quite well.

However they might have looked originally, they’re definitely girls on the inside.

Altering them to be prettier seems to make them happy.

It looks like they’ve taken a liking to fashion, too, as they’re in different outfits each time they’re summoned. I think they’re probably making the clothes themselves.

They have all kinds of styles, too, so I never get tired of looking at them.

Their main task seems to be making their six arms seem more natural, so I’m

always impressed with what they've come up with.

By the way, there are four puppet spiders in all.

At first, they were being summoned two at a time, but I guess they started squabbling about who should get summoned.

So at some point, all four of them started coming at once.

You guys sure are enjoying this, huh?

I get it; you wanted to see me that badly? Guess I can't blame you.

Am I some kind of master aesthetician now or what?

Boy, this is tough.

I'm so talented that the girls are all scrambling for my attention.

It ain't easy being popular, huh?

Yeah, I know, it's not that they want to see me—they're just happy I'm helping them be prettier. I get it, all right?

Anyway, they didn't have names, so I figured it would be easier if I gave them some, but the Demon Lord stopped me.

"I'll name them, all right! You can't just name them without asking!" she said.

I guess as a parent, she's against someone else naming her children?

I dunno why she didn't just name them to begin with, then.

Anyway, next time they were summoned, I asked about their names.

The response: Ael, Sael, Riel, and Fiel.

That seemed sort of half-assed to me, but I got the feeling I should keep that thought to myself.

The fun thing is that they each have their own distinct personality.

Ael is pretty confident but can also be very shrewd. She's the one who first took a bite of the meat.

Sael, the other one who was there that first day, is the sort of timid and wimpy type.

Riel is a tomboy and a total airhead.

Fiel is a goofball who tends to get carried away.

In a way, it's pretty impressive that their personalities come through so clearly even though they don't talk.

Oh right. Maybe I'll try to give them vocal chords next.

Things will get awfully noisy around here if they learn how to talk, but that's not necessarily a bad thing, right?

I'm sure it'll be hard, but I bet I can do it.

With my thread, there's nothing I can't accomplish!

…Yeah, thread's pretty amazing.

Between my quest for self-improvement, raising Vampy, and remodeling the puppet spiders, I'm getting all kinds of things done on this trip.

That being said, it's not like all of it is going perfectly according to plan.

In fact, this journey has been full of nothing but problems.

I guess that makes sense, since we started the journey because we had problems in the first place.

Vampy and Mera lost the town where they lived, and they had to go on the run to escape Potimas, too.

And the Demon Lord and I are keeping an eye on each other to make sure neither of us pulls anything funny.

So basically, we've all got our share of issues.

When you think about it that way, it's actually a miracle that we've come this far without any major problems.

Really, even if nothing's going wrong right now, we don't know what will happen down the road.

No matter how much you try to put it off, there comes a time when you have to face your problems head-on.

In my case, it's my relationship with the Demon Lord.

Right now, we're basically in a state of cold war, but eventually I'm going to have to give her some kind of answer.

Will we settle things once and for all, or will we actually join forces for real?

The Demon Lord has the same problem.

But both of us are putting that question on hold for now. It's not like there's any rush.

As long as I can keep up my quasi-immortality, I can at least survive any clashes with the Demon Lord.

The Demon Lord is stronger than I am, so she's better off keeping me around than risking letting me run free.

We both just want to maintain the status quo, so as long as nothing major happens, this relationship can probably stay the same way indefinitely.

So the Demon Lord and I are putting off solving our problems, but not everyone can do that forever.

Especially not Vampy and Mera.

The baby bloodsucker has to choose how she's going to live from now on.

Will she hide the fact that she's a vampire and live among humans or follow the Demon Lord to the land of demons?

It seems like even the people in this world hate and fear vampires, so if she wants to live among humans, she'll have to hide the fact that she is one.

And in that case, she'll lose the protection of the Demon Lord, who's going back home to the demon territory.

In other words, she'd have to fend for herself without the support of the Demon Lord.

On the other hand, if she goes with the Demon Lord, she'll have to throw away her status in the human world.

She is still a child of nobility, not to mention the sole survivor of the Keren family, since the rest were all killed in that battle.

If she exploits that position to her advantage, she might be able to stage a

comeback in Sariella.

But that's all hypothetical, of course; whether it would actually work is up to Vampy and Mera.

And whoever makes the decisions in Sariella, I guess.

Following the Demon Lord would mean giving up on all that.

Going to the demon territory would essentially be casting aside her humanity.

It's a huge decision that will affect the rest of her life.

And she only has until we reach the capital of Sariella to decide.

Her deadline is closing in.

No matter what she chooses, she'll have to give something up in exchange.

And I'm sure she's going to have a difficult life ahead either way.

But that choice is up to Vampy. It's not for me to say.

She'll just have to mull it over a bunch and decide on her own.

Frankly, whatever she chooses makes no difference to me. I don't care as long as it doesn't inconvenience me.

But I can't say that for our other comrade. He's inconveniencing me as we speak.

That's right. My fellow traveler Mera.

How is he inconveniencing me? By being *super*-annoying.

Day and night, he spends every waking minute brooding nonstop!

Basically, he's being so depressing that it makes me mad just looking at him.

Now, if that was the whole story, it'd be fine.

I mean, I don't like it personally, but I could still let it go.

What I *can't* let go is the fact that Mera is hindering my Vampy-raising project.

I mean, if your beloved servant is acting unusually gloomy, of course it's gonna get to you.

As a result, she's distracted during our training, which means it's not as effective as it could be.

Aaargh!

I hate it when other people hold me back!

Why do people have to do that?

In fact, why do other people have to exist at all?

It's only because of other people that I have to experience all these annoying feelings.

So if I just got rid of all the other people in the world, I could live in peace and quiet, right?

Then I'd never have to have another painfully awkward conversation again.

What an incredible plan!

Oh, but one of those other people is the Demon Lord, who I can't get rid of.

Okay, never mind.

That was a terrible plan.

See? I'm so annoyed that I'm not even thinking straight.

So Mera's moping around, Vampy's too worried about him to concentrate, I'm getting annoyed looking at both of them… Basically, things are growing tenser by the day.

Mera himself does appear to be aware of the tension and that it's because of him.

But he can't seem to help it.

He's trying to act like he's fine, but no matter what, it always ends up feeling like there's a cartoonish rain cloud over his head.

It's especially obvious whenever they come back from town. The dark mood always multiplies right afterward.

That's when the Demon Lord makes us extra-delicious food with fresh ingredients, but thanks to Mera's gloominess, I can't even enjoy it properly.

And that only makes me even madder.

I feel like I'm going to snap any minute now.

"Ta-daaa! Let's have some drinks to lighten the mood today."

It's the next day after everyone else took a trip into another town.

The Demon Lord, perhaps trying to lighten the tense atmosphere, brought back alcohol for the first time.

Maybe she's suggesting we should drink to forget what's bothering us?

Well, I guess she's not wrong that we need to let off steam somehow, and soon.

"Okay, here you go. You too, White. Sophia… Uh, you probably shouldn't have any."

As she talks, the Demon Lord pours the liquor into cups, handing one to Mera, then one to me.

Wait, me too? Really?

I accept the glass from her without thinking.

Well, I guess I should drink it, since she gave it to me.

I was underage in my old life, so I've never had alcohol before.

I don't know what the laws about alcohol consumption are in this world, but it feels like I'm doing something bad, so it's almost a little exciting.

Although as far as the laws of Japan go, I've already committed all kinds of crimes way worse than underage drinking.

I take a little sip of the clear liquid in the glass.

Ooh, it's sweet.

Maybe this is that fruit wine stuff?

Whatever it is, it's nice and easy to drink.

But unlike ordinary fruit juice, it comes with a mysterious sensation I've never felt before.

What is this? Huh? Fwuh? Whuh?

I dunno, but it's pretty weird.

I keep taking sips of the wine as I dig in to the food.

The Demon Lord fills her own glass, too, and drinks it down in one gulp.

Ooh, she's good at that.

Mera seems hesitant about drinking at first, but seeing the Demon Lord and me go at it, he accepts his fate and gingerly starts taking sips as well.

"Go on—don't be shy. There's plenty more where that came from."

The Demon Lord pours herself a second glass and gulps it down like the first.

Then she does the same with a third glass, filling it from the barrel.

Did you catch that part?

That's right. A barrel.

The liquor the Demon Lord brought us comes in the form of a barrel.

Can we really drink all that?

Yes, I wondered about that at first.

But the Demon Lord keeps chugging away, and she drains most of the barrel by herself.

And next thing you know, we're on to the second one.

A second barrel!

Even so, the Demon Lord's gusto shows no signs of slowing.

This lady drinks like a fish.

Honestly, she could probably finish the second one by herself, too.

But that wouldn't be much fun, so I speed up my drinking along with her.

This is my first time drinking alcohol, but the more I drink it, the more my head spins.

But for some strange reason, I feel like I'm getting lighter and happier.

I’m totally unstoppable right now!

“Nnngh… Hic… Weeeh…”

In direct contrast to my excitement, Mera is…crying.

So he’s one of those weepy drunks I’ve heard about in stories!

I guess it’s true; they really do cry as soon as they’ve had a drink!

Wait, now things are getting even more depressing!

“That’s no good! C’mere, you! You need to drink more!”

“Guh?!”

Ah geez, he’s coughing it up. What a waste.

I guess he doesn’t like it when I try to forcibly pour wine down his throat.

“Wh-what are you…?”

“Quit looking so depressed already!”

I grab his face, pinch his mouth open, and pour wine down there again.

“Bwuh?! Cough!”

He starts choking. Maybe it went down the wrong pipe.

For some reason, it’s so funny to me that I can’t stop laughing.

“Whoa, White’s laughing. And talking, for that matter! This is wild.”

The Demon Lord seems amused, but my stomach actually hurts from laughing so much.

Mera’s having a coughing fit, I’m rolling around laughing, and the Demon Lord is watching on.

This would probably look pretty weird to a random bystander, huh?

Just thinking about it makes me start laughing all over again.

Vampy is asleep, by the way. She was peeved that she didn’t get to drink with us, so she snuck a single sip, and it knocked her out immediately.

I guess she’s what you’d call a lightweight.

“Cough! Cough! Whew…”

Mera finally regains his composure a little but still keeps hacking as he glares at me.

I guess even Mera can get mad.

His face, which has turned red from the alcohol and the coughing, is showing much stronger emotions than usual.

“Hey, that’s a good face. Much manlier than moping around all the time.”

My casual comment sends Mera’s rage over the breaking point.

“What would you know about it?!”

He’s shouting, raising his voice in a way he would never normally do.

“Do you have any idea how it feels to have lost everything and, on top of that, to become a vampire?!”

He’s even forgotten to be mindful of the sleeping baby bloodsucker.

Luckily, the alcohol has her sleeping like the dead, so she doesn’t even stir.

Y’know, if she heard that, she’d probably be pretty upset…

Whether because he shouted right after choking or because his pent-up emotions finally burst out, Mera is heaving as he keeps glowering at me.

Come on, though.

“Ooh, so that’s the whole reason you’ve been acting like the whole world’s ending, huh? Big whoop.”

I take another gulp of wine.

Emptying my glass, I let out a nice big “aaah” before returning my gaze to Mera, who’s now staring at me in frozen shock.

But then his expression starts twisting back into anger.

I keep going before he can even open his mouth. “I mean, I’ve died and lost everything once already, too. And I’m a spider—y’know that, right? Not even human shaped. Vampires are just a little weak to sunlight, and they have to drink blood or whatever. You’re not winning any misery awards with that one,

pal.”

At that, his mouth just hangs half-open, but no words come out.

You lost everything, huh?

Well, at least you’re alive.

You still have your life, at least, and the thoughts and beliefs you’ve built up this entire time.

I got dumped in a whole different world, where all of that is totally useless.

All I’ve got left are my memories and a bit of knowledge.

Even my body changed from human to spider. I had to start over from square one.

You’re a vampire now?

You really think that’s worse than being a spider?

I know Mera’s struggling with his human morals or whatever, but I got shoved right into a kill-or-be-killed survival game where I didn’t even have a chance to worry about that crap.

It’s not like he has to eat poisonous dead monsters if he wants to live.

Vampires? That’s easy mode. He’s still humanoid; he just has to drink a little blood. Yawn.

Besides…

“Would you say the same thing to her?”

I point at the sleeping baby bloodsucker.

“She died once and lost everything, just like me. Then she was born as a vampire. And after all that, she went through the same ‘losing everything’ you did, only for her it was the second time. Get it? She’s lost it all twice. But she’s still doing her best to be positive and move on with her life. Can you say the same?”

Mera gasps and stares at the baby.

Sure, my circumstances are different from Mera’s. It’s not like I can say I

understand everything he's feeling—all I can do is imagine it.

But Vampy knows exactly what he's going through.

He's got someone in the same situation as him right here, but he's acting like he's the only one who's facing all these problems.

He's not even thinking about her.

How's he supposed to be her guardian when he's acting like that?

The guy's just trying to keep up appearances when he can't even commit.

That's what's annoying me most of all.

I don't wanna see or hear about that kind of half-assed BS.

"If you hate it that much, why don't you just die?"

I pour myself another glass from the cask.

Mera's eyes are huge now as he stares at me in disbelief.

What? Did I say something weird?

"If your life sucks that much, you don't have to force yourself to keep living it, right? If you wanna die, I can help, you know? I'll make it as quick as I can."

I wanna live, so I've never once considered giving up and dying, but hey, that's just me.

There are probably some people in the world who do want to end it all.

If Mera says he doesn't want to live anymore, I don't see why he should bother to keep doing it.

I drink my wine in one gulp and set down the glass.

Then I pick up my scythe and hold it to Mera's neck.

"Well?"

Mera, presumably sensing that I'm not kidding around, turns from bright red to pale white.

"I cannot die."

His voice is faint, and his lips tremble.

“Hmm? I can’t heeear yooou.”

“I cannot die! I must not die yet, especially for the young miss’s sake!”

Mera doesn’t sound cool by any stretch of the imagination; his shout is more like a shriek.

But that just shows how much he means it.

“See? You know what you gotta do, then.”

I put away the scythe.

Freed from its blade, Mera slumps down weakly.

“If you have a reason to live, if you have pride or faith or whatever, what’re you moping around for? You have something to protect, and that’s all there is to it. What difference does it make if you’re a vampire now? Just suck it up, no pun intended.”

I dismiss Mera’s troubles like they’re nothing at all.

Pretty cruel, if I do say so myself.

The only reason I can be so nonchalant about it is that it’s his big problem, not mine.

But I can’t hide how I really feel about it, either.

My words shock Mera back into silence, and he clams up.

His eyes are on the sleeping baby bloodsucker.

He seems to be off in his own little world now, so I leave him to it and go back to drinking.

When I wake up again, the world has turned upside down.

Huh? Looking around, I see that I’m being suspended upside down in midair by a bunch of thread strung haphazardly between two trees.

How did this happen?

I have no idea.

Even when I try to go through my memories to piece things together, I’ve got nothing.

Let’s see…

Yesterday, the Demon Lord brought out some alcohol, and we drank it.

I remember that part.

But the rest of it is kind of a blur.

I remember it being tasty and pleasant, but…that’s it? I don’t know what else happened.

Well, there’s no use hanging around upside down any longer.

I free myself from the tangled thread and descend to the ground.

“Good morning.” An extremely clear voice greets me.

Turning around, I see Mera with a huge, bright smile on his face.

Huh? Was his personality always like this?

“Thank you for yesterday. Thanks to you, my doubts have cleared.”

Yesterday? What’d I do again?

“I understand now that what’s important is not what I have become but what my actions will be going forward. And I know what I must do. Until yesterday, I was so concerned over what has become of me, I was unable to steady my resolve.”

Uhhh… I have no idea what he’s talking about…

“But from now on, I will hesitate no longer. I shall accept the fact that I am a vampire, and I shall protect the young miss with all my strength.”

Oh, okay.

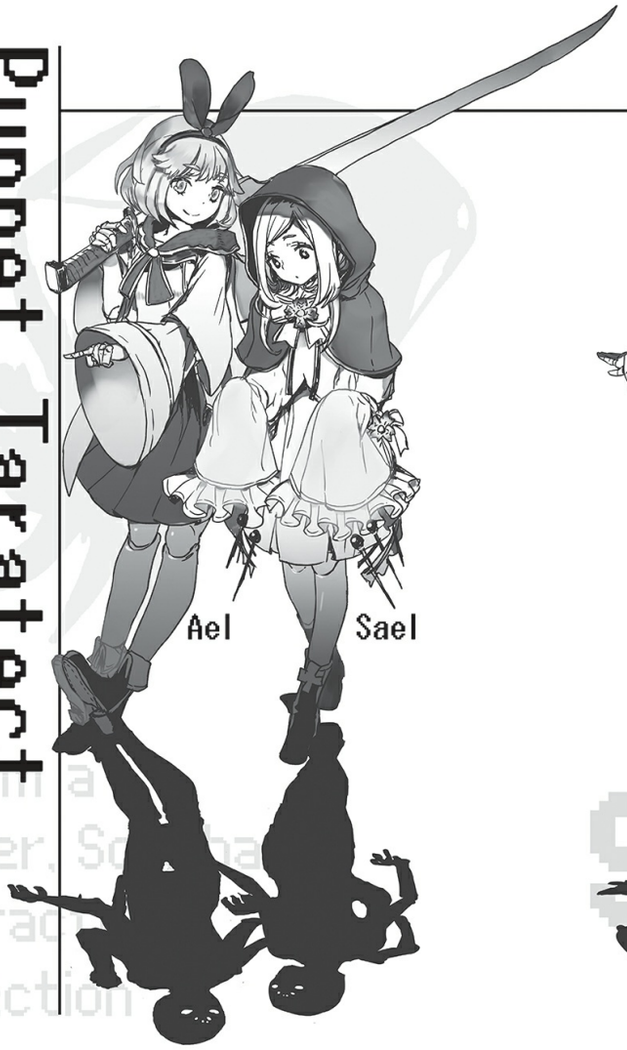
Cool. Good luck with that.

Um, what else am I supposed to say here?

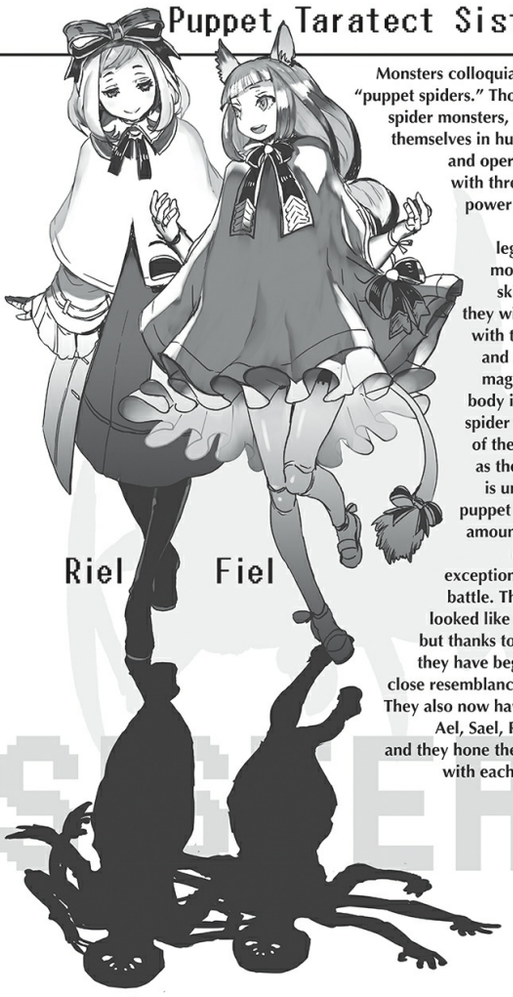
I’m not sure what happened, ’cause I don’t remember a damn thing, but I guess he figured out his issues somehow.

Well, I suppose that’s fine as long as he’s going to stop sulking now, right?

Puppet Taratect Sisters



Puppet Taratect Sisters



Monsters colloquially known as "puppet spiders." Though they are spider monsters, they disguise themselves in humanoid dolls and operate the limbs with thread, wielding power approaching that of a legendary-class monster. Highly skilled fighters, they wield weapons with their six arms and can even use magic. Their true body is a palm-size spider in the center of the doll; as long as the spider itself is unharmed, the puppet can take any amount of damage, making them exceptionally tough in battle. They originally looked like mannequins, but thanks to remodeling, they have begun to bear a close resemblance to humans. They also now have the names Ael, Sael, Riel, and Fiel, and they hone their femininity with each passing day.

THE SERVANT'S DREAM

"Merazophis, tonight we drink."

"Tonight, Master? That is to say, again?"

"Come, now—don't be so stodgy. I simply must drink to carry on."

With his duties done for the day, my master produces a bottle of sake.

This is far from the first time he has requested me to join him in an evening drink.

According to him, I become more emotional when I have consumed alcohol and voice opinions that I would normally never utter.

Evidently, the master enjoys hearing such things.

"Oh dear. Having a good time without me, are we?"

The door opens, and my mistress enters the room.

Her eyes are already on my master's bottle of sake.

"Seras, you know that if you join us for a drink, you are sure to fall asleep within the hour."

"No, I'm quite certain I can stay awake this time."

The mistress is quite weak to liquor.

A single sip can put her right to sleep.

Nevertheless, she says the same thing every time and never fails to fall asleep.

The master pours three cups.

Then he leads a toast, and our cups clink together lightly, emitting a clean sound.

I enjoy the pleasant fragrance as I bring the drink to my lips.

My master tends to prefer stronger liquor, but tonight's drink is quite sweet and smooth in one's throat.

Hearing the sound of a glass being placed on the desk, I turn to see my mistress already nodding off, just as I expected.

My master smiles amusedly, puts his arms around his gently swaying wife, and lifts her with the utmost delicacy.

Then he lays her down gently next to the sleeping Sophia and pats her head lovingly, upon which the mistress slips into a contented sleep.

The master chuckles. "She does not seem to appreciate being left out of our little evening drinks. It's quite endearing."

"It is indeed."

The mistress, whom I have known since childhood, has always been honest and adorable.

Though I knew it was never to be, I could not help being taken with that carefree smile of hers.

And so, I am glad that it is my master who became her husband.

I know that he will never do her wrong.

As long as the mistress is happy, it is but a trifle to lock away these feelings of mine.

"Merazophis, I am sorry."

And yet, my master now apologizes to me with a look of anguish.

"I failed to protect Seras from such terrible misfortune. I was not strong enough."

I shake my head quietly. "I have no doubt that she was happy. How else could she sleep with such a peaceful expression?"

Ah, the scene is still burned into my eyes.

My mistress sleeping peacefully in the arms of my master.

They loved each other until the very end.

Yes, what happened was truly unfortunate.

But my mistress was loved by my master and was happy.

I know that to be true, and so my master need apologize for nothing.

“Even so, let me apologize. I put you in grave danger and saddled you with the burden of grief for us. If you do not wish to bear it any longer, you are free to set it down at any time. You know that, don’t you?”

“All the more reason that you should not apologize, Master. I have chosen to protect the young miss of my own free will.”

That’s right. This is my choice.

I will protect the young miss until my last breath.

“Master John Keren, whom I hold dear as my lord and as my friend. Mistress Seras Keren, whom I love as a woman. I wish to protect your child. Because you have entrusted her to me but, most of all, because I wish to protect her more than anything else.”

Of course.

I have a reason to live.

And yet I forgot that reason and dwelled solely on my own feelings.

Even when I knew how much worry I was causing the young mistress, whom I am sworn to protect.

I must protect her, yet she is always saving me instead.

“I will not hesitate any longer. I shall protect the young mistress in your stead.”

That is the least, and the most, I can do.

I cannot shower her in familial love as her parents did.

But I can stay by her side and support her.

The young miss is strong.

I doubt that one as weak as myself can provide her with much support, but I

will do everything I can.

“It is not grief that I shoulder for the two of you. It is love, for you and for the young miss. And I shall never set it down until the day I die.”

My master smiles at my words.

Though he does not cry, he wears the face of one smiling through tears.

Then, silently, my master finishes his drink and stands up.

He lifts the sleeping mistress and begins to walk toward the door.

“Merazophis…take care of Sophia.”

With that, he steps beyond the threshold.

My eyes snap open.

My hand, still reaching for my master as he stepped through the door, grasps nothing but air.

I felt that if I did not stretch out my hand, I would never see my master and mistress again.

And I was right.

They are no longer of this world.

Tears begin to dampen my cheeks.

I bring my outstretched hand back to my face, wipe away the tears, and stand.

I must have caused them a great deal of worry.

So much so that they deigned to appear in my dreams.

Master, Mistress, you do not need to worry any longer.

I shall protect the young miss.

This vow I swear to uphold until my final breath.

So please, sleep and be at peace.

The Old Man Challenges the Earth

Dragons

I am stark naked!

Indeed! I have become accustomed to this stark-naked lifestyle!

My shame has long since gone flying away somewhere beyond the stars.

In fact, even I cannot be sure whether I had such a thing to begin with!

It has been some time since I began living among the spiders.

As the cavernous Great Elroe Labyrinth is untouched by the light of the sun, my sense of time has become rather unclear.

Thus, I know not how long I have been here exactly.

However, it has surely been no small number of days.

I say this with certainty, for all my skills have increased considerably.

Since I came here, my rate of growth has been remarkable.

Truly, I must wonder what I have been doing with my life until now.

As long as I can put this valuable time to good use, being naked matters not to me!

I have cast aside my clothes, consumed monsters, and slept amid nature.

Wonderful.

Truly, this is how creatures are meant to live.

I cannot help but wonder if building houses, donning clothes, and eating cooked food are exactly the kinds of actions that have caused humanity to

degenerate.

If possible, I would continue living like this for the rest of my days.

However, there is a dark cloud that hangs over this lifestyle now.

The spiders have noticed, too, and are chattering about it.

It is a problem that affects all of us: a food shortage.

The spiders and I have hunted the monsters in this area so thoroughly that there is nothing left to eat.

The only possible food source in the Great Elroe Labyrinth is monsters.

If the monsters are gone, there is nothing left to eat.

We have nearly hunted the surrounding part of the Upper Stratum dry, and even in the Middle Stratum, one must travel some distance before finding any monsters.

It would be highly dangerous to venture into the heat-filled Middle Stratum.

Thus, the Upper Stratum is the only option, but there are no monsters left within the radius of one or two days' travel.

If worse comes to worst, I can teleport back to town, but the spiders do not have that option.

The spiders have a considerably large family, too, which means they have many mouths to feed.

On top of that, their numbers have only grown since I first arrived.

There are far too many for me to count at this point.

As the spiders continue to multiply, they have begun to run out of monsters to prey upon.

Even if they travel elsewhere to hunt, they will be hungry again by the time they return.

The situation is essentially a famine, and soon it will reach a breaking point.

It seems to me that the only solution is for the entire swarm of spiders to migrate. What do they plan to do?

Naturally, the nine spiders who serve as their leaders have noticed the same issues I have.

As always, they talk among themselves using Telepathy in a language I still cannot understand.

Finally, they reach some kind of conclusion and address all the spiders with Telepathy.

Then the nine begin preparing a Large-Scale Teleport spell over the spiders.

I recognize it because I have the same spell myself.

What incredible talent.

The speed with which they develop the spell, the perfect scribing of the rune, the efficiency.

All of it is far superior to my own magic.

Amazing.

The spiders stand ready to be teleported, with me mingling among them.

Soon enough, the spell is complete, and all of us are immediately transported to a different place.

We arrive in a dark cavern, similar to the one we just left.

However, the air feels heavy here, filled with far more tension than the previous cavern.

My Danger Perception skill is reacting intensely.

The spiders seem to sense the same thing.

They've gone into battle mode, standing on high alert.

But as if in mockery of that, one of the spiders closest to the edge of the group is attacked.

Its body is crushed, killing it instantly.

It's been pierced by a metallic claw.

The monster's entire body, shaped like that of an insect, emits a metallic glow.

I quickly Appraise it and learn it is called an Elroe Utoeudo: a monster I have never seen or heard of in my life.

But what truly terrifies me is its status.

Its physical stats, namely attack, defense, and speed, are all over 1,000.

A considerably powerful monster.

The Elroe Utoeudo swings its claws, attacking the spiders.

However, these spiders are no ordinary monsters, either.

They spread out around the Utoeudo, covering it in thread from all directions and rendering it immobile.

Once it's been trapped, other spiders fire spells at it.

In a matter of moments, the Elroe Utoeudo has been crushed by the spiders' incredible teamwork.

Then they waste no time digging in to their first prey in some time.

In the outside world, only a seasoned adventurer would have been able to cross swords with that monster, but here it is nothing more than fodder.

One spider was lost in the process, but it can be replaced in no time.

What a terrifying army.

But where in the world are we, that such a strong monster would be casually milling about?

Since it was called an Elroe Utoeudo, we are surely still within the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

But I have never heard of such a monster.

No…perhaps I have.

Its name was certainly new to me, but I do know of one place where strong monsters run rampant.

The Lower Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

A place said to be swarming with monsters so strong that no human could ever set foot there.

In the past, adventurers have descended into it through large holes known as shafts, but any who dared were all but wiped out.

The only thing the survivors brought back was the information that the place was swarming with powerful monsters.

Could this place be the Lower Stratum?

That would certainly explain the heavy atmosphere coiling around my skin.

I have come to a truly dangerous place.

And yet, for some reason…there is excitement mixed among my nervousness.

How well will the skills I've honed in the Upper Stratum serve me here in the Lower Stratum, which has never been explored by man?

I cannot wait to find out.

Some days have passed since my enthusiastic arrival.

I do not have such energy anymore.

For I am surely going to die here.

The Lower Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth surpasses my imagination.

Monsters as strong as the Elroe Utoeudo or stronger attack us without end.

Just one of these monsters would cause widespread panic in the outside world, but here they are but a dime a dozen.

Truly terrifying.

Equally terrifying are the spiders who effortlessly drive those monsters back.

I, too, participate a bit in these battles to secure my own share of food, but my confidence falters each time I do so.

The monsters fend off my magic easily, to the point where I cannot even tell if I have truly hit them.

Often I have not, for my magic takes far too long to prepare.

And even if I do hit my target, it has little effect, for I am able to do so only with weaker spells that I can cast rapidly and in great number.

If I want to cause damage, I would have to land a more powerful spell.

But this takes time, which lets the enemy easily read my intentions and dodge it.

Yet, the spells that do not take long to prepare are too weak and cause little damage even if they hit.

I long for magic that can be cast easily yet still deals a great amount of damage.

But as much as I rack my brain, a solution does not come easily.

Increasing the speed at which I construct runes for spells would be a lengthy process.

What am I to do?

I have no time to worry about such things any longer.

The spiders sense it, too, and tensions are high.

They are coming.

Monsters beyond compare to any we have seen thus far.

Yes, the monsters we have encountered have been strong.

But even they would tremble in fear before what is now approaching.

<Earth Dragon Kagna LV 26

Status:

HP: 4,199/4,199 (green) MP: 3,339/3,654 (blue)

SP: 2,798/2,798 (yellow) : 2,995/3,112 (red)

Average Offensive Ability: 3,990 (details) Average Defensive Ability: 4,334 (details)

Average Magical Ability: 1,837 (details) Average Resistance Ability: 4,006 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 1,225 (details)

Skills:

[Earth Dragon LV 2] [Imperial Scales LV 9] [Hard Armor LV 8] [Steel Body LV 8]

[HP Rapid Recovery LV 6] [MP Recovery Speed LV 2] [MP Lessened Consumption LV 2] [Magic Power Perception LV 3]

[Magic Power Operation LV 3] [SP Recovery Speed LV 1] [SP Lessened Consumption LV 1] [Terrain Enhancement LV 8]

[Destruction Enhancement LV 8]	[Piercing Enhancement LV 6]	[Impact Super-Enhancement LV 5]	[Magic Power Attack LV 1]
[Terrain Attack LV 9]	[Cooperation LV 1]	[Hit LV 3]	[Danger Perception LV 10]
[Heat Perception LV 6]	[Earth Magic LV 2]	[Destruction Resistance LV 9]	[Cutting Super-Resistance LV 2]
[Piercing Super-Resistance LV 3]	[Impact Super-Resistance LV 6]	[Shock Super-Resistance LV 4]	[Terrain Nullification]
[Fire Resistance LV 3]	[Lightning Resistance LV 7]	[Water Resistance LV 3]	[Wind Resistance LV 5]
[Heavy Resistance LV 2]	[Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 8]	[Rot Resistance LV 3]	[Pain Nullification]
[Pain Super-Mitigation LV 3]	[Vision Enhancement LV 3]	[Night Vision LV 10]	[Vision Expansion LV 4]
[Auditory Enhancement LV 1]	[Ultimate Life LV 2]	[Magic Hoard LV 3]	[Instant Body LV 1]
[Endurance LV 1]	[Herculean Strength LV 9]	[Stronghold LV 2]	[Monk LV 2]
[Sanctum LV 1]	[Acceleration LV 1]		

Skill Points: 31,200

Titles:

[Monster Slayer]	[Monster Slaughterer]	[Dragon]	[Champion]

>

<Earth Dragon Gehre LV 24

Status: HP: 3,556/3,556 (green) MP: 2,991/2,991 (blue)

SP: 4,067/4,067 (yellow) : 3,562/3,845 (red)

Average Offensive Ability: 3,434 (details)

Average Defensive Ability: 3,875 (details)

Average Magical Ability: 1,343 (details)

Average Resistance Ability: 3,396 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 4,123 (details)

Skills:

[Earth Dragon LV 2]	[Imperial Scales LV 6]	[Hard Armor LV 2]	[Steel Body LV 2]
[HP Rapid Recovery LV 3]	[MP Recovery Speed LV 1]	[MP Lessened Consumption LV 1]	[Magic Power Perception LV 3]
[Magic Power Operation LV 3]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV 3]	[SP Minimized Consumption LV 3]	[Terrain Enhancement LV 8]
[Destruction Enhancement LV 9]	[Cutting Super-Enhancement LV 8]	[Piercing Super-Enhancement LV 4]	[Impact Super-Enhancement LV 8]
[Magic Attack LV 1]	[Terrain Attack LV 8]	[Dimensional Maneuvering LV 5]	[Cooperation LV 1]
[Hit LV 10]	[Evasion LV 10]	[Probability Correction LV 7]	[Danger Perception LV 10]
[Presence Perception LV 8]	[Heat Perception LV 7]	[Motion Perception LV 8]	[Earth Magic LV 2]
[Destruction Resistance LV 4]	[Cutting Resistance LV 8]	[Piercing Resistance LV 8]	[Impact Resistance LV 9]
[Shock Resistance LV 5]	[Terrain Nullification]	[Lightning Resistance LV 3]	[Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 3]
[Rot Resistance LV 1]	[Pain Nullification]	[Pain Mitigation LV 7]	[Vision Enhancement LV 7]

[Night Vision LV 10]	[Vision Expansion LV 5]	[Auditory Enhancement LV 5]	[Olfactory Enhancement LV 4]
[Taste Enhancement LV 3]	[Longevity LV 9]	[Magic Hoard LV 1]	[Ultimate Movement LV 2]
[Fortune LV 1]	[Herculean Strength LV 8]	[Sturdy LV 9]	[Monk LV 1]
[Talisman LV 8]	[Skanda LV 3]		

Skill Points: 31,000

Titles:

[Monster Slayer]	[Monster Slaughterer]	[Dragon]	[Champion]

>

<Earth Dragon Fuit LV 11

Status:

HP: 2,965/2,965 (green) MP: 2,912/2,912 (blue)

SP: 2,943/2,943 (yellow) : 2,877/2,944 (red)

Average Offensive Ability: 2,938 (details) Average Defensive Ability: 2,941 (details)

Average Magical Ability: 2,899 (details) Average Resistance Ability: 2,907 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 3,000 (details)

Skills:

[Earth Dragon LV 1]	[Imperial Scales LV 4]	[Hard Armor LV 1]	[Steel Body LV 1]

[HP Rapid Recovery LV 1]	[MP Rapid Recovery LV 1]	[MP Minimized Consumption LV 1]	[Magic Power Perception LV 8]
[Magic Power Operation LV 8]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV 1]	[SP Minimized Consumption LV 1]	[Terrain Enhancement LV 4]
[Destruction Enhancement LV 3]	[Cutting Super-Enhancement LV 3]	[Piercing Enhancement LV 3]	[Impact Enhancement LV 5]
[Magic Attack LV 5]	[Terrain Attack LV 5]	[Dimensional Maneuvering LV 3]	[Cooperation LV 1]
[Hit LV 10]	[Evasion LV 10]	[Probability Correction LV 6]	[Danger Perception LV 5]
[Presence Perception LV 5]	[Heat Perception LV 4]	[Motion Perception LV 4]	[Earth Magic LV 10]
[Terrain Magic LV 6]	[Destruction Resistance LV 2]	[Cutting Resistance LV 2]	[Piercing Resistance LV 2]
[Impact Resistance LV 3]	[Shock Resistance LV 2]	[Terrain Nullification]	[Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 1]
[Pain Nullification]	[Pain Mitigation LV 3]	[Vision Enhancement LV 5]	[Night Vision LV 10]
[Vision Expansion LV 2]	[Auditory Enhancement LV 3]	[Olfactory Enhancement LV 2]	[Taste Enhancement LV 2]
[Longevity LV 5]	[Magic Hoard LV 5]	[Instant Body LV 5]	[Endurance LV 5]
[Herculean Strength LV 5]	[Sturdy LV 5]	[Monk LV 5]	[Talisman LV 5]
[Acceleration LV 5]			

Skill Points: 21,000

Titles:

[Monster Slayer]	[Monster Slaughterer]	[Dragon]	[Champion]

Earth dragons.

Three of them, no less.

Earth Dragon Kagna, Earth Dragon Gehre, Earth Dragon Fuit.

Dragons are a unique existence even among monsters.

They are the evolved form a wyrm can take after many years.

Dragons are said to live deep in nature, far from human influence, and they punish any fool who dares to set foot in their land.

Guardians of nature.

S-rank monsters who wield absolute power.

And there are three of them here.

Even I feel fear in the face of three dragons.

In fact, this is my first time seeing one.

There have been occasions where dragons have appeared in human territory, but these are usually young individuals who have only recently evolved.

S-rank though it may be, an immature dragon that is overconfident in its abilities can possibly be defeated by humans.

Although even then, victory is likely to come at a significant cost.

However, the three dragons currently before my eyes are no such novices.

Fuit's level is slightly low, but the other two, Kagna and Gehre, are high-enough level that it has likely been some time since they evolved.

These are true guardians, with a presence that would put any young whelp who appears near a human settlement to shame.

And now, these dragons are baring their fangs at us.

It would be impossible not to be frightened.

The spiders seem to feel the same way.

Even the nine in the center are in a panic, frantically shouting at one another via Telepathy.

But the dragons will not wait.

Gehre leaps forward.

The lithe and slender dragon is as fast as its appearance would suggest; it closes in on the spiders in an instant and swings its swordlike claws.

The spiders on the front lines are simply sliced in half, without even a moment to react.

Other spiders fire back with thread, but the dragon dodges it with ease.

What incredible speed.

I knew this from the moment I saw its stats, but seeing it in action is all the more stunning.

Gehre is a high-speed physical fighter.

It uses its speed to continue attacking and then dodging back, making short work of the spiders.

Then, as Gehre drives them into a corner, the spiders are assaulted by an explosion.

It's Kagna's breath attack, loosed from some distance away.

Kagna's majestic appearance is akin to a living fortress.

Standing motionless, it launches another breath.

Its destructive force is such that any spiders who take a direct hit from the attack disintegrate without a trace.

The spiders retaliate with magic of their own, but it isn't causing even the slightest amount of damage.

Kagna's defense is flawless.

Its enormous body means that its speed is slow, but in exchange, it excels in defense.

The spiders' magic, which has buried countless Lower Stratum monsters,

cannot make even a scratch on Kagna's scales.

Gehre tosses the spiders around with speed, and Kagna strikes with powerful breath attacks while they're distracted.

Even if the spiders try to fight back, attacks simply don't work on Kagna, and Gehre is too fast to hit.

Just one earth dragon would be dangerous, but now there are two of them working together.

This horrifying combination is inflicting huge losses on the spiders, who have thus far defeated Lower Stratum monsters without a problem.

And on top of that, these two are not the only opponents.

Whenever the other two pause for even a moment, Fuit keeps the spiders in check with perfectly timed attacks.

Fuit uses magic to block the spiders trying to flee from Kagna's breath attack, cuts the thread that attempts to capture Gehre, and circles around the battlefield whenever possible.

Kagna's and Gehre's movements are difficult to follow in the shadows, but Fuit may well be causing the most casualties.

Though its level and stats are lower than the other two, Fuit might well become the most powerful of them all soon enough.

Its instincts are simply remarkable. It knows exactly what to do and when to do it.

This is not good.

At this rate, the spiders may be wiped out entirely.

There are still many of them, but if their attacks are ineffective, their numbers are all but meaningless. They may well lose this battle.

As I keep an eye on the fighting, I quickly construct magic runes.

I cannot simply stand here watching the spiders and the earth dragons fight.

No, I have been constructing runes all this time.

I am preparing to use the most powerful attack spell out of all the magic available to me.

The problem is whether it will hit its mark.

I can barely follow Gehre's movements with my eyes, so I doubt I can hit it with magic.

And while Fuit is not as fast as Gehre, it is flitting about the battlefield so much that it would be difficult to aim.

By process of elimination, that leaves Kagna as my only choice.

But even Kagna is faster than the other monsters of the Lower Stratum.

Its speed pales in comparison to its other stats, but it is still in the thousands.

I must catch it while it is distracted somehow, or it will dodge my spell.

Just then, a group of spiders charges at Kagna in a suicide attack.

Did they know what I needed, or was it simple coincidence?

More than half of them are blown away by Kagna's breath, but the few survivors manage to wrap thread around Kagna.

The enormous dragon writhes. Even an earth dragon cannot escape the spiders' thread so easily, it seems.

As Kagna struggles, more thread is wrapped around it, constricting its movements.

At that exact moment, my spell is complete.

"Get back!" I call out to the spiders, though I know not whether they will understand.

The spiders scuttle away from Kagna, and I unleash the spell at the dragon with all my might.

Inferno Magic level 2: Inferno Spear.

An enormous spear of flame assaults Kagna's body.

Fire is my best element of magic, and Inferno Magic is its most powerful form, so this spell is the highest-level magic I can use.

It manifests the most destructive power of any of my spells.

The spiders' thread wrapped around Kagna is engulfed in flames, and Kagna's enormous body disappears into the hellfire.

The Great Elroe Labyrinth, normally cloaked in darkness, is lit up by the blaze.

But that is only for an instant.

Then the fire disperses just as quickly.

Kagna reappears, shaking off the flames.

Completely unharmed.

But how? I cannot believe it.

Certainly, I suspected my spell would not be enough to defeat Kagna. The difference in our stats is simply too vast.

Even then, I thought I would at least inflict a wound.

But it had no effect at all.

So this is the might of a dragon.

The rumors are true, then, that magic does not work on them.

If this spell will not work on Kagna, then I have no way of harming it at all.

As I stand painfully aware of my own worthlessness, Kagna's eyes turn toward me.

Its mouth opens, the sparks of a breath attack gathering.

No!

I fling myself aside just in time, avoiding a direct hit from the breath.

Nevertheless, it grazes my body.

Drenched in cold sweat, I crawl along the floor, fleeing as fast as I can.

I must escape, or I will die!

The world is far wider than I realized.

When I think how other beasts like this might well exist outside of my knowledge, it proves to me all over again how little I know.

I am aware of the existence of legendary-class monsters, but now I realize that I had never truly conceived of how frightening a thing that must be.

These dragons are S-class, a step below legendary, and already they are fearful beyond measure.

I do not stand a chance against them.

Returning to the front lines, Kagna assails the spiders with its breath.

Gehre aims for the gaps this creates in the spiders' ranks, disrupting their formation further.

As Gehre digs deep into their ranks, the spiders attempt to surround it, but Fuit keeps them too preoccupied.

There are still plenty of spiders left.

But they have no way of fighting back against the overwhelming power of the earth dragons.

At this rate, it is only a matter of time until the spiders are all wiped out.

Determined that I at least should survive, I begin to prepare a Teleport spell, when suddenly a spear of darkness pierces Gehre's body.

My Inferno Spear was unable to break Kagna's hide, but this spear has undoubtedly gone straight through Gehre.

The dragon lets out an anguished roar that echoes through the cavern.

With Gehre's body pinned down by the spear of darkness, the spiders swarm to attack.

For all that Gehre was able to nimbly dodge attacks until now, it has no way of doing so while wounded and trapped in place. Its giant body is all but swallowed up by a wave of countless spiders.

Given Gehre's high defense, it might still survive but for the fact that the spiders are aiming at the wound the black spear created.

No matter how high one's defense might be, it is of little use if one's open wound is under attack.

The wound begins to expand, with more gashes opening up around it.

Not even a dragon could survive this unharmed.

Fuit attempts to free Gehre, only to suddenly sink into the ground.

Fuit's body produces a horrible sound as it's crushed downward, as if being pushed down by an unseen force.

A Heavy-attribute attack!

I remember the master using the same kind of technique.

But to be able to pin even an earth dragon to the ground would take incredible power.

As Fuit is pressed into the earth, the surrounding spiders cover the dragon in thread, rendering it utterly immobile.

The heavy attack stops soon enough, but by now, Fuit is already bound by thread and being swarmed by spiders.

Soon it will meet the same fate as Gehre.

The spiders attempt to flock around the remaining dragon, but Kagna is like a moving fortress, brushing them off easily.

However, that's only until one particular spider arrives on the scene at a far faster speed than the others—indeed, even faster than Gehre.

Speeding up to Kagna, it swiftly slices deep into Kagna's leg with its scythe-like front legs.

Naturally, Kagna cannot remain standing after sustaining a wound like that.

Dragged down by its own immense weight, Kagna crashes to the ground with a resounding *thud*.

And again, the spiders swarm over the fallen dragon.

Right before my eyes, Kagna, Gehre, and Fuit have all been buried by a mountain of spiders.

Each of them tries to escape, but their movements are restricted by thread, and soon they cannot struggle any longer.

I never imagined that such immensely powerful earth dragons would meet

this sort of fate.

I look at the nine spiders, the leading players in this victory.

They are the ones who pierced Gehre with the black spear, who crushed Fuit with a Heavy-attribute attack, and who cut down Kagna's leg.

These nine spiders are truly on a different level from the others.

In some ways, they may even match that great being in strength.

I do feel fear in the face of that power, of course. But even more so, I feel excitement.

The spear that first pierced Gehre was likely Black Spear, a Black Magic spell.

Which puts it on the same grade of magic as the Inferno Spear I produced.

And yet, it was far more powerful than mine.

Perhaps the difference is due to my lower stats.

Still, I believe that the true secret behind that spear's strength was the sheer amount of magic power it contained.

Instead of simply using the spell in accordance with the skill, they added extra magic into it.

It's simple enough to describe, but I know how difficult a feat that truly is.

It would be akin to guiding a tumultuous stream through a tiny canal.

Usually, the canal would simply break.

Once that happened, the excess magic power one attempted to use would be released in a misfire as the rune fell apart. In the worst case, it could even cause a backfire.

But they used such a technique with utmost ease.

It must be possible.

If these pioneering spiders were able to do so before me, there is no reason I cannot do the same.

After I learn this technique, I'll be a step closer to the pinnacle of magical prowess!

As long as I can find a way to acquire this skill, I'll be able to increase the power of my spells while perhaps even learning of a quicker way to produce runes, as I had hoped!

Might I even learn to give lesser spells the same degree of power as advanced spells like Inferno Magic?!

And if that speed of construction becomes the standard, it will revolutionize magic!

Can I really do such a thing?

I certainly shall!

<Experience has reached the required level. Ronandt Orozoi has increased from LV 68 to LV 69.>

<All basic attributes have increased.>

<Skill proficiency level-up bonus acquired.>

<Skill points acquired.>

<Condition satisfied. Acquires title [Dragon Slayer].>

<Acquires skills [Lifeblood LV 1] [Dragon Power LV 1] as a result of Title [Dragon Slayer].>

<Skill [Longevity LV 1] has been integrated into [Lifeblood LV 1].>

Hmm?

So the three dragons buried beneath the spiders have breathed their last.

Somehow, it seems that I have been counted as part of the battle, and I have acquired the title Dragon Slayer.

In spite of the fact that I was of such little help.

Though I truly thought I would die, in the end, it was a valuable experience.

…Yes, it really was meaningful.

Even if I could do nothing of any use at all.

Meeting of the Parallel Minds #3: The Three Earth Dragon Brothers

"Yooooo! They've got a new guy now?!"

"We can't beat three of these things!"

"No, I think we can win, but still…"

"I mean, I figured Kagna and Gehre would be together, but who knew there'd be a new one, too?"

"Looks like Coach Kagna scouted a pretty talented player."

"I guess Kagna's real skills lie in management, not defense?"

"This isn't gonna be as straightforward as fighting Araba one-on-one!"

"I mean, they're all weaker than Araba was, but it's a hell of a lot harder, since there are three of them at once."

"Yeah, but there's not just one of us anymore, either! Behold! Our incredible forces! We'll overwhelm them with sheer numbers!"

"I dunno—that's not gonna work if most of our army's just small fry."

"Well, it's our job to back them up, then."

"And what are we gonna do about the freaky old geezer?"

"Can't see him, don't hear him, he doesn't exist. In other words, just leave him alone."

THE FOUL-MOUTHED GIRL AND THE TOO-FRIENDLY BOY HERO

Hey there, this is Aurel, everyone's favorite eight-year-old.

That damn geezer isn't back yet.

What the hell is he doing, leaving a lovely young lady like me all alone?

I mean, I know Master Ronandt is a super-talented mage and all, but I don't think that makes it okay to just ditch an eight-year-old in some far-off land to set off on a journey or whatever.

What am I supposed to do?

You can't blame me for calling him a geezer instead of "Master" right now.

Anyway, since he left me without any directions, I got that Empire big shot Tiva to give me some work to do for now.

The town I'm in at the moment has some Ohts Army people as well as a few Empire Army guys.

I'm basically doing grunt work for them.

Good thing the geezer at least introduced us that first day.

Otherwise they probably would've chased me out, being like, *Who the hell're you?!*

This town is being occupied by an invading army, and I'm just a kid from the Empire, who is an ally of that army.

If I had to go it alone here, I'd probably be killed in some damn back alley.

Not my idea of a good time.

“Oh, Aurel, perfect timing. I was just heading out for a bit of shopping. Would you mind coming along to carry my things?”

Mister Tiva asks me to do odd jobs pretty often.

Well, it’s phrased like a request, but I mean, he’s looking after me because I’ve been dumped by my old employer.

It’s not like I can say no.

“Yeah, ’course.”

“You could at least say ‘yes, of course,’ you know.”

The older man smiles gently.

Sorry ’bout that.

I’m from the sticks, so I ain’t about to start talking all proper.

But Tiva’s a real good guy, helping out a foul-mouthed brat like me.

He’s so nice, I might just have to switch masters from that old geezer.

I follow the older man into town.

“I’m sorry, Aurel. I hate to make a small child like you help carry things for me, but as much as it pains me to say it, nobody else is free.” Mister Tiva apologizes.

“Stuff like this don’t bother me at all, Mister. In fact, if anyone complains about doing their damn job, you oughta just shove a boot up their ass.”

My crass remark makes Mister Tiva grin.

I know he really is shorthanded.

It can’t be easy running a town that’s just been taken over.

Technically, Ohts is in charge of the operation, so the Empire shouldn’t have to do much, but Mister Tiva is still hard at work every day.

In fact, Ohts is a pretty weak nation, so they’d do a shit job of running this town by themselves anyway.

That’s why the Empire people are running around nonstop even though this shouldn’t be their job.

Works out for me, since it means Mister Tiva was able to pick me up after the geezer ditched me.

But it must be a pain in the ass for the Empire people in this town.

Makes things pretty tense around here.

“Hmm?”

Mister Tiva knits his brow.

A big crowd of people has formed up ahead, shouting and jeering.

Uh-oh. Looks like trouble.

“What are you doing?” Mister Tiva addresses the crowd.

Even without shouting, his voice rings out loud and clear.

The crowd of people freezes in place and turns to look at us.

As soon as they spot his uniform and realize he’s a knight of the Renxandt Empire, they scatter in all directions.

The only person left behind is a young boy who looks like he’s been beaten.

“To think so many adults would do such a thing to a child like this… How cruel. Are you all right?”

Mister Tiva offers a hand to the boy.

The boy, however, stands up on his own without accepting it.

Whoa. Now that he’s standing, this kid’s actually pretty good-looking.

“Are they really the cruel ones here, I wonder?”

Tiva looks confused at first; then his eyes widen, apparently realizing something.

“Compared to what we’ve done to them, it’s only fair that we allow them this much in return,” the boy continues sorrowfully.

I think I know what he’s getting at now.

Ohts ransacked and took over this town.

Not to mention, they did so by attacking innocent townspeople while their

fighters were away at a separate battlefield.

The town's beloved lord and his wife were assassinated, and most of them think that was Ohts's doing, too.

It's natural that the surviving citizens of this town have a deep hatred for Ohts.

So much that they attack Ohts's men on an almost daily basis.

But there's one thing I still don't get.

Why is this boy talking like he wronged them personally?

He doesn't look much older than me, so I doubt he was part of the attack on the town.

"There is no need for you to do any such thing, Sir Julius the Hero."

Mister Tiva's words hit my confused little brain like a ton of bricks.

Hero? *Hero?!*

"Whaaa—?!"

It's not my fault if I yelled a little bit, okay?

I mean, this is the *hero* we're talking about!

Who wouldn't be shocked if humanity's best hope against the Demon Lord turned out to be some little kid?!

"You were only brought along in order to experience the battlefield firsthand. Not a single ounce of blame for what happened in this battle should lie with you."

"But from their point of view, I'm one of the perpetrators. Since the hero went into battle against them, even if I didn't participate, they've lost all sense of what is right. That is why Ohts has acted so unjustly. With the hero on their side, the Ohts Army felt they must be in the right. Nothing they do can be wrong. Even if I didn't do those things myself, my very existence is what put the town in this position."

Whoa, sounds pretty complicated.

“Untrue. Whether you were technically a participant or not, the Ohts Army attacked this town, not you.”

“Even so, I can’t forgive myself.”

The hero looks around sadly.

His gaze lingers on the houses that have been burned down and all the restoration that still needs to be done.

Those eyes are full of remorse and, even more so, determination.

Aah, now I get it. Okay.

This one’s definitely a hero.

He might look close to me in age, but I’ve barely ever seen adults look that determined, never mind kids.

“Sir Hero…”

Mister Tiva looks sorrowfully at the boy, seeing the same thing in his eyes that I did.

I can tell he feels responsible as one of the adults who made this little boy feel such intense determination.

I don’t really know what’s going on behind the hero boy’s determination or Mister Tiva’s complicated expression.

“I came here without thinking, and now I deeply regret it. From now on, I will think and act on my own. Never again will I let myself be used simply because I am a child. Child or not, I am the hero. I have no intention of being a puppet who does not live up to my title.”

“Then please take care of yourself. If you wish to become a true hero, you mustn’t throw away your life like this.”

Mister Tiva gives the warning in a gentle tone.

“But I must help the people of this town somehow.” The hero looks discontent.

“And so you would silently let them strike you? That will not help you or them in the least. Hurting you will only ease their suffering for the briefest moment.

Then they will feel the pain in their hands from having struck you and in their hearts from hurting such a young child. Eventually, they may forget their sense of virtue entirely. You must not let anyone strike you, for their sake as well as your own."

Good one, Mister.

Looks like the hero is surprised, too.

"But…what can I do for them, then?"

"Why don'cha hunt monsters or something?" Oops. I answered him without thinking. "Oh, um, sorry 'bout that!"

"No, it's all right. What do you mean, 'hunt monsters'?"

The hero smiles at me kindly.

"Oh, uhhh… Well, y'know how parts of the town's defense wall got broken and stuff? They've got guards watching the worst bits, but there are other areas that look like they'd break real easily. So what I hear is, a lotta the townsfolk are so worried about monsters breaking down the walls that they can barely sleep at night. There are a lot more monsters outside than there used to be, too, prolly 'cause they're attracted to the smell of death or whatever, right? If you defeat those monsters, that'd help the folks here, wouldn't it? Although I guess that's more of an adventurer's job than a hero's."

The hero's eyes start to sparkle as he listens to my explanation.

"An adventurer?"

"Sorry, uh, did I offend you or somethin'?"

"No, no, just the opposite. You're right. Maybe I could try something like that. Thank you."

With that, the hero runs off.

Mister Tiva and I watch him leave, then finish our shopping like we planned.

From the next day on, I hear tell that the little hero is out fighting monsters to keep the townspeople safe.

If you ask me, it sounds like he's got the makings of a real good hero.

Y’know, the kind who really lives up to his title.

Speaking of titles, when the hell is that so-called “court mage of the Empire” gonna come back anyway?

He might have a fancy job and a lot of power, but he’s not good on the inside at all.

THE MAN BEHIND THE MISFORTUNE

Merazophis is an incredibly loyal man.

He swore loyalty to my parents and, even after their passing, continues to serve me faithfully.

The depth of that loyalty knows no bounds.

Though we're traveling companions now, the truth is that I don't know much about Merazophis's life.

While my parents were alive, I was playing the role of an ordinary baby, so I didn't get to see or hear him very often.

However, I did understand a few things based on what little I did manage to witness.

Merazophis is a workaholic. It's a serious condition, too.

He seemed to work so constantly that I sometimes wondered when he slept.

On paper, he was my father's retainer, but in reality, he was essentially the family's butler.

Or rather, he did the work of both a retainer and a butler.

The driving force behind that intense work ethic was his loyalty to my father and his love for my mother.

Yes. Merazophis was in love with my mother.

If it was that obvious even to me, who had zero experience with love in my previous life, I'm sure it was an open secret that everyone in the mansion knew.

A servant in love with the wife of his master. In a fairy tale, that would probably be the start of a forbidden love affair, but in reality, it would be

nothing but foolishness to act on those feelings.

One wrong move, and there could've been serious trouble.

But because we're talking about Merazophis, that never happened.

He never made a wrong move.

Instead, he kept his feelings inside and acted appropriately for his position.

He truly wanted my mother to be happy from the bottom of his heart, and he trusted my father to take care of her.

I think the fact that everyone knew about it is what made it okay.

How can anyone be so considerate of others?

How can you wish for someone else's happiness even at the cost of your own?

I don't understand it.

Merazophis's adoration for my mother was so obvious that even I picked up on it.

How could he suppress that passion and entrust her to my father?

I can never understand what he's thinking. To be honest, it scares me a little.

What if he decides someday to leave me and goes away forever?

I mean, Merazophis is loyal to my parents, not me.

It's not like he swore loyalty to me.

I'm sure his heart still lies with my late parents.

So what must he think of the person who killed them?

It's simple. Obviously he must hate anyone involved.

There's Potimas Harrifenas, the elf who did the deed directly.

But there's also the Ohts Army, the Word of God religion, and the Empire, who were all involved in the war.

Right now, he's still staying by my side, but what if he decides one day to leave and seek revenge?

I can’t stop worrying about it.

“Ha!”

Unaware of my thoughts, Merazophis is currently swinging his sword with a vigorous shout.

However, the blade cuts through nothing but air.

He’s not doing practice swings. His opponent just dodged him.

Sweat pours off Merazophis like a waterfall as he swings his sword desperately.

I guess vampires do sweat, then, I think absently.

In the meantime, Merazophis trips and falls to the ground, clearly reaching his limit. Though he tries to stand up, his body is undoubtedly down for the count.

I’m amazed that he was able to push himself this far.

From my point of view, his attacks were pretty decent.

It was clear even to me that his movements weren’t exactly polished, but he was able to cover for that with the high stats he gained when he became a vampire.

As a servant, Merazophis only had enough skill to perform the minimum amount of self-defense.

Still, it’s not as if he’s a complete novice, and his high stats make him a decent fighter overall.

It’s his opponent who’s the problem.

White, who’s been effortlessly dodging all his valiant attacks, swings her giant scythe around without a care for his current condition.

As she avoided his sword, she even stopped to comment on his movements a few times.

Watching her, I feel like I understand the true meaning of the phrase *faster than a speeding bullet*.

I can’t even follow her movements with my eyes.

White herself, however, doesn’t seem satisfied. She keeps leaning her head from side to side and swinging her scythe.

Merazophis is so exhausted that he can hardly stand, yet White doesn’t even look out of breath.

This is the reality of the gap between their stats.

Sure, Merazophis has stats far superior to most humans now that he’s a vampire, but that doesn’t matter. Not to White.

I know how hard he’s been working.

Every morning, he does practice swings before the sun rises.

Ever since the day our carriage was attacked by robbers on the way back from my grandfather’s, the day White saved us from certain death, the day the course of my whole life changed.

Merazophis was cut down by one of the bandits without any resistance.

Realizing his own weakness seemed to leave him frustrated.

Starting the very next morning, he began practicing with his sword before sunrise.

It’s not like that would be enough to make him insanely strong.

Merazophis was an ordinary civilian with no swordsmanship skills to speak of.

Nevertheless, he kept practicing every day and continues to do so even now.

And yet, all of that effort is meaningless to White.

I’m sure that must be even more frustrating for him.

I know very well that Merazophis has been working as hard as he can.

White is such an anomaly that she happens to surpass him completely.

He must know that, too, but he’s still gritting his teeth.

Upset with himself for not being able to do anything, he keeps struggling to get stronger.

Though he doesn’t say any of this, the determination in his eyes tells the whole story.

It’s a complete reversal from the low spirits he was in until recently.

Since I snuck a taste of alcohol and immediately passed out the day Ariel brought those barrels, I don’t know what happened afterward.

But something definitely went down while I was asleep. Starting the very next day, Merazophis looked utterly refreshed.

Maybe it was as simple as him letting out his pent-up frustration thanks to the liquor, but it seems to be more than that.

It’s possible that Ariel did something, but when I tried to thank her, she just wryly insisted, “I haven’t done a thing.”

No matter what she might say, Ariel really is kind.

Although she acted cold when I tried to talk to her about Merazophis before, her pointing out my flaws was exactly what I needed.

I’m guessing she must have done something similar to help Merazophis deal with his problems. I certainly wasn’t able to help him.

After Ariel scolded me, I tried to think about what might be bothering him.

But I didn’t need to think that hard.

Merazophis and I both lost the town we lived in.

But he lived there as a human for far longer than I did.

He lost more than I did.

People, places, time…even his own humanity.

Even if I had no other choice, the fact is that I turned Merazophis into a vampire.

I didn’t even think about how that might be affecting him. I just took his words—*“I cannot be anything but grateful for that”*—at face value.

Everything he’s lost, and the weight of living as a vampire from now on…

It would be impossible not to let that bother him at all.

I can’t blame Ariel for being unimpressed that I failed to realize something so obvious.

I really haven't been thinking of anyone but myself.

And I'm still doing the same thing.

If I think of Merazophis instead of myself, the best thing for him would obviously be to let him go, but I can't do that.

He's a vampire now, but he's still as excellent a person as ever, and it's not as if his entire past has been erased.

Since he was essentially my father's butler, I'm sure he'd be in high demand with other nobles, and he must have acquaintances who would take him in.

Whether he reveals the fact that he's a vampire would be up to Merazophis's own discretion, but knowing him, I'm sure he could still be accepted.

No matter what path I choose, there's sure to be danger ahead.

It would be much better for Merazophis to seek out a different path than to follow me into such danger.

I know this.

Yet I still can't do it.

I'm afraid to let go of Merazophis.

After he's put his life on the line to protect me, the thought of a future without him by my side is too terrifying to consider.

I really don't think of anyone but myself…

"All right, I'm hungry. What should we do?"

Ariel looks around. Following suit, I look at our surroundings, too, but I don't see anywhere we might be able to eat.

In fact, all I see are people.

We're in a town right now.

This is evidently the biggest town in the region; from here, it shouldn't take much longer to reach the capital.

As a result, this town is quite lively and full of people.

The crowds are so thick that as Merazophis carries me in his arms, I can't see

anything past the milling passersby.

“I have been to this town before. There’s one restaurant that I recall being quite good; shall I take us there?”

“Sweet! Lead the way!”

Ariel’s eyes sparkle as she follows Merazophis. She seems to be quite looking forward to his recommended restaurant.

It’s hard to believe that this person is a demon lord.

“Right this way.” Merazophis brings us down an alley.

The farther along we go, the less people I see around us, until it seems like we’re entering a quiet residential area.

Then we turn into an even narrower alley, until we arrive at an unmarked door.

As Merazophis opens the door, a bell rings to announce our arrival.

In spite of the unassuming exterior, the inside of the building looks like a proper restaurant.

“Whoa. How do you know about this hole-in-the-wall place?”

“My master was friends with the lord of this town, who told me about this place.”

His offhand explanation makes my heart skip a beat.

It sounds like the lord of this town has met Merazophis. If he was friends with my father, there’s no way he wouldn’t know about Merazophis.

Maybe this person would take Merazophis in.

As the thought distracts me, Merazophis and Ariel take a seat.

Merazophis places me in the seat next to him. It’s a chair for adults, but I can still sit in it all right.

Although I’m not sure if it would work that way for a normal baby.

Just as we’re sitting down, an old man emerges from the back of the restaurant.

“May I take your order?”

“Two of the chef’s special and something that would be easy for a baby to eat, if you happen to have it?”

“Certainly.”

With that, the old man disappears again.

We’re the only customers in the rather dim room.

There are no waiters or anything to be seen, either, so it seems like the man might be running the restaurant entirely on his own.

“Not much of a business-minded fellow, is he?” Ariel asks doubtfully.

“I do not think that profit is a priority for him.” Merazophis smiles dryly. “That was the owner. I am told that he used to work for the lord in question. He’s quite talented, but he retired due to age. However, he still wanted to keep cooking, so he chose to open this small restaurant in an out-of-the-way place.”

“Ooh, so he can just cook once in a while?”

“Precisely. Thus, one presumes that only those in the know ever come to this restaurant.”

That makes sense. There’s no sign on the door, so if you didn’t know about it, I doubt you’d even realize there was a restaurant inside.

He must keep it up as a sort of hobby now that he’s retired from his main job.

So money is secondary.

There are all kinds of ways to live, aren’t there?

Maybe even for Merazophis or me…

“Is something the matter, young miss?”

“Oh! No, it’s nothing.”

I respond automatically to dispel Merazophis’s concerns.

I can’t do it.

I can’t ask him if he wants to be free.

Merazophis doesn’t look convinced by my response, but he doesn’t press the matter.

Because the door of the restaurant has just opened, and another customer has walked in.

The tinkle of the bell draws all our eyes to the door.

The newcomer is an old man, perhaps a little younger than the owner of the restaurant.

I don’t want to stare for too long, so I turn away, only to see Ariel gazing at the man with the smile fading from her face.

Immediately, a chill runs down my spine.

She isn’t using the Intimidation skill, and she isn’t murderous like I’ve seen her before.

But she’s definitely ready for a fight.

That’s the sense I get, at least.

“Pardon me.”

Ignoring Ariel’s stare, the man sits down.

At the table right next to us, even though there are plenty of other seats open.

The reason becomes clear with Ariel’s next words.

“Long time no see.”

The smile returns to Ariel’s face, and she greets the man in a friendly manner.

So they know each other? That would explain why he sat next to us.

But judging by Ariel’s initial reaction, I don’t think she’s necessarily too happy to see him.

“Indeed. It’s good to see you again. Or should I say, it’s a pleasure to meet you?”

That’s strange. Why would he say that if they’ve already met?

“Either way works, right?”

Merazophis looks just as flummoxed as I am by the man's words, but Ariel doesn't seem to care.

"So, to what do I owe this honor, Mister Word of God Pontiff?"

Ariel's words take a moment to sink in, so I don't react right away.

"May I take your order?"

For better or worse, the chef hurriedly reemerges from the back before anyone can make another move.

"I'll have one of whatever she's having, please." The pontiff gestures to Ariel.

"Certainly."

Oblivious to the tension in the air, the restaurant owner goes back to the kitchen.

I take another look at the pontiff.

He seems to be a perfectly ordinary, friendly old man.

His clothes aren't anything special, either, and far from being bloated as one might expect from the rich, he's actually quite thin.

If you didn't tell me, I would have never guessed that this man is the head of the Word of God religion, the biggest religion in the world.

Frankly, even after hearing Ariel say it, I still find it hard to believe.

What would someone so important be doing here without even a single guard?

"Pretty careless to show your face in front of me without an escort, don't you think? Not to mention, you're in enemy territory."

Ariel points out just what I was thinking.

"Not to worry. There are few who happen to know my face."

"Well, *I* recognized you."

"Even so, it would be pointless for me to worry about that. No amount of security could defend me from you, after all. In which case, it makes no difference whether I meet you alone or with guards in tow. In fact, it's better

this way, since it means I will be the only victim if you should choose to attack me."

The pontiff speaks as naturally as if discussing the weather.

Which just makes it harder to fully grasp his meaning.

Only after Ariel heaves an exasperated sigh do I realize what those words mean.

The pontiff is saying he doesn't care if he dies.

And judging by Ariel's attitude, he isn't just bluffing—he really means it.

He's come here alone to meet someone who might easily kill him, simply because it's more efficient than bringing guards.

I can't imagine the amount of nerve it would take to do such a thing.

As I process all this, the unassuming old man before me starts to seem like a much more mysterious, disturbing character.

For the first time, I recognize him as the pontiff of the Word of God, a role no ordinary man could take.

"Let me ask you again. What do you want? You didn't just come here for a friendly chat, did you?"

"Indeed."

The pontiff nods at Ariel's words, looking as though he's ruminating about something.

Briefly, his gaze turns toward Merazophis and me.

"I suppose there's no point in trying to sound each other out in a roundabout way. Very well. I have three points to discuss. The first is that I would like you to cease your involvement with the Goddess religion. The second is to request that you share any information you might have on the elves. And the third is in regards to your two companions there."

He wants to talk about us?

I can barely keep up with what's happening.

Looking helplessly at Merazophis, I see his face set in a grim expression.

It's almost like the look he had when he was facing those elf assassins in the mansion.

The face of someone staring at an enemy.

That's right. The person in front of us is an enemy.

He's the leader of the Word of God religion, who cooperated with Ohts to help destroy our hometown.

After Potimas, the man before my eyes is perhaps our clearest enemy.

"I see. All right, let's hear it from the top, then."

"Regarding the first point, Ohts is planning a further invasion."

"What?!" Merazophis lets out an exclamation of shock at this information.

Ignoring him, the pontiff continues. "Naturally, we of the Word of God will be aiding them as well. Thus, it would be most inconvenient for us if you were to participate in battle on the side of Sariella."

What an incredibly selfish demand.

I can't help but be angry.

Merazophis seems to feel the same way, judging by how tightly his fist is clenched under the table.

I'm sure he's far more furious than I am, but he simply looks on in silence without any further outbursts, so I must do the same.

Our best bet here is to let Ariel handle things.

"Hmm. Sounds like a pretty beneficial request for you."

"If I might make an additional request that would be even more beneficial, we'd be highly appreciative if you would hand over that subordinate of yours who caused the most recent battle—the white spider monster people call the Nightmare of the Labyrinth."

I almost let out a little exclamation myself at this next bit.

I'm not sure which part makes me react like that, but I hurriedly bite my

tongue.

Still, hearing White come up in the conversation definitely has me surprised.

“And why is that, just out of curiosity?”

“That creature is the reason war broke out. We cannot simply let it go free.” The pontiff pauses. “Unless it is already dead, in which case, all the better.”

His expression doesn’t change in the slightest.

However, his words sound sharper than before.

“I thought you weren’t gonna try to sound me out?” Ariel counters blandly.

Sound her out? What does she mean?

The pontiff chuckles. “I said there was no point, but I never said that I would not try.”

“Shameless, aren’t you?”

Ariel sighs again.

“You want to know my relationship with the Nightmare of the Labyrinth and whether it, or myself, is going to assist Sariella from now on. That’s what you’re after, right? You could’ve just asked instead of trying to provoke me into saying it.”

Ariel’s voice is somewhere between bored and irritated.

The pontiff was trying to get information out of her by making unreasonably aggressive demands.

But of course that sort of trick won’t work on Ariel. She saw right through his intentions with ease.

How foolish could he be to try something so basic against her?

“Oh dear. It appears I’ve failed.”

The pontiff doesn’t seem particularly disappointed.

Instead, he glances at me—or more precisely, at Merazophis.

! So he wasn’t watching for Ariel’s reactions. He was watching for Merazophis’s!

Given Merazophis's background, it wouldn't be surprising if he had an outburst over the pontiff's words.

Even if not, he might at least react in a way that would let the pontiff guess certain information.

I was wrong to assume this man was foolish.

He knows what he's doing after all.

I look up at Merazophis, silently warning him not to make any telling movements.

Evidently, he's reached the same conclusion as I have, because he meets my eyes directly and gives a slight nod.

"First of all, Dustin, that thing's not my subordinate."

Ariel raises her voice slightly as she addresses the pontiff.

Dustin must be his name, I suppose?

"Although you've probably already guessed that much. Anyway, as far as that goes, I've got things under control. That's all I can say on that particular matter."

Ariel's words are too vague to really be considered "information."

She barely said anything at all, but the pontiff still nods as if satisfied.

"If you say you have things under control, Lady Ariel, then that is all I need to hear. However, I am curious as to how all this might affect Sariella in the future. Do you have anything to say in regards to that?"

"I don't plan on doing anything else in Sariella. Just gonna stop in for a visit at the capital and then go home. As long as nobody sticks their nose where it doesn't belong in the meantime, that is."

"Fear not. I do not intend to do anything that might draw your ire."

"Yeah? Not sure if I buy that. You've already failed at reining things in once. Besides, those things you're using…"

"I assure you my grip on the reins is perfectly stable. However, it is true that unwelcome and unexpected interlopers did cause problems previously. For

that, I sincerely apologize.”

“Uh-huh. So you’re serious this time, huh?”

“We are always serious. We simply must ascertain that our plans are all the more airtight this time. Which is why we would like to avoid any wild-card factors.”

“I see. So those wild cards are me, you-know-what, and Potimas, I suppose?”

“Just so.”

Ariel and the pontiff continue their exchange.

Try as I might to follow, there are certain vague keywords and left-out information that make it difficult for me to fully understand.

The parts that do make sense to me swirl around wildly in my head.

These things might have a major effect on Merazophis’s and my future, after all.

“Then for my first point, I shall take it that you do not intend to work with Sariella. As for the second point, about the elves, perhaps it is best that we discuss it along with the third. Namely, who exactly is that child whom the elves are targeting?”

The pontiff’s eyes are squarely on me.

He still has the expression of an amiable old man, but his gaze is piercingly sharp.

Merazophis raises a hand as if to shield me from that gaze.

His back is to me right now, so I can’t see his face, but I’m sure his expression is very grim indeed.

In spite of that, the pontiff continues to stare at me.

“Naturally, I am not asking for a name such as, say, Sophia Keren. What I want to know is who is on the inside. Do you, by chance, have memories of your previous life?”

Utterly shocked, I catch my breath.

I never could have expected that he would correctly guess something so unlikely.

I can tell my reaction has shown him he was correct, because for the first time, his expression wavers.

“Goodness. I did not think it likely, but…it is true? Does that mean there is a bug in the system?”

The pontiff’s relaxed attitude has gone out the window.

His expression looks distressed, but he speaks no further for the moment.

The sudden change surprises me, but not as much as the unexpected vocabulary he used.

System? Bug?

What does that mean?

“Heeey, buddy? Come back to reality, will ya?”

Ariel raises her eyebrows at the silent pontiff.

“I beg your pardon. It seems I am doomed never to escape this bad habit no matter how many times I am reborn.”

“It’s not good to overthink things too much, y’know. Why don’t you just empty your head and relax a little?”

“If I could do that, I most certainly would.”

The pontiff smiles with self-derision.

I feel as if I’m seeing his real expression for the first time.

“The system is operating normally. Don’t worry about that.”

Right after Ariel speaks, the chef emerges from the back with plates in hand.

The pontiff closes his mouth before speaking and watches in silence as the man delivers our plates.

The restaurant owner silently places the food on our table, withdraws into the back, then comes out with more plates. Either he’s being sensitive to the unusual atmosphere in the room or he hasn’t noticed it at all.

At any rate, he repeats the process a few more times, lining up all kinds of dishes on the table.

His background as a lord's head chef is clear: Just by glancing at each dish, I can tell they're fresh and delicious.

A rich, enticing scent fills my nostrils.

But unlike everyone else's food, the plate in front of me is just baby food, a mush of vegetables or who-knows-what.

I knew this was coming, but it's still a little depressing.

"Well, we wouldn't want the food to get cold while we have our stuffy conversation. Let's eat first, shall we?"

Once the owner disappears into the back, Ariel reaches for her food.

Although the pontiff arrived after us, his food is ready, too, possibly because he ordered the same thing as Ariel.

The pontiff says a little prayer before beginning to eat his food.

Merazophis, too, says grace before he eats.

Their prayers are different: Merazophis's, which I'm used to hearing by now, is of the Goddess religion, while the pontiff's must have been the Word of God version.

While the Goddess prayer offered thanks to the Goddess, the Word of God prayer seemed more like one of penitence.

Before eating his own food, Merazophis scoops up my baby food with a spoon and offers it to me.

Normally, I would eat it myself, but the pontiff is here. If I want to pretend to be a normal baby, I have to let Merazophis feed me.

Although I'm not sure there's much point in keeping up the act at this point. It's embarrassing, and the pontiff already knows I'm not normal. Nonetheless, I let him feed me.

Ariel and the pontiff eat in silence.

The atmosphere in the room is so painfully stifling that we can't even enjoy

the taste of the presumably delicious meal we're eating.

Well, mine is baby food, so it's probably nothing to write home about anyway.

We finish our meals in silence.

For a while after, no one speaks.

"The system is operating normally. However, it's true that an irregular situation has occurred." Finally, Ariel breaks the silence. "As a result, I had no choice but to act. Frankly, not even I can tell what's going to happen from here on out. But I think it's pretty clear that the times are changing. You Word of God people's attempt to crush the Goddess religion is just one link in that chain, no?"

The pontiff simply sits there docilely, not answering Ariel's question.

But…wait a second.

What did Ariel just say?

The Word of God is trying to crush the Goddess religion?

It's not Ohts that's trying to defeat Sariella?

"So the Word of God, not Ohts, was behind the invasion of Sariella. Is that what you mean to say?"

Merazophis breaks his silence for the first time, looking from Ariel to the pontiff.

Thus far, we'd thought Ohts was the main instigator behind the attack on Sariella. But what Ariel just said makes it sound like the Word of God religion is the one that compelled Ohts to attack.

It might seem like the same thing, but there's a very big difference.

If that's true, then our enemy isn't the small country of Ohts but the Word of God, the biggest religion in the world.

Sariella might have been able to defeat Ohts, but if the real one behind the war is the Word of God religion, our home nation doesn't stand a chance.

"Yeah, of course. Why would a tiny nation that could be knocked over by a strong breeze charge into battle on its own? It didn't seem at all suspicious to

you that Ohts started a war just like that?”

Ariel, not the pontiff, responds to Merazophis’s query, revealing that the Word of God religion is the mastermind behind the attack of Sariella, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

The pontiff neither confirms nor denies it, but the fact that he’s remaining silent seems like confirmation to me.

“Do Word of God believers hate the followers of the Goddess that much?!”

Merazophis gnashes his teeth.

The relationship between Sariella’s Goddess religion and the Word of God has apparently always been volatile.

With this war, they must be planning to settle the score once and for all.

“I hate to break it to you, but this guy’s motives aren’t that simple. He’s not really that devout to begin with, see. In fact, it’s more like he’s picking a fight with the gods.”

It takes me a moment to process Ariel’s words.

How could the man who leads the biggest religion in the word be picking a fight with gods?

If that’s a joke, it doesn’t seem very funny.

But Ariel’s expression is dead serious. In fact, she’s glaring at the pontiff accusingly.

Huh? So it’s the truth?

Do gods even exist in this world?

I mean, I guess since we all hear that “Word of God” voice, it wouldn’t be that surprising if whoever’s speaking it really is a god.

But considering how mechanical that voice is, I personally find it a little hard to believe.

“My ideology is irrelevant at the moment. After all, one person’s expectations are all but meaningless in the face of real results. That’s exactly why I am in this chair now. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I'm guessing that by "this chair," he means the position of pontiff, not literally the chair he's sitting in right now in this restaurant.

But overall, I'm still finding it hard to grasp everything the pontiff and Ariel are talking about.

Given his expression of deep thought, Merazophis seems to be in the same boat.

However, I think their conversation requires knowledge of a certain something we aren't aware of yet.

As long as we're in the dark about that something, I don't think we'll be able to keep up.

"Are you quite certain the system is operating normally?"

And I think that "something" might be the "system" they keep talking about.

But until we know exactly what this "system" thing is, that doesn't help me at all.

"I guarantee it. The system is in perfect working order. In fact, this might be the most stable it's ever been."

"Is that right? In spite of the sudden decrease in MA energy?"

"Yep. I don't think that was exactly part of the plan, but there's no problem with the system. Not with its operation anyway."

"In other words, while it may be operating normally, there is still a fundamental problem?"

"You could put it that way. Everything it's been building up over all those years has suddenly gone to waste. If that's not a problem, what else would you call it?"

"This is true. A very grave problem indeed."

Both Ariel and the pontiff sigh despondently.

It doesn't seem like the kind of thing two mortal enemies would do.

"But let's put that aside for now. It's not exactly the kind of problem we can solve with a few simple actions anyway. Your biggest concern right now is

Sariella, isn't it?"

With that, Ariel closes her eyes for a moment.

Then she opens them again and speaks.

"Let's start with your three main points. Number one, as far as my actions from here on out are concerned, it's just like I said before. Right now, I'm planning on bringing these kids to the capital of Sariella. After that, what they do is up to them, but either way, I'm not planning on staying in this country. I'm not planning on doing anything to aid Sariella, even if these guys decide to stay here. As long as nobody does anything to change my mind, that is. Once I've left this country, you're free to start a war or whatever you want."

I can't help but be a little shocked by Ariel's words. It sounds like she's washing her hands of us.

I know she doesn't really intend to do that. Still, hearing her talk about this country like she doesn't care in the least does hurt.

Especially since it sounds like she doesn't care whether we stay here or not, either.

Considering how much she's looked out for us so far, I think she must care about us at least a little.

But just as she said, if we stay here and get caught up in a war again, she's almost certainly not going to save us this time.

That reality makes the path ahead of us look dark.

"Number two, the elves. I don't know much about that myself, actually. But I do know they're targeting point number three, this girl, as well as other people like her. Potimas himself even showed up, or at least one of his usual puppet things, so they must be pretty serious about it."

As she talks about the elves, especially Potimas, Ariel's expression is one of unconcealed contempt.

I don't like them, either, since they targeted my life and all, but my feelings are closer to fear than hatred.

That man indifferently tried to take my and Merazophis's lives. I can't forget

those cold eyes, which looked at us like we were nothing more than garbage to be disposed of.

To me, the man called Potimas is like the specter of death itself.

Just remembering him makes me want to shake with fear.

If we part ways with Ariel, that man might attack us again.

If the Word of God religion attacks Sariella, that will certainly be a problem, but I think Potimas might be an even bigger threat to Merazophis and me.

“Hmm. I suspected they might make some sort of move, so I have been on my guard. And if he is moving so freely, it is even worse than I feared. If you had not taken care of him, Lady Ariel, I know not what might have occurred.”

“Feel free to thank me.”

“Indeed, I thank you very much. Although I would be even more grateful if you had erased all traces of the battle, not just the bodies.”

“Ahhh. I guess he was using a gun and stuff, huh? Right, right. I didn’t think about those little details.”

“It’s quite all right. We took care of the rest, so there is nothing for you to worry about.”

The pontiff is talking as if he did Ariel a favor, which she more or less ignores.

So if guns are used in this world, you have to cover up any evidence.

White took care of the bodies, but I wasn’t really worried about things like that at the time.

I certainly wasn’t in any state to think about bullet holes or anything like that.

But if even those traces have to be hidden, what exactly was that machine body Potimas was using?

I thought this was some kind of fantasy world that was less developed than Earth, with strange things like skills and stats.

But Potimas’s machine was easily more advanced than any technology I’ve ever seen on Earth.

There’s something very strange about this world.

And Ariel and the pontiff clearly know the truth behind it.

Is the “system” they keep mentioning the source of this world’s strangeness?

I’m not sure, but it’s clear that Ariel and the pontiff don’t want the world at large to know about machine technology.

“At any rate, it seems that our information has been leaked somehow. Ohts’s surprise attack on the capital has been compromised.”

“So you lost the information war, huh?”

The pontiff nods meekly at Ariel’s rude remark.

“Yes, indeed. We put a great deal of importance on secrecy, and I thought that our intelligence organization gave us the advantage, but the results speak for themselves. We simply cannot keep up with the elves’ information network.”

Seeing the pontiff’s serious expression, Ariel’s face turns grave as well.

“Isn’t there anything you can do?”

“We have been doing our utmost, yet our efforts are to no avail.” The pontiff shakes his head glumly. “The elves’ circle of devotees is growing. And since they are unaware themselves that they are passing information along to the elves, there is little we can do to stop them. They are good people who believe in the elves’ public-facing banner of true world peace, so it is difficult for us to intervene.”

True world peace? In a place where monsters are everywhere and humans still fight among themselves?

What a sketchy claim. Who would buy into that?

“Most devious of all is the fact that there are those even among the elves who truly believe in that ideal. As a result, there is no way of knowing whether any given elf is directly connected to Potimas, so if we make a careless attempt to finish things, we may find the tables turned on us instead. With the amount of power he has now, he could even manipulate public sentiment to turn people against the Word of God.”

“You should probably be taking care of the elves before you take care of the Goddess religion, then.”

“Indeed. However, by the time I first founded the Word of God religion, the elves had already built themselves a rock-solid position. No matter what I do, they are always one step ahead.”

Ariel and the pontiff sigh in unison again.

At this point, it’s not at all clear whether they’re enemies or allies.

Initially, Ariel’s reaction made me think they were enemies, but it doesn’t really seem that way when they look to be on the same page in a lot of ways.

“Well, even I can’t tell what the elves are up to, but I do know it can’t be anything good. This is Potimas we’re talking about.”

“Well said. That man always brings an ill wind.”

…Maybe they’re actually friends after all?

“Anyway, as far as your third point goes, I don’t think I wanna tell you that.”

Or maybe not. It seems like Ariel is pretty leery of the pontiff after all.

“Even if the elves are involved and we might be able to be of some assistance in that regard?”

“Even then. Letting the elves use her would be the worst-case scenario, but how do I know the Word of God wouldn’t do the same thing? I’m not gonna show my hand to someone I can’t trust.”

Okay, I give up. I can’t tell whether they’re friends or enemies.

I think it might be too complicated to sum up in such simple terms, to be honest.

“But that means you might well intend to use her yourself, does it not?”

“If I can, I probably will. But I intend to prioritize her own wishes above all that.”

That she’s saying this right in front of me just proves that she’s sincere, I think.

“I see. Then there is more to her than the fact that she has memories of a previous life.”

I’m impressed the pontiff was able to guess that much from what little information he was given, but I doubt he’ll figure out anything else.

I mean, who would ever imagine that someone might be reborn from another world?

Although, if he was able to figure out that I have memories of a previous life, does that mean such a thing is relatively common in this world?

“Well, that’s all I wanted to say. Do you have anything to add?” Ariel addresses Merazophis.

No, not just Merazophis. She’s looking at me, too.

Does that mean it’s all right for me to speak?

The pontiff looks at me and Merazophis, too.

I gaze up at Merazophis and send him a telepathic message only he can hear.

“Merazophis, if there’s something you want to say, you can say it.”

I have nothing to say myself.

I mean, there are lots of things I’d like to say, but I don’t think I could really gather my thoughts together well enough to express them sensibly.

This man, the pontiff, is almost certainly my enemy.

I know that, but honestly, it doesn’t really feel that way.

I mean, I don’t know much about the Word of God religion.

All I know is that it’s the biggest religion in the world, and that it’s opposed to the Goddess religion worshipped in Sariella.

Which means I basically know nothing at all.

I’m sure there’s some deep-seated grudge between the Word of God and the Goddess followers, but I don’t have a clue what that might be.

And although I know he’s behind the war, that doesn’t mean I can suddenly view him as my enemy.

What happened in Keren County still doesn't quite feel real to me.

It was destroyed before I could form a deep attachment to the place, after all.

I do feel sad and angry, but it's like I'm viewing those emotions through a pane of frosted glass.

But I'm sure Merazophis feels very differently.

He spent much of his life in Keren County, and lost things that can never be replaced.

So I think it would be better for him to speak than someone like me.

And yet, Merazophis shakes his head.

"There is nothing I wish to say."

Ariel, myself, and even the pontiff look surprised.

"You sure? Don't you wanna make an angry declaration or two? I mean, you could even kill this guy right now and no one would complain about it."

Ariel's comment seems dangerous to me, but I'm guessing she's saying it because it's a very real possibility.

The pontiff said himself that he came alone knowing he might be killed.

Based on Ariel's confirmation, I think that was the truth, and that he really would accept it.

"No. I have a feeling that killing him here would be pointless. I'm sure it would not stop the flow of the times. Besides, his death would not cause him to regret his actions. At best, it would only serve to briefly ease my resentment. Such an act could never make up for the loss of my master, my mistress, and all of Keren County. Your life is trivial by comparison."

Merazophis's words are dismissive, but there's a swell of dark feelings behind them that he can't entirely keep out of his voice.

I'm sure there's plenty he wants to say.

And yet, he chooses to hold his tongue.

"I am the young mistress's servant. If she chooses not to speak, there is no

reason for me to do so. Everything I do, I do to serve her."

So that's why he's keeping his emotions at bay.

I thought it would be better to let him speak, but he's saying that if I'm not going to say anything, he won't, either.

We each hold the other in such high regard that it's almost like a strange stalemate.

But I think I'm all right with that.

"Pfft! Heh-heh-heh. He said your life is trivial."

For some reason, Ariel is snickering.

"Indeed. I was fully prepared to be killed, but I did not expect to be told such a thing."

The pontiff's voice is as calm as ever.

But, although it might be my imagination, he suddenly looks incredibly frail. Like a plant that's on the verge of withering.

"Trivial, is it? Yes, I suppose you are right. My life is quite trivial indeed. I feel I must apologize for attempting to offer up this life of mine in return for the pain I have caused you. I am sincerely sorry."

Then he bows his head deeply.

The leader of the biggest religion in the world, bowing to us.

"And yet, I cannot stop. I must not, no matter what."

I feel a shiver run through Merazophis's body, as well as my own.

Because we both sense it: the overwhelming weight of the resolve this withered old man carries within him.

He says his life is trivial, yet he holds on to some unshakable conviction.

I don't get it.

What could be that much more important than your own life?

"We've both taken on difficult roles," Ariel mutters quietly, then speaks up. "Well, then. There's nothing else to talk about, right? We're gonna take off

now. Oh, but if you wanna apologize, you can grab the bill for us here. Shall we?”

Ariel stands up.

Merazophis follows suit with me in his arms, and we head for the door.

All the while, the pontiff keeps his head bowed.

Merazophis acts as if he doesn’t notice, but I keep my eyes on the pontiff the whole time.

“Oh right. It’s all well and good that you’re so focused on Sariella, but shouldn’t you be a little more worried about the demons, too?”

Just before we leave, Ariel addresses the pontiff again.

“The new Demon Lord for this generation is me, after all.”

Her remark, which she states quite casually, evokes a dramatic reaction from the pontiff, whose head shoots back up from its bowed position.

But before he can say anything, the door shuts, closing us off from him.

“Are you certain it was wise to reveal yourself as the Demon Lord?”

Merazophis speaks up for the first time since we returned to our room at the inn.

“Yeah, it’s fiiine. Him knowing that isn’t gonna change anything. It’s just like the Word of God religion attacking the Goddess religion. Nothing anybody does will stop that from happening eventually.”

Does that mean this war was inevitable, then?

“What about you? Sure you didn’t wanna give him a piece of your mind?”

“As I said before, if the young mistress does not wish to speak, then I have nothing to say, either.”

Merazophis lays me down on the bed as he responds.

“You should’ve just told him off without worrying about me.”

My voice through Telepathy is a bit sulky.

I kept quiet only because I thought Merazophis would do the talking for both

of us.

Still, in the end, maybe things were better off this way.

I don't think anything Merazophis said would have gotten through to that old man. Or even if it did, he certainly wouldn't alter his course of action.

Ariel's words confirmed that, but even more convincing was the powerful conviction we sensed from the pontiff himself.

In the end, Merazophis's actions were probably for the best, although that doesn't make me feel any better.

No matter what happens from now on, I'm sure nothing will completely clear away our anger and grief.

Even if we killed the pontiff and destroyed the entire Word of God religion, that still wouldn't change.

This was for the best.

But that's just how I feel about it.

"Merazophis… From now on, I'd like you to trust your own feelings instead of only prioritizing mine."

Earlier, Merazophis was refraining on my behalf. It's possible that he feels differently, deep down.

I can't bear to watch him bottle up all his feelings just to protect me.

It always ends up making me feel responsible and guilty.

"I don't want you to try to be an emotionless puppet for me. You don't have to put me first. Trust your own feelings and act on them."

Merazophis stiffens, looking bewildered by my words.

I hesitate for a moment, then force myself to push on.

"Merazophis, if you…if you would prefer to leave me, that's all right. You can go take your revenge, or forget about everything and start a new life. I don't want to force you to be tied to me."

"Young miss…"

Of course, the truth is that I don't want him to leave me.

Merazophis is the one and only witness to the life I've lived in this world so far.

No, maybe I don't need to make it sound so complicated.

There's no practical reason behind these feelings.

I just want Merazophis to stay with me.

But I don't want to steal away his future for my own selfish desires.

I've already taken his humanity from him.

I've seen firsthand how much he's worried and suffered over becoming a vampire.

He seems to have recovered from that now, but I don't want him to lose anything else because of me.

If Merazophis wants to leave, I can't stop him.

If that really does happen, I'm sure I'll want to cry and hold him back from leaving.

And if I do that, I'm sure Merazophis will relent and stay with me out of a sense of obligation.

But that's exactly why I have to keep my emotions hidden.

If he picks up on my feelings even in the slightest, I'm sure he won't be able to leave me.

"Young miss. Do you…have no use for me?"

After I steel myself and bring up the topic, Merazophis looks at me like an abandoned puppy.

Shouldn't it be the other way around?

"That's ridiculous. Of course I do."

I answer immediately.

Of course.

I need Merazophis to be with me.

But I brought this up only because I didn't want him to feel like he had no other choice but to stay.

So why is he looking at me like that?

Confused, I don't know where to go from there.

"Young miss, the sole meaning of my life is to serve you. I have no desire to ever leave your side."

Merazophis kneels next to the bed.

"So please, if you will, grant my permission to stay by your side."

He reaches his hand out toward me, and I grasp it instinctively.

As I do so, it's as if his feelings are transmitted to me through touch, and for reasons I barely understand, I find myself clinging to him.

When Merazophis embraces me gently in return, I follow my instincts and bite down on his neck.

"Ah!"

Merazophis's body shudders, but he doesn't resist.

The taste of blood fills my mouth, and I'm overcome with a deep sense of satisfaction, happiness, and relief.

At the same time, I'm overwhelmed with the desire to weep, and tears begin to pour down my cheeks.

"Mmph… Bwaaah…"

I continue drinking Merazophis's blood as I cry.

Merazophis simply stays still, allowing me to do as I wish, holding me all the while.

Earlier today, we met the pontiff of the Word of God and learned all kinds of things I still don't quite understand, but right now, I don't really care anymore.

As long as Merazophis stays with me, we'll be fine.

That's all that matters.

I know now.

This person is mine.

No matter what anyone says, even if Merazophis himself grows tired of me, I'll never let him go.

I keep drinking his blood until all the crying wears me out and I finally fall asleep, still cradled in his arms.

THE DEMON LORD AND IMMORTALITY

I quietly leave the room so as not to disturb the pair while they're embracing each other.

I guess this means they've worked things out?

This is probably best for both of them right now.

Although in the future, they'll probably have to maintain a bit of distance lest they become super-codependent.

There are still some small kinks to work past, not to mention the big problem of what they're going to do from now on, but at least mentally they've figured it out for now.

Although it sits a little weird with me that White is the one who helped Merazophis dispel his worries.

I never expected her to be so sensitive to other people's feelings.

Although I guess looking back on her memories, she's always been weirdly good at guessing what people are thinking and feeling.

I mean, is she a con man or what?

She absolutely refuses to communicate most of the time, sometimes misleads people, and yet is also good at figuring out their feelings. It's a complete mystery.

When she totally won over the puppet taratects, I seriously didn't know what I was gonna do.

Actually, that's not quite accurate. If anything, that's the moment I knew I had no choice but to keep trying to reconcile with her.

At this point, I don’t think I can get rid of White anymore.

I still don’t understand the root of her immortality, for one thing.

If I try something without figuring that out and she gets away from me, I don’t think I’ll ever catch her again.

White has Teleport, after all. It’s a breeze for her to run away from me with a spell that lets her instantly be transported to anywhere she’s been before.

If she wants to run away from me, I have no way of catching up to her.

That would be all well and good if she decided to focus only on running away, but knowing her personality, I guarantee she’d launch a counterattack sooner or later.

Which means she’d probably use that particular guerrilla warfare of hers again to whittle away at my forces.

I have no way of catching up to her, yet she can launch an attack whenever she wants.

I still wouldn’t lose to her.

But I don’t think anyone else stands a chance against something like that.

If it came down to it, all my forces except for myself would be obliterated.

I don’t see how that’s any different from being defeated.

As it stands, the puppet taratects are already becoming attached to White.

If we wound up fighting, I don’t think she could turn them against me, but they’d definitely be reluctant to attack her.

Seriously, what a dangerous opponent she is.

That’s why I decided to give up on killing her and take her in as an ally instead.

She might be a huge nuisance as an enemy, but if she’s on my side, she’ll make an extremely dependable ally.

That’s why I’ve been trying to win her over and slowly close the distance between us.

Being nice to the vampire servant-and-master pair is all part of that plan.

She seems to have taken a liking to them, after all. If I look out for them, hopefully White will start to think better of me, too.

My kindness might be for a calculated reason, but I think I've still managed to be useful to them.

The rest will depend on what path they choose.

If they decide to come with me to the demon territory, I'll keep looking after them, but if not, we'll say our good-byes on the spot.

That might seem a little cold, but I have things I need to do. I can't stick around here forever.

I keep walking after I leave the room until I end up outside the inn.

Then I keep retracing my steps until I wind up near the restaurant where we ate earlier.

Walking a little farther, I reach a tavern and step inside.

"Were you waiting long?"

"Not at all."

I take a seat at a table, and greet the person sitting across from me.

The Word of God pontiff, Dustin.

This wasn't a planned meeting, but I figured he would be waiting at the nearest tavern, confident that I would come back.

As proof, there are already drinks for two waiting on the table.

I pick up one of the glasses as if it's the natural course of action and down the contents without waiting to clink glasses with him.

"Wouldn't you like to have a toast first?"

"No."

Dustin sighs, but I ignore him.

"We're not on such friendly terms that we can casually share a toast."

"I suppose that's true."

That being said, we're both talking in a much lighter tone than before.

We didn't meet up again like this to keep having tense exchanges, after all. We met up to complain together.

This man and I share a deep bond.

After me, he's spent the longest time dealing with that piece of garbage Potimas.

However, our relationship isn't easy to sum up in a word.

If Potimas is my enemy and Gülie my ally, this man lies somewhere in the middle.

In some contexts, we share a common goal, but in others, we're on opposing sides.

It's too complicated to say whether he's an ally or an enemy.

Given recent events and how they affected the vampire duo, I'd say he's leaning toward the enemy side.

But we also share a common enemy in the elves, so on that front, we can sometimes work together.

In this case, though, I can't go carelessly revealing information to him.

Potimas is definitely after the reincarnations.

If I give this man that information, I'll also have to explain reincarnations to him.

And if he learns about reincarnations, he'll definitely try to use them somehow.

The man sitting across from me will do whatever it takes to achieve his goal.

His goal of protecting humanity.

He created the Word of God religion for the sole purpose of accomplishing that goal—not out of any so-called faith.

Religion just happens to be the most efficient way to gather a lot of people.

That's why he's out to put an end to the Goddess religion, a rival religion that

happens to include a less-than-convenient truth.

It's all for the sake of protecting humanity.

If he has to kill some of those very same humans in the process, he'll do so without hesitation.

This man has no problem with sacrificing the few so that the many might live, so if he thinks reincarnations can help protect humanity, he'll gladly use up as many as he can get his hands on.

Which is why I won't be telling him a single thing about reincarnations.

Knowing him, he'll figure it out on his own soon enough.

And once he does, well, there'll be no saving any reincarnations he finds.

Yes, I'm keeping quiet on the topic of reincarnations, but I don't plan to do anything more to help them, either.

If they happen to be within my reach, then sure, I'll look after 'em in my spare time, but I have bigger fish to fry.

I'm not gonna go out of my way to save every last one of them.

I can't ignore my duty, which is to lead the demons to attack humanity, of course.

In that respect, this man is most definitely my enemy, I guess.

"So, should I take your parting words from earlier as a declaration of war?"

"Do whatever you want. Either way, the fact is that I'm the Demon Lord now."

"So the time has come at last, has it?" Dustin sighs heavily. "A crisis that threatens all humanity."

"Yep. Which is why I dunno if you should really be wasting time on the Goddess religion right now, yeah?"

Quite frankly, I don't much care what happens to the Goddess religion.

Whether people want to believe in the Goddess, worship me as a Divine Beast, or forget all of it and just pray aimlessly, it's no skin off my back.

You wanna destroy them? Feel free.

But there is a possibility that the vampire duo is gonna stay in this country.

If that happens, it'd obviously be better for them if there's no war.

Since I've looked after them for a while now, I think I'm allowed to put a little pressure on him to avoid that.

"Indeed. I will need to make preparations. After I have crushed the Goddess religion, of course."

Hoo boy. No dice, huh?

For whatever reason, he seems to be dead set on wiping out that religion no matter what.

"Ah. Gotcha. Well, good luck with that, then."

"Oh? You accepted that rather more readily than I expected."

"Yeah, 'cause I don't really care either way."

"It seems to me you might have some emotional attachment there."

I snort at that.

Why should I have any attachment to the Goddess religion?

The basic premise of their stupid creed is that if they pray hard enough, the Goddess will do something about their problems.

Send up prayers of gratitude to the Goddess, and she'll watch over you!

Give me a break.

These morons already forced the Goddess to do everything, and now they want to demand even more from her? It pisses me off.

In that respect, the Word of God religion actually has more going for it.

And the man before me is at the forefront of that.

Because he made a religion based on a firm understanding of the system, the secret behind this world.

Honestly, the claim that raising your skills and levels will let you hear the voice of God more clearly was a pretty genius idea on his part.

And spreading that word as the basis of a new religion is an even more impressive move.

Most of humanity knows about the Word of God religion now.

Even if they aren't all believers, so many people are aware of it now that it's basically common knowledge.

His ability to take a ridiculous claim like that and ingrain it so well that it becomes common knowledge is what's truly dangerous about Dustin.

Manipulating the masses.

He influences people's thoughts without their even realizing it, guiding them in whatever direction is most convenient for him.

It's not a system-based skill or any kind of external power like that. He's just naturally a masterful speaker.

Humanity's most brilliant invention is language.

And this man happens to be brilliant at exploiting it.

All he had to do was raise his voice, address the people, and guide their minds.

People gathered, drawn in by that voice, and elevated him to ever higher positions.

Just like that, Dustin gained unparalleled power.

How is that possible? It's simple.

It's because he's right.

Everything he says is overwhelmingly, undeniably right.

For humans, that is.

Because his goal is to protect humanity.

The man is so determined to protect humanity by any means, so unshakably right, that the people he wishes to protect can't help but admire him.

If anything, the Goddess religion is strange for continuing to oppose him.

They're an outlier from the rest of humanity.

From Dustin’s point of view, the time to correct that anomaly has come, nothing more.

But frankly, since I’m not a human, it doesn’t really matter to me what humans do.

Even if it is a little tragic how many of his own kind this man plans to eliminate in the process of protecting them.

“Well, you managed, didn’t you?”

“I suppose. Though it has been a long time since my heart pained me so.”

Merazophis’s words really did get through to him.

He might have been prepared to hear angry accusations, maybe even to be killed.

But I’m sure he never expected to be told that his life is trivial.

“Trivial, indeed. It seems that somewhere along the way, I’d begun to overvalue myself. Imagining that my single life might be enough to assuage their feelings was hubris of the worst degree.”

“Yeah, your life’s not worth much. No wonder they noticed that you don’t care if you die.”

This man is not afraid to die himself.

Rather, his fear is the collapse of peace among humanity.

Thinking of humanity as a whole, he feels there are some humans, like the Goddess religion followers, who can be discarded for the greater good.

And he considers himself among that disposable number.

His own life is of trivial value to him.

The life of someone who doesn’t care if they die doesn’t amount to much.

Especially someone who knows that even if they die, they’ll eventually be resurrected.

Dustin has a skill called Temperance.

Its effect is reincarnation with one’s memories intact.

Even if he dies, he'll be reborn somewhere in the world, inheriting all his memories from his previous lives.

For this man, death is not the end. It's nothing more than a single punctuation mark in his endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

And when he was arrogant enough to assume that such a brief pause was a sufficient peace offering, Merazophis shot him down.

It was pretty refreshing to witness, to be honest.

But at the same time, I felt a little bad.

"Must be rough to be criticized by one of the very people you're trying to protect."

Even if each of his lives might be trivial, when put together, the countless lives of the man called Dustin have immeasurable worth.

And they come with the equally immeasurable weight of resolution and regret.

Along with the pain of having to take the lives of humans in order to protect all of humanity.

"Nevertheless, I must do it."

Dustin's voice is full of anguish but also the determination not to stop.

His unwavering intent is to walk the path of purgatory with his own two feet.

That's why I believe this man is a force to be reckoned with.

Fit to fight with as an ally yet worthy of the highest vigilance as a foe.

"Not to change the subject, but do you know of any skills besides Immortality and your Temperance that might basically make someone immortal?" I ask casually.

Since Dustin's Temperance skill makes him immortal in his own way, I figure he might have an inkling as to White's inexplicable quasi-immortality.

"Hrm? Strictly speaking, my Temperance is by no means immortality, but… Let me think. Perhaps Potimas's Diligence would fall under that category? Since it means that he himself does not die, it may be close to immortality in a way."

I see. That makes sense.

No matter how many times I kill each new Potimas that shows up, the real deal is still safe and sound behind the barrier in the elf forest.

In the sense that he still lives even though I've seemingly killed him, Potimas could be called immortal, too.

But it's not exactly immortality, since the selves he sends after us do die, just not the real Potimas himself.

In which case, Dustin's not really immortal, either, since he dies and is then reborn.

Hmmmm.

I still can't figure out the mystery of White's immortality.

Sure, she has the Immortality skill, but Abyss Magic should've blown her away.

It doesn't make sense. How did she recover from that?

I just don't get it.

Was the White I killed some kind of copy, like what Potimas uses?

…No, that can't be it.

The only skill she has that makes anything like copies would be the Egg-Laying skill. But that makes the weakest duplicates possible.

Even someone as exceptional as White shouldn't be able to easily make a clone so strong that it could hold its own against me pretty well… At least, I don't think so.

Although it's scary that I can't say for sure.

"What makes you ask such a question?"

"Oh, just wondering," I answer evasively.

White is my biggest problem at the moment, but I don't want to let him know that.

I'm sure he'd only make things worse.

I don’t know how exactly he would do that, but it’s scary in itself.

How many unpredictable, unavoidable situations do I really need to deal with?

Can you imagine how I feel getting dragged around like this?

…The tiny part of me that thinks it’s a little bit fun is probably a vestige of “former body brain,” the Parallel Mind that fused with me.

I guess former body brain was always getting forced to do annoying jobs like descaling and stuff…

Hmm?

Parallel Mind?

Fused with me?

“Aha!”

Thud! I stand up so fast that my chair falls over.

I see. So that’s how it is.

I get it now. The reason White seems immortal.

Duh! How did it take me this long to figure it out?!

I already had a hint—in fact, I had all the information I needed to find the answer!

She uses the connection among souls to send her Parallel Minds to other bodies, encroaches on their souls, and takes over the whole operation.

Just like what happened to me.

I managed to survive without being taken over and instead wound up fusing with the Parallel Mind she sent in, but I could’ve lost completely if I let my guard down.

If the takeover succeeds, that means the invader has basically stolen the victim’s body.

In fact, their very life and existence would get stolen.

And if one of her Parallel Minds can do it, I’m sure White herself can do it,

too.

Parallel Minds, Egg-Laying, copies, Dustin, Potimas.

Put all those ingredients together, and you've got the recipe for understanding White's immortality.

In other words, White took over one of her own "clones," a baby made with Egg-Laying, to resurrect herself—a pseudo-reincarnation!

Destroying someone's body won't actually kill them if they can swap into a new body.

Since she managed to evade my soul-destroying Abyss Magic, that means as long as she has a spare body somewhere, she can ditch her current body on the spot.

It all makes sense. She must've escaped from her body right before the Abyss Magic hit.

She's not controlling a clone from her main body, like Potimas.

And she's not dying completely and being reborn, like Dustin.

She's trading into a copy of herself, so if her real body dies, the copy just becomes her new body in a perfect succession.

It basically uses the best points of both Potimas's and Dustin's quasi-immortality.

…Yeah, come on, how was I supposed to figure *that* one out all by myself?

Even with all the information in front of me, I don't know who else would put two and two together.

How did it take me this long to figure it out? More like, how did I even figure it out just now?

"Is something the matter?"

"No, it's nothing."

Dustin looks up at me in surprise, since I stood so abruptly.

But I've got no time to waste on him right now.

“Anyway, you just do whatever you want, ’kay? Because I’m certainly going to. I guess the next time we meet might be on the battlefield, huh?”

“I would like to avoid that, if at all possible.”

“Ha-ha. See ya later.”

With a short farewell, I shoot out of the tavern like I’m fleeing for my life.

I’m sure Dustin will take care of the bill. Right now, I just need to be alone and think.

I wander the streets aimlessly as my head spins.

But no matter how long I think about it, I reach only one conclusion: It’s impossible.

The question is whether I can kill White.

And the answer is no. I can’t.

With her method of immortality, I have no way of killing her.

It’s already pretty difficult to kill someone with the Immortality skill.

You have to either use Abyss Magic or attack their soul directly with a Heresy-attribute attack. Those are the only two options.

But since White has Heresy Nullification, that leaves only Abyss Magic.

The sole way to kill White would be to catch her by surprise and use Abyss Magic before she can run away.

But she’s so fast, and Abyss Magic takes a long time to prepare.

So that’s already a stretch.

The only reason I was able to pull it off before is because all kinds of conditions were working in my favor. But even then, she still got away.

I would need to catch her unaware and hit her before she can run away…but that’s impossible.

There’s no way I could prepare to invoke such a huge spell without White noticing.

It would be almost impossible to catch her by surprise.

So I’m already screwed here.

But let’s say, for argument’s sake, that I somehow manage to hit her with Abyss Magic.

That still doesn’t mean she would die.

I mean, how do I even know where her main body is?

White has the Parallel Minds skill, a skill that divides your consciousness into pieces.

All the minds that are created by that skill are equally the user’s consciousness.

You could say that every one of them is the real thing, the real White.

So what if each of them gained a body?

If I’d been taken over completely by the Parallel Mind known as the former body brain, I would’ve become a second White.

A Parallel Mind with a body of its own.

Isn’t that every bit as real as the original?

The same person, just with a different body.

It’s a paradox: a single individual that exists multiple times.

But it’s still very possible.

If White has given her Parallel Minds their own bodies, that means there are multiple Whites in existence.

For all I know, the one I’ve been keeping an eye on is just one of several.

And in order to kill just one of what might be a multiple set, I’d have to get so lucky, it’d be nothing short of a miracle. The odds are so bad.

It’s no use. I can’t kill her.

I heave a sigh.

What a monster she is.

How can I possibly kill her?

Taking her on as an enemy means nothing but risks, with no benefits to speak of.

I thought that if I figured out her secret, I could find some faint glimmer of hope, but instead it crushed the possibility of ever beating her into nothing.

Okay. I give up.

I can't kill White.

I can't kill her, so it would be foolish to make an enemy of her.

That leaves only one option going forward: I have to get her on my side for real.

If I can get a beast like that under control, she'd be the most powerful ally imaginable.

It's not gonna be easy.

Naming her doesn't seem to be letting me control her, for one thing.

I didn't just start calling her White for funsies, you know.

There's a skill in this world called Naming. If you have it, it's supposed to give you power over any person or creature you've named.

But giving her the name White doesn't seem to have had any effect.

She's probably just too strong.

I mean, I did it knowing it was a long shot at best, so the fact that it failed is no big deal.

The problem was when White tried to give the puppet taratects names.

They were already getting attached to her, so if she had named them, she might have been able to steal them away entirely.

Here I'm trying to get White on my side, and instead she almost steals some of my own forces from under my nose.

The scariest part is that, judging by her reaction, she didn't even realize she was doing it.

I have to win her over somehow, in spite of how she manipulates people

without even trying.

It’s a pretty tall order.

But I have no choice but to do it.

At any rate, my course of action is clear.

“Ugh… I’m sorry. It doesn’t look like I’ll be able to avenge you.”

I apologize quietly.

In my mind’s eye, I’m picturing the queen taratect White called “Mother.”

Not to mention the puppet taratects and the queen’s subordinates who were all felled by White’s hand.

My own kin, all of them lost.

But I can’t kill White.

So I have no choice but to accept her.

That means I have to give up on getting revenge for the queen and White’s other victims.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry…”

Please forgive me. Just like Dustin does, I had to sacrifice you for the greater good.

I’m sorry for being a terrible mother, who can’t even avenge her children.

Somewhere in town, I hear a hymn of the Goddess religion.

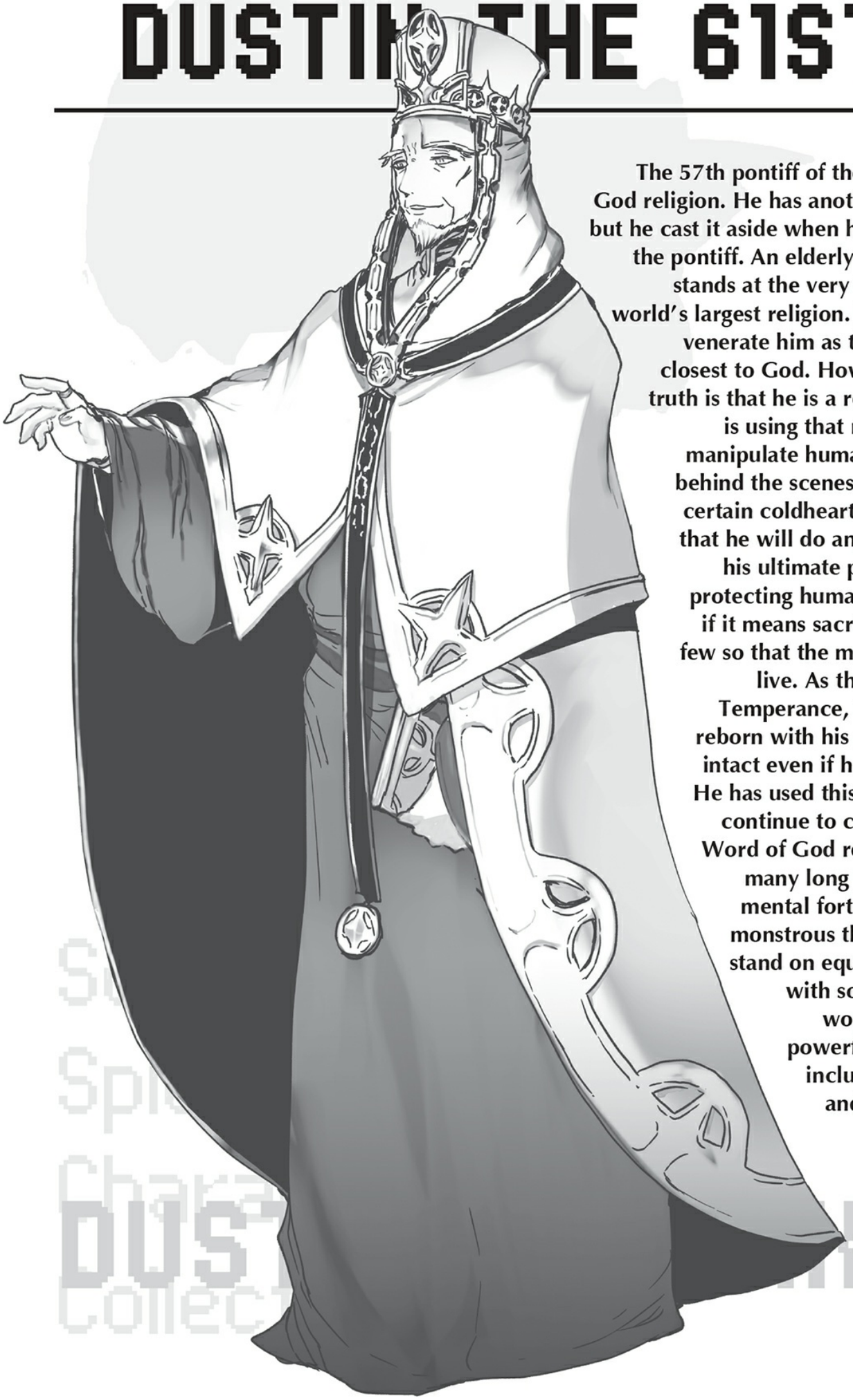
I’m not exactly a believer, but for whatever reason, I offer up a prayer.

Goddess, please let my lost kin rest in peace.

I know more than anyone how futile that wish is, but I continue to pray for it nevertheless.

Dustin LXI

DUSTIN THE 61ST



The 57th pontiff of the Word of God religion. He has another name, but he cast it aside when he became the pontiff. An elderly man who stands at the very top of the world's largest religion. Followers venerate him as the person closest to God. However, the truth is that he is a realist who is using that religion to manipulate humanity from behind the scenes. He has a certain coldheartedness, in that he will do anything for his ultimate purpose of protecting humanity, even if it means sacrificing the few so that the many might live. As the Ruler of Temperance, he will be reborn with his memories intact even if he is killed. He has used this power to continue to control the Word of God religion for many long years. His mental fortitude is so monstrous that he can stand on equal footing with some of the world's most powerful beings, including Ariel and Potimas.

THE OLD MAN MEETS AN ADMINISTRATOR

The spiders have narrowly escaped the attack of the three earth dragons.

And now, they're in the midst of a mass migration through the Lower Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

As they skitter along in droves, I walk in their midst as well.

I wonder at first where we're going, but before long, we arrive at the destination.

And there, I immediately understand the spiders' current purpose.

"Eggs…?"

Before my eyes are several enormous eggs.

And standing at the forefront to protect them are several earth wyrms.

Looking closer, I see the corpses of some spiders at the earth wyrms' feet.

I see.

The earth dragons were trying to protect these eggs.

A small group of spiders must have happened upon them while hunting, and the dragons defeated them, then set out to retaliate against the spiders' main army.

They were trying to cut off the threat at the source before any harm could come to the eggs.

How tragic, then, that all three of them were defeated instead.

It's possible that two of them were even the parents of these eggs.

But now, since those parents are gone, the eggs' only protectors are these

wyrms, far weaker than their dragon counterparts.

Generally, wyrms are not considered weak monsters, but they don't stand a chance against this powerful spider army.

Perhaps they know that as well, for the cries they let out to intimidate the spiders now sound frail and fearful to my ears.

Nevertheless, the wyrms bravely stand to protect the eggs, and the spiders charge at them mercilessly.

At this rate, the wyrms will all be killed and disappear into the spiders' stomachs along with the eggs and their contents.

Until someone arrives to prevent that future from coming to pass.

"I think this has gone far enough."

It's a man shrouded in darkness.

His body is completely covered in black armor that almost looks like a carapace.

His handsome face is dark-skinned as well, giving him the overall impression of the embodiment of the color black.

The only exception is his red eyes, which are now staring coolly at the spiders.

He looks at me for just an instant, then averts his gaze.

…Perhaps it was my imagination, but his expression almost seemed as if he'd seen something he shouldn't have.

How rude.

But who exactly is this rather impolite fellow?

Surely he is no ordinary human, since he's appeared here in the Lower Stratum of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

In fact, is he even human at all?

I attempt to Appraise him, but the result reads simply **CANNOT BE APPRAISED**.

Cannot be Appraised?

It's a similar result to when I Appraised the master, but while that great being

somehow blocked my Appraisal, here it is impossible to begin with.

This person must be on a similar level to the master, then, or perhaps something even more mysterious. That is the only possible conclusion.

Especially given the reaction of the nine spiders, who are all eyeing the man with a wariness that borders on fear.

These same spiders defeated those earth dragons with ease, but they are treating this man with the utmost caution.

He must be strong.

So strong that I doubt I could lay a scratch on him.

I didn't even sense his arrival, after all.

He must have used Teleport, but I didn't even notice.

Unbelievable.

There wasn't even the slightest hint that someone was about to teleport here.

His skills with magic must be extraordinary.

If I didn't know better, I might even suspect that he could be stronger than the master.

"Withdraw at once. Any further violence will be taken as a declaration of war against me personally."

At that, the spiders all freeze in place.

For a moment, everything is perfectly still.

Then the spiders turn around in perfect unison and flee the area at incredible speed.

Unable to keep up with their sudden acceleration, all I can do is watch them leave in shock.

Sensing a gaze on my back, I turn around to see the man in black armor, staring at me with an impossible-to-read expression.

"Why are you following those creatures?"

His voice sounds genuinely puzzled.

In fact, his bafflement is so like that of an ordinary human that the tension leaves my shoulders.

“It’s obvious, is it not? To pursue the pinnacle of magic.”

I puff up my chest.

“The pinnacle of magic. In other words, you wish to improve your magical abilities?”

“Indeed.”

That strikes me as an oversimplification, but I decide to agree instead of wasting valuable time quibbling over the details.

I am not simply seeking to improve my magic. I wish to reach the ultimate heights of what magic is capable of.

“Why are you so concerned with refining such a thing? They are a part of that which wiped out your men, you know.”

Why would I want to refine my magic?

What a ridiculous question.

“If I do not strive for the greatest heights of magic, then who will?”

It’s quite simple.

If I do not attempt to reach the pinnacle, then no one will.

That is why I must reach it. I have no other choice.

If I am humanity’s strongest mage, then I must be stronger in magic than anyone else.

Otherwise, I…

Hrm? Otherwise, what?

The man looks uncomprehending for a moment, then shakes his head as if he’s given up.

“It would be in your best interest to stay away from them.”

“I can do no such thing. There is still so much that the spiders can teach me. And I have yet to meet that great being again.”

Yes, it’s simple.

I am following the spiders to learn from them and to encounter the master of magic again.

I cannot stay away from them when I have yet to accomplish either of those goals.

“I see.”

The man does not look particularly disappointed by my refusal.

Or is it that he’s been wearing the expression of someone looking perturbed from the very beginning?

Heavens, what a terribly rude man.

“Well, then. Ahem. If you are doing this of your own free will, I will not stop you. However, could you not at least put on some clothing?”

…Ah.

That’s right. I’m completely naked.

I suppose it’s common sense for any human to react like this.

However, if I wish to reach the pinnacle of magic, I cannot let myself be held back by common sense forever!

“Hmph. You must be young yet to be disturbed by something like this.”

I am not so weak as to be embarrassed by such a paltry matter!

Look upon me!

This is how the man called Ronandt lives!

“Ah. Erm. I see. It’s quite clear that you are beyond help. In which case, could you not perhaps go from this place now?”

“Indeed! I shall take my leave!”

I must catch up to the spiders before they leave me behind for good.

Thus, I turn my back on the man in black and chase after them at once.

MEETING OF THE PARALLEL MINDS #4:

OMGÜLI-GÜLI!

“So are we gonna talk about how we went to pick up some eggs on sale only to have a final boss show up?”

“It’s not that surprising. Güli-güli is the general manager of the dragons, right? Obviously, he wasn’t gonna take it lying down when we beat three earth dragons and then went after their eggs.”

“Oh yeah, I guess the first time we met Güli-güli was right after we beat that fire dragon. That brings me back.”

“Dammit! I thought we were finally gonna get to eat a wyrm egg!”

“Right, right. We never got to eat that egg we picked up in the Upper Stratum way back when ’cause those humans set our home on fire and chased us out.”

“What d’you think happened to that egg anyway? Since our home was on fire, maybe it got boiled?”

“I’d say it probably got fried.”

“Don’t you remember how hard that shell was? It might’ve actually survived the fire and wound up hatching.”

“Whaaat? No waaay.”

“Yeah right. That thing definitely got fried.”

“Dammit! All this talk about eggs is making me wanna eat some!”

“Yeah, but that’s not gonna happen. If Güli-güli’s protecting them, we’re never gonna be able to lay a hand on those eggs.”

“Actually, since Güli-güli showed up and all, maybe we should rein it in down here for a while.”

“Mm. I guess if we keep killing off dragons and wyrms and stuff, Güli-güli might snap sooner or later.”

“Should we leave the Lower Stratum, then?”

“But if we do that, how’re we gonna feed this giant family of ours?”

“Anyone know a good hunting ground?”

“Sure we do.”

“Huh? Where?”

“C’mon, think. A place where there’s tons of prey that gives out tons of EXP, too.”

“Ooh, I gotcha.”

“So basically, you’re saying we should start taking action for real?”

“I guess our spider underlings have grown quite a bit by now.”

“That’s true. Suppose it’s time, then.”

“Okay, let’s get started.”

“Step one of our plan to wipe out humanity is a go.”

Special Chapter THE BOY HERO'S STRUGGLE

People are getting blown away before my eyes.

The sight of them flying through the air almost seems like a joke.

But of course, getting blown away like that isn't going to end painlessly for those people.

It might look like a farce, but this is still reality.

Some of them hit the ground headfirst, snapping their necks at unnatural angles and killing them instantly.

But most aren't so lucky, and their bodies fall down in a horrific state.

I've never seen a human burst open before.

The nightmarish scene continues before my eyes.

It's hell on earth.

Beyond the masses of screaming, fleeing, dying people, I see the monster that's creating this nightmare.

Forcing my shaky legs to move, I—

I wake up with a jolt.

Once I see that the scene in front of me is just the room I'm currently staying in, I breathe a sigh of relief.

It was just a dream.

I press a hand over my chest, where my heart is pounding intensely.

I have a pulse. That means I'm alive.

That in itself is a relief.

The shirt beneath my palm is soaked in sweat.

It always happens like this when I have that dream.

The dream that forces me to recall the time when I encountered the monster called the Nightmare of the Labyrinth.

It was terrifying.

I am still a child, but I've become the hero.

Which is why I was sent to participate in that battle as an observer only, so I could experience the battlefield as soon as possible.

It was a certain victory, I was told, so there wouldn't be much danger.

But in actuality, my first experience on the battlefield turned out to be a terror.

I learned for the first time how easily people can die.

When my mother gave birth to my younger brother, Schlain, the physical toll took her life. With that grief in my heart, I first learned the true weight of death.

But on that battlefield, death was everywhere I looked.

People died one after another with horrible ease.

I was so terrified that my legs were trembling, but I knew I had to face my fear.

Because I'm the hero.

I don't remember very well what happened after that.

I think I ran up to the Nightmare, only to stand there stock-still, unable to do anything.

But I'm told that my arrival distracted the Nightmare long enough to buy our people time to cast a big spell.

The spell burned the Nightmare up into nothing, and I miraculously survived.

I feel like someone protected me, but I don't really remember.

After that, all kinds of people showered me with praise.

"You really are a hero." "It's thanks to you that the Nightmare was defeated."

But I didn’t do anything.

I couldn’t.

And I still don’t know if what little I accomplished was right.

Looking out the window, I see the ruined walls around the town and the destroyed homes that still haven’t been fully rebuilt.

I played a part in creating this scene.

The people who live in this town were attacked by an army that I was allied with.

And the Nightmare I stood up against was fighting to protect this town.

Who was really in the right?

“Heya, Hero. How’s it going?”

When I return from my near-daily routine of monster hunting, I encounter a familiar face.

It’s Aurel, the girl around my age with the unusual manners.

Apparently, she’s from the Empire and is staying in this town due to complicated circumstances.

“I’m all right.”

“I have a reward for ya after all that hard work.”

Aurel hands me a fruit.

Looking around, I see men eating the same fruit.

She must have brought them as refreshments for the Empire people working on the wall.

“Thank you.”

Not wanting her kindness to go to waste, I accept the fruit and take a bite.

“There seems to be a lot of fruit in this town,” I remark, thinking about how often fruit seems to be included in meals here.

“Yeah. I guess there was this thing called a Divine Beast who liked ’em, so

they were starting to get into cultivating more of ’em, right? And it happens to be harvest time for some of them now or whatever.”

I almost spit out the fruit in my mouth.

That “Divine Beast” must be the Nightmare.

That terrifying monster…liked fruit?

It’s a little hard to imagine.

But the people in this town really did worship the Nightmare.

I know this, because the townspeople sometimes accuse me of killing their Divine Beast and throw stones at me.

Looking at them, I start to wonder who the real villains are.

The Nightmare I saw was truly the stuff of haunting dreams, almost too terrifying to be real.

But to the people of this town, it was a Divine Beast to be worshipped.

“Sir Hero! There you are!”

As I think back on the Nightmare, a voice reaches my ears.

It belongs to a man in the uniform of a Word of God soldier, running up to me as he shouts.

“What are you doing? Were you not told that today is the departure ceremony?” The soldier frowns.

Today, the Ohts and Word of God soldiers gathered in this town are having a ceremony before they advance to the next town.

I was told I should participate. However…

“I thought I gave you my answer already. I won’t be participating, and I won’t be advancing to the next town, either.”

“Please don’t say such things. It’s quite concerning.”

The man really does look anxious.

More specifically, his expression is that of an adult perplexed by an unreasonable child.

But I’ve made up my mind.

I won’t participate in this war any longer.

I can’t stop the war, but I can certainly refuse to give my support.

I want to stay in this town and help them rebuild.

I won’t simply do whatever adults tell me to anymore.

I’m going to act on my own decisions and do what I believe is right.

“I’m staying in this town, no matter what anyone says. Please pass on that message.”

“That simply won’t do.”

Since he came to fetch me himself, I’m guessing this soldier is of decent standing. But right now, his expression is one of pure distress.

I almost feel a little bit bad, but I don’t intend to change my mind.

Just as I’m about to open my mouth to reiterate my decision, I hear a distant roar.

Recognizing it as the sound of people screaming, I start running toward the source immediately.

When I arrive, I realize I’ve come to the departure ceremony that I was so adamantly refusing to attend.

Full of soldiers, the place is in total chaos.

“What happened here?!”

“Sir Hero?!” The soldier I spoke to turns to me in a panic, spit flying everywhere as he shouts like a madman. “It’s the Nightmare! A Nightmare swarm is attacking us!”

As soon as I hear the word *Nightmare*, my body shudders involuntarily.

But what does he mean by a “swarm”?

The answer soon appears before my eyes.

“It can’t be…”

As I look on in horror, a swarm of white spiders comes charging at the gate.

“Close the gates!”

Shouts ring out through the chaos.

Terrified of the countless spiders coming toward the walls, the soldiers nevertheless know what they have to do, and they jump into action.

Immediately, they close the gates that were open for the departure ceremony.

At the same time, other soldiers climb to the top of the city walls and prepare to attack the oncoming spiders.

I try to follow them, but someone grabs my shoulder.

“Sir Hero, please run!”

Turning around, I see Sir Tiva, the Empire knight who’s often with Aurel.

“It’s too dangerous here. Take shelter somewhere in town.”

“I’m going to fight, too!”

Tiva’s grip on my shoulder indicates that I don’t have a choice, but I refuse anyway.

“No.” Tiva shakes his head. “You’re still young. Much too young to die here.”

The pressure on my shoulder grows.

In his eyes, I see grim determination.

Just like that, I know without a doubt: This man was at the battlefield that day, too.

He knows firsthand how terrifying the Nightmare is.

And because of that, he also knows that we have no hope of winning this fight.

“Even so, I have to fight!”

I can’t run away now.

I don’t know how or why, but I know I need to stop the oncoming swarm of

spiders.

These aren't like the Nightmare who protected this town.

For some reason, I can sense without a doubt that they intend to bring calamity on this town and all its people.

I shake off Tiva's hand and climb up the wall.

Looking down, I see that the spider swarm is already closing in on the wall.

The soldiers are attacking with magic, arrows, and more, but to little effect.

There are simply too many of them. If one spider goes down, another simply takes its place.

How many spiders are there?

It looks like at least ten thousand to me, likely a great many more.

As far as the eye can see, the ground is covered in spiders.

The horrifying sight fills me with fear.

But behind me are the people of this town and that girl with the strange manner of speaking.

I can't run away now!

I use Holy Light Magic, the magic I learned when I became the hero.

The handful of spiders hit by the attack goes down, but a flood following them simply tramples their corpses.

I keep using the spell, but it's not fast enough.

There are too many of them.

The spiders at the forefront of the swarm soon reach the wall.

"Huh?!"

And then, without slowing down, they simply start climbing.

"G…gaaah!"

The soldiers try to fight back in a panic as the spiders close in.

The monsters in this area could never climb walls. But these spiders are

speeding up it with no problem whatsoever.

The wall might as well not even be there!

“Down! Get down now!” shouts a man who seems to be a general.

But by then, the first spiders have already reached the top of the wall, and they bear down on us like a tidal wave.

One rises up right in front of me, baring its fangs!

I quickly draw my sword and try to block the attack, but my body is simply too light to stop the spider’s charge, and I tumble backward.

“Agh…!”

Thrown off the wall, I hit the ground below.

I manage to stand up despite the pain and see soldiers fighting off the spiders that have already crossed over the wall.

The soldiers hold their shields forward and try to push the spiders back, but more and more spiders keep coming, pushing ever forward.

A thread shoots out and hits one of the shields, dragging shield and soldier alike into the swarm of spiders.

“Aaagh! Help me!”

The soldier screams as he disappears into the endless wave of spiders.

The same scene is unfolding all over the wall.

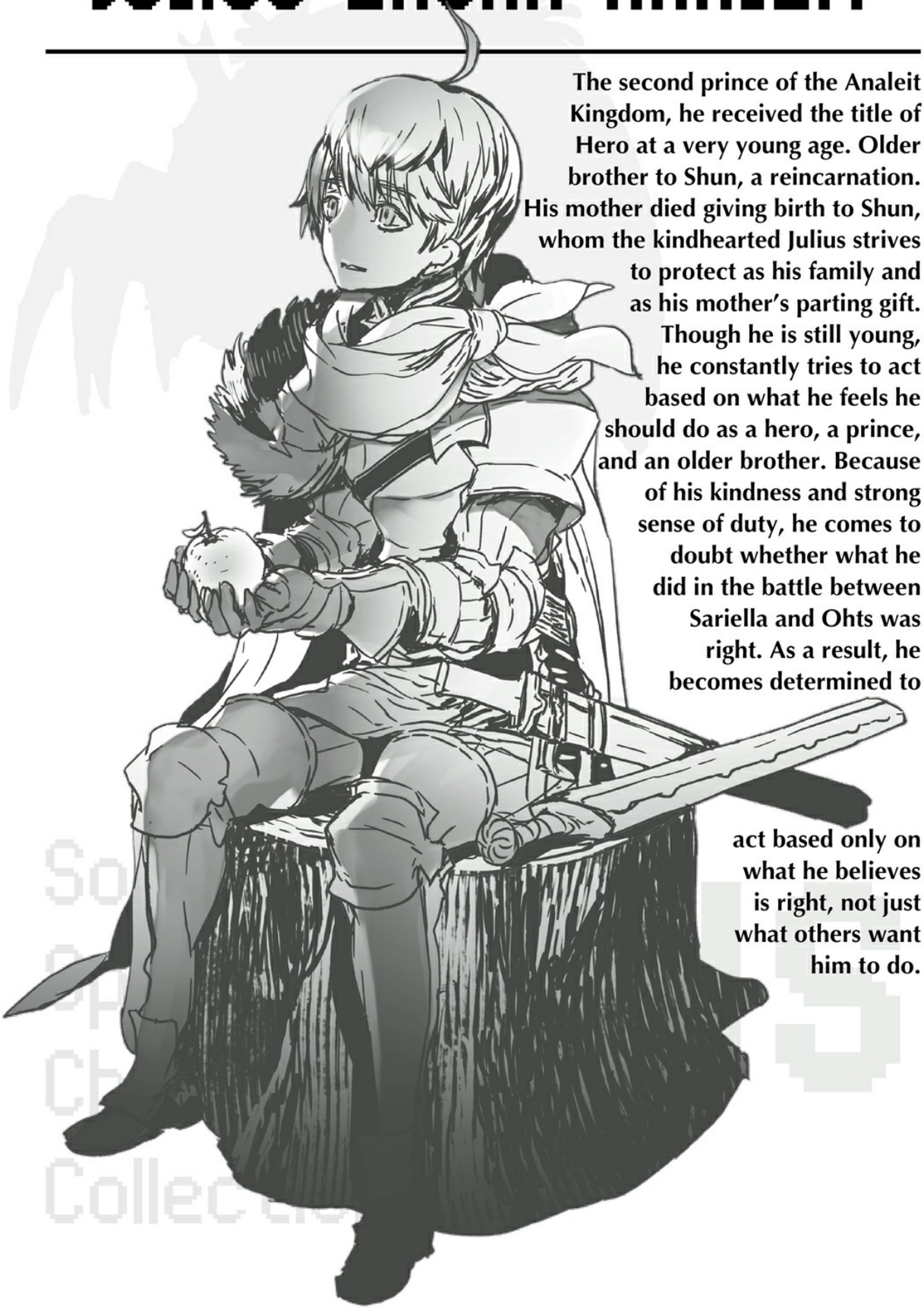
Truly, the stuff of nightmares.

But I have no time to be shocked, because the spiders are closing in on me, too.

“Aaaaah!”

All I can do is swing my sword and try to fend them off.

JULIUS ZAGAN ANALEIT



The second prince of the Analeit Kingdom, he received the title of Hero at a very young age. Older brother to Shun, a reincarnation. His mother died giving birth to Shun, whom the kindhearted Julius strives to protect as his family and as his mother's parting gift. Though he is still young, he constantly tries to act based on what he feels he should do as a hero, a prince, and an older brother. Because of his kindness and strong sense of duty, he comes to doubt whether what he did in the battle between Sariella and Ohts was right. As a result, he becomes determined to act based only on what he believes is right, not just what others want him to do.

THE OLD MAN CHALLENGES THE SPIDERS

I chase after the spiders, but they've already disappeared completely.

They must have used Large-Scale Teleport to go elsewhere before I could catch up.

I cannot help but admire the magical prowess it would take to transport such a large gathering in so short a time.

At a loss for what to do next, I suddenly remember the words the black-clad man spoke to me.

Put on some clothing, eh?

True enough, I have been naked for perhaps too long now.

I suppose I could return to the town for the time being to retrieve some clothes.

I can try to search for the spiders after that.

With that decided, I teleport back to the town.

Specifically, into the room where I had been permitted to stay.

Even I still have enough sense to recognize that appearing buck naked in public would not be ideal.

However, I hear quite the ruckus outside.

Is there a festival or something?

At any rate, I should start by putting on some clothes.

I rummage through my things.

"Ah!"

I’m still searching for clothes when I hear an exclamation behind me.

Turning around, I see Aurel staring at me.

Oh dear. I completely forgot about her.

“Old geezer! Where the hell have you been all this time?!”

“Ah, erm, well… Finding myself?”

She seems to be rather angry that I left her here for so long.

Hrm. I suppose I can’t blame her.

But when I was leading such an intense life, you cannot blame me for forgetting about a little girl or two, either.

“The hell do you have to be naked for?! Wait, now’s not the time for that! You came back just in time! A huge swarm of spiders is attacking the town! You gotta put that fancy magic of yours to use here. Go get rid of ’em for us!”

“What’s that?!”

A swarm of spiders?!

Could it be?

The same spiders I was with until not long ago?

“Just to be certain, would that swarm of spiders happen to be white?”

“Hell if I know! Just put somethin’ on and get out there, man!”

Aurel retrieves some clothes and pushes them into my hands.

And yet, it is not that simple.

If this swarm of spiders is the same one I know, do I even stand a chance of winning?

And yet, given the timing of the matter, it must surely be them.

Then, indeed, this is an impossible task.

“Come now, Aurel. We must run away!”

“Huh?!”

My bold declaration is met with a wild shout from Aurel.

“Don’t be a dumbass! All those soldiers are fighting out there right this very second! If you’re not gonna work now, what’re you even good for?! Without your magic, you’re just a useless old geezer!”

Isn’t that going a little too far?!

Hrm. But my magic isn’t nearly strong enough to stand up to those spiders.

“C’mon, please! Sir Hero… Julius is out there fighting! You gotta save him!” Aurel looks at me pleadingly, her eyes brimming with tears. “Aren’t you the strongest mage in the world? Just go out there all full of yourself and beat the crap outta those monsters like you always do! I’m begging you, please!”

Aurel’s plea fills me with consternation.

I am not the strongest mage in the world.

After all, I was soundly defeated by the master.

Surely, I cannot take on those nine spiders, each of which rivals that great being in power.

I have no choice but to run…and yet.

“You ran away?”

A voice echoes somewhere in the back of my mind.

Those are my very own words from a long time ago.

“Was that oath of ours a lie? I thought we were supposed to protect humanity together! Where did you run away to? Why?!”

My far younger self cries out deep within me.

That was when the previous sword-king vanished.

During his reign, the people of the Empire called him a god of swordsmanship.

That man was my comrade and friend.

“*With my sword and your magic, we will protect humanity*,” he once said to me.

We fought side by side, protecting the Empire from the demon invasion.

I thought we would go on fighting together forever.

I never once doubted that.

And yet, one day he suddenly disappeared.

He fled from his own duties like a coward.

From his rank as the strongest swordsman in the world.

From his role in the very future of humanity.

I felt that I had been betrayed.

And at the same time, I swore that I would never run away.

Not from my rank as the strongest mage in the world, not from the expectations of the people, and not from the future of humanity that rested squarely on my shoulders.

…Why was I so determined to reach the pinnacle of magic?

…What was the reason that I so passionately sought more power?

Ah, I remember now.

I remember why I've been striving all this time!

So I can protect the people in the stead of the former sword-king who fled from his role!

And yet, I thought to run away from peril that threatens the people because I cannot win?

Unbelievable.

I must do no such thing.

My magical prowess exists for the purpose of protecting people.

If I run away, I really will be nothing but a useless, creepy, naked old geezer.

"Do not cry, child."

I pull the clothing out of Aurel's hands and hurriedly put it on.

"Leave it to me."

I will not run away.

Not from my rank as the strongest mage in the world.

Even if that is a false, unreliable title, I must not run away from it.

Victory would be a difficult task.

But I can at least save the hero who Aurel is so worried about.

I rush outside, leaving Aurel standing there in shock.

When I arrive, the battle is in a grim state of affairs.

The soldiers have no battle formation or strategy to speak of, simply trying to fight back against the spiders that press down on them.

I doubt that formations would work against the spiders anyway, since they can move freely through three-dimensional space.

They leap over the soldiers' shields, attacking them from behind. No wonder their formations are in tatters.

"Do not think poorly of me for this, sisters, brothers."

I aim for a place where many of the spiders are gathered and use a large-scale Fire Magic spell.

I still have not mastered the art of packing more magic power into a spell.

But the spiders are naturally weak against fire, so even a basic Fire Magic spell has an impact.

If the nine ringleader spiders don't show up, I may be able to take them on after all.

"Here I go!"

I spray Fire Magic around as much as I can without catching any of the soldiers in it.

All over, spiders burn up into cinders.

Losing their numbers and their momentum, the spiders begin to be driven back by the soldiers, who have regained some fighting spirit thanks to my assistance.

Among them, I see one short-statured young man.

That must be the hero Aurel was talking about.

Goodness, such a small child should not be taking part in a battle like this by any means.

Looking past him, I see another spider bearing down on him.

The boy is unable to react in time and simply gazes up in horror at the fangs closing in on him.

Quickly, I blow the spider away with a fireball.

“You’ve worked hard, my boy. Leave the rest to me.”

No sooner do I speak to him than the boy collapses, perhaps exhausted from the physical and mental strain.

I catch him before he hits the ground.

“Master Ronandt!” Just in time, Tiva comes running up to me.

“Take care of him for me.”

I hand the boy off to Tiva, then turn to face forward.

Before my eyes, the spiders I lived alongside not long ago stand ready for a fight.

Baby Spider Beatdown

The Demon Lord, Vampy, and Mera have all gone into town.

To kill time, I'm amusing myself by remodeling the puppet spiders as usual, when suddenly, I detect a warp in space.

The telltale sign of a Teleport spell.

Someone's about to warp here.

Who? I don't even need to bother wondering.

I'd recognize that waaay-too-perfect manipulation of space anywhere.

Just as I suspected, Güli-güli appears before me.

If there's anyone else in the world who's this good at Teleport, well…let's just say I hope there isn't.

As an administrator, Güli-güli uses Teleport even more precisely than I do.

Even though I have Height of Occultism, too.

I doubt anyone else could be on this level.

"It's been a while."

The puppet spiders are visibly alarmed by Güli-güli's arrival, but I nod as calmly as I can.

"We don't have much time, so I'll cut straight to the point: Your copies are on a rampage. Please do something about it."

Come again?

Hmm? What did he just say?

My copies are on a rampage?

Wait, what? Does he mean my Parallel Minds?

“Perhaps it would be faster to show you.”

With a wave of his arm, Güli-güli creates some kind of screen floating in the air.

What kind of magic is that?!

But what’s on the screen is even more alarming than the screen itself.

It’s the town where Vampy once lived.

And a huge swarm of white spiders is attacking it.

Say whaaaaaaaat?!

“You see? If this is not your doing, I would like you to stop it.”

Huh? Whuh?

“And if this *is* your doing, I shall have no choice but to react accordingly.”

Ignoring my confusion, Güli-güli’s voice takes on a dangerous tone.

“I believe I told you before that if your actions lead to results that run counter to mine, you shall find me standing in your way. Did I not?”

Uh-oh. Am I in trouble?

I don’t think there’s any way even I can win against an administrator, right?

In which case, there’s only one correct answer.

“I’ll go stop them.”

For once, I make a firm statement out loud.

Mostly because if I didn’t, he’d probably kill me on the spot.

With that, I waste no time in starting to prepare a Teleport spell.

“You will, will you? Good.”

Güli-güli looks relieved.

I guess this was a pretty tight spot for him. If he laid a hand on me, he might very well be making an enemy of D.

Doing what he says right now is best for both of us, really.

What the hell are those Parallel Minds doing anyway?!

Are they stupid? Do they want to die? I hope so, ’cause I’m gonna kill ’em for this!

I haaate it when other people hold me back, but I never expected my own damn selves to hold me back, too!

As I rage inwardly, I notice the puppet spiders in a panic in front of me.

Oh yeah. What should I do about them?

Since they’re under orders from the Demon Lord to keep watch on me, wouldn’t leaving them here mean they’re technically shirking their duties?

The Demon Lord might get mad at them for that, even though they didn’t do anything wrong.

I guess I’d feel a little bad.

Maybe I should give them the option to at least be able to say they were watching me the whole time.

“Want to come, too?”

The puppet spiders look at one another, then nod in perfect sync.

Okay.

Then let’s go!

I teleport us behind the army of spiders.

Wouldn’t want the townspeople seeing what I look like now, after all.

Ideally, I should probably be helping the people fighting on the front lines, but I’ll just have to hope they have it under control.

What I need to deal with personally are those idiot Parallel Minds of mine.

Their spider army is so huge, you can’t even see the ground, but I don’t need to search to know where the Parallel Minds are.

They are *me*, after all.

Besides, when there are nine specific spiders who are emitting an aura totally different from the rest of the swarm, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that those are my Parallel Minds.

At any rate, I should probably shove my way in there and talk to them.

I don't wanna endanger the puppet spiders, so I'll have them hang back for now.

"Hey, dummies, what's the big idea?"

My words come easily enough for once. Maybe it's because it's my own selves I'm talking to.

"Geh?! The main body! You're onto us already?!"

One of the Parallel Minds responds to me with Telepathy.

"You wanna tell me what exactly's going on here? Güli-güli showed up to complain to me about it."

"Whaaat?"

"That Güli-güli sure acts fast."

"So fast he was gonna kill me if I didn't stop you guys! Cut it out, will ya? Seriously, what d'you think you're doing?" I make no effort to hide my annoyance.

The Parallel Minds look at one another, then turn to me like I'm the one being unreasonable.

"What d'you mean, 'what'? It's obvious we should kill all the humans."

Huh?

Excuse me?

I don't quite understand.

"You're not making sense."

"If you don't understand that, you're the one who's not making sense."

…Ahhh.

I guess I do kinda get it after all.

I mean, I guess I already knew, or I wouldn't have chased them out of my mind and into new bodies in the first place.

These guys aren't me anymore.

They're similar but not quite the same.

In other words, they're their own people.

And now these other people are becoming a huge pain in my ass.

If I don't stop them, Güli-güli's gonna kill me, so I have no qualms about crushing them.

That being said, one against nine isn't exactly ideal for me.

Huge as the rest of the spider army might be, their stats are so low compared to mine that I can honestly just ignore them.

But even without counting them, I'm still outnumbered.

And my opponents are my own clones.

That means their stats and skills should be the same as mine.

The biggest difference is probably that I'm a half-human, half-spider arachne, while these guys are still the same small spider monsters I used to be.

But there are nine of them.

If I try to fight all of them head-on, I'm not gonna be the one who comes out on top.

So instead, with no preamble whatsoever, I draw close to one of the Parallel Minds.

Then I swing the giant scythe in my hands, piercing through its head.

"Wha—?!"

"Have you lost your mind, main body?!"

You're the ones who've lost your minds!

I use the front scythe-legs of my spider half to slash at the impaled Parallel Mind.

In the meantime, finishing up the preparation of my large-scale Dark Magic spell, I unleash it on the rest of the agitated Parallel Minds.

No matter how fast they might be, they can't avoid my attack if its scale is too large to escape completely.

It hits all of them at once.

Of course, that spell isn't going to kill them.

Since they have the same stats as I do, any magic that can be invoked that quickly won't be able to finish them off.

But it'll work just fine as a preemptive attack.

I'm sure the Parallel Minds weren't expecting me to attack them out of the blue.

So, before they can stand back up, I finish off the one I stabbed with my scythe.

Even I can't do anything if my head is crushed. That's where your brain is, after all.

Without a brain, you can't think, which means you can't do anything.

Luckily for me, the main body, I have both a spider head and a human head, so as long as one is intact, I can still keep functioning.

I know that for a fact, since my human head got blown off during the fight with Potimas and I still managed to get by.

But these Parallel Minds have only the one.

Psh, these boring old spiders without a human half couldn't beat me in a hundred years!

With the head still impaled on my giant scythe, I use my spider scythes to tear this one to pieces.

One down.

Eight to go.

With one of their number taken out, the rest of them seem to fully recognize me as an enemy now.

Each of them is starting to prepare its own magic.

Seems like six of them are going to cast instantaneous spells, while the other two are charging up more powerful magic.

I'm guessing the six are going to try to pin me down with a barrage of spells so that the other two can finish me off with the big guns.

As if I'm just gonna let that happen! Divine Dragon Barrier, activate!

This is the extra-powerful form of Dragon Barrier, which dampens the power of magic.

It's the same method the Demon Lord used to render me powerless before, so these guys won't be able to use magic now.

At least, that's what I thought at first.

But then I barely manage to dodge the spells that come flying at me with no regard for the barrier at all.

Crap. This isn't gonna work.

One of the other Parallel Minds is using a Divine Dragon Barrier of its own to cancel mine out.

Black Spears come flying at me, so I dodge them or cancel them out with my

own magic.

As an arachne, I have two heads and even two hearts.

That means I can do two things at the same time.

Specifically, I can activate up to two spells at once.

But there are eight opponents.

The math of two heads against eight still doesn't work out in my favor!

I can't quite manage to dodge or counter them all, so some of the spells hit my body.

Individually, of course, the attacks don't do that much damage.

But as they say, too much straw will break the spider's back.

Judging that things will only get worse from here if nothing changes, I charge toward the two who are preparing larger-scale spells.

I take a few hits from the other six on the way, but they're not gonna be fatal wounds, so I'll have to ignore them.

Realizing I've abandoned defense in favor of attacking, one of the Parallel Minds speeds over to stand in my way.

This one must have realized that magic wasn't slowing me down, so it's planning to stop me with physical combat.

The Parallel Mind shoots thread at me, which I stop with thread of my own.

Then I swing my giant scythe down at the Parallel Mind, but it swings up its own scythes to block me.

The result: My giant scythe slices right through the Parallel Mind's body, scythes and all.

Sliced in half by a single stroke, the Parallel Mind turns to dust and disappears.

Sure, our stats might be roughly the same, but this was bound to happen.

Why? Because of Rot Attack.

Rot Attack imbues any physical attack with the Rot attribute, a powerful

attribute that controls death.

It's so strong that even when my stats were total garbage, it was able to take out a far more powerful monster in one hit.

However, that high power comes at a cost, since the Rot attribute hurts the user as well.

To put it simply, whatever body part I use Rot Attack with gets totally ruined.

When I first got this skill, I used it on one of my scythes to attack a monster. As a result, the monster turned to dust, and my scythe got destroyed.

So it's basically a self-destruct attack that harms the user in exchange for dealing a huge amount of damage to the opponent.

Because I had Rot Resistance, it only did that much damage to me, but apparently if I hadn't had that resistance, it could've killed me with one use.

Talk about a dangerous skill.

But wait!

All you have to do is use that dangerous skill through a weapon!

If I put the Rot attribute on a weapon, it won't cause any damage to my body!

And maybe because it's not a living thing, the weapon doesn't even take damage, either.

In other words, I can now use that vicious Rot Attack without any risk at all!

Sure, the Parallel Minds can use Rot Attack, too, but they're still just spiders.

That means they can't hold weapons.

If they use Rot Attack, like I said before, they'll damage themselves, too.

I can use Rot Attack as much as I want with zero risk, but they can't use it without being prepared to pay the price.

This makes a huge difference.

Since our stats are roughly the same, if I want to do big damage with a single attack, I'll have to use a really powerful move.

And most of my really powerful moves are magic-related.

Any major spell requires a decent amount of time to prepare, even when using the Height of Occultism skill I have.

Which means that if the Parallel Minds want to cause serious damage to me, they'll have to spend a while preparing a spell first.

I, on the other hand, just have to wave my Rot Attack–infused scythe, which of course doesn't take any prep time at all!

This advantage will more than make up for the difference in numbers between us!

Seven to go!

"That scythe is bad news!"

"It's Rot Attack! Don't let her get too close!"

Ugh! I knew they would figure it out.

Realizing how powerful my scythe is with Rot Attack, the other Parallel Minds quickly move to get away from me.

In the meantime, they keep flinging magic down on me like hail.

I follow hot on their heels, but our stats are the same, which means our speed is, too.

I can keep up, but I can't *catch up* to them.

At this rate, they'll just keep shooting at me as I chase after them.

Damn. This isn't looking good.

The pair who's been preparing spells this whole time is getting ready to use Abyss Magic.

Um, excuse me.

How are you gonna use soul-destroying magic against me, your main body?!

I'll die, you know?

If that hits me, I'll die!

Are you actually totally okay with that?!

But I doubt they'd listen to me if I said all that out loud.

I mean, I'm the one who started trying to kill them first.

By now, they must see me as nothing more than an enemy.

It's too late to stop them with words.

I can only rely on force now.

But how exactly?

Frankly, the situation's not looking good.

I've been using Divine Dragon Barrier and Antimagic Evil Eye to try to hinder their magic, but they're just canceling them out by using identical skills.

Same goes for Sealing Evil Eye.

I guess now we know that Evil Eyes can cancel each other out.

It's precisely because our stats and skills are the same that having more numbers puts them in a way better position.

My main advantages are my human half and the fact that it allows me to use Rot Attack with my scythe, but that doesn't matter if I can't get close to them.

Isn't there any skill I can use to stop their Abyss Magic?

Should I activate Antimagic Evil Eye in all my eyes?

Ah, wait a second. I might have ten eyes if you include my human half, but those guys have seven times eight eyes altogether!

The extra pair of eyes on my human body doesn't matter one bit when there's a boatload more on their side!

So Sealing Evil Eye won't work, either. In fact, even if they didn't cancel it out, I don't know if it would have much effect.

Sealing Evil Eye renders a skill temporarily useless, but that seal is treated as a status condition.

It won't work on a target with Status Condition Nullification.

If only I could stop them from using a skill, I would seal Abyss Magic!

…Hmm?

Prevent them from using a skill?

Wait, don't I have a way of doing literally that?

An idea hits me, so I test it out right away.

""Huh?!""

All the Parallel Minds exclaim in confusion.

As soon as I hear that, I know my experiment was a success.

And I know I've won.

My victory is now so assured that I feel silly for panicking before.

Now I could win this fight while picking my nose.

I mean, I'm not going to, but still. That's how easy this'll be.

Talk about certain victory.

You can't blame the Parallel Minds for being surprised.

After all, they can't use magic anymore.

The Abyss Magic they were preparing has been totally canceled out, too, leaving all their plans in shambles.

And I'm not naive enough or nice enough to just stand around while they're confused.

Immediately, I'm on top of them, aiming my scythe at one of their heads.

The Parallel Mind gets impaled instantly, leaving its body twitching.

Another one comes back to its senses and starts to shoot some thread at me, but nothing comes out.

"Why?!"

Drawing my giant scythe back, I swing it at another Parallel Mind.

This time, though, it manages to dodge my attack, and all of them quickly move away from me.

Still, now they're down to six.

The body I did stab turns to dust as a result of the Rot Attack.

The other Parallel Minds have managed to move out of my range, but they're milling around, clearly unsure how to attack me.

"*What did you do?*" one of them asks, as if unable to bear not knowing any longer.

But I don't answer.

I just silently ready my scythe.

What I did is simple.

I turned off my skills.

As you might know, skills can be turned on and off.

Long ago, when the earth dragon Araba realized it'd been defeated, it turned off its skills so I could finish it off.

That was the first time I realized you could turn skills on and off.

No, I guess I already figured you could do that, but I'd pretty much forgotten, since there didn't seem to be any point in doing so.

I mean, turning skills off has zero benefits.

Obviously, if you turn off a skill, you can't use it anymore.

That's it. Nothing special happens.

It doesn't make your other skills level up faster, or conserve energy, or anything like that.

Frankly, there's usually no reason to ever turn off skills.

But in this case, that little function turns out to be my ultimate saving grace.

After all, my opponents are copies of me at the end of the day.

As my Parallel Minds, their power is really my power.

All that strength, including their skills and stats, is borrowed from the real me, the main body.

So what happens if I, the main body, turn off those skills?

The answer rests with the confused Parallel Minds before me, unable to use magic or thread.

Without Height of Occultism, they can't use magic.

And turning off the Divine Thread Weaving skill deactivates their skills.

I also turned off the Evil Eye skills, their resistance skills, and most other skills, too.

Even Immortality.

If I'm killed right now, I'll be dead for good.

And the same applies to the Parallel Minds.

Really, though, they're just parts of me that happened to gain their own bodies.

If they die, they'll just return to me again.

As it stands, the three Parallel Minds I've killed have already come back to me and are yelling annoyingly inside my head.

Ideally, I could just turn off the Parallel Minds skill and be done with it, but of course it wouldn't be that easy.

I wasn't able to turn off the Parallel Minds skill, maybe because they're in their own bodies right now.

Still, that's not really a big deal.

These guys have no way of winning anymore.

They can't turn the skills back on, because it was me, the main body, who turned them off in the first place.

When all's said and done, they're copies of the original: me.

They can't override the main body's commands.

Originally, Parallel Minds is a skill that divides your consciousness into copies, none of which is any better or worse than the other.

The Parallel Minds and I are supposed to be the same exact being.

At least, that's how it used to be.

Once they absorbed Mother, my Parallel Minds changed.

From that moment on, they were no longer “me” anymore.

They’re their own separate beings who just happen to resemble me.

But I’m still in control of my own power.

Their skills and stats are all borrowed.

This bunch of fakers thinks they can go around using my power for whatever they want?

Not happening.

Giant scythe in hand, I break into a run.

The Parallel Minds scatter, flying in all directions.

I set my sights on one of them and swing my scythe.

My target dodges a few times but can’t keep it up forever against my equally matched stats; soon my scythe grazes a leg, which is enough to cut it off with ease.

With its movements hindered by the loss of one leg, the rest is in the bag.

I skewer its head, just like the Parallel Mind I killed before.

As I finish that one off, another Parallel Mind tries to attack me from behind.

Its scythe-leg comes down on the back of my human half.

But it’s no use!

The dress I made with Divine Thread Weaving catches the Parallel Mind’s scythe.

It can’t block it completely, of course, so the scythe manages to cut through and reach my skin, but it barely leaves a scratch.

Hardly any damage at all.

The Parallel Mind, clearly panicked by how little effect its attack had, tries to withdraw.

Think again, pal!

I swing my scythe around, the blade cutting through the Parallel Mind behind me.

Just like that, the Parallel Mind's body is cut in half in midair.

Four to go.

Without their skills, the Parallel Minds are just a bunch of small spider monsters with high stats.

Their only attack options are biting with their fangs or slicing with their front legs.

And without skills like Cutting Enhancement, even those don't amount to much.

They can't inflict a fatal wound on me when I have the same stats.

On top of that, I can turn their skills off whenever I want.

If they decide to self-destruct and use a Rot Attack, I can just turn off that skill, rendering their attempt into a normal physical attack.

I have nothing to fear from them.

Of the four remaining Parallel Minds, three of them attack me at once.

One goes for my human neck, one for my spider head, and the last follows shortly after the first two.

I'm sure the fourth one is going to try something once I dodge the first two attacks.

I know exactly what you guys are thinking.

Because I'm thinking the same thing.

Guess I'll do something they don't expect.

When the first one aims its scythe at my neck, I catch it with my human half's mouth.

When the second one aims its scythe at my spider head, I block it with my spider half's scythes.

The third one, surprised by this turn of events, tries to hit the brakes, so I

ruthlessly swing my scythe at it.

Unable to stop in time, the Parallel Mind's head runs straight into my scythe.

At the same time, the first attacker uses the scythe that's not in my mouth to stab at my head.

Kshhh. It goes in straight between my eyebrows.

Yeah, no waaay was I gonna be able to dodge that one.

The scythe threatens to pierce right through my skull and hit my brain, but I'm not letting that happen.

I grab the scythe with my free hand and yank it out with all my strength.

Now this poor Parallel Mind has one of its scythes trapped in my mouth and the other in my hand. There's nowhere to run.

I swing my scythe with one hand to complete the execution.

Two more to go.

But in the meantime, the one who was locked scythe to scythe with my spider body has retreated.

On top of that, it's trying to run away.

Fair enough. I guess most people would run if they realized their chances were this hopeless.

Anyone would run. Even me. In fact, it's because I would run that this one's running.

The other one who didn't attack me already tried to run, too, but it looks like the puppet spiders actually blocked that one's escape route.

Huh. Guess I'll leave them to it, then.

Which means I'm free to go after the other one.

Our stats are the same, so I won't be able to catch up to it by running.

That means it won't be able to lose me, either, but I'd rather not just play chase forever.

So I turn on a single skill.

Repellent Evil Eye, activate!

I unleash a gravity attack on the fleeing Parallel Mind.

It doesn't really do any damage, but that's not my goal anyway. I'm just trying to slow it down.

As long as extra gravity is slowing it down, I'll catch up soon enough.

Our base speed is the same, after all.

"J-just kill me! Wait, on second thought, please don't kill me!"

No, I'm definitely gonna kill you.

"Huh?! Seriously, cut it out! Why are you stopping us?! What's wrong with you, main body?! Killing everybody would make things so much easier! Plus, it's the fastest way to save this world, so isn't that the most logical course of action? Why would you get in the way of that?! It doesn't make sense!"

Like I said, you guys are the ones who don't make sense.

Seriously, why would you come to such an extreme conclusion?

The effects of absorbing Mother must've given them some seriously weird ideas.

Admittedly, I do partly understand what they're saying.

If you think about how the system works, killing tons of humans really is the fastest way to save this world.

But eradicating humans to do so is totally missing the point.

My guess is that this is something Mother wanted to do but couldn't, so they've inherited her will.

Ugh, so annoying.

For now, I just cut down the Parallel Mind who's shrieking in front of me.

The Rot attribute turns its body to dust.

At the same time, the Parallel Mind itself returns to me, shrieking all the while.

Ughhh, so loud.

Now there's a total of eight Parallel Minds clamoring around in my head.

The last remaining one is locked in an intense battle with the puppet spiders some distance away.

It's one against four, and the Parallel Mind has no skills.

Even so, it's putting up a pretty good fight.

I guess its stats are relatively high compared to the puppet spiders', huh?

If anything, the puppet spiders must be pretty strong to be holding their own against such a big stat difference.

My magical modifications have made them pretty strong.

At this point, I've more or less rebuilt from scratch the doll bodies that serve as their outer shell.

Honestly, there's not a trace left of how they originally looked.

You can barely tell they're not human anymore, and my Divine Thread Weaving skill has made their bodies stronger, too.

I've hidden four of their six arms as a sort of gimmick; they're normally stashed away inside the doll bodies, making them look that much more human.

Right now, of course, they have their hidden arms out, since they're fighting seriously and all.

They were already really strong monsters, with stats averaging over 10,000, but my modding has made them even stronger.

…Kinda weird, huh?

They're subordinates of the Demon Lord, which should make them potential enemies to me.

Why in the world am I making them stronger?

Yeah, it's a little strange.

But however strong they might be now, they still can't beat the Parallel Mind.

Its stats are the same as mine, after all.

I already know for a fact that the puppet spiders' weapons don't work on me.

So if the Parallel Mind has the same stats as I do, their weapons won't work on it, either.

Even with its skills sealed, its stats are plenty high enough to defeat the puppet spiders.

That's right! Even if I make them a little bit stronger, the puppet spiders still won't be able to beat me, so it's fine.

Yeah, let's go with that.

Anyway, I better step in before the puppet spiders get hurt.

The Parallel Mind is so busy dealing with them that I can easily attack it from behind.

KO! Winner: me!

The final Parallel Mind's body scatters into dust, and it returns to my head.

The puppet spiders must've been having a pretty tough time, because as soon as they see that, they all flop to the ground.

Good work, ladies.

With the Parallel Minds taken care of, I can turn my skills back on.

Now I just have to decide what to do with this ridiculously huge army of spiders.

Looking around, it's all spiders as far as the eye can see.

It sort of reminds me of the hellish sibling war I first saw when I was born in this world.

Pretty traumatic, to be honest.

What am I gonna do about these guys, though?

The fastest way would be to finish 'em all off with some massive Area-of-Effect Magic, but I would feel a little bit bad about that.

I mean, they were only acting on the Parallel Minds' orders. They're really just babies with no will of their own.

As I think about that, I sense something magical from the town.

From my perspective, it's fairly weak, but it seems like it's going to be on a pretty big scale.

Big enough to wipe most of them out.

Just then, a light bulb goes off in my head.

As the magic user in the town prepares a spell, I prepare one of my own.

The magic user's magic activates.

It's some massive AOE fire attack.

Wait, is that the Scorched Earth spell the earth dragon Araba used on me a long time ago?

Whoa. I didn't know there were any humans who could use the same kinda magic as an earth dragon.

Its scale and strength aren't anywhere near Araba's, but it's still damn impressive.

Hmm? Wait a sec, why does this magic user have an Appraisal icon?

Ah! I know!

That's the damn old man who burned down my home with magic in the Great Elroe Labyrinth ages ago!

Fancy running into you here!

Now I can take my revenge for the home you burned!

Oops, while I was thinking all that, the magic-using old geezer finished his spell.

Hellfire burns its way across the ground.

No big deal, though, since the spider army's not there anymore.

Right before the mage used his spell, I activated Teleport and tossed the spider army right back into the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

From the mage's point of view, it should look like his spell wiped them all out.

What are they gonna do back in the labyrinth?

Don’t ask me. That’s their problem.

Childcare?

Hey, it was the Parallel Minds who popped ’em out, not me.

Anyway, looks like this case is closed.

As for the old mage… Hmph. I guess I’ll let him off for now.

If the guy who’s supposed to have destroyed the spider army suddenly dies, it’ll look unnecessarily suspicious.

Like this whole situation isn’t already gonna raise a whole lotta questions.

But it took guts to stand up to that giant army of spiders and risk his life to shoot off that huge spell, so I’ll take that into consideration and let him live this time.

You better appreciate my incredible generosity, pal!

All right, guess we’re done here.

With that, I teleport back to where I came from along with the puppet spiders.

The Old Man Takes an Apprentice

The town wall and gates have crumbled to the ground.

Soldiers rush about, trying to fix it.

I look on, not at them but at the field beyond them.

An army of white spiders attacked this town, but someone miraculously drove them back.

And that someone was me.

At least, that's what everyone else believes.

The massive Inferno Magic spell I invoked, Scorched Earth, burned up not only the spiders inside the town but those outside its walls as well.

The wall and gates within its range were destroyed, too, but that's a small price to pay for protecting the rest of the town.

If my spell really did destroy those spiders, that is.

I stare out at the field.

It's been burned into a wasteland, with nothing else remaining.

But I know what I saw.

Beyond the flames, I saw the master, far in the distance.

A white spider, now with the upper half of a young woman.

Though her form may have changed, I would recognize that great being anywhere.

As well as the signs of the master's magic, which she activated as if timed to match my own.

No, my magic didn’t vanquish those spiders.

That master took care of it before I had the chance.

I was in a hazy state of duress as my MP ran low, so I do not know exactly what magic the master used.

But I have no doubt that she moved them out of the way of my spell.

Otherwise, there’s no way I could have won against that army of spiders, especially their nine leaders.

When I last met the master, it was as enemies, and I nearly lost my life.

But this time, it appears my life has been saved instead.

I still have so much to learn.

Why have I been striving to reach the pinnacle of magic power?

In order to be saved?

No, surely it was in order to save others.

When I was young, I had to use magic to dispel the fiery sparks that were attempting to descend on the Empire or else be burned alive.

For at the time, the desperate battle against the demons was underway.

But then the Demon Lord was replaced, and around the same time, the hero and previous sword-king both disappeared, so the war settled into an almost eerie stillness.

Perhaps it is because it has been so long since that war that I’d forgotten the fervor I once felt.

Striving for the pinnacle of magic.

That was only supposed to be the means, not the end, but somewhere along the way, it ended up becoming my main goal.

I am weak.

After my encounter with that great being, I became painfully aware of my own weakness.

And I have aged.

So many years have passed that I forgot my original goal.

If a weak old man like me strives for the pinnacle of magic, just how much strength might I gain in the process?

If I've gained strength, how much can I do for others with it?

"Oh, there he is, dammit. Hey, geezer!"

"Aurel. I am your master, you know, for all intents and purposes. Is that really any way to address me?"

"If you ask me, 'geezer' is damn well good enough for any jerk who'd leave a cute little girl like me all alone and run off to who-the-hell-knows-where."

Urgh!

I can't argue with her there!

"Oh yeah. Sir Hero wants to talk to you, geezer."

Aurel pushes forward the boy next to her.

Oh yes. I knew I recognized him from somewhere. It's the boy hero.

The one who stood bravely against that spider army despite his youth.

"Um, thank you very much for saving me before."

The boy hero bows his head deeply.

"If you wish to thank anyone, thank Aurel there. I only saved you because she came crying to me, begging me to do it."

"Wha—?!" Aurel's face turns bright red.

Is she embarrassed that I let slip how she cried, or is it something else?

The boy hero, too, fidgets bashfully at her reaction.

Ah, youth.

They're nothing more than infants, really.

"Um! You are the famous mage Master Ronandt, aren't you?"

Working up his courage, the young hero changes the subject.

"I am indeed."

“Erm, then, um… Please make me your apprentice!”

Oh?

An apprentice, eh?

I raise my eyebrows, but Aurel looks even more surprised.

“What’re you saying, guy? This geezer’s a total weirdo! If you become his apprentice, you’ll turn into a weirdo, too, y’know!”

How very rude!

Perhaps I should fire her already?

“E-even if he is a weirdo, he’s shown that he really is powerful. He defeated all those spiders, after all. I want to become stronger, too. So please help me get stronger. I’m begging you!”

Wh-why has it already been decided that I’m a weirdo?

Still, an apprentice…

“Won’t you please?”

I consider it for a moment.

I thought my goal was to reach the pinnacle of magic.

But that was only ever a means to an end.

My real goal was to help people.

But I am weak and old, with little time left.

I cannot lie to myself any longer.

Ever since my encounter with those three earth dragons, deep down, I have known.

I am not strong enough to contend against the truly powerful, and I never will be, no matter how much hellish training and effort I might undertake now.

So how can I be of the most help to people going forward?

An apprentice, eh?

“Very well, then. I shall make you my first apprentice.”

“You mean it?!”

“I do indeed.”

I doubt I shall ever reach the pinnacle of magic.

So instead, perhaps I should take on an apprentice to teach everything I know.

If that apprentice can be of help to others in the future, so much the better.

And this boy is the hero.

They say the person chosen as hero is always one of righteous heart.

From what Aurel has said, this boy is courageous and true.

If I help him to be strong, he will surely use that power for good as well.

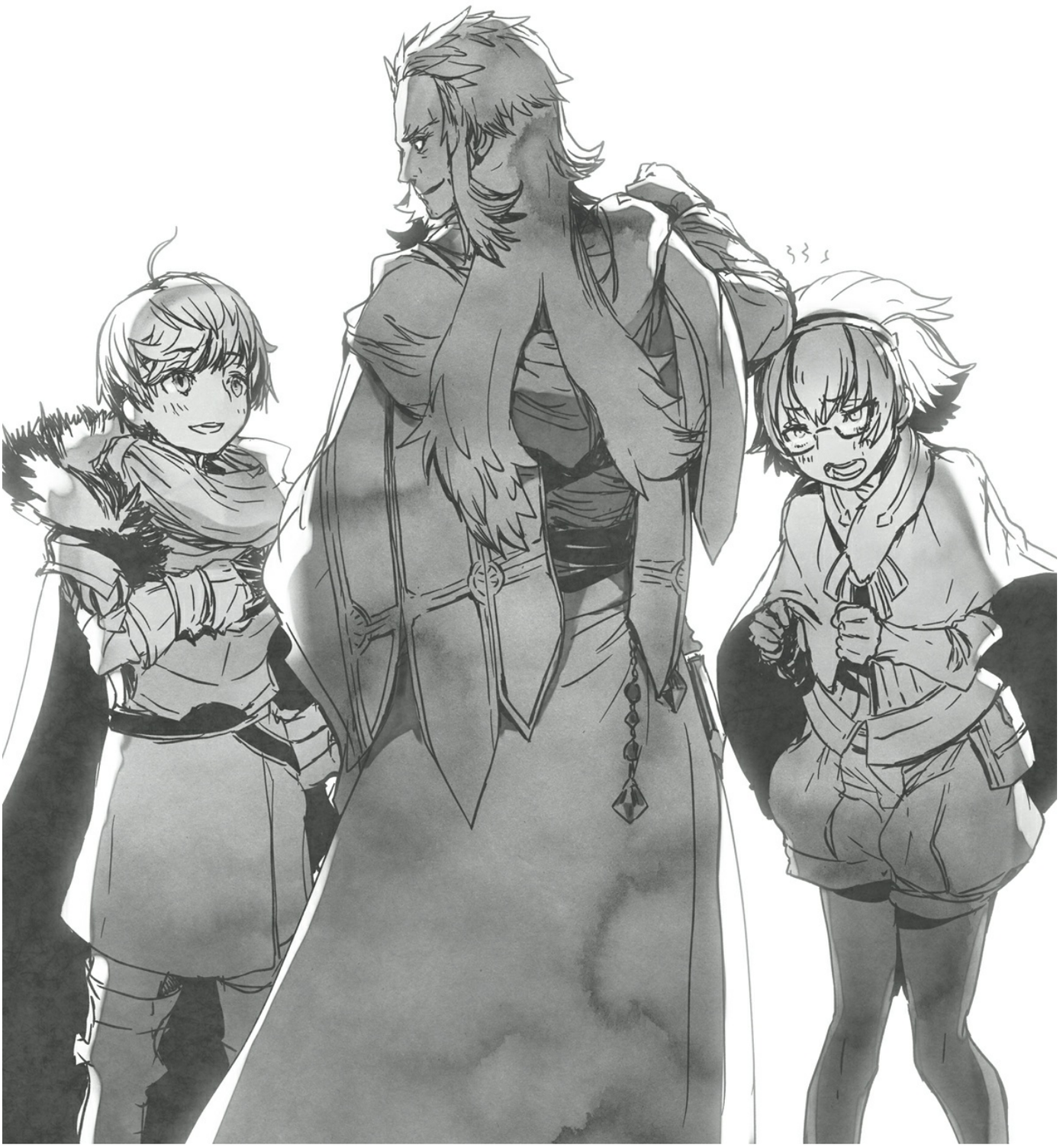
“But my training will not be easy, you know.”

“Yes, sir!”

And thus, I took on my first apprentice.

To think, I set out to become that great being’s apprentice, yet wound up becoming master to an apprentice of my own instead.

Truly, one never knows what turns one’s life will take.



THE PONTIFF'S DECISION

"I see."

After hearing my subordinate's report, I'm unable to suppress a sigh.

The first information I received via Fartalk was that the capital of Keren County in Sariella had been attacked by a swarm of spider monsters.

Our soldiers, who were in the middle of a departure ceremony before leaving to attack the next town, were caught in this attack, though they fortunately managed to fend it off.

However, they took heavy losses and will no longer be able to march on as scheduled.

This means an immense delay to our plans.

In fact, it's no longer clear whether we will be able to carry out this plan at all.

The spider army that attacked is most likely connected to Lady Ariel.

When we spoke in person, however, I didn't get the impression that she was too attached to the Goddess religion.

Which leaves only one possible culprit in my mind.

The Nightmare of the Labyrinth.

A highly unusual spider monster, which Lady Ariel insisted was not her subordinate.

That is the only other being I can think of that could do such a thing.

However, this doesn't quite seem to add up.

Lady Ariel stated that she had things "under control" with the Nightmare of

the Labyrinth.

Though she declined to share any details, I assume that means they've reached some kind of agreement.

If so, why would something like this occur?

It doesn't make sense.

However, the fact remains that it happened.

If what happened at our battle before was the work of the Nightmare of the Labyrinth, it must be supporting Sariella, acting separately from Lady Ariel.

If so, would it not be foolish to attack Sariella any further?

The elves are acting behind the scenes to create some kind of human trafficking ring.

The demons now have Lady Ariel as their Demon Lord.

There is a great deal that must be dealt with outside of Sariella.

And it might be dangerous to risk making an enemy of the mysterious power known as the Nightmare of the Labyrinth at a time like this.

"We shall reexamine our invasion of Sariella. Keren County will still be incorporated into Ohts, but let us refrain from attacking them any further."

I see in the back of my mind the image of a certain man holding a young infant as I give these orders.

Spiders of the Same Stripe

After I defeated the Parallel Minds, I teleported back to where I'd come from, but Güli-güli was still there.

"Is it done?"

I nod in response.

But he continues to sit there wordlessly, and I certainly can't start up a conversation, so the silence stretches on for ages.

The puppet spiders are totally frozen, presumably due to nervousness, which means the awkwardness only keeps deepening.

Right when so much time has passed that I'm starting to think I might die from the stress, the Demon Lord and the rest of our crew return from town.

You're late!

You only ever stay one night; why did you choose now of all times to stay two?!

How do you think I felt keeping silent for two whole nights?!

"Whoops, that was longer than planned. Sorry, sorry."

Sorry ain't good enough!

The Demon Lord smoothly ignores Güli-güli without missing a beat.

Mera and Vampy are staring at him like crazy, but since the Demon Lord is ignoring him, it looks like they don't want to be the ones to say anything, either.

The Demon Lord continues ignoring Güli-güli as she places a barrel firmly on the ground.

Ooh, a barrel.

You know what that means.

It’s gotta be booze!

Without further ado, drinking time begins.

As usual, the Demon Lord is knocking ’em back like water, and Güli-güli is keeping pace, too.

Hey, wait a sec! Why’s he drinking with us?!

Mera drinks a little bit, but mostly he just sits there looking pleased.

Over and over, his gaze keeps drifting toward Vampy, who’s once again snuck a sip of alcohol and passed out immediately.

Uhhh, what? Is this that lolicon thing I’ve heard people talk about?

Nah, I’m sure this is just a parental figure gazing fondly at his ward.

“So, what’re you doing here, Gülie?”

Aha, the Demon Lord finally brought it up!

“I had business with that thing,” Güli-güli responds coolly. “And since I was here, I thought I might pay you a visit as well.”

Wait, was he talking about me just now?

“That thing? What am I, chopped liver?”

Güli-güli looks at me, startled.

What are you so surprised about, pal?

“Ah, apparently White here starts talking when she’s drunk.”

“Is that so?”

Trying to cover his surprise, Güli-güli delicately takes another sip.

For some reason, that strikes me as so funny that I bust out laughing.

“Also, she starts laughing real easily.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

Everything's suddenly so hilarious that I start pounding Mera on the back as he's sitting next to me.

Somehow, that sends him flying into the air.

Hrm.

I thought I hit him pretty lightly, but it still sent him flying, huh?

The sight of him launching into the air like that sends me rolling around in an even bigger fit of laughter.

"Is he dead?"

"No, he appears to simply be unconscious."

The Demon Lord and Güli-güli examine Mera seriously.

C'mon, don't worry! The laws of comedy state that nobody dies from stuff like this!

"Well, I'll heal him just in case. Anyway, what'd you need with White?"

"Its copies were running wild, so I had it stop them."

As soon as she hears the word *copies*, the Demon Lord sits up with a jolt.

"So she really did have copies, huh?"

"You knew about this?"

"More or less."

Ooh.

"Wait, for reals? How'd you know that? What are you, an ESPer? Huh? Are you?"

"An ESPer? More like an ace detective! I figured it out through pure reasoning! Bow before my powers of deduction!"

"Ooooh! Clap, clap, clap."

"Bwa-ha-ha! That's right—applaud me!"

For some reason, we're kinda hitting it off right now.

"…I had wondered why your personality transformed into this, but now I think

I might understand.”

“I know, right? White might seem super-cool and quiet, but this craziness is what she’s like on the inside!”

“Craziness?! Whaddaya mean, ‘craziness’?!”

Just like that, we start arguing uproariously over pretty much nothing.

After we go on yelling like that for a while, things eventually quiet down.

“Ariel. Evidently, this creature’s copies intended to destroy all humanity.”

“Oh yeah?”

“And the reason they went on that rampage is most likely that they absorbed the queen taratect’s soul.”

“Huh! How ’bout that.”

“Ariel. Do you hate humans so much that you wish to destroy them?”

The Demon Lord takes another drink before she responds.

“Sure I do.” Finishing her glass, she launches into a rant. “Yeah, I hate them. I hate ’em so much, it drives me crazy! I hate those assholes who let Lady Sariel be their sacrifice so they can go on living their stupid lives, I hate this world that runs on Lady Sariel’s constant suffering, I hate every last bit of it!”

The glass in the Demon Lord’s hand cracks and breaks into pieces.

Ahhh.

So the Demon Lord is the reason my Parallel Minds went rogue.

I guess if the parent carries this much buried fury, it’s no wonder that would have an effect on her child, my mother.

And by absorbing Mother, my Parallel Minds inherited that, too.

Although I still think it’s pretty weak that beings who’re supposed to be copies of me would let themselves be influenced by something like that so easily.

“But that’s not what Lady Sariel wants. Which is why I’ve been holding back all this time. You feel the same way, don’t you, Gülie?”

“Indeed. I suppose I do.”

“Wow, that’s dumb.”

The Demon Lord and Güli-güli turn toward me in unison at my absentminded comment.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“That’s dumb, I said. I mean, am I wrong? It’s stupid to not do something you really wanna do just for someone else’s sake. I mean, what’s the point in not doing what you want? That kinda life’s no fun. Whatever other people might say or do, what matters most is what you yourself wanna do! Right?”

It doesn’t make sense to hold back for someone else’s sake.

I’ll happily trample all over someone else if it means I get to do what I want.

“Ha-ha.” The Demon Lord chuckles wearily. “If we could be as egotistical as White, our lives would probably be a lot easier.”

Güli-güli, on the other hand, looks thoughtful.

“I see. They are similar.”

“Huh? Who?”

“I always thought it was strange that D had taken such a liking to this creature. But after this conversation, it all makes sense. This creature’s arrogance and selfishness are just like D.”

“Objection!”

Your Honor! How can this man slander my good name by comparing me to D?!

“Which is exactly what makes it so dangerous.”

Güli-güli puts down his glass.

But before he can do anything else, a smartphone suddenly materializes before his eyes.

“You know what I’m going to say, right?”

“…Very well.”

“Good.”

After that brief exchange, the smartphone disappears.

“The hell was that?”

“Beats me.”

The Demon Lord and I look at each other and shrug.

I kinda feel like I might’ve just narrowly escaped an extremely precarious situation, but we’ll just assume that was my imagination.

“Hmph. No matter the world, no matter the era, it seems that major events are always set into motion by the selfishness of one individual.”

Güli-güli looks at me steadily.

“What do you intend to do from this point on?”

“I dunno.”

I won’t know what I’m going to do next until it happens.

“All I know is, I’m gonna do what I want. I’m not gonna let anyone else influence me into changing my goals or something stupid like that. I’ll just act based on my own pride. You can count on that much.”

I’m not like my idiot Parallel Minds, who let Mother influence them into trying to wipe out humanity.

I’m going to follow my own will and do exactly what I want to do.

There is one little problem with that, however.

What exactly is my “pride”?

I can’t go around living for no reason.

I gotta live with pride, right?

I swore that to myself after my home got burned down back in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

But since then, I’ve been so preoccupied with simply staying alive that I haven’t had a chance to decide what exactly my pride is based on.

Now, though, I don’t have to be worried about mere survival.

I've gotten strong enough that I can live more or less problem-free.

It's about time I start really living with pride.

Pride, huh…

I look at the two people in front of me.

The Demon Lord and Güli-güli.

These two have lived longer than you would believe, but they've frittered it all away on someone else.

Namely, to protect the pride of the Goddess Sariel.

My gaze keeps moving.

Next, I see Mera and Vampy, sound asleep together.

Mera, too, is the type to devote his life to someone else.

Doing something for someone else's sake…

It's a motivation I can't understand.

But it does seem to be a motivation you can be proud of.

There's no point in going on living without any pride.

But is there any point having nothing but pride and living in solitude?

The earth dragon Araba comes to mind.

Araba was incredibly strong and dignified, but its final moments were so… lonely.

Am I going to die like that someday, too?

Dying in obscurity, mourned by nobody.

…Yeah, I don't want that.

Pride for someone else's sake, huh…?

Well, I've got a couple of experts in that path right in front of me, so I'll go ahead and learn from their example.

"Please teach me well, *senpai*!"

“…What is it talking about?”

“I dunno. I never know what White is thinking.”

Their reactions are so funny, I can’t help laughing again.

I’m still not sure what exactly my pride is about, but if I keep watching these two, I feel like I might just figure it out.

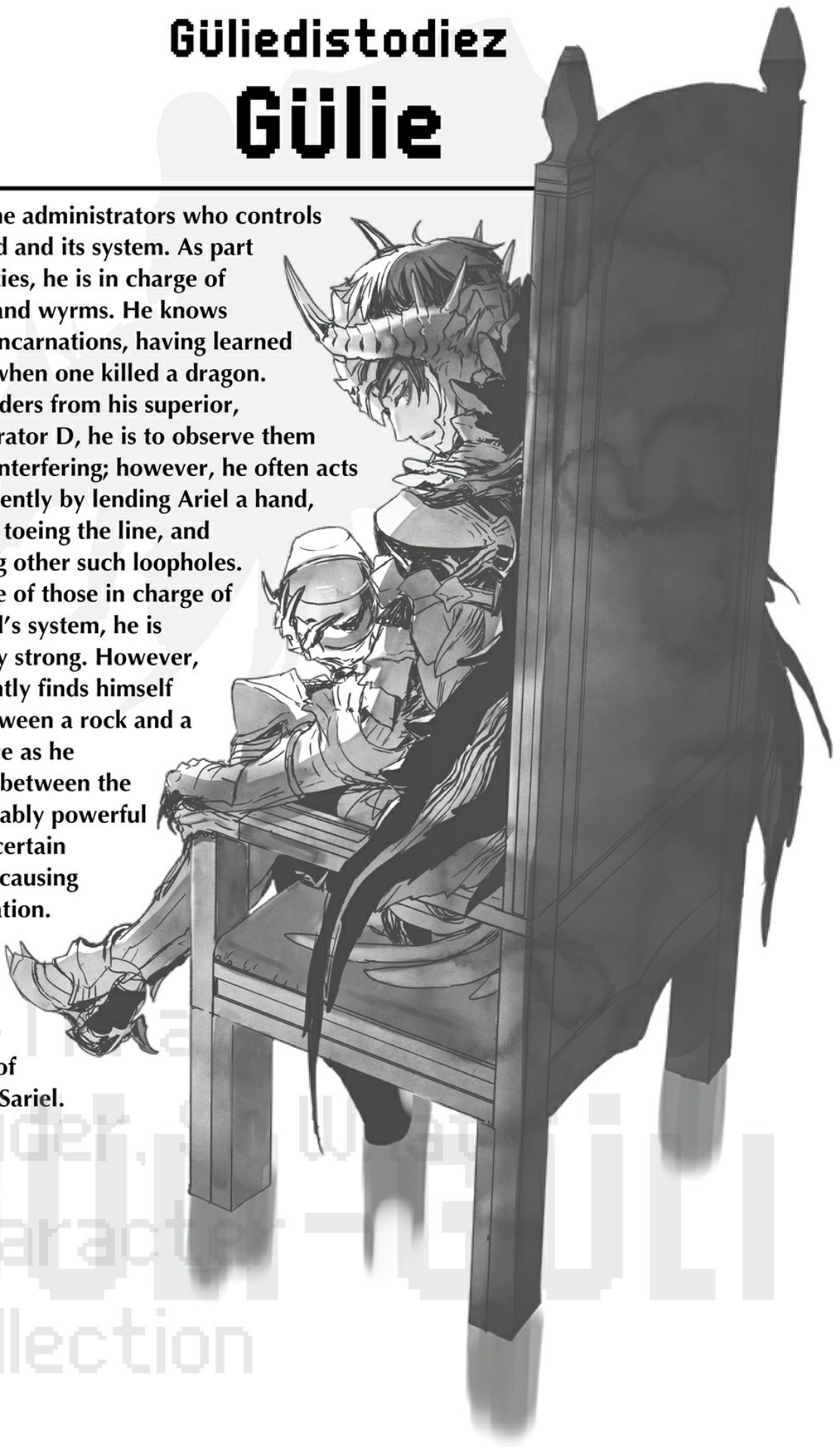
Incidentally, I woke up the next morning not remembering any of this.

Sometimes you take a drink, and sometimes the drink takes you.

Hey, that’s a pretty good saying.

Güliedistodiez

Gülie



One of the administrators who controls this world and its system. As part of his duties, he is in charge of dragons and wyrms. He knows about reincarnations, having learned of them when one killed a dragon. Under orders from his superior, Administrator D, he is to observe them without interfering; however, he often acts independently by lending Ariel a hand, narrowly toeing the line, and exploiting other such loopholes. Being one of those in charge of the world's system, he is incredibly strong. However, he currently finds himself stuck between a rock and a hard place as he balances between the unimaginably powerful D and a certain problem-causing reincarnation. He is watching over the world for the sake of Goddess Sariel.

Spider's Web
Character
Collection

Leaving Misfortune Behind

The day after we ran into the Word of God pontiff, Merazophis collapsed.

The cause: blood loss.

He fainted because I drank too much of his blood.

W-well, I couldn't help it!

For some reason, at that particular moment, I felt like I had to drink Merazophis's blood no matter what!

I drank too much?

Fine, I'm sorry!

Anyway, because of his condition and all, we ended up staying an extra night.

After that, Merazophis was back to normal, thankfully.

Calling it an apology to White for making her wait an extra day, Ariel ordered another barrel of liquor, but I'm pretty sure she just wanted to drink it herself.

As it turns out, Ariel's quite fond of drinking.

When we met back up with White, the evening wound up turning into a little party. Who was that man in black who casually joined in, though?

Since Ariel didn't complain, I assumed it was a friend of hers.

And since White wasn't saying anything, either, it felt like we shouldn't comment somehow, so I sort of let it go.

Figuring I'd get revenge for last time, I took another sip of alcohol, but of course I wound up passing out.

Next thing I knew, it was morning, and the man in black was gone.

What a mystery.

After that, we started up our journey again.

As usual, we spent days traveling through forests, mountains, and anywhere else that regular people would never pass through.

Then, at long last, we reached the capital of Sariella.

Since it's the headquarters of the Goddess religion, there are churches everywhere you look, and the whole place has a very solemn air.

But there are also plenty of lively marketplaces and stuff. You'd think that would seem out of place, but somehow it all works together in harmony. I think it's because the Goddess religion is such a normal part of life for the people here.

It sort of reminds me of when we went on a trip to Kyoto in middle school.

Then again, I got bullied the whole time, so I didn't exactly have much fun.

Our party enters a restaurant at random and eats dinner.

Then we get a room at an inn and relax for the evening.

It's the same routine every time we arrive at a town.

But this time is different.

This is our destination, and now that we've reached it, I have to come up with my answer about what we're going to do next.

Say good-bye to Ariel and White and stay in Sariella?

Or accompany them to the demon territory?

Well, I suppose there might be other options, too.

"So, wanna stay here for a few days and decide what you're gonna do next?" Ariel proposes, but I shake my head.

"No, I don't need a few days."

I've already decided my answer.

"Miss Ariel. Please take us with you to the demon territory."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ve given it a lot of thought.”

When I answer her immediately, Ariel’s gaze turns toward Merazophis.

But before she can say anything, I give him an order.

“Merazophis, come with me.”

Merazophis is my servant.

He has to do what I say.

Ariel was probably going to ask him what he wants, but that doesn’t matter.

I’m not taking no for an answer.

“Certainly, young miss.”

Sure enough, Merazophis readily agrees.

The day we encountered the pontiff of the Word of God, I told Merazophis he could go off on his own if he wanted.

He’s the one who rejected that and chose to stay with me.

So from now on, whatever happens, I’m not letting him go.

Even if he still has attachments to this country, if I say we’re leaving, then we’re leaving.

Or maybe I should say *because* he still has attachments.

Merazophis was born and raised in this country, found various things here, then lost it all.

He has to detach himself from this place, both physically and mentally.

Ultimately, Merazophis is serving my parents, not me.

He’s staying by my side and protecting me because that’s what they wanted him to do.

But that’s not good enough.

I don’t want him to stay with me for my parents’ sake.

I can’t tolerate that.

He has to stay with me for *my* sake.

I wouldn't tell him to forget about my parents, of course. Those memories are precious to him.

But I want him to put me above all that.

Merazophis is mine, after all.

I won't let anyone else have him, not even my mother and father.

That's why we can't stay in this country where he has so many memories.

We're going to leave so both of us can start over.

Leaving everything behind.

And then I'll make sure Merazophis acknowledges me as his real master.

For that to happen, I have to grow into someone befitting that role.

I want to be kind and understanding of other people's feelings, like Ariel.

I want to help people without asking anything in return, like White.

Though I hate to admit it, White really is amazing.

Even putting her stats and skills and all that aside, I think she's more than just a human on the inside.

I don't know any human being who would do this much for someone else free of charge.

She gives off a sense of unwavering conviction and pride.

I might still feel a little bit of jealousy toward her, but more than that, I'm starting to respect her.

It really wasn't just her looks that made people worship her in our previous lives.

If I improve the person I am on the inside, maybe my life will improve a little bit, too.

I remember my parents from my old life, whose only merits were their good-natured personalities.

Really, they had nothing else going for them.

But instead of feeling bad for themselves, they always seemed to be happy.

Good looks really aren't everything.

You have to be a good person on the inside, too.

That's why I'll try to improve myself as a person.

I'll use the looks I inherited from my parents in this world, and add the positive qualities I've learned from White, Ariel, and my parents in my old world, and become the perfect young lady, one worthy of being Merazophis's master.

"Merazophis, make sure you always stay with me and support me, all right?"

"Of course, young miss."

I hold out a hand, and Merazophis kneels and kisses it reverently.

"Huh? Wait a second. This *is* for the best, right? I think it is, but… Hmm? Something feels a little off here. Is she turning into a *yandere*? What? How did things end up like this?"

Ariel scratches her head and mutters to herself, but I'm just going to ignore her.

Thus, we resolve to go to the demon territory.

Part 2 REPORT ON THE NIGHTMARE OF THE LABYRINTH

After the Tragedy of Zatona, the Nightmare did not appear again for some time.

According to Sir Julius the Hero, who was in a standoff with the Nightmare until the end of the Tragedy of Zatona, the Nightmare disappeared after being hit by a large spell cast by one of the armies.

It is assumed this spell was the work of the army of the Holy Kingdom of Alleius.

At the time, it was thought that the Nightmare was killed by the spell, but considering the subsequent Defense of Keren County, it is now generally thought that the Nightmare may have survived.

The Defense of Keren County took place in year 842 of the Kingdom Calendar, the same year as the Tragedy of Zatona.

In this incident, the former capital of Keren County was attacked by an onslaught of white spider monsters.

The attack was intercepted by the Ohts Alliance Army, which was preparing to continue its invasion of Sariella.

Sir Julius the Hero, though quite young at the time, also participated in the defense, as did Elder Ronandt, the court mage of the Empire, who happened to be present at the time; with their assistance, the spider horde was successfully repelled.

However, due to the massive casualties, Ohts was forced to cancel its invasion of Sariella.

There are many theories as to where the spider swarm originated, but most

prominent is the belief that it was connected with the Nightmare.

It is generally thought that the Nightmare may have been commanding the army.

However, some scholars believe that if the Nightmare was truly leading the spider army, then the defense would not have been a success.

After this incident, white spider monsters known as the Nightmare's Vestiges, which are assumed to be the same species as those that appeared in the Defense of Keren County, emerged, but none of these sightings has been confirmed as the Nightmare itself.

In any event, the final confirmed sighting of the Nightmare was at the Tragedy of Zatona, and any subsequent sightings can be considered only speculation.

Theories abound as to whether the Nightmare died at the Tragedy of Zatona, at the Defense of Keren County, or continues to survive somewhere even today, but these, too, are nothing more than speculation, and the truth of the matter is unknown.

In conclusion, though the Nightmare's period of activity was short, it has had an enormous effect on human society.

Most notably, it reminded us all that there are some individual creatures against which no ordinary human, even an army of them, stands a chance.

The monsters considered to be legendary-class may be few in number, but their existence cannot be denied.

The only reason we humans continue to exist, in spite of the existence of monsters that it's said no number of humans could defeat, is that these monsters have no interaction with humans.

Legendary-class monsters live only in unexplored regions and places where humans dare not set foot.

It is only because they do not approach human settlements that humanity is allowed to keep living.

Personally, I believe the Nightmare showed itself before humanity to remind us of that fact.

—Agrissa Furyu,

Analeit Kingdom monster researcher

AFTERWORD

Hello, I'm Okina Baba, and I don't get any stronger if I take off my clothes.

The only people who get stronger when they remove clothes are ninjas.

If an old man takes off his clothes, he won't get any stronger.

He'll just be a weirdo!

The only place where it's acceptable to be fully nude is at home and at the bathhouse.

Everyone, please behave yourselves and don't imitate this behavior.

Anyway, this is the sixth volume.

Honestly, I'm not sure how things wound up this way myself.

That old man is seriously out of control…

But let's forget about that ridiculous geezer.

I believe this volume is a little different in nature from the previous ones.

The S chapters, which take place further in the future than the main story, don't appear this time, so all the chapters take place in the same time period.

Not only that, but instead of the usual nonstop battles, this volume focuses more on the characters' inner turmoil and relationships with others, which also makes this volume unusual.

The one thing that hasn't changed is that our protagonist still does whatever she wants! And the old man does, too.

Incidentally, one of the characters who spends time in the spotlight this time around, Merazophis, might just be the subject of one of my favorite illustrations.

As soon as the illustrator, Tsukasa Kiryu, sent me the character designs, I

actually exclaimed, “Whoa! This is totally Merazophis!”

I was impressed by how the illustration really brought out his overly serious nature.

Kiryu-sensei never fails to impress.

Anyway, I wound up liking Merazophis even more because of that, so his role has grown a lot compared to the web version.

Don’t blame me!

Finally, a few words of thanks.

Thank you to Tsukasa Kiryu, who always draws such beautiful pictures.

Those illustrations really are one of my biggest motivators.

Also, thanks to Asahiro Kakashi for continuing to draw the manga version so wonderfully.

Honestly, I can’t get over how amazing Kakashi-sensei is.

I don’t know what else to say about someone who manages to transform such a difficult source text into a super-entertaining manga.

The third volume of that manga comes out at the same time as this volume of the novels, so please do check it out.

Thanks as well to my editor Mr. K and everyone else involved in getting this book out into the world.

And thanks to everyone out there who’s picked it up.

Thank you very much.

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