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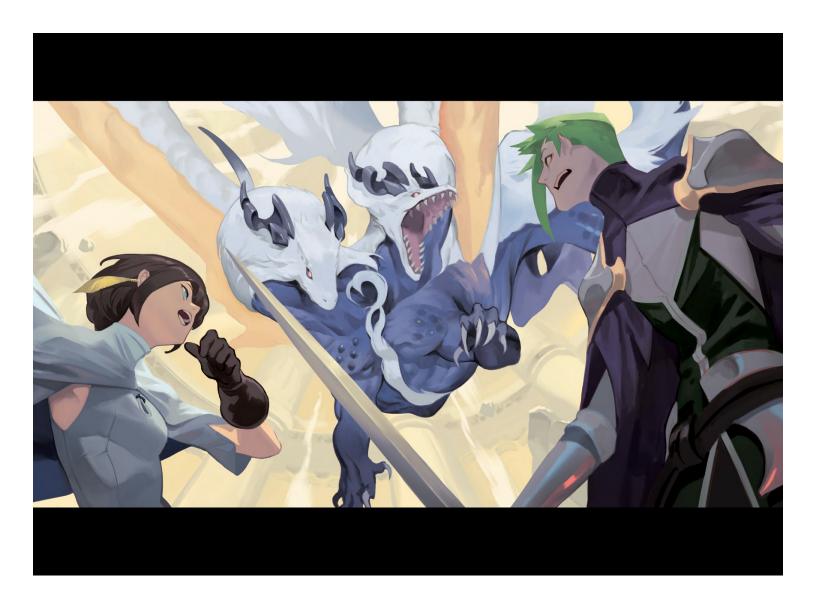
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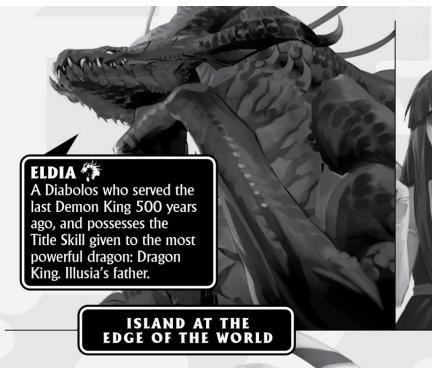
Necoco

ILLUSTRATED BY

NAJI Yanagida



Seven Seas Entertainment



ALLO

A girl from the Lithovar tribe who was sacrificed as an offering to the manticore. Resurrected by Ouroboros, then evolved in order to inhabit a human body once more.

ALPHIS

A swordswoman who acts as Lilyxila's retainer. Doesn't seem to think much of the Ouroboros's group.



The "saint" who came to meet Illusia and ask for his help to defeat the Demon King. Soft-spoken and mild-mannered.

NOAH'S FOREST



MELTIA 🚱

A swordswoman from the Royal Capital. Brought Myria along on her journey after the two met in the village.



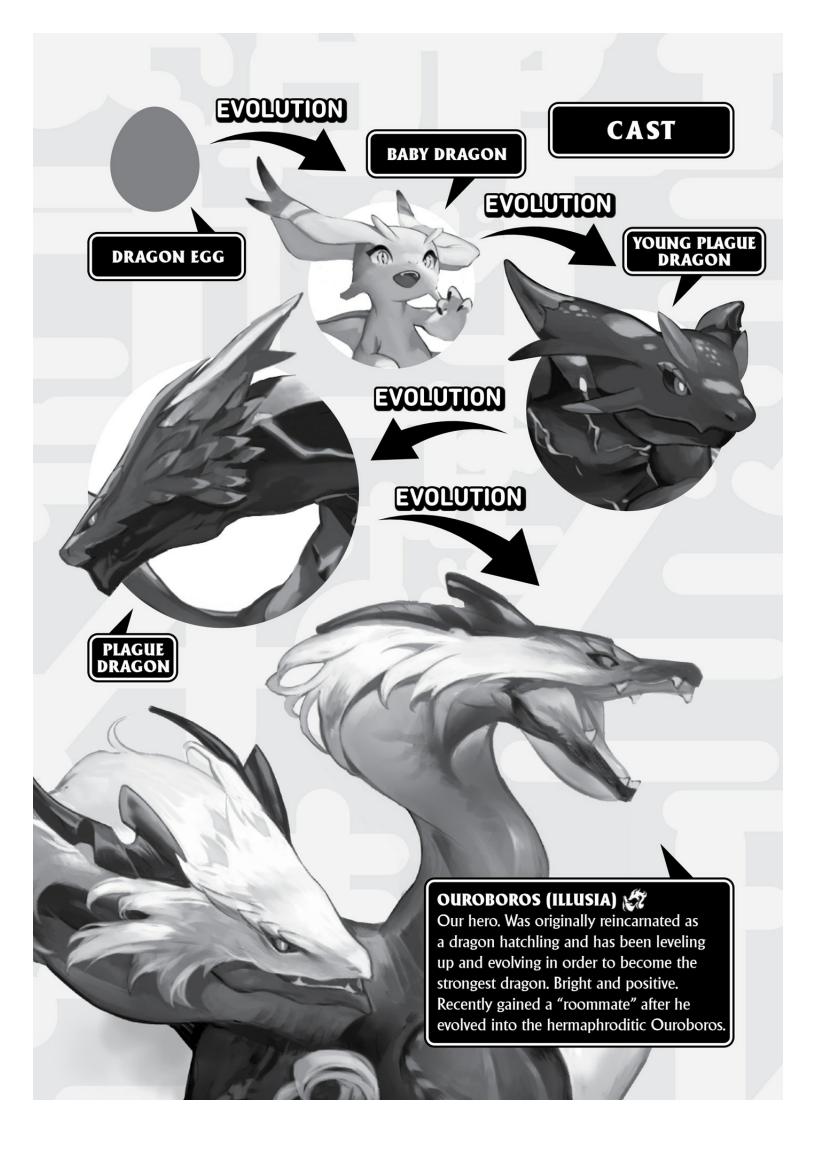
MYRIA 🏖

A kindhearted girl who named our hero. Traveling with Meltia after meeting her in the village.



BLACK LIZARD 🍣

A trusted companion of our hero. Master of poison attacks.



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THE STORY SO FAR

After
resolving the troubles
surrounding the legendary
mythical creature there, Illusia left the
Lithovar Tribe's settlement behind and flew to
the Island at the Edge of the World.

However, while this island had some rank L (for Legendary) items up for grabs, it was also crawling with powerful rank A and higher monsters Illusia had never seen before, so he couldn't let his guard down for a single moment.

Furthermore, behind a door tucked away in some ruins he found while exploring, Illusia discovered something written using hiragana characters and English letters—both alphabets used in his previous world. Although he had no clear memory of his life before becoming a dragon, he began to wonder if there was some connection here with his previous life. Intent on getting to the bottom of the matter, Illusia ventured deeper into the underground ruins, where he met a massive Diabolos Dragon named Eldia. Eldia—who held the title of Dragon King, the most powerful dragon in the world—was Illusia's father.

However, as Eldia was loyal to the Demon King and Illusia wanted to ally himself with the humans, it was impossible for the two to see eye to eye, and so Illusia left without telling his father the truth about their relationship.

During their time on the island, the saint came to visit Illusia. The Demon King had been sighted in the Royal Capital, and Saint Lilyxila had come to ask Illusia for his help in defeating him. The Demon King was currently disguised as the princess of Ardesia and was inviting adventurers to parties in the castle in order to farm them for experience points. Unfortunately, Eldia spotted the saint during her visit and immediately launched an attack.

The Dragon King title wasn't just for show, and even with the combined power of Ouroboros and the saint, the two only barely managed to escape the island. After that, Illusia and Lilyxila headed for the Royal Capital, where the Demon King was waiting.

Tensei Sitara Dragon no Tamago datta-Saikyo Igai Mezasane Volume 8
© Necoco/Naji Yanagida 2018
Originally published in Japan in 2018
by EARTH STAR Entertainment, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with
EARTH STAR Entertainment, Tokyo,
through TOHAN CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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ISBN: 978-1-63858-910-5

Printed in Canada

First Printing: November 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1: Alban Mine

Part 1

Having worked with Saint Lilyxila to defeat the Dragon King Eldia and escape the Island at the Edge of the World, I was now flying across the vast expanse of the sea alongside the Holy Dragon, Seraphim. Our destination was the city where the Demon King was said to be hiding: Alban, the royal capital of the kingdom of Ardesia.

"Groooaaa!" I called out to Lilyxila, who was perched atop Seraphim's back, trying to catch her attention. She seemed to figure out that I had something to say to her, because she looked back at me and nodded.

"Go ahead."

Since I didn't have the Telepathy skill myself, Lilyxila had to use Telepathy and read my mind when I wanted to communicate.

Hey, Lilyxila... Don't you think letting other humans see the two of us together is a bad idea?

"Ahh... Forgive me, you're quite right. Across the great ocean lies my homeland, the Holy Land of Lialum. I will stop there to rest for a short while; would you mind if we parted ways temporarily once we've sighted land? I will give you a map detailing the way to Ardesia's capital, of course."

Well, that seems reasonable. Lilyxila had said she would guarantee my safety and free passage, but that wouldn't be a simple feat. Things were sure to go badly if she brought me into her homeland without prepping anyone for my arrival.

"Before we part, I'd like to discuss our plan for defeating the Demon King. He's likely rank A...but I think his level may be a little lower than yours. If all goes well, you may not have too much trouble defeating him. But of course, this is all just conjecture."

Hmm. That's great, if it ends up being true. Could you explain your reasoning?

"The Demon King's actions seem...far-fetched. He took over a castle of humans by impersonating their princess. This allows him to safely raise his level while also hiding his true identity from me."

So he's trying to level up? I guess it was true that if he was stronger than Lilyxila and Eldia, there'd be no need for him to sneak around.

"But there are holes in this line of thought. First of all, it just seems too roundabout of a method. Perhaps there's some other advantage to doing it this way...or maybe it's just how the Demon King is?"

Yeah... There's gotta be a quicker way to kill a bunch of powerful opponents than pretending to be a human princess and summoning them to your castle.

"That being said, I've never met the Demon King, so I cannot speak for his personality. And I have too little information about the skills he possesses to be able to say anything about them at all. I'm sure he must have a skill that allows him to transform into a human, but that is all I know."

There was a surprisingly large number of monsters who knew the Human Transformation skill. In order to use it for an extended period of time, you had to find a way to counteract the skill's MP drain. But even monsters that didn't have as much MP as I did could counteract it with skills like the manticore's Nekomata or Nightmare's One Hundred Faces. With so little information, it'd be tough to nail down the Dragon King's species.

"Secondly, no matter how intelligent this Demon King may be, the fact that he's succeeded in impersonating the princess is strange. The Demon King may have an accomplice working inside the castle who is helping him keep control."

So you're saying there might be other enemies in the castle besides the Demon King? I see. Even if we could theoretically take the Demon King down without issue, we shouldn't let our guard down. With this many uncertainties at play, the idea that he could be under-leveled was nothing more than wishful thinking.

"If you succeed in defeating the Demon King, I will head to Ardesia's capital. Should things begin to get out of hand, I'd appreciate it if you could at least find a way to get him out into the open. If I can expose his monstrous form, I'll be able to act without any concern for the relations between our countries."

So if I fail to defeat him and let him escape, or retreat because I'm not strong enough and make him chase after me, you can attack the Demon King under the pretense that he's a monster who appeared in the castle and is trying to escape? That sounds like a plan... When will you be able to get to Ardesia, Saint Lilyxila?

"The longer we allow him to remain there unchecked, the more it will cost us, and the higher the Demon Lord's level will be when we do face him. I'd like to strike at him right away, but since we need to cross the border between nations, that seems ill-advised. I don't want to do anything that will attract the Demon King's attention. I'll have Seraphim make haste for the Royal Capital. If he flies like the Demon King is at his back, I'd wager he'll arrive there in two—no, three days."

At this, Seraphim's eyes narrowed slightly in disgruntlement, which Lilyxila couldn't see from her perch atop his back.

But... Three days, huh? If I flew hard, it wouldn't take me more than a day or so to get to Ardesia. If I spent the first day flying and the last one defeating the Demon King, that'd still leave the second day completely free. It might not be a bad idea to use Human Transformation to get some information in the Royal Capital in the meantime.

I might even hear some rumors about the Demon King. I wanted to get information that backed up what the saint was telling me before I faced the Demon King. Everything I knew about the current one came from her lips—I couldn't rule out the possibility that the saint might be making up the story about the Demon King in order to frame me somehow.

Suddenly, I noticed the Saint staring at me as I was deep in my thoughts.

Crap! She might've caught something I didn't want her to hear. Ballrabbits!

Yeah, ballrabbits! Before too long, my thoughts were fully occupied with the image of a tower made entirely of ballrabbits.

After a while, I began to see land on the horizon, signaling the end of our long flight. This was true land, the kind where monsters like Adams didn't roam free.

As Lilyxila had told us, this was her homeland: the Holy Land of Lialum.

Lilyxila pulled Seraphim to a halt in midair. I moved in front of them and stopped, wheeling around to face them. Lilyxila gave Allo a map detailing the way to Ardesia and its Royal Capital, and then our two groups parted ways.

HEADED FOR THE kingdom of Ardesia, flying low to avoid attracting attention. The headwind blew across my scales in a caress, and the salty scent of the ocean air reinvigorated me. As I looked behind me, I noticed that the shockwaves caused by my flight created a valley along the ocean's surface. I asked Allo, who was riding on my head, to take a look at the map and direct me along a route that would avoid land as much as possible—especially occupied land.

A couple of little detours were no problem for me. I might not have been as fast as some others of my rank, but being rank A in and of itself made me one of the fastest monsters in the world. This sort of large-scale travel reminded me for the first time in a long time that I was now an Ouroboros—a dragon outside the realm of ordinary dragons. I suddenly found myself missing the days of being a Baby Dragon, running amok in my little forest.

Allo, who was resting on my head and looking at the map, suddenly spoke up in a voice that sounded close to tears. "Um, Master Dragon...? I'm sorry, I think maybe I've gotten us lost..."

Lilyxila had given us a map along with a tool that looked like a golden balance, which was supposed to help us steer us toward our destination. But the sea was vast, and it was impossible to tell which island was which from just a single glance as we flew by. Plus, we'd taken several long detours that made it even harder to tell where we were.

Okay, then I'll fly up a little higher and take a look around. There weren't any large continents nearby, and even if someone saw me, from this distance they'd just assume I was a flying dragon instead of an actual Ouroboros. If I was noticed, I could just fly away. I'd make it to Ardesia before they heard any word of my arrival.

I shot straight up, quickly gaining altitude. The ocean's surface fell away beneath me, and I began to see islands dotting the horizon and the continent beyond them. How's that, Allo? Think you can figure it out now?

("She's nodding her head,) reported Partner, craning her neck to look at Allo where she was perched on my head.

Okay, cool. Then we should get moving. As I tilted my head downward and prepared to descend back to the ocean's surface, I noticed that Partner's head was frozen in place, staring behind us.

I turned around and saw a massive bird monster, maybe four meters long, standing on a lone rock in the distance and repeatedly thrusting its enormous beak into the sea. I figured it must be hunting for fish. It didn't seem particularly strong, so I wasn't sure why Partner was so transfixed. But then came her telepathic message:

("Mmm... Looks tasty...")

Oh, so that's what the deal is? Well, we've been flying for a while. Why don't we stop for a bite to eat?

"Graa! Graa!" Partner gave a few big nods, looking pleased. What a simpleton. But I was getting hungry too, so I didn't really mind.

It's probably rank D or C, so I should be able to take it down with a Whirlwind Slash or two once I get close enough... As I contemplated my course of action, a large whirlpool began to form on the surface of the sea, near the rock where the bird stood. My Psychic Sense skill tingled, telling me that there was something lurking in the depths of the whirlpool. The bird monster sensed something was amiss as well and took its head out of the ocean, looked up toward the sky, and tossed the fish it had caught in its beak into its throat. With its meal finished, it kicked off from the rock and flew into the air.

Then, a single blue tentacle sprung up from the whirlpool and snatched the bird out of the sky, dragging it back down and into the sea without giving it any chance to resist. I watched in stunned silence, amazed at the suddenness of the

scene. Partner, too, was watching the developments with wide eyes.

In no time at all, the bird monster was pulled beneath the waves, disappearing from sight. A few final screeches came from the center of the whirlpool as the bird monster succumbed to its fate. Then, a pale figure that was twice as big as the bird monster emerged from the vortex.

"Ooooooon..." A low roar echoed across the vast expanse of the ocean.

Wh-what the hell? What is this grotesque creature?

Kraken: Rank B monster

The king of the sea. Lures in ships and dragons with its tentacles, then devours them.

One of the three great scourges of the sea.

Sailors unfortunate enough to meet the Kraken are certain to meet their watery death.

Oho... So it even kills dragons? Scary. Partner seemed pretty surprised by the Kraken's appearance, and she stared at the strange figure with her mouth open in disbelief. Sorry, Partner. The Kraken took that plump bird for itself. I'm sure we'll find another monster of that caliber soon.

A thin line of drool dripped from Partner's open mouth.

("Now that looks tasty...")

Huh? You want to eat it? I-I mean, I won't stop you, but do you really think it looks tasty? It's got, like, six eyeballs. I'm not sure that's the kind of thing you'd want to eat. I guess it's a little late to question your eating habits, though...

As if sensing it was being contemplated for our dinner, the Kraken sank back down into the depths of the whirlpool to make its escape.

("H-hey! Go after it!")

Huh? Do you really think we'll be able to catch it? Now?

As I was considering our options, I noticed that Partner was staring at my face with a glimmer of magic gathering in her eyes. She was going to use Master's Demonic Gaze to take control of our body, wasn't she?

O-okay, fine! I'll try and get it for us, so hold your horses!

I swooped down to close the distance between me and the Kraken. But by the time I reached the whirlpool, the Kraken had already disappeared beneath the swirling vortex. *That's one fast octopus,* I thought. *Or maybe it's more like a squid...?* Whatever it was, it was gone, and I was somewhat relieved that I hadn't reached it in time.

"Graa! Graaaaaaa!!"

Partner twisted her head around, throwing a tantrum next to me. Fine, I got it! I'll try a little harder!

I flapped my wings and fired a Whirlwind Slash toward the center of the whirlpool. The slash sent a wave of ocean water spraying into the air and made a deep ripple on the ocean's surface. It was hard to tell if I'd actually hit anything or not. I squinted my eyes, trying to look deeper beneath the surface, and saw a faint blue fluid floating up from the recesses of the ocean.

Looks like my attack hit.

The next moment, a black, gaseous substance sprayed out from the ocean's surface.

I flapped my wings, sending out a gale of wind to divert the Kraken's ink. Some of it landed on the tip of my snout, and I suddenly felt a little dizzy. The ink must cause some sort of status condition.

A huge, pale tentacle shot out of the whirlpool, heading straight for me. I tried to dodge it by flying up higher, but with my brain feeling like it was rattling around inside my head, I was only partially successful.

The first tentacle only grazed my back leg, but the second and third ones managed to wrap themselves around my ankles. I felt the tentacles begin to pull with a surprising amount of force.

This thing was kidding itself if it thought it could drag me into the sea just like that, though. I flew higher, straining against the vice-like grip of the tentacles. The Kraken's body was lifted out of the sea and into the air.

"Ooonn? Ooo, oooOOooooOOnn?!"

The Kraken unraveled its tentacles from around my ankles and tried to escape back into the sea, but before it could, Partner bent down and grabbed both tentacles in her mouth and bit down hard. Now there was no escape.

I swung my paw at the Kraken, who was left exposed and unprotected in the air. A single strike with my claws sent fluid spewing out of its body and completely crushed three of its six eyes. The Kraken's body writhed and convulsed as I went in for a second strike.

My attacks coupled with Partner's fangs piercing the Kraken's tentacles were too much for it. The tentacles the Kraken had been using to anchor itself were ripped from its body, and the Kraken's massive carcass floated to the surface.

Gained 910 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 910 Experience Points.

As usual, my Divine Voice announced the Kraken's erasure from existence. Its massive, pale body floated on the surface of the water. Black ink dripped from the ends of its limbs and open maw.

Oh, right... I wonder what that status condition was? Curious, I examined the ink.

Sea King's Ink: Value B

Ink released by the Kraken, one of the three scourges of the sea. Its toxins cause Hallucination, Poison, and Sleep status effects.

Can be used as both an attack and escape mechanism. When the Kraken is attacked by a monster that preys on it, it releases concentrated ink with a unique, rich flavor to distract the monster and allow the Kraken to escape. The toxins can be neutralized by diluting the ink, allowing it to be used as a sauce or seasoning. Considered one of the seven great delicacies of the world.

Due to the Kraken's ferociousness, the ink is a remarkably rare find on the market.

So it's not just one of the three great calamities—it's one of the world's seven great delicacies too? I caught the smell of concentrated, boiled-down seafood wafting over from the black liquid seeping into the seawater.

I stuck the tip of my snout in the water. The scent was strong but kind of addictive. I stretched out my tongue to try and lap some of it up.

On top of its rich flavor, I assumed the Sleep and Poison status effects must've had an effect on me too, because my brain was quickly enveloped in a drowsy, euphoric haze. The ink, combined with the ocean's salty seawater, created quite the agreeable mix of flavors.

W-wait, this definitely isn't something I should be drinking undiluted. I shook my head and pulled back, restraining the urge to guzzle it all down. My mouth was overflowing with drool.

Endure it, me! This flavor, combined with the status effects, made this stuff incredibly addictive. If I kept drinking it, I'd be a completely useless human...or a completely useless dragon, even! I held back and looked over to Partner, who was dipping her entire face into the blackened water.

("'S good! Soooo good! Delicious!!")

Part 3

THE SUN WAS BEGINNING to rise into the sky, turning the sea at the edge of the horizon a bright vermilion. Even though this world was flat, the sun still somehow rose in the morning and set in the evening. I stopped for a while to watch the sunrise but eventually got annoyed by Treant nodding thoughtfully at the sun from where he was perched on my back. I decided to turn around and wade through the sea for a little while.

Although we took some detours to avoid crossing into occupied land and got a little lost, flying through the night allowed us to successfully reach our destination—the waters surrounding the kingdom of Ardesia—in less than a full day.

From this point onward, we couldn't risk being discovered. Instead of flying, I bobbed along on the ocean's surface, just to be safe.

My gaze turned toward Ardesia, out in the distance ahead of me. I could see three massive mountains along the coastline. They were mostly barren and almost entirely covered in soil, with no trees or shrubbery on their peaks. Although neither Allo nor I could read the text on the map very well, Lilyxila had explained some aspects of it and drawn out several routes before we parted ways, so we had an idea of what to expect as far as Ardesia's landscape was concerned.

What lay before us was Alban Mine, one of the three great labyrinths of Ardesia. Alban Mine was also called Mithril Mine, for the magical silver ore that was extracted there, among other rare and precious minerals. This mine was said to have been the key to the kingdom of Ardesia becoming the largest nation in the world. However, in the present day, all the relatively safe parts of the mine had been completely cleaned out. Only the boldest of adventurers dared to explore deeper into the mine and risk coming face-to-face with the monsters that lurked within.

Alban Mine wasn't far from its namesake: the royal capital of Ardesia, Alban. With the way the mine put Ardesia on the map, it made sense that it had taken its name from the capital.

Lilyxila had suggested this mine as a good place for me to hide, as it was mostly inaccessible yet close to the capital, and I'd need a place to rest for more than half of the day in my dragon form after venturing out as a human. She had mentioned that there were some unusually nasty monsters deep inside the mine, but because the mine's unique environment made it the only place they could live in, there was no danger of them coming to the surface. And if they did, Lilyxila assured us, we'd be able to escape them with ease. "I'm sure you and your friends will have no issues," she'd said.

Lilyxila had been shocked by Eldia's power on the Island at the Edge of the World, so I figured the monsters in Alban Mine—so close to a human settlement—were probably no stronger than Adam at best. They could be a major threat to humans, but I doubted they'd be much of one to me.

It was going to take three days total for Lilyxila to get to Ardesia. We'd spent one of those days traveling, but I still had plenty of time to spare. For the second day, I wanted to secure a safe place to wait in Alban Mine and then head into the city of Alban in human form to gather information. I planned to bring Allo and Nightmare along; Nightmare could use its One Hundred Faces skill to reduce the MP cost of my Human Transformation skill, so it was useful to take with me.

Wait... Does that mean Treant is the only one who's staying back? Is that going to be okay...?

Well, whatever. I'd worry about that later. First, I needed to get to the mine and heal up from that long flight. And I couldn't use Human Transformation for long periods of time, so I wanted to find the shortest route to Alban I could. I had to plan out my schedule carefully.

On the third day, as soon as Lilyxila arrived, I'd be using the information I

learned on the second day to storm the royal castle and defeat the Demon King masquerading as the Ardesian princess. Even if I couldn't successfully reach the Demon King, if I revealed myself, I knew Lilyxila would come to my aid. If the Demon King was using Human Transformation, his HP, attack power, and defense would be reduced by half. I doubt the Demon King is so powerful that he'd be able to take me down in that state. Revealing my true form seems like the best bet.

Because of how quietly the Demon King was choosing to operate, I could assume that his stats weren't particularly exceptional. The Demon King wasn't openly attacking humans, and he wasn't going after the Beast King or the saint either. He'd be up against the saint, who had already subjugated the Beast King, and me, who'd defeated the hero and taken his power for my own. We were working together, knew his whereabouts, and were planning to launch an attack on him. I only had a vague understanding of the larger-scale conflict here, but even I could see that the Demon King was behind the curve.

He was luring humans in one by one because he had no other choice. He might've been capable of grandiose gestures, like taking over a country by impersonating its princess, but he apparently couldn't fight on the same level as his peers. He had to be a coward by nature.

And because of his cowardice, he can't raise his level or respond adequately to the saint's thorough and hyper-efficient moves. There's no way the Demon King can come out on top against me, Lilyxila, and the Beast King. Lilyxila is definitely coming here to win.

I landed near the mine, keeping a watchful eye on my surroundings. The beach was littered with small mounds of black sand. I assumed it was waste from the mineral refinement process, discarded haphazardly along the coast.

I dropped Allo and the others off, then shook my whole body to rid myself of the seawater that clung to my scales. I could see a bunch of different holes leading into the massive mine. There were broken mine carts and tracks all over the place, but there was no way *all* of them were man-made mining tunnels. The sheer number of entrances struck me as odd, and some of them were so big that even *I* could fit through them.

Well...first things first. I need to rest, plan my next move, and see if there's a safe spot for Treant to lay low while we're gone.

("And after that, let's get some food.") Partner said, bringing her face close to mine.

Riiight... Hopefully there's something we can eat around here. You ate plenty of squid and weird fish while we were out on the ocean. Just be patient for a bit.

Something else occurred to me. Y'know, when we go to the capital, we might be able to eat all kinds of delicious food. Even if we stuff ourselves to our heart's content while we're in human form, you'll be hungry again once we turn back into a dragon. I doubt it'll taste anything like the food we've been eating until now, but...at the very least, you might be able to try out some new food, right?

Partner's eyes lit up at my vague bribery.

("W-well, I guess I can endure it for a little while, but...")

Ahh... Wait, my bad. I'll be going there in human form, so I won't have any money to get food. And we won't have a lot of time to dilly-dally, so... I'm sorry. That was just a passing thought.

Partner's eyes flashed. ("Master's Demonic Gaze.")

She took control of my paw in an instant and unleashed a fierce uppercut to my jaw, breaking several of my fangs and sending blood spattering through the air.

Part 4

ALBAN MINE WAS FILLED with numerous tunnels, ranging from mine shafts to monster nests. The dozens of holes that dotted the otherwise bald mountains gave them a somewhat rugged appearance. There were bridges connecting the tunnel entrances and stairs carved into the surface of the mountains, but they all appeared quite old; a lot of the scaffolding looked damaged beyond repair.

My first order of business was to survey Alban Mine and figure out whether it would work as a home base while we were in Ardesia. I needed to know if it was safe for Treant to wait for us here and if I could come back here once my MP was depleted by the Human Transformation skill without any danger. In order to know that, I needed to figure out just how strong the strongest monsters in the mine were.

There were other reasons to scope out the monsters in the mine too...

("Food! Food!")

The main one being that I wanted to pacify Partner by giving her something tasty to eat before I was stuck in my human form for a while.

I doubt there are very many monsters in this mine that you'd enjoy eating though, Partner.

("Why not? There are some strong ones in here, right?")

Well, according to Lilyxila. But this mine is right by the royal capital. Even if they don't go outside because they need to be in the mines to survive, I doubt there are any high-ranking monsters around.

("Then...how about a tasty one?")

That leap in logic was too drastic for me to follow. Partner... The strong monsters didn't settle here because they thought there'd be tasty monsters to eat. Only you would decide to settle in a dangerous area permanently because

of the meal prospects.

I walked around the mine for a while with Allo and the others, until we came across a massive crack in the ground. I peeked my face into the crack. There seemed to be a cavern down there that was wide enough for even me to move around comfortably.

When I used my Psychic Sense to poke around more, I could sense the faint presence of a demon. I didn't know what it was, but I could see a dim light coming up from deep underground.

Hmm. If I'm going to try and get down there, this might be the best place to do it... I'd like to believe there's something tasty hiding out down there, if not delicious. Please, big bad mine! Make Partner's taste buds sing!

The cavern inside the mine had a pretty steep slope, but it wasn't impossible to walk on. The height inside was perfect. Even when I stretched out my neck, the top of my head only just brushed against the ceiling. It was wide enough for two Ouroboros to walk down it side by side.

We descended into Alban Mine with me in front and Allo and the others following behind. When I reached the end of the tunnel, I quickly figured out the true source of the light. The earthen walls inside the cavern were hardened and crystallizing in some spots, where they emanated a faint bluish-white glow. The light I'd seen from the outside was probably from the clusters of luminous crystals.

My vision was just fine in the dark, but there was nothing better than having a bit of light. Besides, the crystals were quite beautiful. I stepped forward to take a closer look.

Dragoness Magic Crystals: Value B-

Formed from the heat of a magical flame emitted by a high-ranking dragon.

The magic of the flames contained in the crystals gives off a continuous blue

light that illuminates cavern depths.

Highly resistant to fire and fetch a high price due to their beauty.

B—, *huh?* Not bad. I'd assumed all the rare minerals in the shallower parts of the mine would have been cleared out, but it looked like there were still some left. Or maybe there'd been a fissure in the ground more recently? If we dug them out and took them with us, we might not have to worry about money once we got to the royal capital. Not to mention, the fastest way to get information from people was by waving a bit of cash under their nose.

I was staring at the dragoness crystals and admiring their luster when, out of the blue, Partner sank her fangs into the dirt wall and ripped out a hunk of crystal. As I tried to figure out what she was doing, Partner jerked her head upward, then crunched down on the crystal in her mouth with her mighty fangs and began to chew. As soon as she got a good taste, though, she spat it out with a "Ptoo!"

("Seriously...?")

What made you think it'd be tasty in the first place?! Now what're we gonna do? You tried to eat a hunk of dragon crystal... We might've been able to sell that for a decent chunk of change, you know!

("You eating something in the capital isn't going to make me feel any better.)

Were you really holding out hope that what I said would come true? You haven't looked at me since you spat it out. Are you still pouting...? You healed me with Hi-Rest after that uppercut you gave me earlier, so I thought you weren't that mad, but you're seriously still pouting? Look, I'm sorry, Partner, okay? I'll tell you all about my adventures in the human world later.

("Stories about the human world can't fill my stomach.")

Then I'll buy enough food that you can taste it too.

"Shiii! Shhhiiii!" Nightmare hissed from behind me, joining Partner in her

protest.

Aw, c'mon...! It can barely tell what's going on, but it's still trying to score points with Partner?!

But Partner seemed uninterested in Nightmare's appeals. She was sniffing around, trying to see what other smells were nearby. I wonder if her Psychic Sense picks up the scent of food better than mine because she's more of a foodie?

("All I smell is rust.")

Oof... Guess this mine's a bust, then. Partner, I'll try to get some food while I'm in the capital, but don't get your hopes up in case I don't find anything, okay?

Okay?

("Hm? That scent... Humans?")

What? I stopped and lifted my snout, sniffing the air frantically. If there were still humans mining here, my plan to use this place as our base was toast. I sniffed around for ten seconds or so, but all I could smell was dirt. I couldn't detect the rust smell Partner mentioned either.

("...Hunh.")

Partner shook her head from side to side, looking dumbfounded. Weird. We're two heads from the same body, so how can our noses be so different? I sniffed again, my chin on the ground, nose flaring with effort.

I don't get it. What did humans even smell like, anyway? I'd never really registered a distinctly human scent on anyone. I dunno, maybe it was because I was a former human, so I didn't rely on my sense of smell that much?

I turned my head the other way to try sniffing in the other direction and saw Allo with her hand clasped over her mouth, trying to muffle her laughter. When our eyes met, she wordlessly collected herself and stood up straight.

H-hey, you ain't fooling anyone like that! Did that really make me look that silly?!

Allo quickly pointed at Treant, who was standing next to her. "B-but... T-Treant was laughing too..." she stuttered.

I looked up at Treant. In response to Allo's heartless snitching, it quietly turned its face to the dirt wall behind it, hiding its expression with minimal effort. Okay, I guess I'll leave the sniffing duties to Partner, then. I'm not used to this kind of... Hm?

My Psychic Sense picked up the presence of some kind of small demon in the vicinity. Partner seemed to notice it as well and stretched her neck out, eyes blazing with excitement.

At the far end of the tunnel, sliding along the sloped ground, was a strange figure. It looked almost like a silvery puddle of water, about the size of a human. Inside the grayish-silver puddle was what looked like an artificial organ made of steel, which was beating rhythmically.

Uh, that's definitely not something we should be eating! Is it a living thing, or some kind of device from an ancient civilization?!

Magiatite Heart: Rank B- Monster

A cluster of powerful magic metal (magiatite) which has gained sentience over the span of thousands of years.

Magiatite is usually found inside the veins of powerful monsters that slumber deep underground, making it extremely difficult to find and excavate. However, because magiatite hearts have a will of their own, they can sometimes be found in other areas.

The magiatite heart's magic lowers the melting point of the magiatite around it and generates heat to liquefy it, thus allowing it to be manipulated. Although its molten body is exceedingly valuable, the magiatite heart's rapidly expanding and contracting attacks are unparalleled in power. There is no end to the number of adventurers who have sought its riches only to

become its victims instead.

Whoa... That's awesome. That was a pretty rare monster, right? A rank B—definitely wasn't something a human could handle on their own—aside from the hero and the saint, I supposed. But if there were monsters this strong hanging around, setting up camp here might be a bit of an issue...

By the way, what's magiatite?

Magiatite: Value A

A magical metal formed inside veins of magical energy deep beneath the planet's surface.

Used to forge legendary weapons.

Because of its vast magical power, alchemists have suggested that it could be used as an energy source for magical tools or golems, but this theory has not been confirmed due to the metal's rarity.

Wh-whoaaaa! It's got an A value?! Let's hunt it down! If we can sell it, we'll have more money than we can spend in a day! Man, I'm all hyped up now!

There is a legend from ancient times stating that the king of a small country fell ill with an incurable disease. All hope seemed lost until one of the court jesters gave him a piece of magiatite to ingest. He was cured and lived to be one hundred and twenty years old.

Th-that's incredible! This metal's gotta be priceless!

However, there have now been a total of five past rulers who have suffered and died for believing in this old wives' tale.

Oh... Right. No, yeah, let's not get ahead of ourselves here. But...it's still worth a fortune, right?

As I fretted, Partner stared at the magiatite heart with dead eyes.

("Looks gross...")

Part 5

THE GRAYISH-SILVER CORE, submerged in the pool of molten metal, changed angles and vibrated slightly. The movement seemed as alive as a human eyeball.

As soon as the vibrations in the core stopped, the magiatite heart began to move. It slid across the floor of the cave like it was water—much faster than I would've thought was possible with its strangely shaped body—and headed straight for me.

I had Allo (B+), Treant (C+), and Nightmare (C+) with me. They weren't at very high levels yet, but I was pretty sure they were strong enough to deal with a B—magiatite heart without me. It was sure to be an easy victory.

But the magiatite heart didn't get very close before it quickly moved to the edge of the cave.

Huh? I thought this thing was tough. It's just gonna run away?

As soon as I thought this, a part of the magiatite heart's body lifted up and shot out a gray-silver mass of metal. I tried to bat it aside with my paw, but it stuck to the surface of my skin, scorching the scales and sending out peals of smoke. It was blisteringly hot.

So the heat from its magic core is what melts the hard metal and allows it to move? Maybe I underestimated this monster a bit. This thing is going to mess me up if I touch it directly.

I bent down and arched my body, then flapped my wings and unleashed a Whirlwind Slash. The slash swept over the magiatite heart's body and pierced the ground beyond it.

This thing isn't going to be easy to catch, is it?

As I stopped to think, the magiatite heart's core created a long whip of

molten metal and slung it at my feet.

Tch! That singed my toes! I've got burn marks all over my scales too. I should get a closer look at this thing's stats...

Species: Magiatite Heart

Status: Normal

Lv: 52/70

HP: 96/112

MP: 373/410

Attack: 121

Defense: 456

Magic: 332

Agility: 390

Rank: B-

Special Skills:

Magiatite: Lv —

Poison Belt: Lv 7

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 6

Grecian Language: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv MAX

Magic Resistance: Lv MAX

Debuff Immunity: Lv —

Normal Skills:

Magic Metal Creation: Lv 7 Liquid: Lv 7 Corona: Lv 6 Transform: Lv 6 Telepathy: Lv 5 Fireball: Lv 8 Clay: Lv 5 Clay Gun: Lv 5 Regenerate: Lv 6 Metal Breath: Lv 4 Shock Absorption: Lv 5 Evade: Lv 4 Double Poison: Lv 7 **Human Transformation: Lv 1** Title Skills: Final Evolution: Lv — Sage of Steel: Lv — Coward: Lv — Rare Monster: Lv — Ancient Being: Lv —

Whoa... What a crazy status screen!

That being said, the magiatite heart didn't have enough attack potential to take me down. At worst, it could give me a couple of nasty burns. But thanks to

its Shock Absorption and Evade skills, my attacks weren't going to do a whole lot of damage. If I wanted to take this thing down, I needed to make it stop moving long enough to land a direct hit.

But it seemed pretty smart too... Not only did it have Telepathy, it also had the Grecian Language skill. If I could find a way to communicate with it, it might give us some more information about the mine. It also had the Coward title skill. That made me think it only attacked us because it wanted to get past us and escape outside instead of venturing further into the cave.

Okay, new strategy. I needed someone to stay back and defend Treant, and I was sure a monster of this rank must be close to the top of this mine's food chain. But I didn't have Telepathy, which meant my best bet was restraining the magiatite heart until it calmed down and stopped attacking.

I called out to my friends in my mind. *Partner, Allo, Nightmare, Treant! Catch this thing for me!*

Treant stepped forward.

("Wait, does that mean we can't drink it?")

Don't drink it! It'll kill you!

A small depression appeared in the magiatite heart, facing directly at me. It sucked in the air around it, then released a puff of silvery mist toward me.

Is that its Metal Breath skill?

I flung a wing over my face to protect it and immediately felt a searing, continuous pain throughout my entire wing. The mist clung to my wings and hardened, impeding their movement.

Crap! It released some vaporized magiatite into the air, and once it cooled down on my wing, it turned solid! That's one heck of a party trick. If I'd been any smaller, I would've turned into a magiatite-plated statue!

The magiatite heart used the time it took me to recover after that Metal Breath blast to make a dash toward the exit.

"Grooooooh!" I roared at its retreating figure. I was enough of a threat to it that its entire body flinched in response, which gave us an opening.

"Clay!" Allo shouted, holding her hand up toward the monster.

With Allo and the others' agility, it wasn't likely that they'd be able to land a direct hit on the magiatite heart, but it was easy enough to disturb the ground it was moving toward. The path in front of it reformed as a series of jagged cracks and peaks, and grate-like obstacles rose up out of the dirt.

To the magiatite heart, which traveled along the ground, this was a major impediment. It slowed down, gathered some of its liquid metal, and shot a spear of magiatite straight into the dirt in its path. The spear pierced through, destroying Allo's handiwork.

As the heart dashed for the tunnel again, Treant used Gravity, and a circle of black light began to expand outward from a point that captured not only the magiatite heart but also Allo, Nightmare, and me inside.

Man... Can't you be a little more careful with that skill? My stats are high enough that I can move without much effort, so it helps me, but you'd better apologize to Allo and Nightmare later.

Allo resisted on her hands and knees, then stumbled and fell to the ground face-first, struggling, while Nightmare staggered around and shot Treant a multi-eyed glare.

I shrugged off the gravitational force before turning and dashing at the magiatite heart, claws outstretched. The heart spun to avoid them, and my claws sunk into dirt instead. It swerved back around to hurl a metal spear in my direction. I had no time to dodge, so I caught it with my other paw.

The molten metal sizzled through my scales, but it didn't do enough damage to bother me much. I clenched my fangs and endured it, moving my paw along the spear to get closer. The magiatite heart backed up and encountered the grate Allo had made. The liquid magiatite began to pass through the grate unimpeded.

Now! I cleaved through Allo's dirt grate with my claws and sank them into the magiatite heart's liquid body until I encountered the solid organ at its core. I scooped it out of the molten metal and lobbed it at the tunnel wall with a resounding thud.

It was the perfect plan. In order for the solid metal core of the magiatite heart to get through the grate, it had to slow down and become more of a low-density liquid so it wouldn't get stuck—and that was when I dove in to remove the heart from its liquid magiatite armor.

The armor itself was the issue, because it could utilize its Evade and Shock Absorption skills to the fullest. Whether I was going to kill it or capture it alive, I needed to pry it from its armor first.

I moved closer to the heart, buried in the tunnel wall.

Hey, magiatite heart. I know you have Telepathy. Tell me everything you know about this mine.

(I can't believe it. A dragon of such power, appearing out of nowhere from the outside world...) The telepathic message came from the magiatite heart, which was pulsing with a soft reddish light. It seemed like it wanted to communicate.

(Have it your way, then. Boil me, roast me, eat me however you like.)
Uh, no thanks... I don't think you'd taste very good.

Part 6

REACHED OUT to the magiatite heart with my mind again. I'm willing to overlook the fact that you attacked me first, but I have a few questions for you. You've been alive a long time, right? And you clearly have a certain amount of intelligence. Could you tell me about the monsters in the mine we should look out for?

The heart's core dislodged from the hole it made in the wall and fell to the ground with a thud. Then the hunk of metal turned around and pointed at me.

I moved forward, closing the distance between us and lifting my paws in preparation to stomp down if it tried to escape. Treant, too, approached the heart with a crackling sound and two tree branches outstretched. Where'd Treant learn such an intimidating move?

(I have no means of escape. I submit. But you, two-headed dragon, must leave here as soon as you are able.)

What? Why? Is there something going on deeper in the mine?

«The dragon sleeping at the bottom of the mine has risen. You are powerful, I
admit, but I assure you that you are no match for this monster...»

This heart sure was arrogant for a monster who had just tried to run past me and escape by stabbing me with a piece of metal. Although strangely self-confident, the heart didn't seem unnecessarily hostile. It had likely just attacked first with the intention of getting away from me.

«I came to mediate between the monsters in the mine and the dragon, to prevent unnecessary death... Regrettably, the dragon paid no heed to my words.»

I couldn't be sure it was telling the truth, but the heart seemed pretty kind based on what it had said so far. I was glad it didn't look appetizing; it would've

been Partner food by now if it were.

On the contrary, I am fleeing the cave right now because the dragon in the depths tried to eat me.>

Well, I seriously doubted that. I was sure the dragon only went after the heart because it was the first thing it saw.

(In addition, there is a human adventurer inside the mine. I have seen fewer humans visiting the mine in recent years. One can presume his purpose here is to take on the dragon. But hunting the dragon from the depths is no task for the weak of heart. This man is much more than a simple adventurer; he is more akin to a hero.>

A hero...? The only person I knew who even came close to being called a hero was Lilyxila, the saint. But it made no sense for Lilyxila to arrive early and surprise me inside the mine, and it was still supposed to be some time before she made it to the capital.

«He was a large man, half naked, with long silver hair. I never thought the day would come where I would flee from a human, but there was a terrifyingly oppressive air about him...» The magiatite heart's core shuddered.

That's...definitely not the hero. I killed the hero. Besides, that didn't even sound like the hero I knew. That one had the same name as me, and he was an outcast with blond hair and slim, feminine features.

Partner had sensed a human in the mine, though... I assumed that must've been the silver-haired man the heart was talking about. But unless the human had Sacred Skills somehow, it made no sense for a rank B— magiatite heart to be afraid of him.

No, a human who could intimidate a rank B— monster had to be much more powerful than the likes of Adoff or Azalea. Someone like the hero or the saint would be a fierce opponent for even a rank A monster, though...

«Are we finished here?» the magiatite heart asked, inching toward the exit.

Nightmare quickly moved to stand in its way.

Nice work. I turned my thoughts toward the heart again. You're an unusually intelligent native species of the mine. I'm sorry, but I need you to stick around a bit longer.

«Wh-what? Are you going to eat me after all?»

No, no. I just need to ask some questions about the mine. Are there any other dangerous monsters down there? Aside from the dragon of the depths and the adventurer.

«Dangerous monsters? Well, there was the Gold Gigantic Golem that wiped out all of the adamant miner ants, but...»

The what?! What kind of monster is that?! I guess I won't know unless I see it for myself, but it sounds powerful...

«We... I mean, I took the Golem down, so it is no longer a threat. Excluding the dragon of the depths, I believe I am the strongest monster in the area. There are no monsters here that you and your allies should fear.

So this ancient old grandpa of a hunk of metal was the most powerful monster in Alban Mine? Well, I guess it made sense. They wouldn't build the royal capital so close to the mine if it was full of rank A and B monsters. Even in the magical forest near the Lithovar tribe's settlement, my mother—a rank B+ dragon—was by far the most powerful monster around.

Wait... "We"? Who is we?

<Hmm? O-oh, nothing. Just my younger brother. He is no longer around.>

What's that supposed to mean? Did he die, or go somewhere else, or what?

(In truth, I do not know. Nor do I wish to know.)

I couldn't help but notice how strange the heart was acting. What, did they get into a fight and split up or something? Well, whatever had happened between them, it sounded like the monster was already gone; no need to push for more details. The heart didn't seem like it was the type to lie either.

And with that, I must be on my way... The magiatite heart began to move, ever so slowly. Treant blocked its path again.

A small depression appeared on the liquid metal surface of the heart, from which purple smoke shot out in a straight line. Treant, caught in the smoke, toppled over, its roots wriggling. It was the heart's skill, Double Poison.

I spread my paw, pinning the magiatite heart to the dirt.

Y-you bastard! What the hell did you do to our walking houseplant?! Partner! I changed my mind! You can eat it now!

\(F\)-forgive me! Forgive me! My frustration suddenly got the better of me! I
 have controlled my might now! \(\)

When Nightmare got close, the heart got scared, but when it was Treant who approached, it got aggressive instead!

I slowly lifted my paw, keeping my guard up just in case. Partner used Hi-Rest on Treant, who slowly got back to its feet...or, rather, roots.

Well, Treant had made to intercept the magiatite heart, but I didn't really have any more use for it. It looked pretty harmless, so I guess it was okay to let it go now... No, wait.

Hey, magiatite heart. Why don't we help each other out a little?

<What?>

I'll drive the adventurer out of your cave and slay the dragon of the depths.

<That would be most welcome. However...>

In return, would you be willing to look after Treant and keep it safe while I'm gone?

<Come again?>

If it weren't for the dragon of the depths, you'd be the strongest monster around, right? I don't want to leave Treant here on its own. I'd feel much safer with you around to protect it.

Treant, is it? Well, I suppose I could rest easy with you in my debt. I accept.>

As expected of a Sage of Steel. You know how to play things to your advantage, don't you? All right! I'll get searching for my targets, then.

As I was about to move out, another thought from the magiatite heart drifted into my mind.

«But staying here in Alban may not be worth the price it demands...»

I looked back as the murmured thought reached me, but the magiatite heart just turned its exposed, lonely core toward me and said nothing. There was something tragic about its steady gaze.

Does it...maybe know something about what's happening in the capital right now? I wondered.

But it didn't seem like the heart was willing to talk to us about it now. I could've threatened it, but I wanted us to remain on good terms with each other. If it stuck around Treant, the opportunity to ask what it meant would definitely come again.

For now, I turned to head deeper into the mine and find this so-called dragon of the depths, wherever it lurked underground.

Part 7

W E WALKED FOR A WHILE, descending deeper and deeper into the underground caverns. Allo carried a shard of the light-emitting dragoness crystals in her hand to light the path ahead. I could more or less find my way in the dark, but I knew the visibility was bound to get even worse, so I was grateful.

The dragoness crystal was still a little wet with Partner's saliva, but Allo didn't seem to mind... Although she sometimes paused to wipe her hand with her sleeve.

Well, it is what it is, I guess. We do have some serious dragon breath going on, after all. I was suddenly reminded of the fact that Allo didn't like it when Ballrabbit stuck things in its mouth either. I looked away, deciding to pretend that I hadn't noticed.

As we continued our descent, we started to sense what seemed like a malevolent force from the depths. As the presence intensified, we reached a point where the rock walls of the cavern began to glow a strange, rainbowish hue.

The glow was faint; although they shone in seven different colors, the light they gave off was dull and muted. Even so, it was a magical sight.

We should really go in there with all hands on deck, I thought. Old Grandpa Magiatite back there said the dragon of the depths didn't listen to it, so I doubt we'll be able to work through things with words; a fight is inevitable.

Just as I steeled my nerves to head in, Allo poked at my foreleg from her spot at my side.

What, Allo? If you walk too close to me, I might step on you, you know.

"Treant..."

What about Treant? Was it bullying you? I didn't see anything...

When I turned around, I saw Treant was surrounded by a circle of five insect-like creatures with massive shells on their backs. Their shells were spiral coils, similar to the ones a snail carried. Like the walls, they emitted a faint, rainbow glow. Two eyeballs peeked out from each of the spiral shells, along with countless long, thin, beige tentacles.

What the hell? Are they...giant ammonites?

I was so focused on the one closest to me that I barely registered that Treant was surrounded.

Grim Ammo: Rank C+ Monster

An ammonite which has undergone a special kind of evolution after ingesting magical ore.

The grim ammo's shell is made of a magic ore called ammotite. Because of the ore's rainbow hue, many believe it to be a sign of good fortune.

So they're called grim ammos, huh? I suddenly registered that the dull rainbow glow in the walls must've been from the fossilized remains of thousands of grim ammo carcasses that'd been trapped in the ground for however many years. I looked around, my heart sinking, and saw what looked to be a grim ammo shell half-embedded in the cavern wall.

Wh-whoa... The scene around me suddenly looked a lot less empty than I thought it was.

Treant looked at me nervously. Treant's evolution, Magical Tree, was rank C+.

Are five grim ammos of the same rank going to be too much for it? I wondered.

When Treant's eyes met those of the grim ammos, it froze and immediately

looked down, trying to blend into the background.

Erm... I doubt that's going to work, Treant. Trees don't grow underground.

"Grrroooohh!"

I let out a soft growl, and the grim ammos scattered like spiders scuttling back into their hidey-holes. Partner bit at one of the fleeing grim ammos and got a mouthful of ammotite shell. She crunched into it with a series of cracking and snapping noises.

Dang. Talk about no mercy.

Gained 130 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 130 Experience Points.

Small fry like those sure are easy to hunt, huh? How's it taste? I asked Partner. She slowly nodded and spat out the remnants of the shell. The innards of the broken shell were littered with cream-colored body fluids and little bits of grim ammo flesh. *O-oh. That's...kinda gross.*

("Mm, it's not bad. It's a little tough, though. Could use some more seasoning,") she responded, still chewing. I figured she must've been talking about the meat itself, since I couldn't hear the crunch of the shell anymore.

("Wanna try a bite?")

Partner opened her mouth, showing me the crunched and chewed remains of the grim ammo on her tongue.

U-uhhh... I'm not really a huge fan of eating other people's leftovers...or other dragons' leftovers, for that matter. Even if we're technically from the same body.

("Whatever. More for me.")

Partner closed her mouth and started chewing again, almost like a cow

chewing its cud. She was a girl—shouldn't she be a little more modest? Or was this normal for dragons? Well, whatever. I'd have another chance to try a grim ammo if we ran into any more in this mine.

Just then, a high-pitched clang echoed from the end of the passageway. It sounded like the source of the sound was quite close. At the same moment, my Psychic Sense picked up on the presence of two beings in that direction. It seemed like a human and a large monster who were fighting each other, just like the magiatite heart had described. *Maybe we should pick up the pace*.

After confirming that the way back was free of enemies, I sped up and headed for the innermost part of the underground tunnel. I noticed Treant desperately chasing after me as I went.

I felt like there was no need for Treant to rush since I'd made sure there were no enemies coming from the rear right now. But considering the fact that I'd just missed a bunch of grim ammos coming up to attack us, I understood why Treant wasn't exactly quick to trust my judgment.

The end of the grim ammo tunnel opened up into a massive cavern. At the center was a dragon about ten meters long, its entire body covered in emerald-green crystals.

Crystal Dragon: Rank B Monster

A dragon whose entire body is covered in magical crystals.

It boasts high defense and wields magic that allows it to freely manipulate its magic crystals such as its "Crystal Squall" skill, which is both powerful and difficult to evade. It cannot fly, but one must exercise caution when it spreads its wings in preparation for this skill.

Although the Crystal Dragon only eats magical crystals and ores, its "Petrifying Breath" can turn opponents into magic crystals, so finding food isn't a problem.

"Isn't a problem"? That terrifying skill sounds like the definition of a problem!

I figured this must be the dragon of the depths that the magiatite heart talked about. However, it didn't seem like we'd have to worry about fighting this particular opponent: The Crystal Dragon's body was covered in gaping slash wounds, and its HP was already at zero.

The Crystal Dragon's huge body slumped to the dirt, defeated. In front of it stood a large man with long silver hair and a sword as long as he was tall in his hand.

The dragon's body began to shake. The fissures in its gleaming crystalline body deepened, its thick legs crumbled, and its broken wings fell to the ground. In front of it, the large man raised his great sword. The dragon's thick neck shook, then broke off and tumbled to the ground in front of him.

This human man had defeated the Crystal Dragon. It had to be him—there weren't any other humans or monsters around. He took on a rank B monster by himself and killed it...

This felt impossible, based on what I'd seen of humans thus far. The highest-ranked humans I'd met in this world were Adoff, the knight commander from Harunae, and Azalea, Tolemann's bodyguard and the captain of the Hungry Hunters—both of whom were akin to rank C red ogre ants in terms of stats. The only humans I knew who could take down a rank B monster were the hero and the saint, who both had Sacred Skills at their disposal.

So who the heck was this guy? If there were supposed to be two humans and two monsters with Sacred Skills, like the legends said, that quota should've already been filled up by the hero, the saint, the Demon King, and me.

But, well...the Crystal Dragon seemed pretty strong, but it probably wasn't very fast if all the crystals coating its body were any indication. If this guy used a combination of different skills to kill it, he might've been able to manage it...

In my experience, though, humans just weren't able to gain stats of the same caliber as monsters. I guess the only way I can figure out what's going on is to check his stats myself...

Volk Veidaf

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 83/85

HP: 854/854

MP: 274/317

Attack: 671+101

Defense: 435

Magic: 147

Agility: 547

Equipment:

Weapon: Moon-Piercer Leral: A

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 5

Swordsman: Lv MAX

Psychic Sense: Lv 7

Stealth: Lv 7

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 4

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 8

Magic Resistance: Lv 7

Poison Resistance: Lv 4

Curse Resistance: Lv 4

Instant Death Resistance: Lv 4

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 5

Normal Skills:

Mega Cleave: Lv 9

Concentration: Lv 7

Armor Pierce: Lv 7

Shockwave: Lv 7

Blade of Exorcism: Lv 8

Moon Pierce: Lv 8

Regenerate: Lv 5

Dimension: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Master of Swords: Lv MAX

Legendary Adventurer: Lv —

Seeker of the Sword: Lv —

Battle Fanatic: Lv —

Dragonslayer: Lv —

Collector: Lv —

Moon-Piercer: Lv —

Bearer of the God of Destruction: Lv —

Smoldering Mad Devil Swordsman: Lv —

For a second, I thought I'd read the status screen wrong. What in the world? Who the heck is this beast of a guy? What happened to the idea that a human's stats can't get that high? This guy can't be human, right?

With stats that high, he could tear a giant centipede to shreds or even bludgeon the mother avyssos to death. Could humans even learn Regenerate? That was the skill that lets you regrow severed limbs and stuff! Could he take down even a low-level Adam? I mean, I was sure he wouldn't be able to take Lilyxila on, but he definitely could've slayed the hero.

I turned my attention to the large man's—Volk's—larger-than-life great sword.

Moon-Piercer Leral: Value A

Attack: +101

Long ago in a small country, a fortune teller foretold that a plague from the moon would fall upon the land, destroying the nation and bringing its citizens to slay their king.

To prevent this calamity, the king summoned a mage and a swordsman and bequeathed to them a staff and a sword, with which they were commanded to destroy the moon. This sword, the Moon-Piercer Leral, is one of the two weapons crafted to fulfill the king's wild delusion.

The king spent so much of his kingdom's wealth on these two weapons that his subjects revolted, capturing him and putting him to death for his folly.

Whoa... This guy seemed like bad news himself, but his sword was equally bad news. The sword's attack modifier value rivaled that of the hero's sacred sword that Partner had ended up eating.

Volk slowly looked up at me, then lifted his great sword Leral and held it at

the ready. That was the moment I saw his face in full glory: He had an intense, fearless look about him. He must've been in his late twenties or early thirties. His golden eyes pierced through me, and his mouth formed a ferocious grin.

"This dragon turned out to be a bit of a disappointment, but who would've thought I'd also run into a mythical two-headed Ouroboros here, of all places! I'd heard rumors of one in the region, but this...this truly is the very Ouroboros from The Epic of Niva!"

Volk swung his great sword, sending out a gale of wind in its wake.

"As a swordsman, there is no greater joy than facing off against such monsters of legend! Allow me the glory of slaying you!" Volk cried, spraying spit into the air with his impassioned speech.



I'd been hoping that maybe I wouldn't have to fight him, but from the way he was acting, that felt like wishful thinking on my part. He seemed like the type of person to get worked up over things all by himself.

D-damn it! What was this monster of a man doing here? Was he really after that Crystal Dragon? Something about him being here felt...off, somehow. *It feels like I'm forgetting something important... Oh!*

Suddenly, Lilyxila's words sounded in my mind. "There has been a string of deaths due to illness in the Ardesian royal family as of late. As such, control of the kingdom was transferred to the rather young princess; however, she has been acting quite strangely. She frequently invites skilled swordsmen and mages to visit her castle, but unfortunately...it seems that most of them have gone missing."

Yeah, that's it! The Demon King was luring renowned swordsmen and mages to the castle to farm them for experience points. And Volk, as a rank B+ was likely a prime candidate. Maybe he knew something about what the Demon King had been up to lately?

After we defeat him, maybe we can ask him what he knows. If all goes well, we might be able to follow Volk as he makes his way into the castle too, I mused.

But regardless of what happened later, it seemed unlikely that we'd be able to do anything without facing off against him first—Volk was definitely raring for a fight. But with those stats, I was going to have to be extra careful to make sure I only incapacitated him and didn't accidentally kill him instead.

Part 8

VOLK RAISED HIS GREAT SWORD and started to run straight at me. His eyes shone brightly through the gaps in his silver hair.

"I will hunt you down, Ouroboros! Prepare to meet your maker!"

He was fast. Maybe it was just his sense of determination, but he seemed even faster than his stats suggested.

No, calm down. My agility was much higher than his. If I kept my cool, taking him down should be easy. I motioned for Allo and the others to stay back, then dropped onto my haunches to ready myself for an attack from Volk.

"Hyaaaaah!"

Volk swung his great sword in three mighty cleaves as he ran, generating three Shockwaves from the tip of his sword that came flying toward me. I flapped my wings, then concentrated the resulting wind magic on my forelegs and let out a vicious Whirlwind Slash.

As I'd hoped, my slash successfully canceled out Volk's skill and even managed to reach him, although its attack power was dramatically reduced. Volk evaded the wind blades by leaping forward and dodging deftly from side to side.

I would've liked to have stopped him by flipping the entire surface of the tunnel around us over with a well-timed Earth Fall, but if I had done that in a cave this deep underground, I might've ended up burying both of us alive.

We stood a fair distance from each other; I knew that the only way Volk could attack me here was with his Shockwave skills. My goal here was going to be to disrupt Volk's movement so I could finish him off at close range.

Partner, I need you to use Master's Demonic Gaze on him. Although her skill level was still pretty low, it would give me the opening I needed to get close.

Volk's Magic Resistance was high, but his magic stat was low for his level. Master's Demonic Gaze may not do much, but it'll do something, at least.

("I can't use that unless he makes eye contact with me.")

If you pretend to draw in a breath, I'm sure he'll look at you, right?

("Nah, I can't do it. It's up to you.")

C'mon, just pretend! Oh, and at the right moment, shoot some Death at him. But don't hit him; I don't want to actually kill him. Just shoot it in front of him so he stops moving or something.

("That's...basically cheating, you know,") Partner replied, pulling back her head and squinting at me with distaste.

H-hey, don't say it like that! If we want to neutralize him safely, there's no better way, right? I'm a pacifist at heart. Feints and diversions are prime battle tactics! Sorry, but I'm not so dragon-brained that I think the only way to win a fight is head-to-head combat!

I thought Partner might not get on board with my plan, but after a moment she arched her head back and sucked in a deep breath.

When Ouroboros breathe deeply, the force generated is so powerful that it seems to distort the space around us. The base of our neck swelled, more on Partner's side than mine. Wow, you're a lot more committed than I thought you'd be, I thought, impressed. Partner gave me a sideways glare.

Volk turned his attention to Partner. I could tell he still had his eye on me, but a majority of his focus was on her. From his Dragonslayer Title Skill, I could assume that Volk was no stranger to fighting dragons. That meant he definitely knew about the dangers of dragon breath attacks at this range.

I lowered my head slowly to avoid alerting Volk and moved away from Partner as her eyes glowed crimson. Volk, wary of Partner's potential dragon breath, didn't have any time to react. His face froze in shock, and his sprinting legs stumbled, but then he rolled sideways in midair and barely managed to

keep his balance, landing in a crouch. Sweat dripped from his forehead. He looked at Partner, who had her mouth tightly shut to prevent any of her breath from escaping. He must've thought she was going to release a peal of dragon breath in his direction any second now.

"Hn, hnnnng... You're fooling yourself if you think a silly little trick will be enough to stop me..." Volk thrust his great sword into the ground and used it to get back to his feet, knees trembling.

He used the sword to drag his still-immobile body along, and his eyes darted to the side, trying to find a way to dodge Partner's hypothetical breath.

All right, sorry things had to go this way! I lowered my head and rested my chin on the ground, then opened my mouth and released the Scorching Breath I'd been secretly preparing. A raging fire burst from my jaws and rushed toward Volk.

"Wh-what?! Simultaneous breath attacks?!" The flames caught Volk at a completely unexpected angle, forcing him to pull back the leg he'd extended to kick off from the ground and try to flee in the other direction. Then Volk looked sideways at Partner, and his eyes widened.

"Graaaah..." Partner let out the breath she'd been holding in a calm, relaxed exhale.

("Whoops. I timed that wrong. Ran out of air.")

Then came a sputtering Volk with a meaningless monologue: "What nonsense! A proud dragon—a mythical two-headed dragon, no less—using such trickery!" Volk's handsome features were distorted; his eyes filled with rage. He had more of a dragon brain than I did.

Sorry for not giving you the fight you wanted, but I'm just your average guy, so I'd rather fight your brawn with some brains.

I charged forward like I was trying to chase the fire and stretched my claws out toward the figure silhouetted in the flames. Volk, who was using the blade of his great sword as a shield, noticed my approach and quickly hoisted the great sword into the air once more.

I slashed downward, and the edge of his blade caught my claws. For a moment, we were locked in a stalemate; then the rest of the flames engulfed Volk. I could weather the fierce fire with my scales and overwhelming HP, but they had the potential to be lethal to him. He was no match for me in terms of raw physical strength either.

I put all my weight on him, trying to crush him. Volk swung his great sword and slammed my claws into the ground.

Tch! My claws are stuck! As I struggled, Volk pointed his great sword directly at my chest.

"Allow me to show you the power of this blade's skill: Moon Pierce." Volk drew back his arm in preparation to strike.

U-uh oh, something big is coming!

The sword's boost to Volk's attack power was no joke. If it hit, it would hurt. A lot. I batted wildly at him with my opposite paw, armed with my Paralyzing Venom Claws, to try and knock him away. Volk's Paralysis Resistance (Lv 5) made it unlikely for the skill to succeed with just a wild grab, but if I got a direct hit on him, it should be paralyzing. From there, I could get him to surrender.

"Graah!"

Partner, who'd been waiting all this time for her perfect moment, cast Death.

A black light appeared and began to spread out from Volk.

W-wait, hang on, Partner! You got the timing down, but that's not what I asked for! I told you not to hit him! We don't know if that'll kill him or not!

("Jeez, quit being so naive, will ya? This guy's out to kill us. If we don't fight fire with fire, we'll be the ones going up in smoke.")

"D-damn you!" Volk shouted, then readjusted his stance and brandished his great sword in the black light. "Blade of Exorcism!"

The black light from the Death skill dispersed. It looked like that sword could dispel magic... Dang, that was a handy skill. I was almost jealous. Thank goodness he had it, though, or he might've been dead meat by now.

I swiped mercilessly at the defenseless Volk with my right claws, which pierced deep into his shoulder. The force of my slash sent the silver-haired giant flying through the air, and Volk's grip on his great sword weakened. It looked like he was about to drop it, but then he grabbed the hilt with his other hand to steady it. As expected of a top-class swordsman. I felt a strong sense that he wouldn't ever willingly let go of his weapon of choice for anyone.

"Leral! My...my Leral!" Volk gasped, pulling the sword to his chest.

Or...maybe he was just a bit of a weirdo.

My swipe slammed Volk's bloodied frame into the wall with a resounding thud, accompanied by the crack of broken bones. His eyes went white, and he didn't try to get up again.

Part 9

VOLK HAD COMPLETELY surrendered consciousness. It was no wonder: He'd been hit by both my Scorching Breath and my Paralyzing Venom Claws. There was no way a human man could weather two attacks from a rank A monster and come out standing, no matter how tough he was.

I mean, I'm glad we got him without killing him, but the way he was holding that sword like he was trying to protect it was a little weird. Wouldn't he rather have driven it into the wall to reduce the impact some?

I knew it was expensive, but was his great sword, the Moon-Piercer Leral, really that important to him? Yet even as I asked myself that question, I knew the answer. It was clear as day.

Volk was stuck in the wall, so Nightmare pulled him down with a bit of well-placed web. Allo bent down and poked at Volk's cheek with her fingertip, a serious look on her face. She was probably worried about whether he'd get back up again.

Allo, get that sword from him. It'd be a pain if he were to wake up and decide to pick another fight. That'll kick his strength down a notch, and we can use it as a hostage too. As Allo picked up on my message, she nodded her head and touched Volk's hand, trying to pry back his fingers to take the great sword. But it was no use: She tried for maybe ten seconds, but his hand just wouldn't budge. It seemed like he had a better grip than she expected.

Allo struggled for a bit longer, biting her lip in frustration. She turned to look at me apologetically, before quickly turning back to Volk again.

She put her hands on both of his wrists, and a black light began to emanate from her palms. She seemed to be trying to use Drain to suck out some of the life force from his hands to weaken his grip. But although Volk's complexion worsened, his grip on the sword didn't weaken. What the heck? Why is he being

so stubborn?

But I guess for a swordsman like him, surrendering one's sword to the enemy was as bad as dying, so it was no surprise that he was being stubborn. But even so...there are limits.

"U-um... Master Dragon..." Allo turned back to me, looking like she was about to cry.

Before I had a chance to react, Partner extended her head. What, do you have an idea?

She didn't answer me but gently slid her fangs over Volk's sword. The next moment, she shook her head with all her might. Volk's arm stretched painfully until, finally, his hand was ripped from the sword. His body rolled along the ground with tremendous momentum until his back struck against the opposite wall.

Partner looked back at me with the sword locked firmly in her mouth.

("Not bad, huh?")

Not bad, but...you didn't have to be so rough. It solved the issue, but considering his current condition, you could've also accidentally killed him.

Nightmare, as capable as ever aside from its abrasive personality, started to wrap Volk up in its webbing before I even had a chance to ask it to. It lifted its face and looked at Partner as if to ask, "Will this work?"

"Graaah." She gave a short cry.

("Sure, that'll work, I guess?")

Partner lifted the massive great sword, which had almost fallen out of her mouth.

Don't tell me you like chewing on that great sword? Don't eat it like you did with the hero's holy sword; we won't get a single word out of Volk if you do.

I thought about having Partner cast a restorative spell on Volk, but it seemed

like it wouldn't be necessary: His wounds were healing right before our eyes, probably thanks to his Automatic HP Recovery skill. He also had the Regenerate skill, didn't he? That was an unusual skill for a human...

Was he really human? His stats were comparable to those of the humans I knew who had Sacred Skills. There were some that were particularly high-level, but the ones with Sacred Skills were the only humans I knew of who were even remotely close to maxing out their levels.

Volk's excellent recovery skills would have made it much easier for him to go out adventuring alone. Even if he was critically injured—like having an arm ripped off—he could use Regenerate to grow a new one so it didn't kill him. It also meant he could take more drastic actions with less regard for their consequences.

Which meant that Volk was able to raise his levels much faster than most other humans. Maybe that was how he got so powerful.

After a few minutes of waiting Volk woke up. His eyes darted around in confusion; he attempted to move, only to notice his restraints. He looked down to see his entire body wrapped in a cocoon of spiderwebs. His fearless facade twisted to a look of astonishment, and he let out a high-pitched noise, almost a shriek, that seemed out of character for someone of his burly physique.

"H-hnnngh?!"

I moved my face closer to his. Hey there. Looks like you finally woke up.

I'd been planning to threaten him, but a battle-hardened warrior like him would be a hard nut to crack. His eyes were tense and narrowed, and his nose was scrunched in a snarl.

"Where is my beloved Leral?!"

Wow... He's more concerned about what happened to his sword than the fact that his body's being turned into a spiderweb Daruma doll.

Partner moved her head closer and showed him his great sword locked

behind her fangs. A look of anguish washed over his face.

"Damn it, if it weren't for all these threads, I'd..." Volk trailed off and began to struggle, trying to break free. Allo placed her hand on the back of his head. If she unleashed all her magic at once, she'd blow his head clean off before he could get himself free.

"Hng! Very well, I lost. Kill me and be done with it. To meet my end halfway along the path of the sword, at the claws of a dragon... Well, I suppose it is a fitting end for Volk the Dragonslayer."

Only halfway? It looked like he was close to reaching the end of the path of the sword, considering his stats. I honestly doubted there was another swordsman in the world better than him. Even the great hero was so far below his level that this guy could mow him down with a single cleave.

Now, the easiest way for us to communicate is if I use Human Transformation. Sorry, Partner, but you'll have to sit out for this one again.

After a moment of rummaging around my mouth, I spat out the raggedy clothing I'd taken from the Lithovar tribe settlement—which I'd been storing in there all this time—and used Human Transformation.

My insides began to melt, and my body shrank rapidly, Partner's head along with it. It seemed like my body was getting more used to the transformation each time I used it because this change was much smoother and faster than it was before.

I gently patted my face with my hand to make sure that I was fully human. Yup, definitely human. I reached up and ran my fingers through my hair.

"A-ahh... Ahh... Ah." I used my hand to support my throat and gave my voice a try. Okay, not bad.

"M-Master Dragon!" Allo squeaked, a faint blush forming on her deathlywhite Levana Liche cheeks. She looked away and held out my freshly vomited rags with both arms. "Sorry, thanks, Allo." I haphazardly started pulling on the rags.

Volk looked up at me with stunned eyes. "What?! Wh-why would an Ouroboros, a two-headed *king* of dragons, go to the trouble of using Human Transformation here...?"

I picked up the Moon-Piercer Leral from where it had dropped nearby and swung it lightly through the air, then set it on my shoulder and turned to face Volk. *Now, where to begin...*

Suddenly, the confused look in his eyes disappeared, and he nodded as if he understood. He must've figured out we were looking for information and wanted to speak to him. He was a quick study—seemed like his Legendary Adventurer Title Skill wasn't just for show after all. He knew how to adapt.

"If you're choosing to take the form of a man to face me... I see. That must mean you wish to duel on equal terms. Interesting... Very well then, I accept! Face me and fight!"

What? No, that's not the goal here...

"I've got a couple of questions for you," I told him. "If you answer them honestly, I'll let you go. I have no reason to actually kill you."

Volk was silent. His sharp warrior's eyes drilled holes into me.

Okay, why wasn't he talking? Was this some kind of psychological warfare? I wasn't very good at the whole interrogation thing... Maybe I should've been more demanding about it? Was I being too soft on him by offering to settle things peacefully? Or was he too prideful to accept me letting him off the hook? Or maybe he was planning to catch me by surprise and make his escape...

We couldn't be too careful. He was a Legendary Adventurer, after all. He'd been able to survive all kinds of predicaments before; that was the only way he could've made it to his current level. I had to stay alert and keep my guard up.

I noticed that Volk wasn't looking at my face—his eyes were focused on a spot a bit lower, where the great sword rested in my hand.

"...Of course, I'll give you back this Leral thing too."

The moment I lifted the sword, he began to speak. "You, an Ouroboros, wish to ally yourself with a human...?"

I was wondering why he went quiet all of a sudden. He was just worried about what happened to his sword? He gave in because he was so concerned? It was like he cared more about that sword than his own life. *A-anyway, let's get on with it.*

"Did you come to Alban because the princess invited you to her castle?" I asked Volk.

The rumor was that the Demon King was pretending to be Ardesia's princess in order to lure powerful humans to the castle and kill them to grind experience. If Volk had been an adventurer based in the royal capital, he probably would've already had a run-in with the Demon King. The fact that he was still alive suggested that he'd recently come to Alban with a specific purpose, and it made sense for him to come if the princess invited him.

If his answer was yes, Volk could be a valuable source of information about the princess.

"Indeed," he said. "If the princess is gathering powerful swordsmen, maybe that swordmaster Howgley will show up. Then I can cut him down and prove that I am the superior swordsman."

So that was his true objective, and the banquet with the princess of Ardesia was just...the means to that end? Wow...a straightforward guy like him might be easier to get along with than I thought.

"But what concern is that of yours, dragon?" he asked.

"The princess has been replaced with a monster. I came here to defeat that monster."

Volk stared at me in wonder. "What...?"

I used the great sword to slice through Nightmare's webs, freeing Volk. Then I

placed the great sword in front of him. "The monster wants to lure powerful individuals to the castle and harvest them for experience points. Don't go to the party, or you'll be killed. You've already heard some unsettling rumors about it, right?"

Volk took the great sword in his hand and stood. "There are indeed some strange things happening within the royal family...but that doesn't mean I believe you. What reason would you have to be concerned about human matters in the first place?"

"Because there's no telling how many humans will die if I don't do something about it!" I said, voice rising. "It's not like I don't have my reasons!"

Defeating the Demon King was about more than just making a pact with the saint. There was no telling how many humans the Demon King would sacrifice in the name of gaining experience.

But that wasn't my only reason. Once the Demon King was powerful enough, he would lead an army of monsters to wage war against the humans. If that happened, it could mean the end of the world. Myria's village, Nina's country, the Lithovar tribe's settlement...none of them would be safe.

Seeing that Volk looked somewhat confused, I reined in my voice a little. "... Anyway, it's not a bad deal for you. Just tell me what you know about Alban and the royal princess, and then hightail it out of here."

Volk looked me in the eye and sniffed. "Hmph! Now you've got my attention. But I, Volk, am not so spineless nor shameless as to flee to safer lands when the opponent I'm trying to kill not only doesn't want to kill me but also warns of coming danger. If you wish to defeat this monster in order to save human lives, then I will be the sword with which you strike it down. My life is yours to command."

O-oh? Is this guy suddenly offering to team up with me? I mean, he was even stronger than Allo, so I wanted to take him up on it, but this felt a little rash...

"Besides, going to the princess's party is my best shot at confronting Howgley.

Even if it *is* a trap, I won't let that opportunity slip away. He's a slippery one, that Howgley; so unpredictable that I have no idea where he is. I've been searching for ten years, but I haven't been able to track him down even once."

D-did he say ten whole years? I could get not wanting to give up on something like that, but still...

"And I would get the chance to slay this creature myself, correct? It may very well end up being too much for a human to handle, but I still have a few tricks up my sleeve."

W-well, I'm pretty sure the Demon King will be too tough for a human to take down. He was apparently having a hard time leveling up, but he'd gone to the trouble of making this elaborate plan, so it seemed like he had a lot of willpower, at least.

The Demon King was definitely stronger than Illusia the hero was, though. Worst case, he'd turn out to be the same class as Eldia. Volk was probably the highest-class human in the world, but if I was able to beat him, there was no way he'd stand a chance against something like Eldia.

But...he still had a few tricks up his sleeve, did he? I wondered what they could be. I didn't see any other skills in his status screen that looked like a secret weapon...

Part 10

AFTER HASHING OUT my plan to investigate the royal capital with Volk, I returned to my dragon form and headed back to the mine's upper levels, where Grandpa Magiatite was waiting.

\(\cdot\)... I do not know why the silver-haired man is with you, but very well. I suppose
I can look after your Treant for a while.

We ended our conversation while I stared at the core floating inside the heart's liquid metal. Treant would be safe and sound.

Treant turned to me with a face like an abandoned puppy's. What? I didn't have a choice! I need to go to the royal capital. And you can't transform into a human, right? You see why you can't come? If you go into the city, the humans will kill you. They'll pick off all your leaves. The inhabitants of this world won't show you any mercy if they know you're a monster.

"Master Dragon, am I coming to the capital too?" Allo asked. "I'm a little nervous..." Despite her nerves, her mouth was agape, and her eyes were shining with excitement. She looked less nervous and more hopeful than anything else.

I'm glad to see you're looking forward to it. I was debating whether or not to bring you along, but I think it's a good idea.

Even if she was discovered, Allo was a class B monster. She'd be able to get away without any trouble. Plus, I'd be there, and Volk could always act as a decoy.

Treant glanced at Allo, whose shoulders flinched; she turned her head away. Treant stamped on a log with its roots.

C-c'mon, Treant...

All that was left now was to decide if I wanted to bring Nightmare along or not. Nightmare had the Human Transformation skill, and also had a Special Skill

that would reduce the amount of MP needed to stay in our human forms.

Taking Nightmare with us wasn't out of the question, but its Human

Transformation skill level was still quite low. It was level 3 for me when I

learned it, and I'd since gotten it up to level 5, but that was still a little bit low for me.

Nightmare, how about you try using Human Transformation?

Nightmare turned its white face to the side and pretended it wasn't listening.

H-hey... Do you want to stay with Treant, then? Are you sure? Hmm?

As I called out to Nightmare in my mind, I felt Treant's eyes on me. ...Sorry, I got a little too carried away for a second.

There was no response from Nightmare. It seemed like it didn't have any particular interest in visiting the human city. It didn't try to use its Human Transformation skill either, so I got the impression that it didn't care much about saving the humans.

It was me leading this time, after all, not Partner, which meant Nightmare probably had little to no motivation to come along.

Well, there's no point in forcing Nightmare to go. Sorry, Grandpa Magiatite, but you'll have to look after Nightmare for me too.

<I do not mind.>

Nightmare didn't seem to have any objections to this, although Treant was looking a little miffed at the thought of having to stay behind with it. Treant probably wanted Allo to stay behind since it didn't get along well with Nightmare. It didn't like me much, and I got the feeling it liked to make fun of Treant too. Nightmare was smart and helpful but also kind of indifferent; it reminded me of a cold honors student.

Me, on the other hand, I tease you with love, Treant. You know that, right?

("Hmph... I wanted to see Nightmare's human form,") Partner muttered.

As soon as Nightmare heard Partner's message, it jolted up and moved closer

to Partner's head.

("Wh-what? What do you want?") Partner asked, a little taken aback by Nightmare's quick movements. She lowered her head to Nightmare's height, which made her neck stretch back a little.

("No, I'm not bothered by it... No, that's not what I mean, it's just...")

They were somehow communicating face-to-face, but neither of them had Telepathy, so they seemed to be having some difficulty. It was refreshing to see Partner looking so confused, and Nightmare shot me a glare when it saw me grinning at her from the side. I quickly looked away.

("I didn't catch all the details, but Nightmare says it's coming with you,")
Partner said to me once the conversation was over. She still had a look of bewilderment on her face.

Jeez, Nightmare was much easier to deal with when Partner was the one telling it what to do. What a simple bug... It was almost cute.

Well, whether you can come or not depends on how good your Human Transformation is, I replied.

Nightmare stood up, wriggling all its limbs. Then its body shrank, making a strange creaking sound. Its red eyes moved toward its temples, and hair began to sprout along its entire black carapace. Finally, its body morphed into a humanoid frame that was a little over five feet tall. The black exoskeleton remained mostly intact; it just morphed into something resembling a robe. Nightmare's face was covered by a white mask in the shape of a waxing crescent moon, just like it was in its spider form.



Owing to the red eyes and the black robes, Nightmare's human form looked a lot like its spider form—did it really count as human transformation? It felt more like camouflage to me... Well, at least Nightmare's body was pretty much hidden. Its getup was weird, but it probably wouldn't give us away.

Nightmare's chest protruded slightly, which made me realize that it was, in fact, a *she*. Nightmare was female. Up until now, I'd always assumed she was male because of how attached she was to Partner...

So, uh...you wanna take off the mask, Nightmare? It's just, I'm curious about what your face looks like under there...

As usual, Nightmare ignored me. Instead, she twirled around in front of Partner, showing herself off to gauge her reaction. Partner took a sparing glance at her and remarked, blunt as could be, ("Eh, not bad, I guess?")

My eyes were fastened on Nightmare, but she didn't even look my way. Not that that was a surprise.

I turned my thoughts to Partner. Could you ask her to take off her mask, please?

She nodded. ("Hey, take the mask off.")

Nightmare froze, completely taken off guard by Partner's request. After a few moments of silence, she tilted her head up to try and protect the mask.

("Allo, take it off her.") Partner ordered Allo. It was rare for her to order Allo around, so Allo was a little surprised, but she approached Nightmare with an unexpected amount of gusto. Nightmare's shoulders started to shake.

...Wait, stop. She doesn't seem comfortable with this.

Allo raised her hands, and the floor of the cave began to transform. Long arms made of clay appeared and twisted themselves around Nightmare's body. This was Allo's skill, Lingering Rope. Within seconds, Nightmare was bound tight. Allo moved her hands toward Nightmare, who struggled in vain to escape the rope.

I took the hood of Nightmare's robe into my mouth and lifted her up out of the Lingering Rope, then used my forelegs to get rid of all the dirt arms.

I said stop, and I mean it! It's not that big of a deal! That was uncalled for! I was just kidding, okay?!

"I'm sorry," Allo apologized solemnly.

Don't you think Nightmare's the one who deserves an apology? I asked, to which Allo lowered her head in Nightmare's direction as well.

Good, that seemed genuine. I feel like I'm in charge of a classroom or something... What about you, assistant homeroom teacher Partner? Do you have anything to say to Nightmare?

("...Mm? What're you all grumpy about now?")

Y-you... You're so inconsiderate, Partner. As I sat there, stunned by Partner's rude attitude, I felt a sudden burning pain on my tongue and spat out a very disgruntled Nightmare faster than I could think.

Blegh! What the heck was that?! It was then that I noticed the red strand of web hanging from my mouth. Wait, was this...Nightmare's Poison Web?

Before Nightmare hit the ground, she shot the web out from beneath her mask and used it to swing to the top of Partner's head.

A-are you sure you wanna come with us? I asked her. Nightmare glanced at me for a second but quickly turned away. Then she used her hands to brush some of my saliva from her robe.

Well, I guess that's that.

"Oh? It seems you're having some issues handling your subordinates?" Volk asked, looking concerned.

Yeah...they're being even more of a pain than they usually are.

Chapter 2: Royal Capital Reconnaissance

Part 1

LEFT TREANT in the care of Grandpa Magiatite and set off for Alban with Allo, Nightmare, and Volk in tow.

Treant came to the entrance of the cave to see us off, staring at us with lifeless eyes as we departed. While I was sure Treant wouldn't have wanted Nightmare to stay behind with it, it seemed equally put-off at the prospect of being the only one left behind while she got to accompany me.

Sorry, Treant. I'll buy you some nice fertilizer or something.

Once my Automatic MP Recovery got my MP back to max, I went to use Human Transformation, but Volk stopped me. "I doubt we'll attract any human onlookers all the way out here. There's no reason to waste your MP while we're traveling."

I grunted and looked at Allo to ask her to be my interpreter. She came up to us nervously and hid herself halfway behind one of my legs like she was afraid of Volk. "Master Dragon says, uh...he wants to know if you have any advice or strategies that might help us."

Volk thought for a moment, then said, "I would suggest capturing one of the steel horses that live near Alban Mine. It is a type of magical beast widely ridden by adventurers traveling into Alban. We will have no issue taking it into the capital."

Hmm... A steel horse, huh? It would be nice to have a faster mode of transportation. I could run fast enough, but I wouldn't want to leave Allo and Nightmare in the dust. Sure, I could carry them all on my back, aside from Volk, but doing that would draw a lot more attention our way. Having a magical beast as an extra set of legs would grant us an added degree of mobility.

"Steel horses are timid beasts that will run at the first sight of danger," Volk added, "but capturing one should be no issue for someone with your speed."

All right, that sounds like a good idea. Let's go catch ourselves a steel horse.

We wandered around Alban Mine for a while until we happened across a magical beast in the distance that I immediately knew was what we were looking for.

It was a horse whose entire body was reinforced with what looked to be sheets of metal. I could even see what looked like seams—and in some places, cracks—in between each plate. It almost looked like a toy horse made of tin. There sure were some bizarre monsters around here... And not just monsters either. Volk was by far the strangest creature I've encountered since I got here.

All right, all right. Let's find out what exactly these steel horses are all about.

Steel Horse: Rank C- Monster

A horse monster whose body is made entirely of metal.

Incredibly sturdy and agile, but it possesses no other abilities of note.

When faced with an opponent of equal or higher rank, it will use its impressive speed to flee in the blink of an eye. However, when its favorite mineral food, Adamant Dragora, is present, it becomes unusually aggressive.

Hmm, I see. Volk had summed them up pretty well. Rank C-, huh? I wouldn't break a sweat fighting these things even if an entire herd attacked me at once. Had Volk ridden one of these all the way here?

Allo, picking up my thoughts, asked him for me. "Did you ride a steel horse to Alban as well, Mr. Volk?"

Volk looked back at her. Allo's shoulders suddenly trembled with fear, and she vanished behind my leg. "Hm? No, I made the journey by foot, of course."

Oh...right, of course. You know, I felt like the reasons for catching this steel horse were flying out the window left and right. That being said, having to keep

pace with Volk on foot would be a pain in every sense of the word, so I was better off finding an alternative.

"We're fortunate to have found one so quickly." Volk continued. "They are useful steeds if you can find one, but they tend to be elusive."

But they were timid too, he'd said... Which meant that if something spooked them enough, they weren't going to listen to their rider. That didn't seem very useful to me. Was there a certain way that humans typically caught these things?

As I pondered our next step, the steel horse noticed my gaze and wheeled around to gallop away.

Crap! Should I chase after it?! Will that work? Volk said they're pretty elusive...

Volk, having noticed my state of panic, drew his beloved great sword, Leral. "Fear not; I will hunt the beast down. With your massive frame, you would risk flattening it if you chased it yourself." As soon as he said this, he lowered his stance and took off toward the steel horse at a full sprint. He caught up to it in no time at all, even with his ridiculously heavy-looking great sword in hand. As I watched this scene unfold, I started to question Volk's entire purpose for hunting a steel horse.

"Ngiii... Ngiiiiih!" The steel horse whinnied, a noise that sounded like a rusty musical instrument, and increased its speed. Volk matched its acceleration stride for stride and then kicked off from the ground into a front flip. While he was upside down, he reversed the great sword and thrust at the horse with his pommel. It was a brilliant maneuver.

But whether by chance or by instinct, the steel horse thrust its head forward at the last second, and Volk's pommel strike skimmed the top of its mane.

Volk's face flushed with irritation. He threw his arm out and turned his body to face the steel horse's, then swung the widest part of the blade down on the horse's head with a resounding metallic clang. The weight of the sword striking its head crushed the steel horse's four legs and sent it crashing to the ground.

Volk flew back with the recoil from the strike, but he landed on his feet, his great sword tucked away inside its sheath.

Okay, that was kind of cool and all, but don't think you've got me fooled! Volk noticed my disapproving look and started to spout a list of excuses. "I-It's fine! I meant to do that! What, you think I would be so foolish as to miss my target?!"

Are you sure about that?! I saw how far you stretched to try and bring the pommel down when it dodged you!

"A-anyway, I have heard that Ouroboros are particularly skilled in white magic! Is that true? Because the steel horse is still breathing!"

Could I...really trust this guy to be my guide through Alban? Somehow, it suddenly felt like I was relying on the wrong person.

Part 2

THE STEEL HORSE was half dead from Volk's vicious strike, but Partner managed to save it with her Hi-Rest. After that, we looked around some more and managed to wrangle ourselves a second steel horse. With that out of the way, we were finally ready to head to Alban, the royal capital of Ardesia.

Because I was concerned about using up all my MP with Human Transformation, I wasn't going to have the luxury to dawdle around much once I transformed. My plan was to get in and get out as fast as I could. I would've loved to go sightseeing, try some delicious food, visit interesting monuments, or lay back and relax in a quiet corner of the city, but I just wouldn't have the time in my human form. Besides, Treant would get lonely back at the mine.

All of that was just going to have to wait until the Demon King debacle was over and the saint made all the necessary arrangements to ensure my safety in Ardesia.

At any rate, we now had two steel horses at our command. If we rode them in pairs, we'd get to Alban in no time. Both Allo and Nightmare's human form—which I'd decided to call Naiko—were on the smaller side, so each of them could ride double with either me or Volk... I guess we'll go with...me and Allo on one, and Naiko and Volk on the other.

I used Human Transformation. Partner disappeared, and my body turned into that of a human male, which I covered with the threadbare rags from the Lithovar tribe. I rolled my shoulders, feeling them crack as they adjusted to their new constraints. My newly transformed body always felt uncomfortable at first.

I looked over at the steel horses. They were huddled together, facing me.

"All right," I said. "This body is a big drain on my MP, so let's get going."

I picked up my saddle—a simple one made from tightly woven spider silk that Partner had requisitioned for me from Nightmare—and draped it over the back

of one of the steel horses, then began to fasten the girth. Well, it was better than nothing.

I turned to Allo. "Okay, let's get a move on." She nodded in agreement as Naiko began to walk toward me, the hem of her long robe dragging along the ground behind her. We both stopped at the same time and looked at each other.

Naiko, you...were planning to ride with me, even though you've been ignoring me and acting like you hated me this entire trip? You don't like to tell people how you feel, do you? That's unexpectedly cute of you. As I thought this, Naiko silently turned to Volk.

Volk shrugged. "Well, I don't mind running, but I am used to handling steel horses. Here, let me show you how it's done, Ouroboros. I doubt it would be possible for me to simply muscle it around, although I'm sure someone with *your* physical strength could manage somehow."

Hmm. I mean, I was fine, but I felt like Volk still harbored a bit of resentment toward me.

I looked at Allo. "You ready? Let's get going."

"Yep!" Allo chirped. "Coming, Master Dragon!" She ran over, cutting Naiko off in the process.

"All right, you're coming with me, spider girl," Volk said, picking Naiko up by her collar and carrying her to the other horse. As her feet left the ground, I saw her glare at me from behind her mask.

Heh heh! If you learn anything from this, Nightmare, it should be to treat me as nicely as you treat Partner from now on. This is a microcosm of what it means to live in a society. It's a good thing you learned it before it was too late. If you behave at the capital, I might be willing to ride double with Volk on the way back instead.

I feigned ignorance to Naiko's unfortunate plight as I mounted, then pulled

Allo up behind me.

Volk spoke up. "I should warn you in advance... Be wary when approaching members of the church. Some of them can detect undead and monsters. You may be able to fool them in passing, but if they start getting suspicious, the jig is up. There are a few adventurers who are able to as well, but they're quite rare."

Interesting. I hadn't known a skill like that existed. Well, we should be fine as long as we didn't draw any attention. And I could always use View Status to see if someone had that skill beforehand, so we'd know to be careful.

"Also...there are the Knights of Alban. If what you say about the princess is true, then they may also be suspicious. Be especially careful around the Three Cavaliers. I heard they were replaced with new ones recently, on the princess's orders."

...The Demon King had personally appointed the three top knights of Alban?

Were they monsters disguised as humans? No, they could be humans who knew his true identity and chose to join his ranks. I doubted he had that many monsters who could use Human Transformation under his command.

But...he could've coordinated their evolutions so they could all use Human Transformation, or they could all be high-level Undead like Allo... We couldn't let our guard down. We didn't have nearly enough information to make any assumptions about what we'd be facing in there.

"It would be best to avoid the Three Cavaliers at all costs," Volk went on. "It is said that they are very skilled...and that they all possess strange powers. One of them may be able to uncover your true identity."

Hmm... I'd have liked to see those knights' status screens and find a way to take them out, but if we screwed up and blew our cover, and the Demon King found out, the consequences would be unimaginable. If that happened, we'd forfeit our chance to take the Demon King by surprise, and he'd go on high alert.

"But there is no need to dwell on them. Even if the Three Cavaliers found us, we could crush them before the thought to report us even crossed their minds. I'd gladly take them on. I've been itching to face them in combat since the first time we crossed paths."

Uh, no thanks?! We won't be able to fool anyone if you start a fight in the middle of the royal capital! Was this sword-head planning to ruin our infogathering by destroying part of the capital?! I was not interested in scratching that itch!

"...Thanks for the advice," I said. "Let's try to avoid them at all costs for now. Could you tell me a little more about them along the way? What they look like, anything you know about them... That sort of stuff. But for now, let's get going."

"Right, of course. To make steel horses run, you have to kick them in the sides with your legs. If you wish to change direction or stop, all you have to do is yell at them or grab them by their necks and yank."

...Right. How to ride a horse, the Volk way. Maybe we would've been better off making some reins too...

"Just watch me and copy my movements. Here we go! Don't kick them too hard, or you'll knock them out!" Volk swung his legs up wide and buried his heels deep into his steel horse's sides with a blow that was almost too brutal to be considered a kick. The steel horse shrieked, then launched forward from its haunches and bolted off in a straight line.

Part 3

"Wow... This place sure does deserve the title of Royal Capital."

Alban was the first large city I'd seen since I showed up in this world. Rows of tall, red-roofed buildings lined the city streets. The bustle of the city was refreshing to me; it reminded me of the cities in my old world.

We walked through the streets of Alban, Allo peering out at the crowds from behind me. She probably wasn't used to being in a place with so many humans about. This wasn't a surprise to me; she wouldn't have encountered many humans in the forest other than the Lithovar tribe. This was her first time in a city, and her eyes shifted from place to place in wonder. Naiko, on the other hand,

looked out at the city unabashedly, even though there were some curious glances from passersby at her white mask. Either she had some thick nerves, or she simply didn't care.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting, Ouroboros." I looked in the direction the voice came from and saw a large, half-naked man who stood out among the crowd. Volk. When we arrived in Alban, he'd headed straight for the city stables to have his steel horse kept for him.

I was tempted to snap at Volk for suddenly blurting out my species and potentially blowing my cover...but I figured it was probably fine. There was no way anyone would think this guy was actually showing a rank A Evil Dragon around the royal capital.

"I know we are short on time," he said. "I will accompany you on your hunt for information until you need to depart."

Yeah, we definitely were short on time. In order to leave the royal capital of Ardesia peacefully, I had to maintain the Human Transformation spell until we got back to Alban Mine—which meant I only had about an hour and a half to

search, max.

It'd been a long time since I was last in a crowd of humans. I wanted to unwind and enjoy the finer pleasures of this world's city, but that would have to come later. My plan for today was just to gather as much information as possible about the princess and the Demon King.

I had three things I was hoping to learn more about: the truth behind how the Demon King had successfully replaced the princess, the Three Cavaliers who protected the princess, and what species the Demon King was. Since the first of those goals seemed difficult to accomplish, I decided to focus on the other two.

Beyond that, I wanted to pick up on any rumors going around about the royal family. Since Volk already knew the gist of what was happening in the capital, it wasn't important for us to spend a lot of time looking into that aspect. Although somewhat hard to believe, our sword fanatic friend Volk was still a member of civilized society, if only on its outskirts.

Volk knew about the sudden deaths of members of the royal family, Princess Crys's subsequent actions, and had basic knowledge of the Three Cavaliers, which he told us about on our way to the city.

After the sudden string of deaths in the royal family, the young Princess Crys had quickly risen in position to become the supreme power in the kingdom of Ardesia. The kingdom's throne was still vacant, however, and a cabinet of advisors now gathered to make political decisions.

According to the kingdom's customs, once Princess Crys found a husband, he would ascend the throne and become king. However, the princess was in poor health and rarely left the castle. Since becoming the last member of the royal family, she had been throwing parties to hear stories from traveling adventurers, replaced the Three Cavaliers with people from her inner circle, and sent out a proclamation saying that whichever man brought her the most expensive gift would be her husband—and thus, the new king. "She seems to have a rather selfish side," Volk had concluded.

It was one thing if she was just a selfish princess, but I couldn't help but view her actions with a certain amount of suspicion. They all seemed like excuses for gathering adventurers together to kill them for experience, replacing the country's strongest soldiers with monsters, and creating rivalry among the high-ranking nobles.

The Three Cavaliers were Rogueheil, a man of character who was also the bishop of Alban; Samael, a former adventurer who became one of the Cavaliers because Princess Crys took a liking to him; and Mephisto, a girl rumored to have been brought in from the slums. There'd apparently been some uproar about the inclusion of a church official and a traveling adventurer in the top ranks of the Knights of Alban, but Volk didn't seem to know much about them beyond that.

The only other thing he knew was that people were joking that Samael had only been chosen as a Cavalier for his looks. When I heard that, I couldn't help but imagine that the frail Princess Crys, confined to her castle because of her illness, might just be acting out due to frustration.

"It'll be hard to find information about the princess in the time we have, so let's focus on the Three Cavaliers," I said.

The fastest way to do that would be to happen across all three knights. If they were all monsters, then it was almost certain that the Demon King had taken over the princess's body. If we knew how strong his most powerful monsters were, then it'd be easier for us to plan our attack and we could get an idea of what the Demon King's rank was. However...direct confrontation was risky, and we needed to avoid it if at all possible. If we screwed up and revealed our identities, we'd lose the element of surprise.

Guess our only choice is to look for someone who might know something... But we don't have much time, so we'd better move quickly.

While I looked around to search for our first lead, I noticed that Allo's eyes were fixed on a storefront featuring a few basic mannequins in a variety of

dresses. Her grip on the back of my rags tightened.

"Allo..." I began, "You know we don't have a lot of time, right? There are a bunch of places I'd love to check out too."

"Y-yeah! I know..." she sighed.

"Sorry, Allo. I promise I'll take you shopping for clothes, or whatever you want, when we get a chance. But not today. What we're doing...it's not just the future of Alban—it's the future of the entire kingdom of Ardesia, and even the whole world, that's at stake."

Allo's expression hardened, and she gave a strong nod. "I-I'll do my best to help however I can, Master Dragon! Whatever you need!"

Suddenly, I heard a woman's voice from off in the distance that stirred my memory. "I never thought I'd be invited to attend a party thrown by Princess Crys, ha ha! I don't know what I'd do if she offered to make me one of the Knights of Alban! I still enjoy my life as an adventurer, but...!"

For some reason, even though there were dozens of people passing by, it was this woman's voice that stuck in my brain. It was a clear voice that stood out, but it was more than that—it was like my brain naturally focused its attention on it.

I turned my head and saw a blonde woman, clad in light armor and carrying a sword at her waist. She must've come here for the princess's party, like Volk... but why did I feel like I recognized her from somewhere? *Hmm...*

"Oh...!" It dawned on me—she was one of the two lady adventurers who used to visit me in my cave when I was a Young Plague Dragon. We had...a strange connection. It wasn't a great memory, to be honest.

But going to the princess's party was a bad idea. Should I try to stop her? Would she even listen to a shady-looking guy like me if I came up to her and started spouting all this crazy stuff?

She seemed very boisterous, and I felt like she might be hard to convince. The

other adventurer I met in the cave was a female demi-human with a giant wooden hammer, right?

I followed the swordswoman's eyes, wondering if the other adventurer was around somewhere too.

"But...I've heard some nasty rumors going around about her." The girl who responded had mousy brown hair that I immediately recognized. She wore a white robe and gloves, and she carried a long staff. Large eyes peeked out from under cropped bangs. "There are stories of people who talk about the princess getting surrounded by knights one night and never coming back home."

My eyes widened, and I instinctively hugged the wall nearby to conceal myself. It wasn't the female demi-human with a hammer; that girl with the brown bob cut was none other than the first person I came to trust in this world: Myria.

Wh-what's she doing here?! Did she leave her village in the forest with the adventurer?! I... I wanted to talk to her for a second and find out what happened. Should I follow her? N-no, wait, what if she blows my cover?

I peeked out from behind the wall and did a quick double check of her appearance. Nope, it wasn't just a look-alike, it was definitely her.

Myria Milleania

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 17/70

HP: 64/64

MP: 76/76

Attack: 36+8

Defense: 47+12

Magic: 69+15 Agility: 58 **Equipment:** Weapon: Healer's Staff: D+ Armor: White Mage Robes: C-Special Skills: Grecian Language: Lv 5 Mage: Lv 4 Resistance Skills:

Poison Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Confusion Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Rest: Lv 4

Fireball: Lv 4

Waterball: Lv 2

Wide Rest: Lv 2

Care: Lv 2

Fire Sphere: Lv 1

Clay: Lv 2

Clay Shield: Lv 1

Title Skills:

White Mage: Lv 4

Monster Master: Lv 2

Wh-whaaaaat?! She sure has grown up since I last saw her! Back when we first met, Myria was just a simple villager who knew how to use a little bit of magic, but it looked like she'd been grinding and built up her levels since then. She knew all kinds of magic now!

Myria suddenly looked in my direction, and I jerked my head back behind the wall. After I'd killed Gregory in Myria's village, I scared all the villagers and left. To her, I was probably nothing more than a dragon who'd evolved into a true demon in body and soul. It'd probably be better for her if she never saw me again.

Eesh, that was close. She almost saw me. Wait, shouldn't I try to act more confident? People would start getting suspicious if I kept creeping around everywhere. And she wouldn't recognize me in my human form anyway.

"What are you doing?" Volk asked, waving a hand in front of my face and peering at me in suspicion. He followed my line of sight to Myria.

"Master Dragon, you said we don't have time for personal matters..." Allo said, her eyes tinged with fear. Her gaze was unimaginably cold.

"No, no, there's nothing personal going on! Look, I heard that blonde swordswoman over there talking about the princess's party, so I wanted to ask her about it..." I pointed at the woman speaking to Myria.

"All right, Meltia," Myria was saying, "I'm going to do a bit of shopping."
"Way ahead of you," Meltia smiled.

Myria bowed slightly at the swordswoman, then turned to walk to one of the other streets. The swordswoman looked away from her, stretched her arms above her head for a moment and yawned before walking in a different direction.

I started to head for Myria, intending to follow her, but just then, something grabbed my ankle and I lost my balance, falling to the ground with a thud. I

looked down and saw a string of spider silk wrapped around my leg.

"Thanks, Nightmare." Allo tried to pat Nightmare on her head, but Nightmare shoved her away.

I guess Allo asked Nightmare to trip me... Great. So she doesn't listen to me, but she listens to Allo?

"H-hey, don't use spider skills in the middle of the street!" I hissed. "You'll blow our cover..."

"If we want to find out more about the party, then we should definitely ask her," Allo said, pointing at the swordswoman.

"Uh... Well, she's also... Never mind. Sure, let's ask her." I mean, I was worried for her because she was invited to the princess's party too, but...she and Myria were worlds different to me in terms of importance.

"Master Dragon!"

N-no, wait! It was just... Yeah, this was a personal matter I guess, but this girl was seriously really important to me. But at the same time...chasing her down felt pointless. I just looked like some guy she'd never met before. Even if I somehow managed to convince her who I was, there was no way that conversation would go anywhere good.

"What would you like to do?" Volk asked. "If this girl is an acquaintance of yours, then I can take these two and find something else to occupy our time while you catch up." As he said it, Allo turned to him with a pout and marched over, fists balled at her sides.

Don't pick a fight, Allo. He's way too strong.

"Volk, are you...concerned for me?" I asked.

"What? Are you making a fool of me?"

"N-no, sorry. Forget it." I couldn't help but be reminded of the first time we met. "And...I appreciate your concern, but it's fine. That girl and I, we... Well, it's probably better if she never sees me again. Don't worry, Allo. I won't let her

distract us from our goal."

Allo walked back to me with a pout on her face, and I patted her head. She gave me an intense stare, then closed her eyes and hugged me around the waist. "I'm sorry... I got the wrong idea and started to feel a little jealous."

It was ironic, really. I'd finally mastered Human Transformation to a level where I could have an open and honest conversation with Myria, but now I couldn't even face her. Well, I was glad I got to see her again, at least. Even if I had no idea why she was here in the first place...

I glanced at Myria again as she walked off into the distance. This might be the last time I'd ever see her. Thank you for everything, Myria. And I'm sorry.

I wonder if she still has a grudge against me...

"Excuse me... Sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry. Would you mind clearing the way?"

"C'mon, what's the big deal? I, the great Samael, have invited you to accompany me! This must be a great honor for you, yes? Congratulations!"

I turned my head back to see Myria being accosted by a strange man. He looked to be a pickup artist of some sort, although clearly not a very good one. His hair was a striking two-tone emerald and gray, and he had a long nose. His eyes, opened wide, had lengthy eyelashes that made him look somewhat young. Even so, his features were quite handsome. *Man, just looking at him irritates me.*

"Sorry, but I have to go! Meltia will be mad at me otherwise!" Myria moved to dodge past him, but he caught her wrist in his hand. She tried to shake it off, but the man's hand held firm.

"There, I've caught you now!"

Uh, this doesn't seem right...

Just as I was trying to decide whether to jump in and stop him or not, Myria's body jolted like it was struck by lightning, and she slumped into his waiting hands.

Huh?! M-Myria...?

Myria Milleania

Species: Earth-human

Status: Poison (Major), Paralyzed, Unconscious

Lv: 17/70

HP: 35/64

MP: 76/76

Oh! He poisoned her?! When? I didn't see that at all. What the hell is he thinking?!

The man spoke, looking at her with false concern. "Hey, what happened? Are you okay? Are you sick, or cursed, maybe? Here, let's get you somewhere you can rest for a while, why don't we?"

That bastard had officially crossed the line. I kicked off the ground and headed for them, ready to bash his face in.

"W-wait, Ouroboros! Calm yourself! That man, he's..." Volk shouted at my back as I ran into the crowd.

I knew how it looked; anyone who wasn't paying attention a second ago would just assume he was trying to look after a sick girl. If we made any unsavory moves, he might try to pin the blame on us.

That was why, in order to expose the poison he used and save Myria, I needed to knock him out with a single punch. He could potentially use a skill to block it, in which case I'd just have to beat him to a pulp and get him to confess. Regardless, I had to do something—there was no telling what kind of trouble Myria would be dragged into otherwise.

The man was supporting Myria's limp body, but he looked up at the sound of

my footsteps. His eyes narrowed quizzically as he caught sight of me, and then he raised his free arm in a lazy block.

Although using Human Transformation halved my attack power, I could still probably kill most humans with a single direct hit. *Guess I'll go easy on him, then.*

I leapt up and swung my fist down at the man's right cheek from midair.

Then I was knocked sideways—he'd blocked me.

"What ...?!"

Did I go too easy on him?! This guy can't just be your average pick-up artist. Is he an adventurer or something?

The man's leg swung at me in a kick as I hit the ground. He was faster than I expected, nearly as fast as Nell, the soldier from the Hungry Hunters. Was Alban just chock-full of super powerful adventurers or what? I moved my body away and blocked his kick with my arm.



"Hng!" I blocked it, but it hurt. The arm that took the kick, and my abdomen that took the impact, both throbbed with pain. *This guy's pretty strong. But isn't he kind of a speedy type too?* His stats were easily much higher than those of Tolemann's troops.

"Tch! Impressive. You managed to block my kick..." I saw the frustration in his eyes. I yanked his leg hard, sending him hurtling into the air and away from me. As I did, I snatched Myria and pulled her into my arms.

The man twisted his body in midair to pick up speed and landed much faster than I expected. As soon as his feet hit the ground, he was in a fighting stance.

"What do you think you're doing all of a sudden...? Is that girl a friend of yours?" he murmured, fingers resting lightly on the sword at his waist. "She just collapsed out of the blue, and I was trying to help. I didn't do anything wrong, but after all this, I don't care whether it was just a misunderstanding. You've pissed me off, and I'm going to kill you."

Ugh! I was trying to finish him off quickly, but I didn't expect him to be able to hold out this long.

I looked around. We were in broad daylight, on a side street that was a little less busy, but we were still in public. Passersby were taking the long way around to avoid getting caught in the middle of our fight, and we'd assembled a small crowd of onlookers.

If we kept this up, we were going to make a huge scene. I couldn't fight and protect Myria at the same time. I set her down against the wall, then stood in front of her and glared at the man.

"I'll finish you with a single thrust!" he declared, then drew his sword, leaned back, and came straight at me.

He was fast. Not because of a skill, but because he had high stats. If it was a skill, it would have a limited number of uses, meaning I could just wait until he ran out. But with a stats-based battle, I didn't have that luxury. But although he

was an exceptionally fast and high-level human, he was still just a human.

And I was faster.

The man pulled his arm back, then fired a fierce stab at my chest. I ducked to avoid it.

"What...?! O-oi!" The man shouted in astonishment at my easy evasion. "You petulant brat! Keep still!"

I had a chance to counterattack, but I decided to let him go for his second strike instead. As he flew forward, I grabbed him by the wrist and forcefully pulled him down to the ground. His sword fell out of his hand with a clatter, and then his cheek met the paved street.

"Hrg...! D-damn it!" the man spat, glaring up at me.

It was no use. He'd lost his weapon, and I had both his arms held down. He was stronger than I expected, but he shouldn't be able to put up a fight anymore. All I had to do now was make him confess.

I was about to start my interrogation when something touched my chest. "... Huh?"

"You let your guard down, you fool!" The man's arm reached out and slashed at my chest with five lethally sharp claws... But that couldn't be right. I had both of his arms held tight. How'd he manage to escape?

"You will die suffering. Output, seventy percent!" A reddish-purple color began to seep through my veins from the point where the man's claws touched my chest. At the same time, my chest started to burn with pain.

Crap...he got me. What is this stuff, poison? I've still got no clue how he poisoned Myria, though. Maybe that was a skill?

I lifted my head, still holding my chest, and a hardened fist flew straight at my face. It sliced through my cheeks, and I spat a bit of blood from my mouth.

"Damn, you're a tough one, aren't ya? All right then, one more hit should do it...!" Just before the second punch connected, Volk leapt through the air

toward me. He smacked me with the flat side of his great sword and sent me flying toward Allo, who managed to catch me despite her small frame.

N-no way... I lost? Even though being in human form halves my stats and skills, I never thought a mere human would beat me. If Volk hadn't saved me, I might've been in some serious trouble—or worse, my Human Transformation might've lifted.

The man looked warily at Volk, who gave a slight bow. For a dragon hunter who'd come charging up to me like a bullet, he was being surprisingly demure. I got the feeling that the man he faced was someone very famous.

"...Forgive me, I believe there has been a misunderstanding. Sir Samael, Sword of Death and one of Ardesia's Three Cavaliers, would you please stand down?" Volk asked.

Wait...Cavalier? Then he's...one of the three knights that report directly to the princess, who I'm trying to gather intel about?!

Now that I thought about it, he'd introduced himself as Samael when he approached Myria. And that was the name of one of the Three Cavaliers whom Volk told me about. I'd been planning to avoid contact with the three knights to avoid drawing suspicion, but it looked like I'd just taken matters into my own hands.

No way. I'd officially lost the right to laugh at Partner for being reckless... But even if I'd known who this guy was, I wouldn't have just let him take Myria away.

Well, whatever. I had to do what I had to do. Since he was here, it was a good chance to check his status screen... I'd put off checking it earlier because I was angry and just assumed he'd be a weak adventurer, but now that he was focused on Volk, I had all the time in the world.

Samael Saberal

Species: Poison Ruler

Lv: 78/85

HP: 683/725

MP: 278/317

Attack: 547

Defense: 361

Magic: 410

Agility: 492

Rank: B+

Special Skills:

Slime Body: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 6

Poison Belt: Lv 8

Grecian Language: Lv 4

Tentacles: Lv 6

Swordsman: Lv 6

Resistance Skills:

Poison Immunity: Lv —

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 8

Curse Resistance: Lv 7

Confusion Resistance: Lv 4

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Color Change: Lv 6

Poison Touch: Lv 7

Poison Tongue: Lv 8

Double Poison: Lv 8

Poison: Lv 7

Neutralize Poison: Lv 6

Diseased Breath: Lv 6

Tentacle Lash: Lv 5

Gravity: Lv 4

Regenerate: Lv 5

Paralyze: Lv 7

Sleepis: Lv 5

Slow: Lv 4

Confuse: Lv 3

Poison Clone: Lv 4

Title Skills:

Piece of the King: Lv —

Final Evolution: Lv —

Tenacious: Lv 6

Poison Master: Lv 7

Demon King's Underling: Lv —

Three Cavaliers: Lv —

Sword of Death: Lv —

Lust Demon: Lv —

Wait, so he's not actually human?!

The name "Poison Ruler" didn't ring a bell, but he had Slime Body... Did that mean he was some kind of slime?

By a random stroke of chance, I'd managed to find one of the guys I was looking for, and everything I needed to know, all at once. It was like Lilyxila had said: The princess had been replaced by the Demon King.

But...a slime? Really? An image of the gross, sticky Forte Slime that had been working behind the scenes during the incident in Myria's village came to my mind.

If the Forte Slime was the Demon King, then I'd understand the need for all this secrecy. Maybe it was summoning all the adventurers for more than just experience? It might be looking for rare skills too. But I was pretty sure I beat the Forte Slime by smashing him into the surface of a lake at the bottom of a canyon, so...

"We apologize for attacking and accusing you," Volk stated, standing in front of me as if to protect me. "This conflict is good for neither of our reputations. Let us end it here."

Without a word, Samael lifted his sword and pointed it straight at Volk.

Volk nodded and readied his great sword as well. "Very well; it seems I have no choice. If you believe you can defeat me in swordplay, then prove it."

"W-wait, stop! Volk, stand down!" I leapt up to try and restrain him.

Although this street was less busy, we were still in the Royal Capital. More and more people were coming to see what was going on. There was no reason to drag this on any longer. Even if we managed to take the Cavalier down, it would only make the Demon King suspicious. I took too long to figure out what the Cavalier was, and I got served my just deserts before I had a chance to fight for real, but everything had turned out okay in the end. If I'd beaten him and

exposed his true identity, there would've been a massive panic.

Plus...Volk might not be able to beat Samael. While he had the physical strength to win, Samael had all kinds of status effect skills at his disposal. Volk, with his low magic stat, would only be able to take him down in a proper fight. If Samael wasn't planning to let this slide, then the only thing we could do was run away.

I'm taking Myria and getting out of here, I decided. If Samael kept coming after us, then I'd fight him to buy her some time.

Samael had used Poison Touch on me, but because my stats were so high, the poison status effect didn't seem to be bothering me much. I'd be able to buy time in hand-to-hand combat; even as a human, my body had enough physical strength to hold up against another human. That way, Allo and the others could escape in the meantime.

It wasn't like we couldn't beat him. Samael had slipped through my fingers once, but now I knew he must've used Slime Body to make his arms thin enough to slide out of my hands. I wasn't going to fall for the same trick twice. It'd be an issue if the other two Cavaliers or some of the Demon King's minions were here, but the capital was a big city. Samael had obviously been acting on his own when he started bothering Myria, so he probably wasn't planning to meet up with any of his friends anytime soon.

"I won't back down." Volk smiled. "I have always longed for the chance to meet one of the Three Cavaliers in combat. If the enemy does not wish to withdraw, then there is no reason for me to back down either. Whether I fail and die, or defeat you and am chased from the city, I will have no regrets. Just leave that girl alone."

C-come on... I appreciate the rousing speech, but I don't want Volk to cause a scene or get seriously injured or something.

"Now, have you decided which one of you is going to die today?"

"Sir Samael! Are you out here causing trouble again?" A voice echoed from

the far end of the street, behind Samael. We turned to see a group of men dressed similarly to Samael rushing toward us, swords strapped to their waists. There were six of them in all. For a second, I was alarmed that enemy reinforcements had arrived, but then I realized they assumed Samael was in the wrong.

"Did you forget that Princess Crys told you not to go around picking fights with strangers? Dame Mephisto is furious!" The man standing at the front of the group of six put his hand on the shoulder of a girl with purple hair, who was standing slightly behind him. She was the shortest of the group, probably in her mid-teens. The others were in their twenties or thirties, so she stood out. The girl stared at Samael with a face devoid of expression. She glanced at Volk, then tugged at the man's sleeve and went back to judging Samael.

The man dropped to one knee and turned his head toward her to listen. The girl whispered something to him, and then he nodded and stood.

"And who do we have here? Is that Lord Volk, whom Princess Crys has also invited to her party? What were you thinking, picking a fight here? Dame Mephisto is quite angry, you know!"

"Mephisto"...? Oh, that was the name of one of the Three Cavaliers. The girl from the slums who Princess Crys recruited, right? She must be a monster too.

"Mephisto...would you leave me be for now? I am not foolish enough to do anything rash in such a dire predicament." Samael said, glancing at the unconscious Myria.

Mephisto shook her head. "Sir Rogueheil is angry too," she said in a small, hoarse voice. Samael's shoulders trembled slightly at the name.

"Tch! Just like him to act all high and mighty." Samael looked over at us and then returned his sword to its sheath. "It seems your lives have been spared for now."

Is Samael backing off...? I wondered in astonishment.

"Lord Volk!" The man standing in front of Mephisto bowed his head. "I beg your forgiveness for the inconvenience Sir Samael has caused you! Please do not take any offense; I will have Sir Samael disciplined by Sir Rogueheil to a degree befitting his breach of hospitality."

Suddenly curious, I checked the man's status.

Species: Knight Slime

Status: Normal

Lv: 49/60

HP: 317/317

MP: 266/266

A knight slime, huh...? Rank C+. I didn't expect even the random soldier grunts to have somewhat high ranks. Beyond that, knight slimes were specialized in attacking, with less magic and more attack and agility. To top it all off, they also had a set of tricky and versatile skills.

Considering even Adoff had only barely managed to take down rank C— red ogre ants at his very best, even a top-rate adventurer would have a pretty tough time fighting one-on-one against this slime soldier. With how many monsters I'd seen on the street so far, there had to be all kinds of monsters holed up in the castle. This felt like the saint's worst-case scenario.

Based on the conversation I'd had with Lilyxila, I'd assumed that we'd have the upper hand against the Demon King, but in reality, he was probably way over-leveled. If Samael was a B+, then the Demon King was basically guaranteed to be a rank A— or higher; at worst, he could be as strong as the Dragon King, Eldia.

And...I didn't know why, but if I thought about that slime and my Divine Voice, I couldn't help but be reminded of that Forte Slime I fought in Noah's forest.

But that thing was dead. I killed it and got experience points for it. But if the Demon King was the Forte Slime, or something like it, we were in trouble. That slime had the ability to steal skills, which it definitely took advantage of while we fought. It held its own against me, even though I was a rank B— and it was only a rank D at the time. If that thing was a rank A now, I couldn't even imagine how powerful it would be.

I assumed the Mephisto girl was similar to Samael in terms of strength, but I opted to check to be sure.

Mephisto Mercalua

Species: Dual Slime

Lv: 71/85

HP: 584/584

MP: 427/427

Attack: 313

Defense: 326

Magic: 497

Agility: 511

Rank: B+

Special Skills:

Slime Body: Lv —

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 4

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 5

Tentacles: Lv 3

Swordsman: Lv 5

Stealth: Lv 7

Psychic Sense: Lv 2

Fly: Lv 4

Twinheads: Lv —

Split Personality: Lv —

Mutual Understanding: Lv 5

Resistance Skills:

Poison Immunity: Lv —

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 8

Curse Resistance: Lv 7

Confusion Resistance: Lv 4

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Color Change: Lv 7

Poison: Lv 3

Gravidon: Lv 6

Hi-Rest: Lv 3

Death: Lv 4

Ooze Bomb: Lv 7

Illusion: Lv 5

Confuse: Lv 5

Diseased Breath: Lv 4

Tentacle Lash: Lv 5

Mucus Cage: Lv 4

Regenerate: Lv 4

Detach: Lv —

Title Skills:

Piece of the King: Lv —

Final Evolution: Lv —

Follower of the Demon King: Lv —

Three Cavaliers: Lv —

Sword of the Mythical Butterfly: Lv —

I knew it. A rank B+...Dual Slime? I wasn't familiar with the species, but judging by the skills she had, I pegged her as more of a trickster type opponent. As I'd expected, she was no match for the Poison Ruler, Samael.

Mephisto caught my eyes on her and glared back at me. I quickly looked away. She seemed somewhat uncomfortable, but she still left alongside Samael and the others.

I picked Myria up. Samael had maintained that Myria had just fallen and he was simply trying to help her out. He only bothered to apologize to Volk because he was invited here as a guest by the princess; he'd barely even looked in my direction.

I couldn't use Hi-Rest in my human form. I needed to find someone who could cure the poison or use some kind of recovery magic. If worse came to worst, I'd have to take her with me from the capital and make Partner heal her.

Thanks to our run-in with the Three Cavaliers, I'd learned more than enough on this trip; enough to know that the Demon King definitely wasn't someone I could ignore or leave to someone else to defeat.

While I held Myria, I looked around at all of the onlookers. As soon as I started meeting some of their eyes, the crowd began to disperse. They'd probably just wanted to get in on the drama from afar and not get pulled into the middle of it.

But a middle-aged man caught my gaze and peeled away from his spot in the crowd to approach me. "Pardon me... Would you like me to treat her? I used to run an apothecary, and I am something of a white mage. In exchange, would you be willing to have a few words with me inside my home?"

Part 4

ALONG WITH MYRIA, Volk, Allo, and Naiko, hurried to the home of the former apothecary owner who'd offered to heal Myria. The man, whose name was Modi, had used Rest to heal Myria on the spot. If he also had a way to cure the poison, then her life would be out of danger.

Modi's house was close by; he'd apparently come running out when he heard the commotion. When we entered, we were greeted by a dusty counter and shelves lined with medicine bottles, speaking to his home's history as an apothecary.

At the far end of the room, a girl with brown hair sat up in her chair, bewildered by our sudden appearance. She looked like she'd been on the verge of falling asleep.

"Forgive me for not introducing myself properly earlier. I am Modi, and the girl sitting over there is my daughter, Luon. Luon, look sharp; we have guests," he called out to her at the back of the room, but Luon simply nodded without looking at him. I tried to greet her with a slight bow of my head, but I got no response either.

"So is that young girl a friend of yours?" Modi asked, closing the door to the back room and turning his attention to Myria, whom I'd carried here on my back. It seemed like he was trying to divert the conversation away from Luon.

"U-um, no, well...I just saw that man harassing her, and I knew something was up, so I jumped in to save her."

I could feel Allo's eyes staring a hole through my back, but I didn't pay her any heed.

The last time I saw Myria, I'd been a Plague Dragon. I recognized her, but even if I wasn't in my human form, she wouldn't have been able to recognize me.

Besides, that was when I killed Gregory, threatened Myria, and then left the village. If she finds out who I really am, then my only choice would be to run.

"Ah, I... I see. That was brave of you. But I would caution against getting involved with the Three Cavaliers any more in the future. They are the subjects of some rather...unsavory rumors. You are travelers, yes? Then allow me to offer a word of advice: Never step foot inside the castle, even if you are invited by the princess herself."

My main priority right now was to make sure Myria was safe, but beyond that...it seemed like I might be able to pick up some more information about the Three Cavaliers from a truly unexpected source. I glanced at the bed in the corner of the room and gave a questioning look to Modi, who nodded. "Yes, put the girl in the bed and let her rest."

I gave Volk a look to stop him from going over and carrying the bed to us, then walked over to it to tuck Myria in. As I leaned over her to adjust the covers, our faces came a little close to each other's, and I suddenly remembered when the two of us chased the Little Rock Dragon back to the village. After a few moments, I realized I'd stopped moving; I hurriedly finished arranging the covers and stepped away from the bed to let her sleep.

...I should probably make sure I'm out of here before she wakes up.

Modi pricked Myria's arm with a small needle before drawing some of her blood into a clear glass vial.

To it, he added a pale blue solution he grabbed from one of the shelves. As he mixed, her blood began to sizzle and bubble, and the solution turned a bright red. "So it *is* poison," Modi muttered, then went back to his shelves to retrieve what looked like a stone, a root of some kind, and a few other things.

"Will you be able to cure her?" I asked.

"Yes, without a doubt. The poison is powerful, but it does not carry any nasty side effects, treatment inhibitors, or curses. With time and treatment, she will be healed. But how in the world was she poisoned in broad daylight? If it was

the Poison skill, you'd be able to tell what was happening from a distance."

I was confident that it was the Poison Ruler's Poison Touch skill that did it, but I thought Modi might think it was odd that I knew that, so I kept my mouth shut.

Modi ground each ingredient into a fine powder with a mortar and pestle, then divided them into separate piles and weighed them on a scale. Next, he sprinkled the ingredients onto the toxic red solution little by little, adjusting the amounts with his fingers as he worked. The solution began to change colors until it eventually returned to its original pale blue hue, with Myria's blood swirling around inside it. Modi nodded in satisfaction, took out a small piece of paper, and placed the powder on it. I didn't think it was anything harmful, but I took a glance at it, just to be safe.

Greater Antidote: D+ Value

A medicine that cures the Poison status effect. Also restores a small amount of HP.

Because it is custom-made, it is highly effective against the specific poison in question.

A high-end product made by a professional.

Oooh, nice! Guess Modi wasn't a former apothecary owner for nothing. I let out a sigh of relief—I could finally relax.

Modi poured the medicine into Myria's mouth and tilted her chin up. After a few minutes, color began to come back to her face. A quick status check revealed that her poison level had dropped to (Slight).

Once he'd determined that Myria's condition was stable, Modi walked to the window and gazed outside. After a few moments, he looked back at me and began to speak. "Luon...used to be the poster child for this shop. She often met

up with an adventurer who had come to visit Alban, and they became fast friends."

Luon...the quiet girl from before? She'd had a strange air about her, but it seemed like she had a good reason for being so quiet.

"However," Modi continued, "the adventurer was invited to one of Princess Crys's parties, and he never visited the shop again after that. I told her that he must have planned to leave Alban after the party from the very beginning, but Luon insisted that he would come again... I don't know if the two of them were in love or not, but I truly thought he was just toying with her."

Never showed up again after Princess Crys's party, huh? I was running with the assumption that the princess was targeting wandering adventurers to invite to her castle and harvest for experience. Under that assumption, the adventurer Modi was talking about had likely met that grisly fate.

"Luon went to the castle herself and made a huge scene. She questioned every person she came across in the castle, and she even joined a band of people who were dissatisfied with the state of the royal family. I told her to stop, that it was unbecoming of her to act that way...and then one day, I received word that she'd been taken into custody by the church. I went to get her, but she barely spoke a word to me—hardly even responded at all. It's been...about a week now since then."

"What ... ?!"

"I was later told that she'd suddenly collapsed while receiving counsel from one of the Three Cavaliers—Rogueheil—as well as the church bishop. I'd convinced myself that it was shock that caused her to collapse...but in truth, I still had a hard time believing it to be true. Then I heard about the disturbance that occurred earlier today and found a girl who'd collapsed as soon as she was touched by Samael, another of the Three Cavaliers. I couldn't help but wonder whether these Cavaliers were...truly human or not. And I just... I wanted to tell someone else, *anyone* else, so they would know..." Modi broke off, his face

etched with sadness and regret.

Strange status effects? Memory loss? That was exactly what the Forte Slime... No, it couldn't be! It couldn't! That slime was dead!

"Sorry about this, Modi, but...!" I ran toward the back door Modi closed earlier and wrenched it open.

"Ah, wait, traveler! I don't want to cause my daughter any undue stress right now!"

Beyond the door, the girl sat still in her chair with a doll-like expression. I wasn't surprised to see that she only gave me a quick glance when I burst into the room.

More importantly, what's her status screen like?

Luon Lexia

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 4/45

HP: 14/14

MP: 14/14

Attack: 8

Defense: 8+1

Magic: 14

Agility: 15

Equipment:

Clothing: Basic Dress: F-

Special Skills:

Resistance Skills:
Normal Skills:
Title Skills:
Former Apothecary: Lv —
Former Poster Girl: Lv —

Nothing.

There was nothing.

Sure, I'd met humans who didn't have any normal skills or resistance skills before. But I'd only ever met one human before who didn't even have a language skill: Doz, whose skills had been stolen by a slime.

A chill ran down my spine. It's them. It's the slimes.

"Traveler...?" Modi looked at me curiously.

Luon tilted her head. She looked like she wanted to ask why I was crying, if only she'd been able to speak.

As I'd feared, Luon was in pretty much the same state I'd found Doz in; the only difference was that he'd had some sort of additional status condition affecting him.



The slimes were targeting wandering adventurers to steal their skills and experience points, and they were silencing anyone who started spreading dangerous rumors by robbing them of their sanity. There was no use denying it at that point: The Forte Slime was alive. I must've been mistaken before. That was the only possible explanation.

I couldn't leave that thing roaming around unchecked. It was more arrogant than Tolemann and eviler than the hero.

As I stood in stunned silence at Luon's stats, Modi walked up to me. "Wh-what is it? Do you know something about my daughter?" he asked, face pale.

I bit my lip, at a complete loss for words. I had no idea what to say to him.

"Mm, mmmgh..." The silence was broken by a soft groan from Myria.

Ack! She woke up way faster than I thought she would! I gave a hurried bow to Modi and tried to hurry Volk, Allo, and Nightmare along with my eyes. "Sorry, but we're on a tight schedule, so we'd better get going. Thank you so much for saving Myr—I mean, that sweet girl. Take care." I announced my intentions, leaving no room to argue, and made a beeline for the door. A brief moment later, Volk, Allo, and Nightmare followed.

As I left, I heard Myria's voice from the bed. "Wh... Where am I?"

"A-ahh, so you've come to. You were... Well, you suddenly collapsed in the street, and those kind folks brought you to my home to be treated."

Modi was talking to Myria, but his voice was a little louder than before, like he was trying to hint that he wanted me to stay and speak with her face-to-face.

"O-oh, really? My mind is so fuzzy... I remember talking to someone from the castle, but nothing after that. Thank you for looking after me. Ah, and I'd like to express my gratitude to my saviors as well..."

I really had no intention of stopping. But when I put my hand on the handle of the front door, I glanced behind me, and my eyes met Myria's.

Her pupils widened slightly. "Um, sorry, but do I...know you from

somewhere?"

I turned my head again and left Modi's former apothecary without another word.

We walked back through the dense crowds of the Royal Capital as I pondered my next move. I don't have much magic left after using Human Transformation this long. If I want to make it back to Alban Mine in time, I need to get going now.

Lilyxila and I had promised to meet up and take down the Demon King in three days' time—meaning that tomorrow, I was supposed to storm the castle and expose the princess's nasty plot. But the Demon King seemed to be much more powerful than either of us had expected, and the castle had essentially become a slime stronghold.

The Three Cavaliers—the Demon King's top soldiers—were all likely rank B+...
They were monsters that, from a human standpoint, could be considered catastrophic all on their own. I wasn't sure whether we could hold our own against them with just me, Allo, Lilyxila, and her spirit servants.

To be honest, things weren't looking good for Lilyxila in particular. I needed to get in touch with her and give her time to regroup for our attack.

Allo was rank B+ too, like Samael. She also had her Debuff Immunity skill. If she could level it up high enough in time, the Poison Ruler's skills wouldn't have any effect on her. Plus, I had to make Lilyxila understand that this was not the time to be concerned about honor. If she could bring soldiers with her from the Holy Land of Lialum, we'd stand a much better chance against all the slimes in the castle. Then it'd be up to me and Lilyxila to take out the slime behind this entire plot once and for all.

And even if we made it through the castle...that was only half the battle.

I fought the Forte Slime when I was rank B— and it was still only a rank D. Now, it was likely at least a rank B+, if not higher.

The longer we dragged this out, the more adventurers we'd lose to the slimes and the more victims like Luon there'd be. But if we rushed things, there was no way we'd come out of this victorious. I would've loved to storm the castle right that second and tear the Demon King to pieces, but I was definitely low on magic from our jaunt around town. If I went on a rampage, the Three Cavaliers would kill me, and then I wouldn't even be able to fight my true target. That was the reality of the situation.

We needed time to prepare. Waiting until tomorrow wasn't enough—we had to build up our strength and then join forces with Lilyxila to take down the Demon King. That was the only way we had any chance of succeeding.

Lilyxila would definitely agree with me once she heard what I'd found out, at least. I was sure she wouldn't force us to go ahead with our plans.

As I thought this, though, I felt a sudden, intense sense of foreboding, an overwhelming feeling that I was overlooking something important.

"Volk...when is the princess's party?" I asked.

"Tomorrow. What, did you think I wouldn't go? I am fully aware of the risks, thanks to the information from that old man. But they sound like an apt challenge for yours truly. If they intend to feast on me, I shall make a feast of my own! Besides, the legendary swordsman I seek may show his face around there."

"It's tomorrow...?" My heart sank. Tomorrow, all of the adventurers who'd gathered here by the Demon King would be killed.

"Would you be willing to consider not going?" I asked. "If you gave me a hand, we could probably take down one of the Three Cavaliers. To be honest...the Demon King seems to be much stronger than I thought he'd be. I need some more time to prepare before we attack."

Volk's stats made him comparable to rank B+ monster. The only issue was that he had a really straightforward and honest fighting style, which meant he might not be great against monsters with a lot of tricks up their sleeves... Still,

he had what it took to fight them on equal footing.

"Forgive me, but I must go, if only to confront Howgley. No matter what else takes place, there will be a man there who is fit to challenge me. And if our enemy is truly a villain who aims to wreak havoc on the entire country, my honor will not allow me to simply flee."

I was silent. Could I really sit back and watch all those humans walk into the slimes' trap, knowing they'd die? Was I...really okay with that?

"If you're worried, why not come along? Each guest is allowed to bring one companion. With you along, we may even be able to snap the Demon King's neck before he knows what's coming."

They were allowed to take a plus one? I'd assumed they'd only allow the people who were invited to go, to avoid suspicion... But maybe it was the other way around? By allowing guests to bring the person they're closest to, they could eliminate them both at once and reduce the chances of anyone coming to look for them the way Luon did.

I thought for a moment, then shook my head. The slime I knew wouldn't be taken by surprise like that. Besides, he was a coward. And with so many regeneration skills, a single surprise hit wouldn't be enough to take him out. The deciding factor in our fight wouldn't be HP, it'd be MP.

"I...need to get back to Alban Mine. Sorry, Volk, but I'm not coming with you tomorrow."

"Very well. Then I suppose we'll say our farewells here and now. Take the steel horse I left stabled; you can use it to ride back to the mine." With that, Volk turned on his heel and walked off. I watched his retreating back as it grew smaller with distance, then eventually disappeared from sight.

Part 5

Our Information-Gathering adventure in Alban over, I headed for Alban Mine with Allo and Nightmare atop our two steel horses. As we approached the mine, I ended my Human Transformation and let the steel horses go.

The ride gave me a chance to hash out my plans. First, I decided, I'd focus on leveling Allo and the others up a little bit, and then I'd find a way to swell our ranks of allies to build a force that could take on the Demon King. I'd avoided using Fake Life before now out of personal preference, but I felt like I wouldn't have the luxury to be so discerning this time around—this fight would be on a different level than anything we'd faced before.

But it wasn't like I didn't have any reservations. All of poor Luon's skills had been erased by the slimes, and it was hard to tell whether she still had any sense of self left at all. Her fate was likely happening to others all throughout Alban.

That slime was just creating more and more victims in order to prevent his crimes from being exposed. He didn't care if he destroyed the princess's reputation and social status, and he probably had no intention of taking things any further than this either. His only concern was how long he could keep the current situation going.

It pained me to leave Volk to his fate at the princess's party. We hadn't worked together for long, but I didn't dislike the guy. He was a sword-obsessed weirdo, and he attacked me on first sight when we met, and sometimes I wondered whether anything I said was getting through to him...but he was also surprisingly kind and attentive. He had a strong sense of self-worth, and he was nice to be around.

If I let things play out the way they were going, Volk would most likely die. All the adventurers who were invited to the party tomorrow would as well, and all

the experience and skills they'd acquired over the course of their lives would become property of the Demon King. I knew that, and I was going to let them die.

("Ugh, you're such a pain.") Partner's thoughts drifted through my head. I looked over to see her giving me a stunned stare. ("If you're just going to keep stewing about it, then go take them out and get it over with. It doesn't matter how many small fry there are. If we drag our main enemy out into the open, that pretentious Lilyxila lady will finish him off, right?")

I wanted to kick Partner for acting like it was that easy, but she had a point. No matter how many rank C monsters the Demon King had under his command, they were sure to seem rather cute compared to the avyssos nest we'd fought. The Three Cavaliers too. They'd be a tough match for Allo or Nightmare, but since Volk was already going to be there, I could have him help me fight them.

As for the Demon King, if I could just drag him out of hiding, Lilyxila and Seraphim could kill him. Of course, I'd help too. And if we weren't enough to take him down, Lilyxila still had her secret weapon: her second Spirit Servant, Beelzebub the Beast King.

But all that was the best-case scenario. In reality, things were bound to go south. There were a lot of risks and unknowns, and a lot of dangers for Allo and the rest.

I'd have loved to go beat the crap out of that slime jerk hiding in the center of the castle right now, but my hide wasn't the only one I had to worry about. Allo, Nightmare, and everyone else's lives were on the line—if I lost, there wouldn't be anyone else to stand in his way. One reckless misstep, and the saint might be killed once she got involved, leaving no one to stop the world from falling into the hands of the slime.

The stakes were simply too high.

Partner sighed and shook her head. ("Come on. You're being way too uptight.")

As we neared Alban Mine, we saw a glowing white dragon standing on top of the mountain, looking down at us. It was Seraphim, the Holy Dragon of Salvation and Saint Lilyxila's Spirit Servant.

But I didn't see Lilyxila, which meant she was likely in Alban already and had sent Seraphim out as her messenger. She was probably under the impression that I'd made all the preparations necessary to attack and bring down the Demon King tomorrow.

Well, sorry, but our chances of coming out of that alive are way too slim right now.

Seraphim turned to me and reached out with Telepathy. You are here, two-headed Evil Dragon. I have come to tell you that the saint has already made her way to the Royal Capital.

So Seraphim was here as a messenger for Lilyxila. I knew it. It was impressive that the Spirit Servant could still function so far from its owner... What a useful skill.

(Tomorrow,) Seraphim announced proudly, *(the princess of Ardesia invites a new batch of adventurers into the castle. Holy Knight Alphis will infiltrate their ranks in disguise to sneak into the castle. The princess is not often seen roaming the castle, but she will make an appearance in the parlor room during this time, which will be a perfect opportunity for us. This greatly reduces the risk of her escaping if we fail to kill her. That is your target destination. The saint said that she leaves any further detailed actions up to you.*

Jeez, Saint Lilyxila was nice and humble toward me, so why were Seraphim and the Holy Knight Alphis so arrogant? Maybe it was because they were both women who called themselves holy while I was an evil Ouroboros who toyed with life and death?

Well, I couldn't imagine Alphis or Seraphim defying their master's orders and smiting me or anything. Their attitudes didn't feel great, but as long as they didn't impact our joint mission, it wasn't worth addressing right now. More

importantly, I had to shoot down Lilyxila and Seraphim's proposed plan while I still had the chance. I closed my eyes and bowed my head.

<...Hmm? What is it, Evil Dragon?>

I'm sorry, I know this was the most convenient plan for you, but... Just as I was about to send a thought to Seraphim to ask her to delay our plans, the reason I'd had such an uncomfortable feeling all this time finally clicked, and my eyes widened in fear and realization.

W-wait a minute!

<Wh...what is it?>

I kept my head down, thinking frantically. What Seraphim had just said about the princess planning to attack adventurers she'd invited to the party jogged my memory.

Meltia, the swordswoman who was with Myria, mentioned how excited she was about being invited to the princess's party. I didn't think much of it at the time, and then I had to deal with the entire Samael conflict right after, so it had slipped my mind entirely.

I'd been under the impression that the slimes wanted experience and skills from only their carefully chosen adventurers. Because of that, I'd assumed that they'd only invite powerful adventurers with decent levels so that they didn't have to bother killing a bunch of weaklings along the way. But I should've given my assumptions another thought when Volk told me he was allowed to bring a companion.

That meant there was a good chance that Myria would be on her way to the castle tomorrow as Meltia's plus one. If that happened, then she probably wouldn't make it back alive.

No, wait, Myria was just attacked by Samael. It wouldn't make sense for her to go to the castle tomorrow when she'd collapsed the day before; she might just take it easy and nap the day away.

But I just... I had a bad feeling about this. Changing my mind at the last minute, after all these foreboding coincidences...

(It seems you have some concerns?) Seraphim asked with a probing look.

The Telepathy skill allowed Seraphim to send thoughts to someone else, but it let her read their thoughts as well. If I wasn't careful, she'd catch on to what I was thinking; judging by the way she was looking at me, she probably already picked up on some of it.

N-no, it's just...I'm worried that a girl I know might be coming to the princess's party tomorrow, so I'm a little preoccupied. I sent the thought toward her and looked away.

(...I see.) The suspicion faded from Seraphim's eyes. This excuse lined up with the information she'd gathered from my thoughts, so she must've decided it checked out. Somehow, I'd managed to outsmart her Telepathy.

If I hid my intentions from Seraphim here, I'd only end up getting the saint's group involved, and we'd be flying into enemy territory with an incomplete force. Their lives, souls, and ultimate mission were at stake. Deceiving them to make them cooperate with us felt disingenuous. I knew all of that, but I kept my mouth shut all the same.

Soon enough, Seraphim kicked off from the top of the mine and began to fly toward Alban. I watched her depart in a daze, my mind racked with guilt about not telling her anything. But there was nothing I could do to change it now.

This issue was way over my head. This was why I didn't want to bring any personal feelings into it... Why, just why did it have to turn out this way? If I'd realized sooner that Myria might be involved, I could've persuaded her not to go! And if that didn't work, I should've stopped her, even if it meant kidnapping her or giving her a serious injury.

As I raised my head and stared at the direction Seraphim had flown off, my dear neighbor on my left gave a short, mocking "Graaah!" I turned to look at Partner, who was grinning like she was enjoying herself.

("C'mon, it's fine, right? They obviously just see us as a useful asset they'll cut ties with if we fail. Don't be so gloomy. It's not like you to worry about someone who'd just throw you away, even if they end up sacrificing themselves. Don't overexert yourself trying to save them.")

But that's not what I'm worried about... If I go there to try and fight, I won't be able to get through the slimes without help from Allo and the rest. But if I take them with me, I'll expose them to all kinds of dangers...

"If you're going, then I'm going too, Master Dragon," Allo declared, looking up at my face. "I'd follow you anywhere!"

Nightmare tilted her head in exasperation, then spat a web from her mouth and climbed on top of Partner's head. Clearly, she wasn't going to help me, but she'd go if Partner was going.

I see how it is.

Treant, who'd apparently come all the way from Alban Mine to greet us, flexed its trunk like it was puffing out its chest.

U-uh, Treant?! I appreciate it, but your slow movement speed and inability to disquise yourself will make it hard for you to even get close to Alban...

(Of course, I will also do everything in my power to keep you safe, my Master.)

D-did Treant just talk?! It'd gotten the Telepathy skill while we were on the Island at the Edge of the World, but it had never used it until now. Nightmare, Partner, and I all looked at Treant in shock. Treant turned its head around, embarrassed, and went into pretend tree mode.

Allo, however, didn't seem surprised, and just watched Treant with interest. Treant, have you been secretly talking to Allo? Actually, why even make it a secret in the first place?

"Graaah!" Partner lightly headbutted me under the chin as I stared at Treant.

Urk! Wh-what was that for?!

("You finally cheered up a little. I have to listen to all your mental ramblings,

and they're getting me down too. Don't bite off more than you can chew on your own, okay?")

Oh, Partner...!

My mind was made up. If I didn't make my move tomorrow, I'd regret abandoning Myria, Volk, and the rest of the partygoers for the rest of my life. If I'd known that from the very start, I would've realized that even if it was reckless, and I might fail, it was better to try and save people than do nothing at all.

Tomorrow, I was going to settle the score with the slimes once and for all.

Part 6

O NCE WE GOT BACK to Alban Mine, I immediately started leveling Allo and Nightmare up. The liquid metal magiatite heart, who I'd dubbed Grandpa Magiatite, came along.

Unfortunately, because Treant couldn't turn into a human, it couldn't come with us to defeat the Demon King. This leveling session would just be a chance for it to earn some extra experience. Treant looked very sad that it would be left out again, but there was nothing we could do. If I wanted to bring it along, I'd have to fly all the way to the castle in dragon form with it on my back and start our assault that way. That wouldn't just alert the Demon King to our plans, it would pit all of the Royal Capital's forces against me as well. I was worried that if that happened, Lilyxila would be forced to face off against me. All things considered, Treant, who was slow and clumsy by nature, presented too much of a danger to bring with us for this fight. There just wasn't enough of a reason to justify it.

Allo patted Treant on one of its branches comfortingly, while Nightmare spat spider silk onto the ground, stressing Treant out even more. *Partner...*Nightmare won't listen to me, so could you please make her behave?

("Why? It's fine. You're so fussy. It's just a joke,") she replied, exasperated.

It might be a joke right now, but this is how bullying starts, you know.

Nightmare may be all big and evolved, but she's still a kid at heart, right? We need to teach her right from wrong.

But my attempt at convincing her fell on deaf ears.

...Fine. Guess it's up to me, then.

Allo, who'd been watching the exchange between Partner and me from the side, held Treant's branch and glared at Nightmare. "Nightmare, stop it. Treant doesn't like that."

Nightmare did a whole-body flinch at Allo's angry tone. After a few moments, she reluctantly lowered her head at Treant. Judging by her meek obedience, she seemed to respect Allo. Treant's eyes filled with tears of gratitude.

Nice, Allo... You sure are rank B+.

"Master Dragon! Master Dragon!" Allo moved away from Treant and toward me, glancing up at me from my feet.

Thanks for helping Treant out, Allo. Nightmare doesn't listen to me much, so I'm grateful. I wanted to pat her on the head, but I was scared I'd rip her scalp off if my claws got stuck in her hair.

Treant and Nightmare both gazed at Allo's back; Treant looked a little lonely, while Nightmare looked somewhat unsatisfied.

"...Graaah." ("Allo's grown up to be pretty strong-willed too, hasn't she?")
Partner said, with a somewhat dismayed tone. I tilted my head, unsure of what she meant.

We pushed on, making our way deeper into the mine. This time, my goal was to level up, not explore the mine, so I was actively searching with my Psychic Sense for monsters to fight.

Despite appearances, I was a pro at leveling. While the best place for me to level up would be on Adam's island, where there were plenty of rank B monsters to fight, the best place for Allo and the rest to level was here in Alban Mine, where the majority of the monsters were rank C or lower.

To put it simply, it was much easier for them to gain experience by fighting a bunch of opponents who were equal or slightly lower in rank to them rather than aiming for a single big monster to defeat as a group. Allo and the rest were still at low levels for their rank ([Allo: Lv 22/85], [Nightmare: Lv 20/70], [Magical Tree: Lv 10/60]), so this was a perfect place for them to level up. With my support, I figured they could all make some decent gains in half a day.

I do not mind you hunting monsters here, but I ask that you do not disrupt the

natural balance of the mine, Grandpa Magiatite said to me via Telepathy. (If you could thin out the grim ammo ranks a bit more, I would be grateful. Their numbers have multiplied, and they consume a great deal.) I'd assumed he was just coming along to keep us company, but it seemed like he'd been waiting for the right time to give me advice.

I didn't know much about the mine's natural ecosystem, so I was grateful for his guidance and bowed my head in thanks. He seemed relieved; he lowered his liquid metal body and spread it along the ground.

You don't have to worry. We won't eat you or anything...

Grim ammos were giant ammonites with shells made of ore that shimmered with rainbow light. They'd tried to surround Treant and eat it on our last journey through the mine. Because they traveled in groups and were a high rank C, they were perfect targets for Allo.

On our way, we ran into a stonebear—an angular bear made of ore that reminded me of a claybear—but Grandpa Magiatite's core stretched out from the liquid metal and shook from side to side, so I just shooed it off with one of my paws. The stonebear ran away with a steady, plodding "tmp-tmp, tmp-tmp."

«A rare species, that one,» said Grandpa Magiatite. «Quite timid and docile.

And its main source of food is grim ammos. I would much rather you let it go, if possible.»

That's fine. It doesn't look edible anyway. It felt like a needless waste of life to kill a monster I couldn't eat.

Soon after, we came across our main leveling target: a pack of grim ammos. Allo used her Lingering Rope skill, which made long, earthen arms spring up from the ground to restrict her enemy's movement. Then she used Gale to cut through them with a maelstrom of wind and Clay to form earthen spikes that shot up to pierce the grim ammos.

As expected of our ace!

Against Allo, C+ monsters barely had time to resist.

Nightmare, too, was skillfully maneuvering her webs to hinder the grim ammos' movements. When she saw an opening, she pulled the grim ammo out of its shell and sank her massive fangs into its fragile body. One by one, they all succumbed to her venom.

Treant used its Anti-Power skill to lower their attack power, then turned and ran back toward Allo and Nightmare to get the grim ammos chasing it in range of their spells. I was worried Treant would take a lot of damage if it tried to actually attack, so I was relieved to see it work so hard in a more supportive role.

Yes, yes, I think you'd be great in a dedicated support role! You're a natural at this, Treant! It's time to throw in the towel with that whole randomly using Gravity business!

My job was to keep an eye on them. If I saw anything dangerous happen, I'd use Whirlwind Slash to push the grim ammos away. If someone took damage, they'd immediately be healed by either Partner's Hi-Rest or Allo's Fake Life.

After a while, Nightmare and Treant ran out of MP, and Allo started to get a little weary, so we decided to take a break. With me as her battery pack, Allo's HP and MP were essentially unlimited, but rapidly depleting and replenishing them was probably taking a mental toll; some sort of limitation that didn't show up in her status screen.

Tomorrow, we'd be heading back to the Royal Capital to settle things with that slime once and for all.

I checked everyone's levels. Allo had gone from level 22/85 to 29/85, Nightmare went from level 20/70 to 25/70, and Treant went from level 10/60 to 15/60. If we kept this up for a few more days, I could probably get them all to around level 40 or so...but I didn't have a few more days. The levels they'd gained so far were still very significant, though; their stats had caught up somewhat with those of the Three Cavaliers.

It's been a while. I should check my own status screen.

Illusia

Species: Ouroboros

Status: Normal

Lv: 102/125

HP: 2655/2655

MP: 453/2564

Attack: 1029

Defense: 584

Magic: 1129

Agility: 735

Rank: A

Sacred Skills:

Human Realm Path: Lv —

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 7

Divine Voice: Lv 5

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Fly: Lv 7

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 7

Dark Type: Lv —

Wicked Dragon: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8

Psychic Sense: Lv 5

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 6

Twin Heads: Lv —

Split Personality: Lv —

Mutual Understanding: Lv 3

Master's Demonic Gaze: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 5

Falling Resistance: Lv 6

Hunger Resistance: Lv 5

Poison Resistance: Lv 6

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Dark Resistance: Lv 4

Fire Resistance: Lv 3

Fear Resistance: Lv 3

Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 4

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 6

Illusion Resistance: Lv 3

Instant Death Resistance: Lv 2

Curse Resistance: Lv 2

Confusion Resistance: Lv 2

Blinding Resistance: Lv 1

Petrify Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills: Roll: Lv 7 View Status: Lv 7 Scorching Breath: Lv 5 Whistle: Lv 2 **Dragon Punch: Lv 3** Diseased Breath: Lv 7 Venom Fangs: Lv 7 Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 6 Dragon Tail: Lv 2 Bellow: Lv 3 Celestial Fall: Lv 4 Earth Fall: Lv 2 **Human Transformation: Lv 8** Whirlwind Slash: Lv 7 Neckbreaker: Lv 4 Hi-Rest: Lv 7 Regenerate: Lv 5 Sacrifice: Lv — Death: Lv 4 Soul Addition (Fake Life): Lv 4 Holy: Lv 2 Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv —

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 8

Liar: Lv 3

King of Evasion: Lv 2

Wrongdoer: Lv 9

Calamity: Lv 9

Chicken Runner: Lv 3

Mr. Chef: Lv 4

Dastardly King: Lv 9

Stalwart: Lv 4

Giant Killer: Lv 3

Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4

Clan Boss: Lv 1

Laplace Authority Interference: Lv 2

Foreknower of Eternity: Lv —

Ant King: Lv —

Hero: Lv 7

...Tomorrow, I'll use my Fake Life skill without mercy. If I created some followers here, I wouldn't be able to take them with me, so I'd have to wait to create them once we arrived in the capital. I didn't know how useful they'd be, since they'd start at level 1 like Allo and Treant did, but they might be able to

create some distractions for us, at least.

That skill felt like it could be pretty handy, depending on how I used it.

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Liche

Status: Cursed

Lv: 29/85

HP: 412/412

MP: 430/430

Attack: 211

Defense: 185

Magic: 476

Agility: 104

Rank: B+

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 4

Undead: Lv —

Dark Type: Lv —

Body Morph: Lv —

Privilege of the Dead: Lv —

Master of the Earth: Lv —

Evil Eye: Lv —

Undead Maker: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Debuff Immunity: Lv — Physical Resistance: Lv 5 Magic Resistance: Lv 5 **Normal Skills:** Gale: Lv 7 Curse: Lv 7 Life Drain: Lv 5 Clay: Lv 7 Regenerate: Lv 5 Clay Doll: Lv 6 Mana Drain: Lv 6 Lingering Rope: Lv 6 Fog of the Dead: Lv 5 Charm: Lv 1 Wide Drain: Lv 2 Dark Sphere: Lv 2 Title Skills: Evil Dragon's Minion: Lv — Hollow Mage: Lv 7 Everlasting Body: — Final Evolution: — Undead Queen: Lv —

Allo's strengths weren't just her high magic stat but also her impressively high

HP—especially in combination with her drain skills, which allowed her to make the most of that high HP. Her agility stat was low, but she compensated for that with her tricky fighting style, which combined long-range magic and body transformation.

Between her, Nightmare, and Treant, she was by far the strongest in a fight—not just in terms of stats but her impressive skill set too. Allo was even tough enough to withstand a blow from Samael the Poison Master, who was a level above her. Not only that, but she also had the Debuff Immunity Resistance Skill, which rendered Samael's skills useless. Her stats being lower than his would be an issue, but she was still the best match to fight him. With some help from Nightmare and the other adventurers, it might even be possible to stall him.

Species: Nightmare

Status: Normal

Lv: 25/70

HP: 218/218

MP: 18/211

Attack: 183

Defense: 117

Magic: 190

Agility: 145

Rank: C+

Special Skills:

Dark Type: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 3

Poison Belt: Lv 5

Psychic Sense: Lv 3

One Hundred Faces: Lv —

Stealth: Lv 5

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 4

Curse Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Venom Fangs: Lv 4

Spidersilk: Lv 5

Call Allies: Lv 1

Silk Spool: Lv 3

Poison Web: Lv 3

Hanging Thread: Lv 4

Sneak Attack: Lv 3

Curse: Lv 2

Human Transformation: Lv 5

Regenerate: Lv 2

Dark Sphere: Lv 2

Clay: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Evil Dragon's Pet: Lv —

Master Spinner: Lv 5

Meanie: Lv —

Mutation: Lv —

Tenacious: Lv 5

Cunning: Lv 4

Avyssos Eater: Lv 2

Assassin: Lv 5

Final Evolution: Lv —

Although Nightmare's stats were much lower than Allo's, it was better than the rank C+ knight slimes that I was expecting to make up most of the knights we'd be facing. She also had a variety of brutal spider skills, like Spidersilk, Silk Spool, Poison Web, and Hanging Thread, which she could use to move around the battlefield, evading enemy attacks and setting traps in key spots. The battlefield was one place where Nightmare's Spidersilk could really shine. She'd be in danger if she wasn't careful, but if she focused less on fighting and more on assisting Allo, she should be able to hold her own even against multiple knight slimes.

Species: Magical Tree

Status: Cursed

Lv: 15/60

HP: 223/223

MP: 11/166

Attack: 64

Defense: 134

Magic: 169

Agility: 78 Rank: C+ Special Skills: Dark Type: Lv — Grecian Language: Lv 2 Harden: Lv 3 Resistance Skills: Physical Resistance: Lv 5 **Normal Skills:** Take Root: Lv 4 Clay: Lv 2 Rest: Lv 4 Fire Sphere: Lv 2 Aqua Sphere: Lv 2 Clay Sphere: Lv 3 Wind Sphere: Lv 2 Telepathy: Lv 2 **Gravity: Lv 3** Poison Cloud: Lv 1 Physical Barrier: Lv 3 Anti-Power: Lv 4 Title Skills: Evil Dragon's Servant: Lv — Devourer of the Fruit of Wisdom: Lv — White Mage: Lv 4

Black Mage: Lv 4

As for Treant...well, it was still lacking in terms of levels. Allo would benefit if it was around to use Anti-Power, but unfortunately, I didn't have the means to carry Treant around during our fights. I bowed my head to it, and it quickly bowed back.

We took turns sleeping in the depths of the Alban Mine tunnels. As I rested on my back, Grandpa Magiatite came up to me.

You intend to kill the Demon King? he asked.

It seemed like he'd already figured it out. So he knew about the Demon King...

Are you going to try and stop me? I replied.

He thought for a moment. <...No.> Grandpa Magiatite shook his head in disapproval and moved away.

What's his problem? Something smells fishy...

Part 7

E ARLY THE NEXT MORNING, I crawled out of the Alban Mine tunnels with Allo and Nightmare. We'd released the steel horses we used on our last journey to the Royal Capital, so we decided to catch some more to ride in on.

Allo chased the steel horse with Gale, while Nightmare set a web trap to catch it. Treant stood next to me, watching the situation intently and stretching its trunk.

Treant...wouldn't you be able to stop a steel horse with your Gravity skill? I asked.

Treant shook its head sadly, perhaps a little scarred from our previous unpleasant Gravity ordeals.

Oh, I see... That's tough. It'd be hard to catch up to the steel horse to hit it with Gravity with your legs anyway.

While I got lost in thought with Treant, Allo and Nightmare got the two steel horses they'd caught ready. I watched the horses as they looked timidly at their surroundings, then turned my gaze toward Alban in the distance. Today was the day I'd finally settle the score with that slime. I was done letting him yank me around.

No, not just the slime. I'm settling things with my Divine Voice too.

The Divine Voice was meddling with that slime somehow. It had to be involved with its creation one way or the other—it must have been the one who made it into the Demon King who would lead an army of monsters and feast on humans.

Lilyxila believed that the Divine Voice pitting monsters and humans against each other was a positive thing because it meant the fate of the world was in our hands. She even said there was proof of that in the Holy Land...but I still

didn't buy it. I didn't know what I could do about an entity that seemed to be such a large part of this world's system. But when I went to the Royal Capital and learned about the slime's evil deeds, I became convinced of one thing: The Divine Voice, which toyed with human lives through that slime, didn't deserve to be vindicated for any reason.

Hey, Divine Voice. I know I haven't asked you for much lately, but you're still watching me, aren't you? I'm not letting you get away with this. First, I'll take out that slime. And then, I don't know when exactly, but I'm definitely going to beat the crap out of you too.

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 5 is unable to provide that explanation.

The message came from my Divine Voice as if to mock me.

All right, are we ready to head out? I asked, looking at Allo, Nightmare, Partner, and finally landing on Treant. Treant looked at Allo and me in turn, and its trunk started to tremble. It seemed to be worried about whether we'd come back safely or not. I noticed it was trying very hard not to look at Nightmare... although it kept stealing glances at her when no one was looking. Treant was clearly worried about her too, but was trying to hide it.

Don't worry, Treant. We'll all be back soon. I'll keep Allo and Nightmare safe too. I already beat the slimes once, after all.

As we made to head out, I saw liquid metal with a solid glowing core rushing toward me from the mine. It seemed Grandpa Magiatite had come to see us off.

«I see. You are leaving again?» he asked with Telepathy.

I lowered my head and tried to keep eye contact with him.

That's right, old man. I'm going to go save the world. I cleaned out most of the dangerous monsters in the mine when we were leveling up, so you should be safe, but...would you mind looking after Treant, just in case?

Wh-what? Why not? Was he about to say he'd never help someone who intended to hurt the Demon King or something? I thought Grandpa Magiatite hadn't given his allegiance to him, but was I wrong?

«Dragon...I ask that you take me with you. I may not look like much, but I am strong in my own way. I should be of use to you.>

I was stunned. That was an unexpected offer. But it was true that Grandpa Magiatite was a high-level rank B— with a lot of useful skills. He was as strong as Allo, if not stronger, which meant he could at least take on the lower-rank species like the knight slimes that made up their army. Having him along would make the fight a lot easier.

I... I appreciate the offer, but why did you suddenly decide you wanted to help? Didn't you know we were planning to defeat the Demon King when we got back from the capital yesterday?

«I did, but...I was afraid of him. That is why I have hesitated until now.
However, I... I feel responsible for the Demon King's reign.>

Responsible...? Why?

You see, the Demon King who has taken up residence in the Royal Capital...he is a slime I found and rescued after I discovered him washed up on the shore.

What? Grandpa Magiatite saved that slime...? If he ended up on the beach, did that mean he was washed to the sea from the river at the bottom of the cliff I knocked him down?

(I still remember it well. He killed an old friend of mine who also aided him because he said they had skills he needed. He was already stronger than me at the time, so I was unable to do anything. But I wish to avenge my comrade. Please let me help you defeat him.)

...I'd be happy to have you along, but while you do have Human

Transformation, it's only level 2. Your MP isn't very high either. I'm sorry, but I wouldn't be able to take you into the capital.

(Then...how about this?) Grandpa Magiatite began to transform, compressing and hardening into a shape with a fine point. In a flash, he turned himself into a sword. His core was attached to the end of the sword's hilt like a decorative stone.

I see... I can definitely bring you into the Royal Capital like that.



Interlude: A Girl and a Royal Feast

Part 1

"... BUT OUR GOAL is finally in sight, Myria," said Meltia, my adventuring mentor. "I thought you'd receive an invitation because you and the princess are close in age, but I never thought she would invite me for my skill!"

We were in a room at the Staff and Hearth Inn in Alban, the capital of Ardesia.

Meltia was an adventurer who'd once come to my village at Marielle's request, to investigate rumors of a spirit that was disturbing the town. She was now accompanying me on my journey to find the dragon I'd met back then.

I just couldn't believe that the black dragon I'd named Illusia had intentionally killed Gregory. And when he

attacked me that day, it seemed like he'd purposely retracted his claws so they wouldn't hurt me. I wanted to know the truth of what happened that day, so I decided to leave the village with Meltia and become an adventurer.

Meltia was right, of course: Today would mark a milestone in my journey toward that goal. I sat on my bed and clutched my pillow, thinking. Then I turned to Meltia.

"The party hasn't even begun yet," I said. "You never know, it might be a bit of a letdown."

"Well, that depends on my swordsmanship and your charisma. I'll use my sword skills to catch her eye, and then you'll have to win her over with your words," Meltia said, pointing the tip of the wooden training sword she was swinging around at me. It was somewhat dangerous to do that indoors, so I was desperately hoping she'd stop soon.

"Well, I'm not confident, but it's the only chance we've got."

It was common belief among adventurers that the royal families of all the different countries secretly investigated and exchanged information about

monsters and kept track of monsters that were rank B or higher.

The presence of a rank B or higher monster, even at the very edge of a vast territory, would slow down the flow of commerce and lower the value of the land there significantly. The nation's royal family would normally be obligated to take action against them if they were near cities or villages, but unless they showed up near a major city or settlement with an important role, they were often left alone. Rank B monsters meant that sending a party out to hunt them down was almost guaranteed to result in casualties, and sending an ill-equipped force out to face their deaths at the hands of a powerful monster was bad for both the soldiers' morale and the crown's pocketbooks. This in itself was understandable, but there were also many cases of monsters being ignored for political reasons.

Therefore, it was said that the royal family was secretly kept informed about the locations and ecology of the world's highest-ranked monsters, allowing them to take appropriate actions in the worst cases. Although it was hard to know how true this rumor was, there was no way Ardesia, a country with so much influence over the surrounding countries, would be unaware of the existence of a higher-level monster capable of causing a disaster.

During my travels, I'd learned that Illusia, the dragon I met in the village, was a Plague Dragon. Although ranked as a lower B in terms of danger, dragons with wings were incredibly mobile in comparison to their grounded counterparts. Furthermore, the former Demon King from five hundred years ago was said to have been a Plague Dragon at one step in his evolutionary path. There were plenty of reasons to keep an eye out for Illusia.

"But are you sure you're okay, Myria?" Meltia asked, her voice filled with concern. "I heard you collapsed on the street yesterday..."

"Oh, I-I'm fine! Just got a little dizzy is all. Sorry for worrying you."

"Listen," Meltia warned. "I know that today is an important day for both of us, but don't overdo it if you're not feeling well. It doesn't feel right for you to be

unable to move for several hours just because of a dizzy spell. If you're hiding something..."

I couldn't tell Meltia that I'd been approached by one of Princess Crys's Three Cavaliers and then collapsed. There were rumors about Samael, the Cavalier who'd approached me, and his poor behavior. He had originally been on the path to being an adventurer, and it was said he hadn't yet shaken some of his more unsavory inclinations. The apothecary who'd helped me didn't have a great impression of the Three Cavaliers as a whole either.

I just...had a bad feeling about this whole thing. But if I told Meltia about it, she definitely wouldn't let me accompany her to the castle.

"...Although, I am a little worried your sword skills won't be impressive enough to catch Princess Crys's attention. I heard there's this dragonslayer coming who's a living legend. He's rumored to be the best swordsman on the continent!" I gave a wicked laugh, which caught Meltia's attention.

"Y-you don't know that!" she sputtered. "I'm a very well-trained swordswoman! I may not win a mock duel against him, but I can still put up a good fight!"

"If people aren't exaggerating, he's apparently strong enough to slay highrank monsters all on his own. He'd probably be able to split a big tree down the center with the wooden mock duel sword. Right, Inky?" I said to Venom Princess Lacerta, who was crawling around next to the bed and cleaning herself.

Inky looked at Meltia for a second, then turned her head toward the window in apparent disinterest. For some reason, Inky had appeared at every step in my journey and saved me from threats time and time again, so I eventually registered her with the Adventurer's Guild as my familiar.

However...even though she was helping me, I felt like she harbored some hostility toward me for some reason. She used to be a lot more arrogant and abrasive, but she'd softened up quite a bit as of late.

"Hmph..." Meltia went quiet. It seemed the conversation had suddenly turned

in a direction she didn't want to go down.

Howgley, the legendary swordsman, was another adventurer who was supposed to have been able to defeat high-rank monsters single-handedly. However, it was said that he was trapped and killed more than ten years ago by a nobleman after Howgley refused an invitation to work for him. He was no longer around to claim such a title.

"Anyway, it's about time to get ready," Meltia said. I nodded and looked at Inky.

"Mind watching the room for a little bit, Inky?" I asked. Inky looked up at me for a moment, then shrugged like she didn't mind. However, a moment later, she leapt up and pushed me onto the bed. "H-hey... Kyaaaa!"

"Myria?!" Meltia asked in a panic, hand on her sword hilt.

Since Inky became my familiar, she'd saved both mine and Meltia's lives on a number of occasions. We'd learned in the adventurer training course that because the relationship between a human master and a monster familiar was built solely on trust, one should never point their weapon at a familiar.

"Inky, stop... Huh?"

Inky pressed her face against my body and gave a few quick sniffs. Then she jumped off me and knocked the clothes I'd washed and hung to dry yesterday to the ground and started sniffing those as well.

"Um...Inky? What're you doing?" I asked, tilting my head in confusion. Meltia, too, was looking at Inky's back curiously. It wasn't common for the usually cool and composed Inky to make such a fuss.

Part 2

"M ISS MELTIA and your companion, correct?"

As we reached the castle entrance, the guard stationed there bowed his head to the two of us. He smiled at Meltia, then glanced at me with narrowed eyes like I was a bother. "Welcome to the castle. Please come in."

The soldier led us through the castle garden, and I spoke to Meltia in a hushed tone. "Am I not supposed to be here or something?"

"Hmm, people said it wasn't common for visitors to actually bring a companion. Maybe a servant sometimes, but not someone who's obviously a fellow adventurer.

I don't usually come to events like this, so I don't know much about the unspoken etiquette rules or anything, to be honest."

"I'm starting to want to just go home," I joked feebly, then shook my head to dispel my moment of weakness.

This is not the time. I have to make friends with Princess Crys.

I'd heard that not even scholars could decide whether Princess Crys was an unthinking fool or a genius who was always two steps ahead of everyone else. Personally, I doubted it was the former; but I wasn't sure if I believed it was the latter either. Although I'd done a quick preliminary investigation on her, I still had no idea whether or not Princess Crys's actions had any consistency to them. My investigation had only been a cursory one, but it seemed to me like she was constantly changing her thoughts and opinions and stirring up trouble among her subordinates and subjects. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but Princess Crys seemed scary—almost like a monster. A monster I needed to stand against.

Judging by the guard's reaction to me, I felt like my initial impression wasn't very far off. I was a little suspicious as to whether I was really allowed to be

here with Meltia.

However, I had a story that I thought might attract the princess's attention. I'd never defeated any particularly impressive monsters or ventured into incredibly dangerous territories, but I felt like she might enjoy my story about becoming friends with Illusia. This was the only weapon I had for winning the princess's favor.

Meltia and I followed the soldier into the castle's reception hall. There were several circular tables arranged in groups and set with plates, spoons, and other tableware. The invited adventurers had already begun to gather. I was told that nine adventurers in total had been invited.

There were eight people in the room including us, and two of us seemed to be companions. I saw a tall man who looked like a knight with a servant woman standing next to him, an old swordsman with a long white beard, and a younger swordsman. The remaining four guests were a gentlemanly guy with a monocle and a dagger at his waist, a petite swordswoman who looked younger than me, a purple-haired mage with a tattoo of a magical beast on his face, and a slender man with a large sickle slung across his back.

I'd never seen any of them before, but I'd heard rumors about a few of them. The gentleman with the monocle was a famous adventurer known as Bernard the Mind's Eye. He was said to operate more as backup than a direct fighter. And the mage with the beast tattoo was Ghazan the Deadly Flame. Unlike most mages, he specialized in powerful close-range magic and knife skills.

Meltia seemed to be the seventh guest to arrive, excluding the two attendants. That meant there were two more people coming. A chair had been prepared for the princess as well, but she hadn't yet arrived.

A few minutes later, a woman with short, golden hair appeared. She wore a heavy robe, as if she were trying to conceal herself, and her mouth was covered with a bandage. Of course, there were many adventurers that had dark pasts and hid their true identities, but was it really okay to come to the castle dressed

like that? I felt like if they really wanted to hide their faces, then they probably shouldn't be here in the first place.

Next, a huge man with long silver hair appeared in the doorway. He carried a massive sword, befitting someone of his physique, and he seemed more spirited and driven than the other adventurers.

"Meltia, is that..."

"Ah, yes... That must be the dragonslayer."

His features matched the rumors we'd heard—this had to be Volk the Dragonslayer. And the great sword he carried was undoubtedly his beloved Leral.

Meltia's voice sounded a little off when she spoke, and when I looked up at her, I realized she had her eyes fixated on Volk. I didn't blame her; his face was incredibly beautiful and well-defined, like a sculpture of some mythical male deity.

Volk swept his eyes over all of us as if he were looking for someone, then sighed like he was disappointed. "...Seven, eight, nine. Yes, that's everyone. Howgley isn't here? I came all this way because I thought this would be a good chance to face him in battle, but it seems he slipped away again."

I remembered the name Howgley; he was said to be an adventurer who'd died ten years ago. But if he were still alive, it wouldn't be surprising for an adventurer as famous as him to be invited to the princess's party. Whether he'd accept the invitation or not was another matter, though; he was said to have no interest in gaining political power.

Volk glanced around at the rest of us again with a look of disdain, then his eyes fixed on me and Meltia. "Looks like there are only two people here who may be of any actual use. Ahh, and you're the young girl who had the unpleasant run-in with one of the Three Cavaliers yesterday. I'm surprised you showed up."

At that, I averted my eyes, staring at the ground in front of me. *Guess he was* there to see me collapse yesterday. Meltia gave me a probing look.

"Those of you who do not wish to die today, I urge you to depart at once," Volk intoned.

The faces of the other adventurers filled with doubt. Of course, none of us knew what he was talking about—me included.

One of the nearby guards approached Volk with trepidation. "Pardon me, Mr. Volk...does there seem to be a problem?"

"Oi! Where's the princess?" he demanded. "Your master dares to summon us all here, then not bother to show her face? What cowardice!"

"E-erm... My utmost apologies, sir. The princess is a busy woman, so... I will inform you of her impending arrival shortly..."

Unsurprisingly, the castle guards were afraid of the massive dragonslayer and reluctant to confront him; this became clear as he closed in on them with a hostile look in his eyes.

Bernard of the Mind's Eye was getting impatient too. He turned to the older swordsman and called out to him. "Beware, Romulodon! The dragonslayer intends to make a move!"

It seemed Bernard and this Romulodon fellow had known each other from the start. Romulodon's apprentice bit his lip and put his hand on his sword hilt at his waist.

"Oh, I see. So Princess Crys's impostor will only show its face after we've been neutralized or divided into individual enemies? In that case, I know what I must do." Volk drew his great sword from his back.

"What're you—"

The next instant, the guard's torso was severed from his body, armor and all.

Part 3

"H-HOW DID YOU..."

The guard's upper body hit the floor, splattering green blood all over it. His unmoving body turned a translucent green and began to ooze through the gaps in his armor onto the floor. The crumpled goo twitched and convulsed, and then, as if exhausted, collapsed and turned into a runny liquid.

I was startled for the second time that night. The guard wasn't human.

The guards turned hostile immediately, lining up on either side of the hall and drawing their weapons.

"Tch! You've gone too far now!" one said.

"The princess anticipated some resistance, you fool," replied another. "It's about time one of the more sensible ones got smart. We caught the saint as expected too. All has gone according to the princess's predictions."

"The dragonslayer is as beastly as they say! He skipped all the fun and games to go straight for first blood. It was indeed unexpected, but we will not be outdone by you dimwitted adventurers!"

One by one, the guards' complexions all shifted green, and their eyes and mouths disappeared, leaving behind mere dimples that only slightly resembled faces. Massive green droplets oozed from their bodies and formed a puddle at their feet. The guards had all transformed into disfigured, sludgy masses encased in armor.

The strange guards glanced at the other adventurers, then three of them approached Volk at once, surrounding him. "This guy's definitely gotta go at least!" one of them yelled. "Aqua Sphere!"

Water began to spin at high speed from his outstretched hand until it formed a sphere and flew at Volk. Volk blocked the sphere with his great sword as a

second guard held out his hand and cried "Ooze Whip!"

Volk quickly adjusted his stance and jabbed at the guard with the pommel of his great sword to repel him.

"Hng...?!"

However, the guard's slime arm extended to the side and began to encircle Volk, binding his body tightly. "I've got him! Do it!"

The third slime raised his sword. "Take this! Spirit Sword Flash!" The guard's sword turned a translucent green, similar to the slime's body. Then the blade shot forward, the tip aiming straight for Volk's heart. It was an instantaneous attack which left no room for intervention. The slime soldier had used an unusual combination to create an opening for his ally to launch the attack.

They could use this on just about anyone, I thought. It's a complex attack, something not even top-notch adventurer parties can pull off easily.

"...Huh?"

The next moment, the guard's arms that were tightly constricted Volk's body were torn apart by force. Volk, his great sword in one hand, caught the sword aiming for him with the other and swung it around him. The momentum sent the soldier's body flying through the air.

"Ogh!"

"Hyaaaaah!"

Volk swung his mighty great sword twice in quick succession. The soldier drawn in by the Ooze Whip took both hits; the first shattering his armor in midair as the second tore through his body in an explosion of goo.

"Ghaaaaagh?!"

Volk's attack didn't stop there. The great sword's two slashes projected out across the floor, heading straight for the third soldier. This was a basic swordsman skill, Shockwave, which was generated by powerful sword swings. Meltia had once told me that this skill, which allowed close-combat swordsmen

to attack at mid-range with ease, greatly improved the scope of the user's sword abilities.

However, although Shockwave usually took a small amount of time to prepare, I didn't notice any lag in Volk's attacks. His Shockwaves were also unnaturally large—they seemed stronger than the attacks of a powerful black mage. These blows were the attacks of a true swordmaster.

"Huh?!"

As soon as the Shockwave collided with the extended slime blade, it exploded. The guard's face was slashed to shreds, and he exploded, leaving a heap of shattered armor and green ooze.

Volk grinned, his face half covered in slime. "You small fry are no match for me. You'd better call for the princess now; I'm starting to get impatient."

Volk had defeated the two other disguised guards in an instant. The remaining guards froze.

Then the whispers began. "Th-they were only pretending to be human...?"

"Call the Three Cavaliers at once!"

We'd all heard a few rumors about this place, that adventurers who attended Princess Crys's feast disappeared, that the princess had been replaced by a monster. But no one had truly believed it; they'd all assumed the rumors were simply borne out of contempt for a rather eccentric princess who had some strange behaviors.

But presented with this scene, the truth of the matter was clear as day.

"Myria! Let's get out of here!" Meltia ran for the doors, her sword drawn. I nodded and followed her.

"There's nowhere to run!" One of the other strange guards appeared in front of us, blocking our way.

"Lucent Luna!" Meltia shouted, pointing her sword toward the ceiling. A ball of light appeared on the sword's tip and shot down at the guard's helmet.

"Nguh!"

"Now there is!" Meltia leapt up and landed on the guard's shoulder with her full weight. Then she used her two-handed sword to pierce through the joint in his armor at the bottom of his neck and drove the blade into his chest. "A-all right!" she shouted.

"Foolish girl," the guard hissed, grabbing her blade in his hand. "We use real armor to reduce incoming damage, but unlike other fragile monsters and humans, we don't have any weak points. Did you really think a point-blank stab would do the job?" He yanked the sword out of her grip and threw it across the room.

"Urk...!"

"Ooze Whip!" The guard's arm snaked out and struck Meltia's abdomen in midair, sending her flying backward, bent at the waist in pain.

"Guh!"

"Meltia!" I yelled. "Hold on! C-Clay Shield!"

A shield of clay floated in front of Meltia, which she caught and hid behind. Clay Shield was a skill in the clay family that had excellent impact resistance and damage reduction properties. It was somewhat rare and praised by the Adventurer's Guild for its usefulness in fights against powerful demons.

However, the tentacle-like arm that swung toward Meltia broke through it like it was nothing at all. Then it wrapped around Meltia and threw her to the ground, shattering her armor.

"It's no use! Don't underestimate us just because the dragonslayer put up a good fight!" the guard shouted.

This monster disguised as a guard is probably an upper C rank, I thought. I've taken down something this strong with Meltia and Inky's help before...

However, the monster we fought back then had about the same agility as we did, and he didn't have any ranged attacks. In short, it'd been a good match for

us; we'd had the advantage of sheer numbers to make up for our difference in strength. We took advantage of its weaknesses, trapped it, and managed to take it down.

I'd never expected that facing a monster with balanced agility, strength, and intelligence would be so scary. Not only that, but Inky, a key part of our strength, wasn't here. Worst of all, there were at least twenty more of these monsters in the castle, and that number would increase tenfold once they raised the alarm.

"Ha...ha ha ha..." My waist gave out, and before I knew it, I was on the floor in a low crouched position. This is the one place we never should've come. And now there's nothing I can do.

"If a stab won't stop you, then try this on for size!"

"Hm?"

A hooded figure danced into view and placed a gloved hand on the head of the guard who was shaking Meltia around. Beneath the whirling purple hair, a wolf silhouette tattoo stretched from the man's left eye to the corner of his lips. It was the top-class close combat mage, Ghazan of the Deadly Flame.

"Millibomb!" Purple flames spread out from Ghazan's palms and exploded.

"Oogh!" Amid the smoke, the mucus on the slime guard's head caught flame and burst. The head thudded to the floor. His body convulsed, then collapsed into an amorphous puddle, staining the carpet green. Ghazan rode the explosion's recoil, leaping backward through the air and landing lightly on his feet.

"Forgive me; I had to time my shot to make sure it connected. I would lose to their agility if I didn't take advantage of whatever openings I could find. Don't feel too bad, now; the girl still breathes."

I stood, suppressing my trembling legs with sheer force of will, and nodded to Ghazan in appreciation. "Th...thank you!" He nodded back.

I dashed over to Meltia and placed my hand on her body. "Rest!"

Meltia's eyes opened. "N-ngh...Myria? My... My sword..."

"Leave it, Meltia! We can't fight these things! We have to get out of here," I said, shaking my head. "Let's leave it to the other adventurers. We aren't even meant to be here; we only made that impressive kill because we had Inky helping us!"

We weren't like Volk, who handled the three monsters that surrounded him with ease, or Ghazan, who ruptured that guard's head with a single blow. Before we had Inky, we'd only been able to take on higher rank D monsters together. This battle was way out of our league.

Beside us, Ghazan faced off against his next opponent. He was using his knife to deflect the guard's attacks, but the guard seemed to be gaining ground.

"My strength," he panted, "lies in surprise attacks, like my fireworks from before! In a show of pure strength, I am no match for these beasts!" One of the guard's flexible tentacles struck his abdomen, and he doubled over, then fell to his knees. The sword in the guard's other hand swung toward him.

"Millibomb!" The purple flames appeared from the tip of his outstretched fist, flew outward, and exploded on impact. One of the guard's arms was blown clean off.

"You tricky little adventurers...!"

"What can I say? I'm good at playing the long game." Ghazan's wolf tattoo stretched as he grinned.

Out of nowhere, a tentacle wound itself around Ghazan's leg and pulled him to the ground.

"What?!"

"Well, that was an impressive magic skill. Dealt a lot of damage. Maybe the most I've ever taken... But it still isn't enough to defeat us. I told you, didn't I? We have no weaknesses. You can hit us in the chest or in the head—it doesn't

matter. Our regenerative skills mean we can get right back up. So, you see...I lay there and pretended to be dead, and in that time, my wounds have fully healed."

The guard whose head Ghazan had exploded was already back on his feet, in perfect condition. There were no signs of injury anywhere.

"Time for me to pay you back for all the damage you did." The guard sneered. "I doubt a pitiful human like you can endure a single hit, but just to be sure, let's start with your face." The strange guard pulled Ghazan toward him and whipped him across the face with his opposite tentacle arm. Red blood sprayed out, and as Ghazan was sent flying back, the guard grabbed him with the opposite arm and delivered a second blow.

"What's the matter?! That explosion that knocked my head off hurt so bad, I thought it'd kill me, you know! If you can deal it, you better be prepared to take it! That's what it means to be human, isn't it?!" The guard whipped his tentacles around, stretching them out thin before lashing them at Ghazan like whips.

"St-stop it..." I let out a weak plea, but of course, the monster didn't listen. His tentacles tore through the air and whipped around. With a sickening crack, Ghazan's flesh was torn from his face, and blood sprayed out from his body.

"I could've killed you just then, but your experience belongs to the princess." The guard set Ghazan's limp body onto the floor.

Meltia turned to me. "Myria, leave me and get as far away from here as you can."

"N-no! I can't do that! I'm the reason you came here in the first place, Meltia!"

"You must. If you don't, we'll both die here."

"B-but...!" I looked around. There were two of the strange guards at every door. We were completely trapped. They were going to kill every person here in order to keep the truth hidden. The only time we would've been able to escape

was when Volk told us to, before the battle began. But now it was too late.

Is there any way for me to get both Meltia and me out of here? I looked around again, thinking desperately.

Fortunately, the guards didn't seem to see me as much of a priority, perhaps because they thought I was too weak to be a threat. None of the guards were coming to engage me. Unless I tried to make a break for the doors, they might not bother with me until later. It probably wasn't a big deal to the guards, but I was glad to have some time to think and heal Meltia.

In one corner of the hall, the man with the monocle, Bernard of the Mind's Eye, supported the older swordsman Romulodon and his apprentice with magic as they fought three of the strange slime guards. However, they were clearly being overwhelmed. Romulodon was covering for his apprentice's weaknesses and somehow managing to keep them fighting, but judging by their injuries, I doubted they would last long.

I finally understood. The three of them had probably been suspicious of Princess Crys from the beginning and intentionally drew her interest so they could be invited here and investigate.

No wonder Bernard called out to Romulodon as soon as Volk started attacking...

The blonde woman with the heavy robe and covered face fought one-on-one with another slime guard, desperately dodging the onslaught of ever extending and contracting tentacles and swords. But for some reason...her expressions seemed a little artificial.

Is she just pretending she's having a hard time? I can't think of any reason why she'd do that, except... If someone's struggling, fewer guards will rush over to help. But that wouldn't matter if the other adventurers all fell.

Volk the Dragonslayer was surrounded by ten slime guards.

"Don't get too close!" one of the guards called. "Watch his arms! You should

be able to tell right before he uses a nasty Shockwave!"

"It's hopeless! My level's too low! I'm going to go cover the rear!"

"Can't you try and slow him down a little?!"

"It's impossible! I've already hit him with Hi-Slow and Poison! He's as weak as he's gonna get! Take him down!"

The reason the other adventurers only had a few guards to contend with was because Volk was taking on the rest of the guards himself. Surrounded by enemies and covered in blood, he checked his prey's positions with a fearless grin on his face.

Even so, other than the old swordsman's trio, the blonde-haired swordswoman, and Volk the Dragonslayer, the rest of the adventurers had already been knocked unconscious. Some of them had missing limbs, melted away by poison.

I didn't know whether my fellow adventurers were alive or dead, but I knew that the only reason Meltia and I were still alive at that moment was because we were deemed too weak to be worthy of attention.

Part 4

THE GUARDS HAD GIVEN UP on attacking Volk in a respectable way and were now trying to use their strength in numbers to overwhelm him; similar to the way humans fought high-rank monsters.

"Ooze Bomb!" One of the slime guards spat out a lump of mucus at the speed of a bullet. Volk dodged skillfully out of the way.

"Tch...!"

"Y-yes! We've got him now!"

It wasn't the guards who clicked their tongues—it was Volk.

Behind him, the bullet of mucus splattered across the ground. Smoke billowed upward, and the ground began to melt. Volk's back was hit with some of the splatter, and blistering burn marks appeared on his skin. His movements began to slow, starting from his left foot. The molten ground beneath his shoe seemed to dissolve items around it. But worse, once the resulting liquids began to mix, they hardened, sticking his shoe to the floor.

"Ooze Bombs! Kill him with Ooze Bombs! They're costly, but they have a wide range, and they can stop his movement even if they miss!"

"Better yet, knock him down now! But make sure you don't kill him! He's prime pickings for the princess!!"

Tentacles rained down on him from all sides. Volk suddenly vanished from sight, then reappeared again as he sprinted forward and cut down one of the defenseless slime guards.

"What?! Impossible! There's no way he could escape from an Ooze Bomb's adhesive so easily!"

Volk grinned and lifted his leg. The soles of his feet were covered in blood. His shoes had melted and stuck to his bare skin, but he'd peeled the skin from his

feet by force.

Smoke rose from his bloody feet, which quickly regenerated.

"He's...on a whole different level..." I whispered.

I could understand why he was revered and feared as the strongest adventurer on the continent. He was fighting well against an entire army of unknown monsters. His prowess against them was not a matter of strategy but of sheer power. Even so, this marvel of a dragonslayer was getting visibly worn out. His breathing was ragged, and the sword and arm attacks he'd been able to handle with ease at first were now occasionally landing direct hits.

Two of the people in Romulodon's party had already been defeated; now it was just Romulodon fighting on his own. His distress showed clearly on his face. On the other end, the dimpled faces of the slime guards were lifted in easy smiles.

Think. Think. I can't take down one of these slime guards myself. But if I don't do something, Meltia and I are dead. Something, anything that'll slow them down...

Suddenly, Volk's words from earlier echoed through my brain. "Looks like there are only two people here who may be of any actual use. Ahh, and you're the young girl who had the unpleasant run-in with one of the Three Cavaliers yesterday. I'm surprised you showed up."

I'd assumed the two people he'd been talking about were Romulodon and Bernard. However, there was clearly a big gap between their abilities. That was why Romulodon was still holding his own against the three guards, even though the battle had been all but lost.

So maybe from Volk's point of view, out of the two of them, Romulodon was the only one of merit.

By process of elimination, I figured the other person Volk believed was of use had to be the blonde swordswoman who'd survived so long against the guards.

But if she was as powerful as Romulodon, she should've been able to defeat her single opponent by now.

I followed her movements with my eyes, my suspicion growing. *Yeah, she's definitely holding back*. She never let a fatal attack connect, and she wasn't inflicting any fatal wounds either. Was she only pretending to fight because she was in cahoots with the princess? No, that wouldn't make sense. If she was on the princess's side, she wouldn't have to fight at all. She could just wait until all the adventurers were dead. We'd be wiped out anyway. There was no point in wasting guards just to show off.

Maybe she was just trading blows to avoid getting noticed so she could look for an opportunity to escape? But the castle was huge. There'd be guards all over the place. And if she hung around here, there'd be reinforcements on the way before too long. Or maybe...there was a third force at work here, with a completely different agenda? Was my assumption that dragging the fight out would be detrimental incorrect? Maybe she knew that if the fight dragged on, someone other than enemy reinforcements would show up eventually?

If that was the case, then even if there were deaths on our side, she had no intention of bringing them to light right now.

"U-um... Mr. Volk! Mr. Romulodon! I think things might just turn around for us if we hold out long enough!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. Volk looked annoyed, and Romulodon looked at me curiously. The lady in the robe, however, stared at me with wide eyes.

Did I...hit the nail on the head? There was no way to know for sure, but I had to hold out hope. If my logic was correct, there was no point in throwing everything we had into the fight now to escape from the enemy at hand. Something would show up eventually to turn the situation on its head. Until then, it was better to conserve our strength like the blonde swordswoman and wait the situation out.

"And, also! That woman over there is holding back!" I called out. The woman

glared at me with a terrible expression on her face. I averted my gaze.

If I'm right, then it's fine, but if I'm wrong...she'll probably make me regret it for the rest of my life, or maybe even for ten reincarnated lives past this one. I was only alive right now because the slime guards, whose ranks Volk thinned out, couldn't afford to waste any strength on taking me out. Who was I to say that woman was holding back?

Romulodon, running out of options, began to move toward the swordswoman in an effort to borrow her strength.

"St-stay back!" she called.

"The lives of my apprentices and the fate of the country is at stake!"
Romulodon said. "I'd suspected as much after seeing your inconsistent sword skills. Forgive me, but I cannot allow you alone to be the one to escape!"

The strange slime soldiers couldn't grasp the meaning behind our words, and their movements became less controlled.

"Shockwave!" Volk thrust his sword at the group of guards. A wave of energy split the ground beneath the guards' feet, knocking them away and sending their formation into chaos. There was now a break in the guards circling Volk; he darted out of it and ran around the hall, swinging his sword at will. One of the slimes received five massive blows from his great sword, leaving a puddle of green in its wake. I guessed it had probably died after just the second blow.

With fewer guards to fight, Volk had more leeway. This gave him even more of an advantage against them.

Romulodon also moved closer to the blonde swordswoman. She took that opportunity to strike at the slime guard with her sword, attracting their attention.

At that point, I was fairly confident they'd be able to hold the guards off. But anything could happen. The battle raged on, with Meltia and I watching from the corner of the room. As we sat there, the door facing me burst open, and

another twenty or so strange slime soldiers rushed in. They all began to shout.

"What do you think you're doing?! The party's only just begun!"

"We were instructed to be wary of the saint from Lialum...!"

"What the hell? Even if the guests fought back, how could they take down so many guards?!"

My heart sank. "U-uh oh..."

It was over. We'd lost. It was only a matter of time before we'd be killed. It was a miracle that our forces had been so evenly matched that we'd survived this long. But now our opponent's strength had more than doubled.

Seeing that I'd been left to my own devices, one of the soldiers came at me with his weapon raised. "These two are worthless. We always get one or two humans like them in the mix. The princess won't mind if we just kill 'em. They're not even worth feeding to her."

I looked at Meltia, who was lying on the ground beside me, and then stood, filled with determination.

"Oh no you don't. Those two are for the princess!" A man ran after the slime soldier and grabbed him by the back of his neck. A black liquid began to seep from the slime soldier's neck to the rest of his body, and he

collapsed into a pile of goo on the spot, leaving only his armor and sword intact.

"We meet again. Perhaps you'll be less cold to me this time around?" The man smiled, and I realized he was Sir Samael, the Sword of Death, one of the princess's Three Cavaliers. The one who'd approached me in the street the day before.

Part 5

"GOODNESS... I should've let Rogueheil come in first. He would've been able to neutralize the lot of you all at once." Samael set his hand on my shoulder, and all of a sudden, I was frozen. I couldn't move an inch. If he wanted to, he could've probably made me suffer the same fate as the slime guard he'd just melted to death right in front of my eyes.

I remembered that I'd felt ill right after he touched me last time too. So this guy can release poison through touch...? No, not a guy. I know that much now, at least. He's definitely a monster, one from the same family of monsters as all these guards.

We weren't facing just one of the Three Cavaliers—another one had appeared in the hall behind him. It was the younger girl with purple hair: Mephisto, the Sword of the Mythical Butterfly. They'd both come to replenish our enemy's forces.

Mephisto walked toward Volk, who was still trying to keep up with the slime guards. He turned to face her.

"Ah, good. I was just thinking it'd be a waste to run out of strength while fighting a bunch of army grunts. If my final opponent is one of the Demon King's seconds-in-command, then it will be a worthy end! I'll be taking your head!" Great sword in hand, Volk leapt straight toward Mephisto.

"Mirage."

Mephisto's form blurred, then split into five identical copies that spread out and surrounded Volk. "Your fighting style is too...dull," she said. "Too focused on raw physical strength. I may not be a match for you in a strength contest, but that's it." The five Mephistos raised their swords and approached him.

"All I have to do is take them all out at once!" Five huge slashes erupted from Volk's sword, ripping the floor and hurtling toward each of the five Mephistos.

"S-such force...!"

Four of the Mephisto clones leaped in the air to dodge the attack. A Shockwave hit the fifth, but it passed through her body without connecting.

"Too bad! There are still four of us le—"

Volk interrupted her with a laugh. "My target is obvious after a single dodge! Your undisguised panic will be the death of you! Moon Pierce!" A bundle of light spiraled outward from the tip of his great sword, then converged on itself and shot out in a straight beam that vaporized everything in its path. He turned it toward the Mephistos that had dodged to avoid the Shockwave.

"I am at my limit, but I'm going to take you along with me!"

"Agh!" The real Mephisto's face was filled with shock; even I could see it from this far away. Volk's Moon Pierce was similar to Shockwave in that it utilized a sword maneuver to send a gale of magic toward his opponent. But it was on a completely different level in terms of power.

I didn't think there was a creature alive in the world today that could survive such a blow; Mephisto of the Three Cavaliers should be no exception.

At that moment, the front of Mephisto's blouse opened vertically, and out peeked the face of a ragged old woman with dark, unkempt hair. It was a horrifying sight. I knew she had to be a monster, but that withered face...it was grotesque. The woman had sickly, bloodshot eyes and blueish-purple lips.



"Hah! Not so fast, you fool... Taste my Gravidon!"

As the monster's head extended from Mephisto's chest, a third arm extended with it and raised itself in front of her. From the tips of its fingers, a black orb of light appeared. It swelled outward, growing until it was about the size of the monster's head. Then the second Mephisto shot it straight toward Volk.

The ray of light from Volk's Moon Pierce shot through the Gravidon orb, which made the beam distort. As a result, the beam grazed Mephisto's floating body and burned a perfectly circular hole in the wall behind her.

"I...missed?"

"What in the world was that power...? Are you even human? Well, sorry, but this isn't the end for me." The second head looked behind him and snickered.

As Mephisto landed back on the ground, the slime soldiers surrounding Volk all attacked at once. Swords and tentacles rained down on him without mercy. Volk's responses seemed slow, perhaps because of the toll the big attack had taken on his body.

Romulodon had already been knocked to the ground as well. Only the blondehaired swordswoman had managed to break free and run, but with all exits blocked, it was only a matter of time until she was caught.

"Don't you worry. You won't be killed. No doubt they'll just steal a few random skills and turn you into the princess's puppet," Samael said, patting my head where I kneeled. "Man, I really lucked out. Mephisto and Rogueheil don't get it, but I do. They're too...serious. They should learn to have some fun sometimes, lighten up a little. Anyway, if I take you with me, I'm sure the princess would be pleased."

"Have I...met her before?"

"Nope. At most, she's only seen you from a distance. But I heard your lady friend over there has met her before. I've been hearing rumors like that all over the place. And you're the girl I keep hearing about, yes?"

I had no idea what Samael was talking about. But it sounded like he might be more willing to talk than I thought. And I needed answers. I was expecting him to be a bit more mysterious and incomprehensible, so I was a little relieved to see we could at least communicate.

"All right. I'll go with you. But in return, you have to let Meltia go."

"No deal. There's no benefit to letting her go." Samael said, shrugging.

"She came all this way for me. I know I'm powerless here, but from your reaction, I got a feeling that there might be some room for negotiation." I said, pointing my staff toward my head. My hands shook; I was terrified. Still, I did my best to bring a smile to my stiff face.

"...Hmm, interesting. I've heard similar words spoken from victims of assassination plots and raids. Not one of them truly meant it, though. It'd be interesting to bet on whether you'd actually land a hit on me or not too...but you've piqued my interest. Fine, I can ask the princess to wipe her memory and then kick her out or lock her up. I can't guarantee that she'll agree to it, though."

His conditions favored his side so much that they were almost meaningless. But I'd at least figured out a few things from this exchange—and more importantly, it kept Samael, one of our strongest foes, focused on me instead of the fight.

As I tried to decide what I should say next, there was a resounding crack...and then the ceiling suddenly collapsed in front of us.

Standing on top of the rubble was an immense two-headed dragon, so huge that it took up the entire corner of the room it fell into.

The slime soldier who'd grabbed hold of Volk froze in confusion. Volk took that opportunity to grab hold of the end of his tentacle and fling him away. Several of the slime soldiers dived out of the way and scattered. Their armor cracked on the ground, and the green slime bodies inside flew out.

A few other slime soldiers raised their blades and swung them down at Volk to try and finish him off, but instead their swords clashed with the scales on the dragon's neck when it swooped in to protect Volk by putting him in its mouth.

It flapped its wings, creating a series of blades of wind that it launched almost indiscriminately at the surrounding area to keep the slime soldiers at bay. The ones that received a direct hit had their armor split in two, their bodies reduced to a green splatter.

"A dragon?!" shouted Samael. "What the hell's a dragon doing here? Is this the saint's doing?!" It seemed like the dragon was an unexpected arrival for them too. On top of the great two-headed dragon's head sat a giant spider and a girl with unnaturally pale skin and red eyes. Some sort of liquid metal monster crawled along its back.

The giant spider spat a string of web at the castle wall, then leapt over to it and scuttled up to the ceiling. The liquid puddle of lead moved off the dragon's back and exhaled a breath of silvery powder, which clung to the body of the nearest slime soldier and spread until a shining silver statue stood in its place. The statue continuously trembled and convulsed—that is, until the dragon brought its foot down on it, crushing it completely.

The deathly pale girl still stood on the dragon's head. From there, she used some sort of wind magic to create a tornado that sent soldiers flying, smashing them into the walls and floor. In no time at all, the horde of slime soldiers turned to liquid and dissipated, leaving only their armor behind.

"Is this another one of her Spirit Servants?!" Samael muttered, gripping me by the shoulders. "No, the Saint's Spirit Servant slots should already be filled... What in the world is such an elite-rank dragon doing here in the first place...?" His face was a mix of frustration and fury. He bit his lip, then spoke like he was about to be sick. "It can't be," he said. "Is that...Illusia?!"

"What ...?"

Illusia was the name I gave to the dragon who'd come to my village. The one

I'd been looking for all this time. I slowly turned my gaze toward the twoheaded dragon rampaging in the distance. I could see a vague resemblance between the dragon in front of me and the dragon I'd kept in my memories... But that was all.

"...Damn it," Samael cursed. "It seems like we underestimated the saint. She must've made contact with him first and formed an alliance before we even had a chance. Well...no matter. As long as our enemies stick together, Mephisto and the slime soldiers will be able to take care of them. Everyone except Illusia, of course. Now, in order to get word to the princess and join up with Rogueheil to take down Illusia..." Samael looked at me, and his face broke out in a wicked grin.

"Well, I suppose this isn't the worst outcome after all. I never thought I'd get my hands on such a good bartering chip this late in the game. The princess calls events like these blessings from the Divine Voice—although I don't believe in things like that myself. Now, the only question is...when will the saint lay the rest of her chips on the table...?"



Chapter 3: Assault on Alban Castle

Part 1

ALONG WITH ALLO, NAIKO—or Nightmare—and Grandpa Magiatite in the form of the longsword I wore on my back, I struck out for the Royal Capital atop our two steel horses.

According to my Divine Voice, Grandpa Magiatite's sword form classified as a weapon. As we arrived in Alban, I raised the sword to the sky and examined it.

Magiatite Spirit Sword: A Value

Attack: 77

Magic: 24

A sword crafted of the rare and valuable magic metal, magiatite.

Magiatite is an excellent conductor of magical power and can enhance the user's ability to wield magic. Magiatite of such high quality is so rare that it almost feels like a waste to leave it as a sword. Additionally, the sword is a living being.

The sword had impressive stat modifiers. An attack of 77 would be unimpressive to me in normal circumstances, but with my attack power cut in half while I was in human form, I was grateful for the boost.

Since time was of the essence, I ended up giving the steel horses away for free to a man in the capital who seemed to be struggling for money. The man told me that steel horses were incredibly popular steeds because of their speed and strength, but it was impossible to tame them without a first-class adventurer along, so they were extremely valuable. In return for the horses, I pestered him for information I was missing about the princess's parties.

After our transaction, I headed straight for the castle and began to snoop around the grounds, using my Psychic Sense to detect any nearby soldiers. I soon came across a knight slime in my way that I couldn't avoid. Fortunately, it hadn't seen me yet.

I saw my opening and rushed forward at full speed to slash the knight slime diagonally across its body, from shoulder to opposite leg. My sword-handling skills were weak at best, so I just tried to attack it with all my might, which was apparently enough to take down an upper rank C knight slime.

They were all wearing human disguises, but thanks to View Status, I could tell they were just slimes. Before any other knight slimes came to investigate the disturbance, I grabbed on to one of Nightmare's threads and quickly scaled the castle's back wall.

Allo's reinforced arms pierced through the roof in a flash, allowing us to successfully infiltrate the attic. After that, we made our way up to the reception hall where the party was to take place, relying on Lilyxila's rough floor plan of the castle.

Things had been going well up until that point; however, one of the enemy slimes was especially perceptive, throwing a wrench into our plan. We ended up getting chased by a horde of knight slimes before Allo somehow managed to seal the doorway with her Clay skill, trapping our pursuers on the other side.

Finally, we made it to the room above the reception hall. We'd timed things perfectly: There was still a bit of time left before the party was supposed to start but not long enough for news of an intruder to spread far enough to stop the party.

Now was our chance—we needed to strike while the enemy was confused. The plan was to work together with the invited adventurers and defeat the Demon King. I didn't want to involve humans in this fight any more than I had to, but this was the best way.

In order to absorb all the adventurers' experience points, the Demon King

always had to reveal his true form to them. That would be the perfect moment to make the first move against him.

I couldn't afford to lose. A monster that could not only disguise itself as a human but take on the appearance of someone in such a major position of power was too dangerous to ignore. If the Demon King defeated me here, I had no doubt that the world would one day fall into his hands.

Of course, the responsible thing to do would've been to consult Lilyxila about the size of the enemy's forces, look for other opportunities, and craft a scenario that was more conducive to our victory before we faced the Demon King.

But here I am. And since I was selfish enough to partially trick Lilyxila, I really can't lose. I don't know who my enemy is. I don't know if it's the ghost of the slime I fought way back when, or a clone of it, or what... But whatever it is, there's no way I can run now.

I closed my eyes and thought for a minute, then opened them and gave a slight smile to Allo and Nightmare. It was the only thing I could think to do to ease the tension in the air. "All right, everyone. Ready to go?"

Allo looked past me with a puzzled expression. "Master Dragon, I hear some shouts and noises coming from over there."

"Huh?" I stopped and strained my ears to listen...and heard what was clearly Volk shouting over what sounded like part of the castle being blown to pieces.

I was too late. The battle had already begun.

"Y-you've gotta be kidding me! How'd the fighting start so fast?!"

I started to panic. Wh-what do I do? What's the plan here? What am I supposed to do next? Oh man, this was a bad idea. Did the Demon King already show himself? I-Is Myria safe?

Nightmare let out a sigh and stood in front of me. She lifted the edge of her mask with her hand to expose her small lips. "W-wah, wooh..." She made a few noises like she was practicing her speech, then looked back at me. "C-calm

down."

The shock of Nightmare speaking out loud calmed my confused and distraught thoughts. *N-Nightmare, when'd you start learning Grecian Language...?!*

"She said she wanted to learn so she could talk to you, Master Dragon," Allo said, a bit of pride in her voice. She must have been the one teaching Nightmare.

Wow, Nightmare. I never would've guessed from your...usual behavior that you'd actually want to talk to me! As if reading my thoughts, Nightmare summoned every ounce of murderous intent present within her mask and aimed it directly at me. Clearly, she was doing it because she wanted to talk to Partner, not me. I mean, I knew that, but still...

Regardless, this surprise had given me a chance to calm down. "Thanks, Nightmare." I reached out my arm to pet her head, but she bent down to avoid me. *Urgh... This dang spider!*

I ran in the direction of the explosion I'd heard before. It sounded like it came from somewhere a little farther in than the reception hall. As I investigated the situation with Psychic Sense, I suddenly heard a loud explosion from directly below me—it was clear from the sound alone that it was an incredibly powerful technique.

There was no time left to wait. I released my Human Transformation skill, and my body started to expand. Partner stretched her head out next to mine, while Nightmare shot a thread at my head and used it to climb onto my back, carrying Allo. I looked at Partner and nodded.

Then I slammed my front paws into the ground with all of my might. I roared, and with a mighty crack, the floor gave way, and I landed on my feet in the reception hall.

I looked around. The bodies of several defeated adventurers littered the ground, along with green slime clad in human armor scattered throughout the

hall.

At my feet, I saw Volk kneeling down, his skin a latticework of wounds.

"A dragon?!"

"It's the saint's messenger beast! She finally joined the fray!"

"Who cares what it is?! Just focus on killing Volk while we have a chance! If we let him take a break for a second, we're in trouble!"

The knight slimes surrounded me. I swept the horde back with a swipe of my tail, flinging them through the air to slam against the far wall. Despite the impact, however, they seemed to still be breathing... Barely.

Maybe it's a bad idea to go easy on them, I thought. Especially when I don't know what's happening around us. The knight slimes were pretty tough foes; a moderate attack wasn't enough to kill them.

I looked around and flapped my wings, sending a barrage of six Whirlwind Slashes at the slimes. They each hit a single foe, one cutting its knight slime victim and their armor cleanly in two.

Gained 490 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 490 Experience Points.

When the Whirlwind Slash touched the floor, it created a wind storm that scattered each knight slime's mucus all along the floor. The knight slimes couldn't withstand my attack, so they dissipated and turned into experience.

Gained 510 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 510 Experience Points.

Ouroboros's Lv has increased from 102 to 103.

Gained 530 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 530 Experience Points.

These small fry were no issue for me—the real trouble lay with the Three Cavaliers. Even so...

"Kill Volk!"

"But how can we get close enough to a dragon like that?!"

"You don't! Volk's weak—just kill him from a distance!"

At that moment, Partner suddenly brought her face close to Volk and pulled him into her mouth with her tongue. I was scared for a second that she was trying to eat him, but it seemed like she was actually trying to protect him from the enemy onslaught.

"C'mon, men! We've gotta find a way to kill Volk!"

"N-no way! It's impossible!"

Part 2

"HRRGH!"

Volk's muffled voice came from behind Partner's fangs, followed by a glowing light emanating from the gaps in her teeth that had to be him using Hi-Rest. He'd apparently used his brief respite in Partner's mouth to recover.

Nice work, Partner.

Soon after, Volk was spat out of Partner's mouth like a piece of chewed gum. He spun in midair and landed on his feet, spraying droplets of Partner's saliva along the floor. "...Thanks, I suppose." Volk's eyes lit up with disgust when he realized the great sword in his hand was also covered in drool.

Y-you could've at least avoided picking up the sword. I know it was a splitsecond decision, but still...

"Blast it all! Volk's completely regenerated!"

"Don't worry! We still have Mephisto and Samael on our side!"

"But this...this isn't looking good for us!"

Volk kicked off the floor with both feet and whirled his massive great sword around. The elastic knight slime arms that reached for him were slashed to pieces. He bent his legs slightly and leapt upward, then sliced another knight slime vertically through its entire back, armor and all. The slime's green ooze turned to liquid and dissipated.

First, I need to get a hold on the situation. As I watched the movements of all the slimes near me, I asked Partner to recover the fallen adventurers that littered the hall. Partner nodded and gave a short "Graaah!" The light of Hi-Rest shone from various spots across the hall.

I looked around again. Myria should've been invited to the feast, right? As I scanned the faces of all the adventurers, my eyes met those of a blonde woman

wearing a heavy cloak. Her emotionless gaze was immediately familiar: It was Alphis, the holy knight who accompanied Saint Lilyxila. It seemed she'd slipped into the party as the vanguard for the attack.

A moment later, Alphis tore her gaze from mine in order to fight an approaching knight slime. I couldn't tell if she wouldn't accept me specifically because I was a monster or if she just treated everyone with the same detached attitude she used with me.

She probably only sees me as another monster, I thought. Her treatment was a far cry from the saint's calm, gentle respect.

I kept scanning the hall and suddenly spotted Myria crouched down in the corner. She was staring at me, her eyes wide.

The last time I saw Myria was before I'd evolved into an Ouroboros. I doubted she recognized me for who I was. Anyone would react the same way if a random dragon dropped into their party from the ceiling.

But...as I looked into Myria's eyes, the memory of me killing Gregory and swiping at her with my claws before leaving the village flashed through my mind like it'd only happened yesterday. I almost turned away, unable to bear her gaze, but then I noticed the man standing next to her and retrained my focus.

He had distinctive emerald-green and silver hair and had a venomous smile on his face. It was Samael, the Sword of Death, and one of the princess's Three Cavaliers. Samael, like Myria, had his gaze fixed on me.

Wait, don't tell me he's planning to hold Myria hostage? Did he know about our past? Or did he put two and two together after I saved her from him in the city? No...I was in human form when I did that. There was no way he could know we were the same person, right?

Or maybe...if their Demon King really was the slime I took down, who managed to survive somehow, he told them about me. I didn't remember talking to Myria in front of the slime, but it seemed like it had stolen the mahawolf's skill, the one that allowed it to share information with other

mahawolves in the pack, so maybe it'd seen me and Myria through one of their eyes.

Either way, the background info wasn't important to me just then; what mattered was that Samael seemed to be taking Myria as a potential deterrent for me and that it was actually an effective plan.

"Hey, Illusia! That is your name, isn't it?!"

Crap, he knows my name. The possibility that that damn slime was behind all of this kicked up another notch in my brain.

An impatient grin was plastered over Samael's face. It was a look that said using my name was his way out of this predicament.

From the faces of the other soldiers, I'd gathered that they'd been expecting an attack from the saint; they were not, however, expecting an Ouroboros to show up with her.

It seemed like the Demon King had made some preparations, but the fact that Saint Lilyxila had gone out of her way to contact me and risk drawing my ire, and succeeded in adding me to her ranks, meant that the saint was clearly one step ahead. I clenched my fangs and glared at Samael.

Partner's voice floated through my brain. ("Hey, Illusia, don't get too worked up.")

Yeah, yeah. I know.

I didn't know how much information Samael knew, but he wasn't certain that it was me. If I responded in the affirmative, I could be putting Myria in danger.

"Ha, ha ha, ha ha! So it really is you, isn't it? It's clear as day when you freeze up like that!" Samael laughed.

"W-well...sorry to get your hopes up, but even if that dragon really was Illusia, I'm not sure I'd be a very effective hostage." Myria's words made my heart ache. I turned my head to face the other knight slimes.

For now, my top priority was taking out all the slimes in the reception hall.

The Demon King was inviting adventurers to the castle to farm them for experience. Our lives outside of this conflict were going to have to wait on the backburner for now.

"Besides! You can't kill me without permission anyway!" My shoulders shook as Myria's voice rang out. He can't kill her without permission? What's that supposed to mean? Regardless, if it was true, it was the most valuable bit of information I'd gathered.

"Shut up, little girl! And don't be so full yourself, got it? If you have no worth as a hostage, then you're not even worth keeping alive!"

"Kyaaa!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Samael's hand on Myria's neck.

"Grrroooooaaaaaaah!" I concentrated magic in my stomach and let out a Bellow toward Samael. For a moment, the entire hall stopped moving. Samael's expression froze, but it quickly thawed as he began to laugh.

"So this girl's important to you, is she? Then come face me. You'd best not leave it to one of your subordinates either, or you'll regret it." With that, Samael pulled Myria by the arm and ran into an adjoining room.

"I-Illusia? But... But why...?" As she was pulled through the door frame, she turned to face me, and our eyes finally met.

Part 3

STARED AT THE DOOR Samael and Myria disappeared through. I'd be able to fit if I bent over and slid through, but if they started going through narrow passageways, I'd likely be forced to use Human Transformation to follow them.

Plus, Samael's goal was likely to divide our forces. He'd probably concluded that they couldn't stop me, Allo, Nightmare, Grandpa Magiatite, and Volk with just two of the Three Cavaliers and a few random slimes.

But with me out of the way, the rest of the group would have to take on Mephisto and the slimes themselves. Volk was the strongest of the bunch, but although he'd restored his HP, his MP was still low. He was also probably mentally exhausted by now.

What should I do? Samael might kill Myria if he got angry, but the rage he'd displayed might've all been a bluff too. If someone else went after them, he might also give up on negotiations and spare Myria.

But since I didn't know why Myria wasn't being killed, there was no evidence that she would come out of that unharmed. Given the circumstances, it wasn't outrageous to think that she might be unwilling to be taken as a hostage and end up acting on her own. The question was who I would rather make things more dangerous for: Myria or the rest of the adventurers in the reception hall.

...No, it's not just that. I was pretty sure that I could at least take down Mephisto or Samael in a one-on-one fight. The fact that Samael had run away with Myria meant that he had some kind of plan up his sleeve.

We're just one step behind them. I gritted my teeth in frustration. My head hurt thinking about the last of the Three Cavaliers, Rogueheil, and the Demon King joining the fray.

Where was Lilyxila? She'd sent Alphis in to scout things out; surely, she could tell what was going on. I wished she'd at least send Seraphim in or something...

This must've meant that she wasn't going to show up until the Demon King did.

As I stood there pondering my options, more slime soldiers started to pour through the hall's main doors.

"Buy us some time, and don't give the adventurers time to catch their breaths!"

"Where's the saint? I'm gonna hunt that bitch down and present her to the princess myself!"

In total, another twenty or so new soldiers stood ready to fight.

She's got to be running out of soldiers by now! How many slimes does she have under her control, anyway?

"Well, that's unfortunate. What, are you despairing because you think I'm too weak to take them on?" Volk snickered in front of me.

N-no, I never said you were weak. In fact, you're really strong for a human. But you don't have a Divine Voice, do you?

"An adventurer alone won't be enough to beat them. Let me borrow one of your allies. Yes, that ball of liquid metal will do. We'll take care of that Cavalier girl." Volk turned toward Grandpa Magiatite. He was sliding across the floor and coating the knight slimes in vaporized magiatite, which hardened and rendered them powerless. Volk had the right idea: Grandpa Magiatite was clearly the best monster for clearing out the knight slimes.

The adventurers Partner had healed were starting to move, but they seemed to be threatened by the mayhem around them. Most of them had already run out of MP, and they weren't as powerful as the slimes. However, Volk was in a tight spot. Even with Grandpa Magiatite on his side, he'd be hard-pressed to take on the slime soldiers and the Three Cavaliers all on his own.

"Get moving!" Volk called. "Their top priority right now is you, Ouroboros. I'll be damned if I, the future greatest swordsman in the world, am going to let myself be taken down by a bunch of slimes pretending to be sword-slingers!"

I knew what Volk was implying. It was too dangerous for me to chase Samael down alone. I'd have a much greater advantage in a one-on-one fight against him, but Samael clearly had a plan. He could very well lead me straight to where Rogueheil was lying in wait. Other forces could be hiding in the castle as well, not to mention the Demon King himself. If I came across any of them alone, I'd be outnumbered and out of luck.

"Graaah!" Partner cried, looking up at the ceiling. Nightmare, suspended up there with her webs, had been dropping web piles in front of the knight slimes to block their attacks; but when she noticed my gaze, she quickly used one of her dangling strings to come down to me. I bowed my head at Volk.

He nodded back. "I'll catch up to you as soon as I get rid of the big threat and all her small fry around here," he said, pointing his sword at Mephisto, the purple-haired Cavalier girl. Mephisto looked...different from the last time I saw her. Her blouse was open at the front, and a woman's head with ragged hair grew out of her chest.

But this didn't surprise me. After all, Mephisto was a Dual Slime.

Dual Slime: Rank B+ Monster.

A two-headed slime. One head manages status effects, while the other manages death and destruction magic. Dual Slimes are skilled at close combat, while also specializing in simultaneous magic activation and continuous attacks with its water blades. When cornered, the slime will separate into two.

From the description, it was clear that this monster was trouble, but not any more trouble than the other enemies we'd be facing from here on out. Volk said he'd take care of the Dual Slime, and I couldn't afford to hesitate.

I moved toward the doorway Samael and Myria had just vanished behind, and

Nightmare shot a web onto my back and climbed on.

The knight slimes in my way scattered. It seemed like they didn't want to go to the trouble of challenging me, now that Samael had expressed his intent to take me on.

"Gale!" Allo, riding on my back, sent a peal of wind magic at the fleeing knight slimes.

"Ahh, the dragonslayer. It seems we underestimated you." Mephisto said with a blank expression.

Her second head smiled. "Aha ha! What a fool. We've already figured out all of your skills and weaknesses! The only reason you've survived this long is because the slimes you've been fighting are just as stupid as you are! You know you wouldn't win a single battle in a hundred against me, don't you? Shouldn't you cry and plead for mercy? 'Oh, big dragon, stop chasing after little girls and save me instead!'"

I whirled back toward Volk with worry as I heard Mephisto's words, but Volk was simply standing there with his great sword at the ready, showing no signs of agitation.

"I told you, I'll be right behind you, Ouroboros. I won't allow you to question my skills any longer."

I nodded and turned back, then smashed through the door—and the surrounding wall—that led to the hallway Samael and Myria had fled through.

I wasn't without my doubts. Not about Volk's skill, per se, but about pitting him against Mephisto; they had two completely different fighting styles. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing. Was it really okay to put my personal feelings for Myria above everything else when the world was at stake?

Maybe that was why I thought there'd be more benefits to me staying and fighting with the rest of them. Still, even though I felt bad for the saint and the other adventurers, I knew that no matter how much I agonized about the

decision, I'd still end up choosing the same path forward.

Memories from when I'd first come to this world surfaced in my mind. I remembered the way Myria had used Rest when Doz cut me, and how anxious she'd seemed when she first called out to me.

Part 4

bent my head and surged forward, cracking the ceiling in places as I went. My paws left deep divots in the soft floor behind me. Then one of my paws broke through, sending splintered flooring crashing down a story, but I kept pushing onward.

In such cramped quarters, Samael would have the advantage. But in terms of stats, I easily came out on top. The difference in our ranks was huge. I also had Allo and Nightmare on my side. Samael's goal was to lure me away and spread our forces thin, but we'd still win that fight. He knew that too, which meant he must've had some other objective in mind.

I figured Samael didn't think ordering me to kill myself would work, even with a hostage. And if the threat was dangerous enough that I decided to give up on rescuing Myria, then Samael would lose an important hand, his bargaining chip against me, and his life to boot.

I wasn't sure what I'd do if Samael decided to opt for more desperate measures and make Myria his human shield, but there were an awful lot of risks involved with a plan like that. No, Samael's plan has to involve using Myria to create a scenario where our fight is stacked in his favor.

Samael was devious, just like that slime was. Although, if he'd just attacked her without thinking it over, Myria might've already been dead, so perhaps I couldn't complain about that deviousness.

Samael was running in front of me, and he joined up with more knight slimes. Five appeared in the passageway.

"S-Sir Samael, the situation is—"

Samael ran ahead, shouting orders to the knight slimes. "You have one minute...no, twenty seconds! Damn it, quit struggling, girl! I can bring you along

the easy way or the rough way, your choice!"

The knight slimes all froze in front of me for a second, bewildered.

"Our job is to slow them down!" one called.

"Which means Ooze Bombs! Aim for their legs! And their faces!"

The knight slimes spat out little bullets of slime that exploded on impact. This was the same skill that had gotten Volk's feet stuck to his shoes. I leapt off the floor with my back paws, then scrambled through the narrow hallway, sidestepped, and swung my claws wide.

"Grrrooooh!" My claws popped the Ooze Bombs, destroying them. The burst bullets splattered onto my scales. I felt a burning, numbing pain as the ooze melted parts of my hide, but it wasn't anything serious.

Every wall in the room was covered in my claw marks, and they crumbled as I passed through them.

"Wh...what're we supposed to do against him?!"

I broke through the knight slimes' line of defense with ease, tearing three of them apart with my claws as I went. Nightmare somehow managed to cling to me with her webs, and Allo held onto my back with her enhanced arms.

Gained 1,360 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,360 Experience Points.

My Divine Voice chimed in to report that I'd gained around three enemies' worth of experience points. As the two surviving knight slimes sat dazed on the ground, a few pieces of broken rubble fell, crushing them and cutting their screams short.

Gained 940 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 940 Experience Points.

Sorry, but I don't have time for you guys. Samael, if you want to trap me, then go ahead and try it. I'll use that chance to beat you to a pulp and get Myria away from you.

"D-damn it! No matter how high my level is, I'm still a rank C+ against an Ouroboros! I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out. But Rogueheil is just a bit further!" Samael looked back at me, then turned his attention to his route. Myria, being yanked along by the arm, glared up at Samael and narrowed her eyes like she'd made up her mind about something.

Wh-what're you planning to do, Myria...?

As Samael realized the threat I presented, his attention on Myria naturally faded. This was an opportune time for Myria to make a move, but the difference in their strength was too high for her to do much.

"But a ranged area-of-effect attack should do something, at least! Fireball!" Myria placed her hand on Samael's right shoulder. The next moment, a ball of flame expanded from her palm. Once it grew about as large as two apples, the ball of flames burst open.

I heard the sound of crackling flames. Then Samael's face appeared from the thick smoke, twitching in fury. "Didn't I tell you not to get carried away? Well, it doesn't matter to me either way, but don't you think it'd be best for you not to make me angry?"

Samael's right hand remained motionless on Myria's shoulder. Not only were there no burn marks on his arms, but his clothing looked pristine as well—because his clothes were made of the same viscous mucus that made up his body, they were more like flesh than clothing. Such a weak attack wouldn't do any damage.

Myria, on the other hand, had been caught up in the burst of fire and was

coughing from the smoke. Her hand had taken a direct blast of fire, and it was covered in severe burns from her thumb to her palm and wrists.

But it hadn't been for nothing. Samael's eyes widened in realization, and he leapt to the end of the hallway, yanking Myria along by the hand. Two Whirlwind Slashes—one going in the wrong direction, the other sailing right over Samael's head—flew up and out from my wings. A few severed hairs from Samael's green-and-silver head floated to the ground, turning back into mucus in midair.

Samael followed the blades of wind with his eyes, and his face twisted into a distorted grin. "Man, that was close... Were you aiming to hit me right after I'd gone deaf from the close-range explosion and nearly blind from all the smoke? My reaction was a little slow. Not a bad attack for taking advantage of my impaired senses. I nearly had my head severed from my body. I would have, if your judgment weren't so poor."

He turned his gaze back to me. "Are you in a hurry to defeat me? Or is this girl not as important as she seems to believe she is? Do you think I can't kill her because I'd lose my bargaining chip? What a shallow assumption. It's not just a choice between letting her live or killing her. I can take it slow, do it in strategic steps. I could melt her face off with acid and ruin her pretty looks, or maybe I'll rot off her feet and make her unable to walk for the rest of her life. How about that? Here, as a penalty to you, I'll make her a little more compact so it's easier for me to walk." Samael reached his hand toward the base of Myria's left foot.

At the same moment, two Whirlwind Slashes passed behind them and crashed into the back wall, causing the ceiling to collapse. The passage in front of Samael filled with debris, blocking his path forward.

"Ngh! I-Illusia! You've been aiming for this from the very beginning, haven't you?!"

Samael was a slime, which meant he'd be able to escape through the debris blocking his path, but Myria couldn't. If he wanted to escape, he'd have to leave

her behind. After that, I could turn back with Myria and meet up with Volk, then take down Mephisto while she was on her own. At worst, the Demon King could potentially escape...but even that would at least mean being chased out of Ardesia and suffering a tremendous loss of power.

Rather than being hasty, I preferred to keep the worst-case scenario in mind and choose the option that'll get us out of our predicament safely.

To be honest, Lilyxila's actions had been too unpredictable for me to bet on having her around for the big battle. She might've thought it'd be game over for the humans if she was caught, but she was still being too cautious. I was sure the saint had her own ideas for how she wanted this to go, but as the one out here risking the lives of my friends, I didn't appreciate her laying low.

"Rogueheil, you dumb, arrogant bastard! Damn it... Damn it! This is how it always goes! He says he's gonna stay around as backup, but then he's never here when I actually need him to be! He's useless when it counts!"

Samael looked back at the hallway I'd blocked, his whole body shaking with fury. He hurled insult after insult at the final, absent Cavalier. "If only we'd been able to take Illusia down here and readied ourselves to intercept the saint! Even if she escaped, everything would be fine so long as the princess had enough time to kill Illusia and get her hands on her new host!"

Samael was losing his composure. One of his arms held Myria's leg down threateningly, while the other scratched his own head in frustration.

A chill ran down my spine, and I surged toward him. In my experience, you never knew what a guy in such dire straits would do. Images of the cornered, desperate hero suddenly slaughtering dozens of humans flashed through my mind.

That was more of an extreme case, and I thought there was some interference from the Divine Voice involved too, but still. A man with a hostage getting desperate seemed like a recipe for disaster. Samael was betting more on his escape with Myria than I'd thought.

From his words and deeds so far, I'd assumed Samael wasn't allowed to mess with Myria, but it seemed that assumption was incorrect. I was eager to have Myria back safely, in part because I was out of options.

Samael sneered. "Congratulations, Illusia. You win. I'll take my leave for now and leave the girl here for you. But I'm a bit of a sore loser, so instead...I'll be taking her legs!"

Restorative magic like Rest would only heal injuries to a natural extent. Even if you wanted to heal a body covered in wounds, Rest wouldn't heal a ripped-off arm or a crushed eyeball. To regenerate damaged body parts, you needed a skill like Regenerate. I had Regenerate, but unfortunately, the skill couldn't be used on others.

At this distance, it'd be faster to run over and hit him than use Whirlwind Slash, but even then, I wouldn't get there in time.

"Watch closely, Illusia! Output, one hundred percent! Poison To—"

But Samael stopped mid-sentence as his body suddenly froze in place.

Is this...Partner's skill, Master's Demonic Gaze?

("Hurry! I can't keep this up for long!") Partner's thought flashed in my mind as she stared at Samael. I didn't even waste the time it took to nod before my paw extended in a full swing and slashed through his body with all my might.

"Gaaagh!" Samael's body slammed into the wall with a loud thud, splattering dark green liquid everywhere. For a moment, his body began to lose shape, but then it returned to its original humanoid form. Samael, having seemingly escaped the clutches of the Demonic Gaze, glared at me as he panted against his shoulder.

Oh, thank goodness. Because Samael was glaring more at Partner than at me, her Demonic Gaze had made it through. If he'd been glaring at me, I wouldn't have been able to maintain the eye contact necessary to keep Master's Demonic Gaze going.

"Hng! A skill that stops movement...! Ah, well, no matter. I was just letting off some steam anyway. Thanks for the extra information about your skills."

Samael's body slipped through the cracks in the rubble and began to disappear. His mouth, which was losing his shape, moved as he said, "I'll tell the princess—no, I'm done playing the knight. I'll tell the Demon King to keep his head down for a while. I'm sure he has no fear of you or the saint, but...I would rather not take any chances."

Then he vanished completely from sight.

I ran over to Myria, who was laying on the floor in a heap. Thankfully, her HP was fine, and I didn't detect any abnormal status conditions. Samael had escaped, but Myria was safe.

"Phew..." I lowered my head and heaved a sigh of relief.

("Do you think those guys are really going to run?") Partner asked.

I wonder... They'll still have a reserve force available to use, I bet. But I think their whole ruse is on the verge of collapsing. For now, we should at least try to take Mephisto down, even if we don't know her current whereabouts.

Myria looked up at me from her prone position. "Is... Is that really you... Illusia?" she asked between coughing fits.

I didn't answer her. Instead, I looked at Nightmare, who was standing on my back.

Nightmare, would you mind taking her with you? I asked. Nightmare tilted her head reluctantly, but she jumped off me the moment Partner glared at her. She was so easy to figure out now.

Nightmare approached Myria, bringing her white face close. Myria looked back and forth between her and me, fear filling her eyes. No doubt Nightmare's big spider body was somewhat shocking to her.

At that moment, without warning, a loud, destructive crash rang out from the collapsed wall. I immediately swept Nightmare and Myria aside with my paw.

From the pile of rubble, a pillar the greenish color of oxidized bronze appeared and pierced straight through the ankle of my right foreleg.

Blue blood flowed freely from the open wound. I lifted up my paw to examine the damage. The bone had been hollowed out completely, blown away with unbelievable power and speed. Even though I'd done it to protect Myria and Nightmare, I didn't have the stats to avoid the blow completely, so it had easily pierced through my hide.

"Oho ho... It seems Samael was right to send me here. This is a little too much to handle for the likes of Samael and Mephisto. I'm just glad I got here in time. I'd planned to stay hidden until the Saint was ready to make her move, but things rarely go according to plan."

A large, old man emerged from the rubble. He sported a bald head and a white beard that hung down past his chest. He wore the same colors as the other Cavaliers, but instead of a sword or scabbard, he had a simple robe. His appearance matched another person Volk had spoken about, and who we'd heard rumors of in the capital: This had to be Rogueheil, the Sword of Infinity, the last of the Three Cavaliers and the most powerful mage in the Royal Capital...or rather, the slime that had stolen Rogueheil's appearance and identity.



Chapter 4: Rogueheil, the Sword of Infinity

Part 1

THE LARGE OLD MAN who'd appeared—Rogueheil, the last of the Three Cavaliers—smiled broadly as his eyes landed on me.

B+. Come on, let him be a B+. If he's any better than that, then I'm in serious trouble. Plus I have the Demon King waiting to strike, and without the Saint or Seraphim, I'm at a disadvantage.

Unfortunately, my Divine Voice quickly dismissed my pleas as naivete. In this world, one always had to expect the worst.

Shoggoth Ooze: Rank A- Monster

Large, highly intelligent, and possesses excellent fighting skills. An extremely dangerous slime.

Sometimes labeled as deities and may even gather devoted followers to create a cult dedicated to their worship. Disguises itself as a human when appearing in public, but when it assumes its true form, it is said to be so terrifying that all who gaze upon it lose their minds.

So the final Cavalier is rank A-...

I'd assumed as much, of course. If the Demon King had a small army of C+ monsters at his command, it wasn't surprising that there was a rank A– among his subordinates. It definitely wasn't an assumption I'd wanted to be correct, though; I'd been hoping the Demon King himself was an A-. This meant the Demon King was likely a rank A or above.

Ugh. This sucks. Samael's goal being to meet up with Rogueheil the Shoggoth Ooze must've meant he thought he'd be able to do something about me. The question was whether I could actually take this guy down or not, never mind

the Demon King. Samael had probably given up and gone through the rubble to run away and happened to run into Rogueheil on the other side.

But still, a rank A— underling... From my experience, the highest rank that human fighters could usually attain was something in the B range.

But he also lacked the skill that doubles experience that I had. If he was rank A-, then he must've seriously neglected his levels, right? And it didn't matter what his rank was if he was low on skills and stats.

Rogueheil Aurornia

Species: Shoggoth Ooze

Lv: 81/105

HP: 1185/1185

MP: 699/734

Attack: 395

Defense: 414

Magic: 739

Agility: 698

Rank: A-

Special Skills:

Slime Body: Lv —

Grecian Language: Lv 5

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 7

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 6

Tentacles: Lv 7

Stealth: Lv 7

Psychic Sense: Lv 7

Poison Belt: Lv 8

Digestive Fluids: Lv 7

Fearsome Gaze: Lv 7

Petrifying Gaze: Lv 7

Maddening Gaze:

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 5

Magic Resistance: Lv 5

Poison Resistance: Lv 4

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 6

Curse Resistance: Lv 7

Confusion Resistance: Lv 4

Sleep Resistance: Lv 6

Petrify Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Color Change: Lv 7

Telepathy: Lv 7

Life Drain: Lv 7

Hi-Care: Lv 5

Death: Lv 5

Grapple: Lv 6

Ooze Bomb: Lv 7

Diseased Breath: Lv 6

Tentacle Lash: Lv 5

Clay Sword: Lv 6

Curse: Lv 8

Regenerate: Lv 7

Skill Crush: Lv 5

Wide Summon: Lv 7

Holy Pillar: Lv 5

Reaper's Rain: Lv 4

Ooze Machine Gun: Lv 3

Doppelganger: Lv 8

Sacred Skills:

Piece of the King: Lv —

Final Evolution: Lv —

Demon King's Underling: Lv —

Three Cavaliers: Lv —

Bishop: Lv —

Sword of Infinity: Lv —

Master of Ugly Demons: Lv —

Wh-what the heck? Why was he so broken? And why was his level so high?! I'd never even seen some of these skills. Even the names of some of them sounded disturbing.

This was worse than I thought. What the hell; with these stats, Rogueheil should be Demon King himself.

Behind Rogueheil, a foul-colored mucus seeped through the rubble and

reformed to reveal Samael. "Honestly, Rogueheil. You're so late that I was about to abandon the castle entirely."

"It could not be helped. I have been entrusted with the duty of protecting the Demon King from unforeseen circumstances. But due to your ineptitude, I was forced to step in. The Demon King has ordered us to throw down all the cards we have in our hand. His wish is to defeat the saint here and now at all costs. However," Rogueheil cast his eyes toward me, "it seems there is more to this than he is letting on."

Considering Samael's desire to bring Myria to the Demon King, I figured the Demon King wanted to finish me off at the same time as Lilyxila.

"You presume to know the Demon King's intentions, Rogueheil?" Samael asked. Rogueheil didn't respond.

Samael was clearly wondering whether or not it would be better to temporarily withdraw. I knew I'd appreciate a time-out, but it sounded like the Demon King wanted this conflict with the saint and me over and done with.

On the other hand, this might be a good chance for me to take out the Demon King, now that he was getting desperate. But it never paid to be overly optimistic.

"...Those two, they're Illusia and Myria. I'm sure of it."

"Oho ho? The dragon I understand, but why the Demon King also wants us to capture that little girl is beyond me. But, very well. I'll leave the girl and the others to you."

"C'mon. You're leaving me to take care of the weaklings?"

The two Cavaliers turned their gazes toward me.

Shoggoth Ooze Rogueheil, the Sword of Infinity.

Poison Ruler Samael, the Sword of Death.

Rogueheil's skills and stats were no joke. If he and I started fighting here, Nightmare, Myria, and Allo would all be in danger.

Samael was planning to take on Allo, Nightmare, and Myria. That meant I'd be left to fight Rogueheil, and Allo could protect Myria and somehow find a way to escape.

"Now, then. I dislike battling in such *confined* quarters. No doubt you feel the same, Illusia?" Rogueheil smiled, clearly trying to get a rise out of me. If Rogueheil's words were to be believed, his body's original size was a little larger, and he'd been forced to compress his body to maintain a human size and shape. However, unlike my Human Transformation skill, slime transformation didn't affect their stats, so staying in human form probably didn't affect him much.

If we could change locations, that'd be much better. Allo and Nightmare, with a wounded Myria, needed to be kept as far away from Rogueheil as possible.

I turned my head toward Allo and the others and gave a short grunt. Allo nodded, then she and Nightmare—with Myria riding on Nightmare's back—ran back in the direction we'd come from.

"W-wait!" Myria called out in desperation. "Is that really you, Illusia?! It is, isn't it?!"

I didn't answer. I had no idea what was going to happen to me from here on out.

Lilyxila had given me her word that she'd do everything in her power to allow me to live in human settlements after we defeated the Demon King, but I had no idea how long that would take. I wasn't even sure if I'd get a chance to take down the Demon King during this conflict. Furthermore, I knew that until this Demon King issue was resolved, if I got close to Myria now, she'd just end up getting dragged into it like she had this time.

"It seems the jig is up, Illusia."

Two blueish-green lights appeared, flanking Rogueheil. These lights transformed, taking on mass and stretching upward to form two greenish

bronze pillars.

"Holy Pillar."

The two pillars tilted downward, then shot forward in a straight line toward me. This was the skill Rogueheil had used on me earlier that pierced through my paw.

I jumped back and used my claws to divert the pillars' trajectories. They pierced through the floor, creating a large hole. Four lights appeared around Rogueheil, and after a moment, four more pillars appeared.

How long can he keep this up? I wondered. The pillars were hard to dodge in this small hallway, especially for someone my size. The only thing I could do was continue to deflect the blows and send them through the floor.

I stepped back, readying myself for the next onslaught. The four pillars shot toward me at high speed. I stepped back again and swiped them away with my claws. They were definitely fast, but not fast enough that I couldn't handle them. However, while I was busy dealing with Rogueheil and his pillars, Samael took his chance to try and dodge past me to go after Allo and the others. I leapt at him as he ran by, extending my claws as far as I could. *Gotcha*, I thought.

But Samael's body suddenly turned green and dropped to the ground like water, and my claws slashed through empty air. His slime form slid away, and as soon as he was far enough away that I wasn't a threat, he went back to his human form.

I turned my attention to my wings. If I bought a little time for them here, Allo and the others would have a much better chance of escaping. Allo wasn't ready to face a threat like Samael yet. They were both rank B+, but the gap between their levels was too big. It was hard for her to deal any real damage with her attacks, and all of Samael's attacks would be lethal against her.

"Graaa!" ("Illusia! The danger sticks, they're coming!") Partner sent me a thought to bring my focus back to our fight with Rogueheil.

The metal rod pierced through the tip of my wing as I tried to gather enough wind for a Whirlwind Slash.

"Gaagh!" I roared. The magic I'd been gathering with my wings dissipated. It was no use; I couldn't afford to take my eyes off my rank A opponent long enough to deal with Samael.

("He's coming!")

I looked back to see Rogueheil jump forward, coming at me with an agility that was difficult to believe a man of his age and appearance possessed. He reached for me, and his arm rippled and transformed into a long tentacle, extending his reach.

My only choice is to trust that Allo and Nightmare will keep Myria safe. Now, it's time to beat this old man into a not-so-early grave.

I expected Rogueheil was the strongest monster under the Demon King's command, and he was probably the only rank A monster among them other than the Demon King himself. If I took him out, I'd reduce the Demon King's forces considerably. Although Rogueheil had skills that allowed him to manipulate and change his body's shape at will, I was still on top in terms of raw power.

I figured it would be best to lure him in and rain hits down at him from close range...but the approaching Rogueheil had an eerie smile on his face. A chill ran down my spine.

I stopped trying to draw him closer and swung my paw at him from just outside his range to try and get him to stop. My claws tore through Rogueheil's tentacle arm. He quickly retracted it and reverted it back to a normal human arm.

"Hmph. What a shame," he said, expressionless.

Suddenly, it clicked. He was trying to use his Skill Crush skill.

Normal Skill "Skill Crush": Envelops target in user's own mucus, enabling deletion of the target's Special Skills, Resistance Skills, and Normal Skills.

...A skill-deletion skill. It felt almost too sinister to be real. No doubt Rogueheil wanted me to start a close-range fight so he could wipe my skills, even if it meant taking some damage.

From that skill, I felt the shadow of the Forte Slime I'd once fought looming over the entire Demon King affair. I spared a glance behind me to where Samael was running down the wrecked hallway.

I wonder if Allo and the others managed to escape... As the thought crossed my mind, Allo suddenly popped out from behind a corner, a black sphere of light pulsating in her hand.

Is that...Dark Sphere? This was the first time I'd seen Allo use that particular skill, but I remembered seeing it in her stats.

The black orb of light spun out of Allo's hand and spiraled into Samael's body. He was blown off his feet and slammed against the wall behind him. The blast severed his arm, which broke off from the elbow and turned into a mass of green goo.

"Gaagh! Y-you..."

Allo had apparently only pretended to escape so she could catch Samael off guard and deliver a nasty blow. The power contained within Dark Sphere—which Allo likely built up while she was hiding—was not something to be taken lightly, even with such a disparity between their levels. This time, her clever plan was a big hit—literally.

Allo took one last look at Samael before fleeing down the hallway. Samael lifted his newly regenerated arm and opened and closed it a few times as if to check its grip strength, then began to chase after Allo.

Sorry, Allo... I'll have to leave Samael to you!

Part 2

SWUNG MY PAW at Rogueheil for a vicious slash. Rogueheil turned one of his arms into a tentacle and then leapt up to avoid my attack. He turned to run through the crumbling wall, so instead I smashed into it with all my might, sending debris crashing down onto the floor.

Rogueheil smiled at the fallen debris, then lifted his arm and turned toward me.

"Holy Pillar!"

I deflected the three blueish-green pillars hurtling toward me with a couple of Whirlwind Slashes, changing their trajectory so they thudded into the floor, nearly vertical. Then I stomped on them where they met the flooring. They snapped and fell, landing next to Rogueheil and all the debris. I scanned my surroundings, looking for Rogueheil, but thanks to the rubble, he was in my blind spot. When I caught sight of him again, he had both his arms raised. His body went transparent, turning a color close to green, and his outline dissolved.

"Oho ho ho, did you think you had an opening? Too bad. Eat this! Ooze Machine Gun!" The surface of Rogueheil's body rippled, and then countless sticky bullets erupted from all over his body.

Tch! Talk about bad timing! Don't think you can underestimate me, though! I won't just sit here and let you batter me around!

I took in a quick breath, then released it toward Rogueheil. A wall of fire formed a barrier between the two of us, engulfing the old man and his slime bullets. It was my Scorching Breath skill.

"Guh!" The slime bullets that I didn't get to in time embedded themselves in my legs and torso. Sharp pain emanated out from the entrance wounds; the bullets were clearly made of a strong acid, which dissolved my scales and began to burn my skin. Ooze Machine Gun was a nasty, versatile skill, capable of

hitting many targets at once with skin-eating acid.

"Heh heh. You can make decisions much more quickly now without those liabilities you call friends in the way, can't you? Thank goodness; I was starting to get bore—"

I slammed my tail into Rogueheil as he tried to escape from the flames, splattering green bodily fluids everywhere. He thudded into the wall behind him with a grunt. "Y-you...!" he sputtered, eyes wide. I swung my lethal Ouroboros claws at his face with all my might, scraping the ceiling and walls along the way, and carved a massive gouge into his body, sending him flying backward.

"Is that all you've got...?" Rogueheil's body rapidly began to regenerate before my eyes; he was back to normal in a matter of seconds. This wasn't just a characteristic of slimes—Rogueheil seemed to be spending copious amounts of MP to recover as fast as possible.

His overwhelming regeneration speed, while disheartening, was also an indication that Rogueheil wouldn't be able to keep up with consistent damage unless he exhausted all his MP with recovery skills.

Just gotta keep up the pressure with a bunch of quick attacks! I can't give him any time to rest! I took my mind off the destruction around me, twisted my entire body around, and swung down to slam my massive claws into him again.

"Guh! H-how dare you... Holy Pillar!"

A thick blue-green pillar appeared in front of Rogueheil, blocking my path. I figured his plan was to make a wall between us to block my attacks and give himself time to heal.

"Heh, heh... Now, get ready for—"

"Grooooaaaaah!"

I let out a Bellow, then swung my arm down with all my might. The pillar shattered, creating cracks in the ground that spread out in ripples until it crumbled beneath Rogueheil and sent his body pelting to the ground of the

floor beneath us.

Still no experience points, though. That guy's one tough old bastard. I immediately jumped down after him and spotted him still struggling to crawl out of the rubble. I raised my arm.

Sorry, Rogueheil, but this fight ends here!

Suddenly, I felt a prickle of unease. This feels too easy. Why would he give away his position right away?

Did he...want me to find him?

I could guess at what his plan was, thanks to seeing his skill list before. This had to be his Doppelganger skill...

Normal Skill "Doppelganger": Reduces HP to create a slime double. Once the doppelganger takes a certain amount of damage, it will disintegrate, resulting in no experience gain for its attacker.

Partner! Keep an eye out! This one's a clone!

I whirled around to swipe at the real Rogueheil, who'd crept up behind me from the shadows. Rogueheil made a huge backward leap, then stuck his tentacles to the ceiling and pulled himself up there to rest in a belly-crawl position.

("Get our body outta the way!")

I did as Partner asked, arching my body away from her head as much as I could. Looking behind me, I saw that Partner had bitten into the doppelganger's tentacle and was about to rip it off by force. But before she had a chance, the doppelganger's body collapsed and vanished.

"...Hmph. You didn't fall for it? Perhaps your abilities really are a step above my own."

I looked up and let out a Whirlwind Slash at Rogueheil, who was dangling from the ceiling, but he evaded the attack by swinging around the room with his extended tentacle arms. He swung toward the stairs at the far end of the room and began to head down them.

We were on the ground floor, which meant he was going underground. He led me deeper and deeper below the castle's walls. The further we were from Allo and the others, the better, so I was fine just letting him lead me wherever he wanted, but going along with his intentions still made me uneasy.

I chased Rogueheil to the bottom of the stairs, where we emerged into a massive hall. Unlike the castle's above-ground interior, though, this hall was completely decked out in metal.

Perfect. I can go all out in here, and it's not so cramped. Let's get this over with. Bring it on!

"Illusia, allow me to share with you the conditions under which the Three Cavaliers came into being. We were chosen because we were the top three strongest out of the group that possessed a certain level of intelligence. Monsters with lower intelligence tend to reach their final evolution at lower levels...but there were some who didn't."

Huh? What the heck is this guy talking about?

Suddenly, a massive door at the back of the underground hall toppled to the ground with a crash. The moment I peered into the expanse behind the door, I was so horrified that I couldn't breathe.

From the depths emerged a massive slime, about the same size as me. Inside the slime's body floated a number of human figures. Most of them were just bones, but there were also some floating around that were still partially covered in rotten flesh.

"Bruuuaaaaaagh!" The mass of slime gave a fearless roar.

"This was to be our final secret weapon to ensure the saint's defeat. I didn't

expect to have to move here before we even knew what she was plotting, though. But that's not all. Wide Summon!"

A giant summoning circle formed around Rogueheil. It flashed with a dazzling light, and then in its place stood five green-skinned giants. Each looked about three meters tall. They all had grotesque, squashed faces and clutched massive clubs in their hands. The giants looked around with lifeless eyes, then turned their attention to me.

Wh-what's with all these creepy newcomers...?

How much power did Rogueheil think he needed to throw at me just to beat me?

"I suppose I should get serious now too. My human form is too weak for a proper fight."

Rogueheil's body lost its color, then began to lose definition and expand. In the blink of an eye, all semblance of the human Rogueheil was gone.

When he expanded to four meters tall, color returned to his body, and he turned a grotesque gutter green. A mass of tentacles shot out from Rogueheil's form. His entire body was dotted with eyeballs that blinked unnervingly.

«Hyoh hoh! Did you truly think you could beat me just now? It is the mark
of a skilled tactician to hide one's claws until the enemy has been made assured
of their victory! Now, let's see... Doppelganger!

Rogueheil's entire body split into two, three...no, five clones. Each one instantly expanded to the original's size.

You can't escape now, can you, Illusia? I'll suck your memories out of you one by one, just like I did to everyone else in this city! Hyoh hoh hoh!> Rogueheil's body split

open to reveal a huge mouth with at least four tongues hanging from it.

When I first saw him, I'd thought Rogueheil seemed like a calm old man—but that clearly had been nothing more than a facade.

Part 3

"BIJUUAAAAAAAGH!"

A circular depression appeared in the massive slime, from which a cacophony of screams erupted. Even I was terrified, frozen in place for a moment. The eye sockets of the corpses floating in the mucus seemed to look at me with resentment as the slime advanced.

It was slow. But between the massive slime, the five giants, and the five Rogueheils, I knew I was in trouble.

Giga Slime: Rank A- Monster

A monster of unbelievable gluttony.

It will devour everything in its sight.

The souls of those ingested will not be reincarnated but will instead be made to suffer endlessly inside the Giga Slime.

Right, of course Rogueheil is bringing out all the rank A– big guns! Things aren't gonna be quite so easy this time around!

"Grooooh!"

The ugly giants with smashed faces ran toward me, passing the Giga Slime, as the Rogueheils crawled around on the ground and moved to surround me.

Quell Troll: Rank B- Monster

The final evolution of the most fearsome and brutal of the trolls. Rulers of the Black Forest.

Their minds are constantly filled with thoughts of rage and frustration. It is said among adventurers that it is better to die than be captured by a Quell Troll.

Th-they're all rank B-?! What about Rogueheil's doppelgangers?!

Species: Doppel Shoggoth Ooze

Status: Doppelganger

Lv: 75/75 (LOCK) (MAX)

HP: 53/53

MP: 8/8

Attack: 248

Defense: 258

Magic: 461

Agility: 437

Rank: B-

Special Skills:

Slime Body: Lv —

Tentacles: Lv 5

Poison Belt: Lv 6

Digestive Fluids: Lv 5

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 2

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Poison Resistance: Lv 2

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4

Curse Resistance: Lv 5

Confusion Resistance: Lv 2

Sleep Resistance: Lv 4

Petrify Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Color Change: Lv 5

Life Drain: Lv 5

Grapple: Lv 4

Ooze Bomb: Lv 5

Diseased Breath: Lv 4

Regenerate: Lv 5

Title Skills:

Final Evolution: Lv —

...As expected, they were much weaker than his main body, but they were still max level rank B-. Their HP and MP weren't so high, though. Maybe they could only take the amount of HP that was sacrificed when they split off from the main body. Like the Doppelganger skill description said, I'd be able to wipe them out with one hit...if I could actually hit them.

I sent a Whirlwind Slash toward the two trolls that were running at me. Even a single Whirlwind Slash was enough to do a lot of damage to rank B— enemies. The slashes sliced through the flesh of the two trolls. They bent over and dropped to their knees, motionless.

All right! I should be able to take these guys out in no ti—oh, just kidding!

Species: Quell Troll

Status: Hardened

Lv: 69/69 (MAX)

HP: 317/483

MP: 174/192

Species: Quell Troll

Status: Hardened

Lv: 68/68 (MAX)

HP: 299/488

MP: 165/189

When I looked closer, I realized that the blood from their wounds had stopped, and their flesh had a strange, metallic quality to it. A skill that boosts defense and hinders movement by turning their bodies to steel? Seriously?! Here I am, trying to cut them all down as fast as I can, and they keep pulling out all these annoying skills!

While I was focused on the trolls, the swarm of Rogueheils surrounded me. I almost lost track of which one was the main body, but there was one that moved faster than the others and kept his distance. The four other Rogueheils advanced toward me, leaving the main body behind. *Guess I've just gotta burn 'em all to a crisp.* My wide-range skills were limited to Scorching Breath, Diseased Breath, and Earth Fall, which would send out a shockwave. With this hall's low ceiling, I couldn't risk using Earth Fall, so Scorching Breath was going to have to do. I inhaled, drawing magical power into my stomach.

The Rogueheils' bodies began to ripple. The doppelgangers didn't have Ooze

Machine Gun, though, only Ooze Bomb, and a few single shots wouldn't be an issue for me.

I let out my Scorching Breath, moving my head around in a circle. Partner kept an eye on my surroundings to try and eliminate the blind spot created by my breath attack. In response, slime bullets shot at me from all directions, and the Rogueheils scattered. They'd disappear once they took enough damage, so a breath attack like mine was a natural enemy for them.

I'd been hoping to take out at least one of the doppelgangers with that attack, but I only succeeded in getting the Rogueheil legion out of my way. This situation was getting worse by the second...

Behind my fiery cover, I tried to come up with a solution. I guess I ought to try and whittle away at those trolls? But their Harden skill made them a lot tougher than typical monsters at their rank. So maybe if I take out Rogueheil's doppelgangers first...?

But they were really fast, and they were using the trolls as decoys, and they used nasty tactics that made them hard to hit. What should I do? If I spent too much time thinking, I'd give them an opening to attack.

I guess I'll leave the trolls alone until they get close and then use Scorching Breath to make them Harden and slow them down... In the meantime, I'll make sure Rogueheil's clones don't run away by attacking from up close... Wait, maybe I should...

As I pondered my options, I suddenly felt a chill run down my spine, and my body froze as if I were paralyzed. I could barely move my eyes, but out of the corner of my eye I saw the true Rogueheil standing near me, his eyes wide open.

Is this one of Rogueheil's Gaze skills?! He had three different ones: Fearsome Gaze, Maddening Gaze, and Petrifying Gaze. My guess was that this was Fearsome Gaze.

My Master's Demonic Gaze skill required constant eye contact to stay

activated, but it seemed like this one could be used regardless of eye contact.

Damn it...!

"Groooooh!" I released a wave of magic to shake it off. Typically, the easier a binding skill was to activate, the easier it was to end its effects. Plus, my stats were higher. I should be able to hold out against these guys if I keep my wits about me!

Suddenly, something came flying at my head through the wall of flames, thunking me in the skull before bouncing off. For a moment, I saw stars. Whatever it was, it sure packed a punch. I spread my wings out to my full wingspan to increase the air resistance behind me and dug my claws into the ground. The blow still sent me back a few meters, but not enough to slam me into the wall and knock me down or cause any additional damage.

That hit... Was it...from the Giga Slime...?

Now that I had a clear field of vision, I could see the Giga Slime's many tentacles looming over me. I can't ignore this guy either. If I get hit with that many tentacles, it's game over.

I jumped to the side as the Giga Slime's thick tentacles slammed down right where I'd been standing. Massive trenches appeared in the walls and floor where the tentacles landed.

That slime was all about stats, HP, and attack. If the only thing that mattered was raw power, it'd be even stronger than me. It was impossible to survive in this world without focusing on specific stats, but as a pawn in a group fight, its stats worked horribly.

〈Hyaaah hah hah! That one hurt, didn't it? Well done, Giga!〉 Rogueheil crowed via Telepathy. 〈The souls of hundreds of humans and monsters are trapped inside the Giga Slime's body. The Demon King steals their skills, I erase any useless skills and wipe their memories, and then we dispose of them. The corpses of the adventurers, who no one will come looking for, are stuck underground and used as fodder for the Giga Slime.〉

Destroying all of a creature's skills and wiping their memories... I only had a faint idea of what that would do to them. Skills were acquired through experience and instinct. Depriving someone of their skills was depriving them of their very identity. That explains why the man from Myria's village, Doz, and Modi's daughter, Luon, had both lost their minds.

("Hey, Illusia! Don't let that guy freak you out! The big nasty slime is coming!")
Partner said in my mind.

I know, I know. Rogueheil's just feeding me useless, gross info to shake me and screw up my focus. I get that, but I also can't stand listening to him blabber on.

The Demon King will drain most of your skills, and then, while you teeter on the brink of insanity, the Giga Slime will devour you and keep your soul hostage. You will suffer and moan for eternity, unable to understand a thing! A horrifying thought, is it not? Truly horrifying! You will soon be joining the ranks of all the adventurers before you in its stomach! Hyoh hoh, hyoh hoh ho!

As much as I tried to ignore it, Rogueheil's monologue was taking up all of my attention. I knew I should just let it fade into the background, but I couldn't. I just couldn't.

«As I've been trained in Telepathy, I can hear all of their voices calling out to me. 'Let me out, let me out, please end my suffering... It hurts, oh, it hurts so much...' Hyoh hoh hoh, they make me laugh!>

"Grrrr..." I growled low in my throat and glared daggers at Rogueheil. His personality and behavior were definitely evil...but his very nature as a creature was pure evil too.

No, that's not it. His evil behaviors probably drove him into even more evil evolutions. Rogueheil didn't just take on that creepy visage by chance; it's a result of his nature affecting his outward appearance.

<And now, I thank you for being sufficiently distracted.>

The trolls were closing the distance between us. Rogueheil's doppelgangers waited behind me, and the Giga Slime was behind them, looking for an opportunity to attack.

"Goooogh!" "Guaaaah!" "Groooh!" Three trolls swung their clubs down, directly at me.

Partner tried to bite one in the arm, but it hardened into steel so her fangs couldn't pierce through.

I raised my paw but failed to block in time; the other two trolls' clubs swung down toward me. Meanwhile, Rogueheil's doppelgangers were prepping an Ooze Bomb behind me.

I concentrated all my power at the tip of my paw to create a black flame. The trolls' clubs hit my neck and shoulder with sick thuds, but I dug my back claws into the floor and rode them out.

As an Ouroboros, I didn't have the overwhelming offense or defense of the average rank A monster. I had a lot of magic, but not much more than Rogueheil, a magic-oriented rank A—. No, as an Ouroboros, my strength was in my unrivaled toughness.

"Gohh..." The trolls in front of me hardened, perhaps struck by my murderous intent. I threw the black flame in my paw at them with all my might. The flames sailed through the air, drawing a line of black fire in its wake.

Normal Skill "Dragon Punch" Lv 3 became Lv 4.

My punch struck one of the Hardened trolls. At first, the steel shell on the troll stopped the hit, but I looked deep into its eyes and focused more strength into my arm to break through.

"Guuoooooh!" The troll's body cracked in half at the waist, and it fell, its hardened shell turning back to flesh and blood.

Gained 1,104 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,104 Experience Points.

Ouroboros's Lv has increased from 103 to 104.

I maintained my momentum and blasted away the second troll standing behind the first.

Gained 1,120 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1,120 Experience Points.

That's what I'm talking about.

I should've been relieved, but I was seeing red.

It was good that I'd reduced the enemy count, but I was now in the worst possible position.

The Ooze Bombs from Rogueheil's doppelgangers were flying straight for me. But that wasn't all. The real Rogueheil's body was covered in pockmarks, which meant he was getting ready to use Ooze Machine gun. The Giga Slime was also preparing to attack with more of its massive tentacles.

This volley of attacks would be next to impossible to evade normally. If I lost my stance, I'd be assaulted with attacks from all sides. Even a tanklike Ouroboros like me wouldn't be able to weather that assault.

Then I guess there's only one thing I can do! It was a massive gamble, but if there was no way to safely protect myself, I had no choice but to rely on luck.

I kicked off the ground with my back legs and leapt into the air, flying low. Then I curled my body into a ball and began to spin. I sped up in the air, and the Ooze Bomb bullets soared through the air behind me.

When I landed back on the ground, a massive crack appeared in the floor. I spun through my opponents, tearing the floor to shreds and wiping out Rogueheil's doppelgangers along the way. The Giga Slime's tentacles pierced forward, but I was already gone.

I did it! I dodged all their attacks! I approached Rogueheil, who'd been watching from afar.

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<Tch! Damn it, you...you...!>
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Rogueheil slammed his tentacles into the ground and leapt up to evade. I slowed down my rotation long enough to smack the floor with my tail, sending me hurtling into the air toward him. I swung my paw at him with all the momentum and force I had left in me.

I'd never let a slimeball like you be the one to take me down!

But I spoke too soon; I heard the whoosh of the Giga Slime's tentacles piercing through the air toward me. So instead, I smacked Rogueheil with my tail to send myself back to the ground and curled back into a ball to increase my speed.

Tch! I missed my chance. I couldn't reach him in time. I probably could've at least taken a bite or two out of him first, but that would've been pushing it.

The Giga Slime's tentacle attack was coming again. I arched my body out of the way, and the tentacles only grazed me. I knew it. This guy is too much of a nuisance to leave alive. But if I stay still to aim at it, the rest of them will attack me at once.

"Bluuuaaaaaagh!" the Giga Slime roared as the countless corpses inside it drifted around sadly.

Rogueheil's real body crawled along the floor, creating distance between us.

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<Huff... Huff... That was close. Giga saved me...>
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The eyes in his body wriggled, blinked, and looked at me. They really creeped

me out.

So long as the Giga Slime was up and moving, it would try to spear me if I started fighting someone else. But if I moved in to finish off the Giga Slime, Rogueheil's clones and the trolls would surround me.

I wanted to use my agility advantage to cut down the trolls' and Rogueheils' numbers, but that meant playing into Rogueheil's plan to wear me down. His goal was to slowly and steadily reduce my HP and MP to reduce the biggest advantage I had over them: I was a tank.

I had no choice but to take a risk and go for either the real Rogueheil or the Giga Slime. I haven't used my Death skill much, but...it might work against the Giga Slime? Its magic is pretty low for a rank A—.

("But that skill doesn't have much range, right?") Partner chimed in. ("You'll have to get closer to it somehow.")

It's probably a better idea than trying to whittle its health down, I replied. It looks tough. If I can take one of them down first, it'll be a lot easier to take care of the rest of them. It'll be worth it, even if I end up taking some damage.

It would've probably been easier to take Rogueheil out first, but since he unleashed the Giga Slime and trolls against us, he'd been hanging out at a safe distance and focusing on provocation and interference. It was hard to get to him when he was so intent on staying out of combat.

Depleting all my MP by taking these guys out one by one felt like a bad move, considering I'd potentially still be facing a fight with the Demon King later, but I had no choice. Chasing after Rogueheil while he ran around like we were playing a game of tag was not only pointless, but it would also leave me open to multiple attacks from my other foes.

The Giga Slime was slow and had big, obvious attacks, but I had to be careful about its tentacles' piercing strikes. The tentacles were like whips with tremendous reach, so they were the opposite of slow. I was reminded once again of the fact that being big was a threat in and of itself.

...Hmm? Wait, that might be my saving grace... According to the Divine Voice's description, the Giga Slime should be attacking indiscriminately. But whether through training or by virtue of its close relation with the Demon King, the Giga Slime seemed to have enough intelligence to follow Rogueheil's commands.

However, it still didn't seem particularly intelligent seeing as it could only hit me every once in a while. If things went well, I might be able to take advantage of that fact.

I looked around to get a better idea of the overall positioning of me, the Giga Slime, Rogueheil, Rogueheil's doppelgangers, and the trolls. Well...this'll be risky, but it's a better plan than playing right into the palm of Rogueheil's hand.

I curled my neck up and used Roll, then headed straight for the Giga Slime. Three trolls and four Rogueheil copies chased after me in battle formation.

*CLuckily for me, I can create far more than just five Doppelgangers...*Rogueheil's slime body expanded and then separated with slimy pops, creating four more copies. I'd defeated one of the five already, so that brought Rogueheil's doppelganger total up to eight. This guy truly was an endlessly creepy bastard.

<Hyoh hoh hoh! How about that? Are you shocked? There's no way you can win at this rate. Sometimes in battle, one can see the result before the fighting even begins.>

The sight of so many massive, extraterrestrial slugs gathered together, their many eyes blinking, was so hideous that I felt sick. No matter how many times I saw them, I couldn't get used to them.

The real Rogueheil dropped to the ground, and the four new clones approached me.

("Blegh... What's with this guy?") said Partner, annoyed. ("There's no end to 'em. We can't win if we don't do something about him first.") Even for her, who'd happily feast on the holy sword or the fearsome forest gods, Rogueheil

didn't seem particularly appetizing.

However, it was wrong to say that Rogueheil's doppelgangers were unbeatable. In fact, the more he used Doppelganger, the more obvious the skill's weaknesses got.

Doppelganger required each clone to constantly consume MP in order to maintain their form. If I checked Rogueheil's stats regularly, I could get a sense for how much MP each one consumed from his Automatic MP Recovery.

If that didn't work, then I could always get him to make a massive stock of clones in advance. It would probably not be smart for Rogueheil to use Doppelganger—thus draining his HP and MP—while he was facing off against me. It seemed like he'd been limiting the number of clones he made beforehand, but as soon as he saw the Giga Slime go for me, he made more doppelgangers. My guess was that he'd try to recover the MP he'd lost while I was otherwise occupied.

The four new Rogueheil clones crawled along the wall and chased after me at full speed.

Did he just...leave his brand-new bodyguards behind to fend for themselves? No, at this distance, he's probably thinking he can just call back his closest doppelganger if he senses any funny business from me.

Still Rolling, I kicked off from the ground, changed direction, and zoomed around the Giga Slime.

<Now, Giga! Attack!>

At Rogueheil's command, the Giga Slime raised a massive tentacle into the air. As I swerved to avoid it, the other monsters caught up to me in a case of unfortunate timing.

Okay, fine. Then just try and hit me and get it over with. I'll focus on taking the hit and reduce my damage that way.

The Giga Slime's tentacles swung toward me. I kicked off the ground and leapt

at the edge of the tentacle, lodging my claws deep inside it.

The next moment, the Giga Slime's tentacles shot forward at high speed, with me still holding on. But now, because I'd led the Giga Slime around to face this direction, the tentacle was headed straight for Rogueheil.

Creating all those doppelgangers had drastically reduced his health, and now, with his doppelgangers on the other side of the hall, his real body was left defenseless.

I kicked off from the tentacle and landed on the ground. The tentacle hit the wall next to me, denting the metal and making the entire basement shake. The tentacle coiled up and slid back toward the Giga Slime.

⟨R-ridiculous! Using the Giga Slime's tentacles as a mode of transportation?!
It's... It's... > Rogueheil's flustered form was directly in front of me. His clones instantly shifted around to head toward me, but it was too late—they wouldn't be able to get to us in time.

<Holy Pillar! Holy Pillar!>

Two massive, teal pillars flew straight at me. I swatted my paw at them with all my might and knocked them to the side, where they stabbed themselves into the ground.

Anticipating Rogueheil's next move, I bent down and splayed my wings.

(V-very well, then... Doppelganger!) Rogueheil's body split apart and began to expand as he retreated, and five new Rogueheil clones were created.

I flapped my wings and sent the wing I created to my arms, then released the energy from the ends of my claws as four Whirlwind Slashes in a row.

Rogueheil's clones scattered to avoid them, but two were struck down. The clones' bodies crumpled, then dissolved into goo and disappeared.

You've been holding back with your Doppelganger skill for a while, but now you're using it repeatedly, right in front of your enemy. You're out of options, aren't you, Rogueheil? It's time to end this.

«...It seems my safety measures have backfired. I wish I could have offered the experience points for your death to the Demon King, but now I have no choice but to kill you myself, Rogueheil said, his tentacles outstretched and poised for close combat. (You can see my skills, can't you? Do they frighten you? My Skill Crush skill is proof that I am the one closest to the might of the Demon King! I cannot steal skills like him, but I can erase them from existence. Surely you agree that attempting to fight me in melee combat is a fool's errand, yes?

Rogueheil shot his tentacles out toward me, and I lifted my paw in preparation to rip it apart. Rogueheil's countless eyes pulsed and widened.

He was going to use his Gaze skill to frighten me and create an opening. I readied myself to resist the intimidation with my entire body.

Die! Rogueheil's shriek reverberated through my mind. Three of the Rogueheil clones surrounded me, quivering, and began to fire their trusty Ooze Bombs at me from their mouths.

Rogueheil bent down, then leapt toward me, clearly trying to ambush me with Skill Crush while I was busy dealing with the Ooze Bombs.

Good! Come in close so I can beat you to a pulp!

... Wait. Was the whole Skill Crush thing a bluff?

If so, then he might just be threatening me instead of actually trying to engage in close combat. What should I do? Would it be better to dodge them? No, I didn't have enough time to fall back!

The trolls couldn't reach us in time, and the Giga Slime was far enough away that it would be a minute before its next attack. Rogueheil was also weak from his repeated use of Doppelganger. If he were bluffing, he'd be trying to get away from me right now so he could recover some HP and MP.

This is the time to attack! I surged forward and swung my claws.

I hit one of the Ooze Bomb bullets and destroyed it, but the other two hit my shoulder and burst. Pain shot through my body, and I felt my wings begin to

retract and harden. But I could endure it! My HP tank Ouroboros body could take all the damage I needed it to take if it meant hitting Rogueheil. The fact that I could take a lot of damage without worrying was a prime advantage of being an Ouroboros.

Rogueheil, instead of jumping forward to face me up close, stayed out of range. His deformed body began to ripple again.

So the Skill Crush was a bluff, I realized. He's going to use Ooze Machine Gun to try and mow me down! I was right!

<Hyoh, hyoh hoh hoh hoh! I've won the battle of wits! Goodbye, Illusia!>

My claws were less than two steps away from him, which made evading the Ooze Machine Gun nearly impossible. I was entirely at his mercy.

Numerous acid bullets shot out from Rogueheil's body, heading straight for me. The first bullet pierced my shoulder, causing me to stagger backward. The second shot hit me in the face.

My face burned. It felt like the acid was melting my scales and making them stick to my skin. It stung so bad that I couldn't open my eyes. Naturally, Rogueheil wasn't going to waste this golden opportunity. Acid bullets pelted my arms as I attempted to wipe my face, and then were followed by a direct hit to my unprotected torso. My entire body seared with pain.

¿Die, die, die, diiieeeee!>

I was in agony, like the flames of Hell were searing my skin. Rogueheil was clearly determined to end things here and now. If I didn't get out of there as soon as I could, I'd be in serious danger. But I used Regenerate to counteract the damage and, instead of falling back, lunged forward, grabbing Rogueheil firmly with my claws.

<Wha...?>

Well? Didn't expect that one, did you?

"Groooooogh!" I lifted Rogueheil up with my paw and slammed him to the

ground with all my weight. Rogueheil's viscous body bounced, and the floor cracked beneath him.

<Ghogh?!>

My paw struck Rogueheil in midair. The impact of the blow sent him flying, until Partner chomped down on him, pinning him in midair.

<*O*-ogh...?>

Then, I hit him with a Dragon Punch.

Rogueheil's body—or most of it, apart from the mucus secured behind Partner's fangs—sailed away and tumbled along the ground. The eyes that littered his body were completely crushed and oozing black liquid.

Rogueheil's doppelgangers scattered around the area burst one by one and dropped to the ground as harmless liquid, having apparently lost the power to sustain themselves.

Haaah, haah... Heh heh, I pulled it off. How'd you like that, Rogueheil? You endured it, didn't you?

Rogueheil Aurornia

Species: Shoggoth Ooze

Status: Normal

Lv: 81/105

HP: 123/1185

MP: 44/734

All right! One more hit, and this'll be over...!

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted one of the Giga Slime's tentacles hurtling in my direction. But outside of a lucky punch in melee, it's way too slow

to scare me!

I jumped backward to avoid it. The Giga Slime's tentacles scraped across the floor, gouged through the wall, and bisected the space between Rogueheil and me.

Y-yes, perfect! Rogueheil returned to his humanoid shape. His color, however, remained the same drab green, and his body was still littered with smashed eyeballs. He jumped onto the Giga Slime's tentacle. The tentacle retracted like a stretched rubber band, pulling Rogueheil back with it.

I rushed after the retreating tentacle and unleashed a Whirlwind Slash. The blade sliced through the tentacle but only grazed Rogueheil's body; his human form was too small for my Whirlwind Slash to target him.

I kicked off from the ground, coiled my body into a Roll, and followed after them.

Dang it! He stole my move and used it as his getaway!

Part 4

W HAT WAS ROGUEHEIL PLANNING, once he got back to the Giga Slime? He was almost out of HP and MP. He shouldn't be able to summon a doppelganger to fight me without recovering first.

Was he just going to keep his distance and try to escape? I'd be an idiot if I let that happen when I'd come this far! I had to do everything I could to finish him off!

If Rogueheil had a chance to recover and brought the other two Cavaliers with him, or if he and the Demon King came to attack me, I'd be in way over my head. The reason I'd succeeded against Rogueheil so far was that I had a lot of information about him. His basic tactic was to create a doppelganger to engage me and hang out on the sidelines as he used his Gaze skills to contain me. I was able to deal with him when his partner in combat was a mindless Giga Slime, but if he teamed up with the Demon King, I'd be in trouble.

Rogueheil's only vaguely humanoid shape crouched atop the Giga Slime's massive body. The three trolls that were left, presumably intent on buying them time, stood poised between the two of us, ready to intercept me.

(l've got a trick of my own up my sleeve!) Rogueheil's voice echoed through my mind.

A light shone out from the point where Rogueheil and the Giga Slime's bodies were in contact. The Giga Slime began to dissolve slightly where Rogueheil touched it. Rogueheil's body began to moisten, and the eyes along his frame, which had been closed, opened once more.

He's using Life Drain! I realized. Since his MP was low, he was avoiding using Regenerate by using the Giga Slime as his HP tank!

Damn, that's sly... But it was a clear indication of how desperate he'd become.

The three trolls blocked my path. It'd be impossible to get past them with Roll, considering how predictable my trajectory would be, which meant I only had one option.

Let's crush 'em!

I accelerated straight into one of the trolls. No feints here!

The troll opened its arms wide in preparation, then pinned me down with both its hands.

"Grooooogh!" the troll roared. Its body was enveloped in light, and its muscles bulged outward. It was a skill that strengthened attack power! The troll's limbs were instantly hardened into steel. By using the Harden skill on just its limbs, it boosted its blocking ability while still leaving enough flexibility to keep me pinned.

The troll's makeshift shield slowed me down considerably, but I still managed to push through. Its legs, now steel statues, scraped backward as I rammed into them.

"Grooogh!" "Grooogh!"

The two remaining trolls hardened their limbs too, pushing me down from different directions. But that wasn't enough! *Don't think you can stop me when I'm rolling with everything I've got!*

The floor beneath me started to chip away with a grinding sound.

<Well done, you big brutes!>

Rogueheil, still riding atop the Giga Slime, was turning jet black. <I do not yet have enough strength or mass, slime. I will be borrowing yours.>

Where Rogueheil was touching it, the surface of the Giga Slime began to turn black. The Giga Slime squirmed in agony, and black sludge started to leak from both of their bodies. The sludge crawled up to the ceiling, then expanded to cover the entire expanse overhead.

U-uh oh. That doesn't look good?!

«I was hoping not to have to use this, but I have no choice! Drop dead, Illusia!
Pour down from the heavens, my Reaper's Rain!»

A black cloud appeared above Rogueheil, from which lines of black ooze began to rain down at random. *So this is his Reaper's Rain skill?!*

Normal Skill "Reaper's Rain"

Greatly reduces user's HP and MP to create a black rain that gives Instant Death and Curse effects to any caught beneath its cloud.

This skill, when used, cannot be rescinded by the user. It will only end when the user's HP and MP are depleted to the point where they can no longer continue.

This feels like a huge mistake for Rogueheil. If I can endure the rain, I'll be able to kill Rogueheil with a single good smack.

The Instant Death status effect rarely worked against opponents of higher rank, and Partner's Death skill, which was probably better, really only worked against opponents who were several ranks lower than me. At that point, it was faster and easier to just hit them. If the Curse effect worked the same way as the dragon scale powder did, it would only do normal damage and impede my movement a little. *No need to prolong the battle any further. I can handle this.*

The rain poured down in front of me. As it touched the ground, it began to turn it a dusky black color.

W-wait. What's...happening?

Black mucus poured down my back and into the wounds left by the bullet holes, flooding me with immediate, searing pain. It was so intense that I stopped spinning and fell to the ground.

This...isn't painful so much as it's agonizing. What in the world is this? Rain?

You've gotta be kidding me. It's more like a storm of cursed spears!

The black rain poured down the backs of the hardened trolls who were blocking my way. At that moment, their entire bodies convulsed, and their limbs all turned back to normal. Then their bodies turned a dusky black and they collapsed, their skin bubbling in the rain.

Gained 784 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 784 Experience Points.

Gained 896 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 896 Experience Points.

Gained 448 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 448 Experience Points.

Ouroboros's Lv has increased from 104 to 105.

R-Rogueheil just...let them die, just like that?! If they'd hardened their entire bodies instead of just their limbs, they might've been able to survive!

I didn't know if Rogueheil was scared I'd act while he told them to get out of the way or if he just decided he didn't need the immobilized trolls anymore because the outcome would be decided by the time the rain stopped or what, but either way, he clearly thought they were disposable.

Regardless, this Reaper's Rain skill was bad news. I didn't expect it to work on rank B- trolls.

Maybe it's more likely to work because it's pouring down constantly, whereas the chance to hit with Death is on an individual basis?

Rogueheil himself seemed unable to move while he was attached to the Giga Slime, perhaps because he was devoting all his consciousness to keeping his Reaper's Rain activated. But even with that in mind, this skill was just too

powerful to risk.

Resistance Skill "Instant Death Resistance" Lv 2 became Lv 3.

Resistance Skill "Curse Resistance" Lv 2 became Lv 3.

M-my levels went up?!

I was glad to see my Resistance Skills improving, but in my experience, they only leveled up when I was in a really tight spot. *D-does this mean if I keep getting rained on, it could actually kill me?! Am I going to die from this?!*

Die! Drop dead already, Illusia! Just die, die, die! The deformed old man stared at me with his many, many eyeballs.

Ugh, that bastard...! Damn it! This stupid rain will kill me before I can even get close to him!



Should I run? This skill wasn't going to stop until Rogueheil was on the brink of death. The Reaper's Rain could still hit me while I was trying to bust down the wall and escape...but my chances of survival would be much higher if I ran than if I went after Rogueheil.

But was I really going to let him get away after I'd come so far...? If I ran now, even if I cornered him the next time I saw him, he could still use Reaper's Rain and I'd have to run away again.

"Graaah!" As Partner roared, we were enveloped in a gentle light. The black color dissipated from the rain around us, turning it into clear water. Partner had used Holy.

W-with this, we could—

("No we can't! I can't keep using this over and over until the rain stops! I'll run out of MP before he does! But we can use this to escape...")

You're right... Holy wasn't a skill that could be used continuously. It was a temporary fix at best. Using it over and over would just be throwing away MP. If only I had an umbrella that could protect us from the Reaper's Rain, I could...

Wait...an umbrella? Suddenly, an idea flashed through my mind.

Yes. An umbrella, to protect me from Reaper's Rain. That might just work. It was risky, but if I didn't try, I'd have to either run away or be cursed to death.

Partner! Use Fake Life to revive the quell trolls!

("What? B-but even if we do, they'll be too weak to do anything...")

I know. Monsters revived with Fake Life come back at level 1. But they're also revived with a permanent Curse status effect—which means the Curse from the Reaper's Rain won't do anything to them.

"Graaaah!"

The three trolls were enveloped in black light. Then their bodies, painted black from the rain, twitched violently, and they began to rise, their gazes fixed

on me.

"Goooh, oooorgh...ooogh..." The trolls moaned in low voices as if cursing the world.

As I'd hoped, they stood under the cursed rain without any reaction; they simply stared at me with their dagger-like gazes and didn't move.

I was starkly reminded of the time the avyssos zombie I'd resurrected with Fake Life had turned on me. Fake Life didn't allow me to completely control the will of the dead I resurrected, but that didn't mean I couldn't control them at all. The avyssos zombie had followed my instructions for a while before it turned too.

Go ahead, Partner.

Now that the trolls were under our command, Partner's Master's Demonic Gaze should be able to affect them.

Partner's eyes widened and flashed with red light. I bent down, and the trolls clambered onto my body and began to harden into their steel forms. It probably looked a little awkward, but now I had Curse-resistant steel armor.

Sorry, trolls. I know this skill probably feels like I'm making a mockery of your deaths, but I've decided that I won't hesitate to use it anymore if it helps me achieve my goals. I'll release you after this is over, so please bear with me for a little bit.

Title Skill "Wrongdoer" Lv 9 became Lv MAX.

Title Skill "Dastardly King" Lv 9 became Lv MAX.

Fine. Say what you like. I don't know what your intentions are, Divine Voice, but as for me, I'm gonna do what I gotta do. Provoke me, intervene, do whatever you want. I can't do anything about you right now anyway. But I'll be doing whatever I want too!

I pulled my cold steel armor down over my head and charged at Rogueheil. The solid steel meant it was heavy enough that it wouldn't fall off, even if I picked up my pace a little bit. A few drops of rain fell still through the gaps, but the vast majority of it was blocked.

«N-no! Stay away! Stay awaaaay!» Rogueheil's shrieks flashed in my mind.
«Die! You will die here! Die! Die! Die! How stubborn must you be?! After running into the trap I set for the saint, being beat upon, being shot with acid bombs, and facing the final ace up my sleeve that I did not wish to use, why are you still coming toward me?! Nonsense... What utter nonsense! You, you're dead! Die!
Die now!»

The dark cloud of sludge rising from the figures of Rogueheil and the Giga Slime grew darker. The Curse rain hammered down even more intensely than it was before.

That's my line, you rotten old bastard! You just don't know when to quit!

Unfortunately, while the steel troll armor was useful, I couldn't use Holy while I was wearing it. There was a chance they'd get caught up in the light and have their Curse purified, which would kill them. They might be able to withstand it in their steel forms, but if I tried it and it didn't work, I'd lose my troll helpers right then and there.

The rain was getting heavier and heavier. As I approached Rogueheil's motionless form, two massive tentacles rose up from the Giga Slime and swung down at me. I leapt to the side to avoid them. Sorry, but that thing's way too slow to hit me!

¿Die, die! Hurry up and run out of power and die! Die!>

I steadily approached the frantic Rogueheil as the rain pounded down until I finally made it to the Giga Slime. While I couldn't say it was an easy trip, I didn't have to worry too much. The closer I got to Rogueheil, the more I was able to escape the rain. Rogueheil didn't put himself in the attack radius, so there was no rain near him. I released the trolls from their hardened forms once they

were no longer necessary, and they fell to the ground in a heap.

<D-die...die...>

Give it up, Rogueheil. You can't deactivate that skill until you're about to die. You can't even move properly while you're stuck to the Giga Slime, can you? Even though I'm right in front of you.

«Giga! Crush him!» Two tentacles rose up from the Giga Slime again. «If you
think he's slow, think again! You fool, getting this close to a gigantic enemy... I
can still use this trick! What? "Cannot use skill"? You dunce, I'm using Telepathy,
aren't I?!»

I suddenly got a chill from Rogueheil. What is this, this...intense chafing of wills... Is this really Telepathy?

The next moment, I felt a wave of nausea rush over me, and I immediately knew what had happened. Rogueheil had relayed the thoughts of one of the corpses whose soul was sealed in the Giga Slime's body to me.

I could feel it all. Their fear, their regret, their grief, their resentment. And above it all, an infinite pain that welled up inside me.

<Hyoh, hyoh hoh hoh! Found your weak spot...>

Partner! Use Fake Life!

("Y...you got it!") A black light appeared inside the Giga Slime and began to spread.

Normal Skill "Fake Life" Lv 4 became Lv 5.

The Giga Slime stopped moving, and its massive body convulsed.

<G-Giga Slime, get going! Move! Wh-what're you... Gwogh!>

One of Giga Slime's massive arms clamped down on Rogueheil and lifted him into the air.

<B-but why?! Why, Giga Slime?! Why...?!>

Inside the Giga Slime, countless corpses were being resurrected.

You said it yourself, Rogueheil. The Giga Slime is filled to the brim with souls who all harbor resentment toward you. The grudges those souls bear have pervaded through the Giga Slime's entire being, and they drove the Giga Slime to act. It won't be long until the souls can act against the Giga Slime's own will, but for now it was enough to drag out the one old coot who isn't ready to throw in the towel yet.

(Y-you, you dare make a fool of me?! I, the great Rogueheil, cannot end here!
I, I am...the Demon King's most powerful follower!>

The Giga Slime's arm swung downward, smashing Rogueheil into the floor.

«Gagh! Ill...Illusia... Illusiiiaaaaa! Die! Die! Die!»

Rogueheil raised his dying body off the ground and pointed a shaking finger at me. A ball of black light burst in front of my nose: just a simple Death skill. Of course, it had no effect on me.

I put all my weight into my forelegs and stomped down hard on top of Rogueheil. His humanoid form was crushed beneath my paws with a loud, wet popping sound that echoed through the air.

Gained 5,184 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 5,184 Experience Points.

Ouroboros's Lv has increased from 105 to 107.

At long last, I had finally defeated Rogueheil. Although he was at the top of the pecking order, I hadn't expected one of the Demon King's underlings to give me such a hard time. I was beyond exhausted. Title Skill "Hero" Lv 7 became Lv 8.

Gained Normal Skill "Holy Sphere" Lv 1.

Oh, a sphere-based magic skill, huh? I'd seen others use sphere magic before, but this was a first for me.

When I lifted my front legs, Rogueheil was nothing but liquid. I looked down at it for a moment, then turned my attention to the still convulsing Giga Slime. It was trembling from all the pain and suffering racking its body.

Partner... Please. I turned to look at her, and she nodded and gave a short cry. The small black light of her Death skill appeared, then floated over to the Giga Slime.

The black light spread through its body like a haze. There was a popping sound, and the Giga Slime gave a heavy shudder. Then it turned to liquid and spread out along the ground, leaving only the corpses piled in a heap in the center.

Gained 4,864 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 4,864 Experience Points.

Ouroboros's Lv has increased from 107 to 109.

Just as I thought. The Giga Slime had an incredibly low magic stat, so Death worked on it. With that, Rogueheil and the Giga Slime were officially dealt with. But this ordeal wasn't over just yet.

I looked at Partner again. She nodded, and the warm light of Holy enveloped the Giga Slime's liquid remains. I still had to purify the spirits I'd so selfishly given power to. When I used Holy on the trolls that were still frozen in place, their bodies shuddered, and they quietly toppled onto their sides. I turned to the Giga Slime next.

I'm...sorry for taking matters into my own hands back there. But with your help, I managed to avenge you all, so...thank you.

I suddenly felt some kind of noise enter my mind.

<Th-thank...you...>

The words were interrupted by my Divine Voice.

Monster's rank is too low to gain Experience Points.

I closed my eyes and bowed my head.

Gained Normal Skill "Telepathy" Lv 1.

W-wait. Telepathy...?

Telepathy was a skill that was common among high-ranking monsters. I could've learned it at any time, but I had a feeling my chat with the spirits may have been the straw that broke the camel's back. At least, I liked that explanation a lot more than thinking Rogueheil's constant blathering in my brain was what'd triggered it.

I bowed to the corpses scattered along the floor once more. Thank you for lending me your strength to stop the Giga Slime. I'll definitely be taking out the Demon King slime soon too, so you guys can all relax and finally rest in peace.

Bonus Story 1: Volk's Side Story

The Road to the Royal Capital

A GIRL WITH silvery gray hair sat on the edge of the wagon's back end. She wore a white cloak, a blue feathered cap on her head, and a dagger at her waist. As she rode, she looked out at the surrounding landscape: a wide expanse of grassy plain, with nearly twenty wagons moving through it in tight formation.

A short, portly man with round glasses walked up and called out to her. "Your name is...Loretta, right? Hmph, my word. A young girl like yourself, living the adventurer life..."

The girl called Loretta turned to look back at the man with a smile. "I came from a poor family, so I didn't have many options. To tell you the truth, I'd love to marry into some merchant's family and leave my adventuring days behind me for good."

"Oh, is that so? Hm, hmm..." The merchant man looked away, his cheeks turning red.

"More importantly," Loretta went on, "I've been thinking about this since we set out, but aren't there a lot of adventurers escorting this caravan? More than usual, I mean? Is it because of that story about Princess Crys inviting adventurers to Alban?"

"Ah, you mean that fool of a princess? No, that doesn't really have anything to do with it. She never invites more than ten adventurers at a time, I hear. Rumor has it that there's been increased bandit activity along the roads here lately; that's why I went out of my way to join a caravan. Didn't you hear about that when you signed on?"

"No, not particularly..."

Merchants sometimes brought adventurers along with them to guard against attacks from monsters and thieves. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement: The merchants got free protection, and the adventurers got a free ride. A large merchant caravan like this one would typically have a good number of guards accompanying it. This much muscle meant the caravan wouldn't have a difficult time with monsters, and the bandits would think twice before attacking.

"Ahh... I see," said the man. "It's because the caravan's head is affiliated with the Shabala Trading Company. They've always had a nasty way of doing things. He probably kept quiet when we were departing because he didn't want to be singled out or kept from participating."

"Whaaat? That's not good!"

"Ha ha, it's all right. There are too many of us. I'm sure the bandits will be too frightened to come close. And if they do, we can just chase them down and wipe them out." The merchant made a fist and punched the air.

Loretta smiled at him, then turned her attention back to the scenery. The corners of her mouth turned up in a smaller, quieter smile.

Well, I just so happen to be the vanguard for this particular group of bandits, so...

Loretta was a member of the Troll's Clubs, a band of thieves that ran rampant near the Royal Capital. She worked as an adventurer in order to sneak into situations like these and gather intel, and otherwise had a track record that was good enough to not raise any suspicions.

Her job was to ascertain the size of the caravan and the number of adventurers accompanying them and to relay that information to a messenger from the Troll's Clubs. She'd already left once, just before the adventurers had all arrived, and informed the messenger about the caravan's approximate size.

Later, during the lunch break, the other members of her group who'd infiltrated the caravan were planning to cause an incident. She'd take that opportunity to shoot a magic skill into the air to inform the Troll's Clubs of their

location. When the others arrived, she was to attack the caravan from within and then join them.

It would've been better to do all of this in the middle of the night, but as the merchant man had said, folks were extra vigilant against bandits these days. If they got chased off by members of the royal guard, it'd be a disaster. The best moment to attack would be during the next break, when they were as far away from the surrounding cities as possible.

Heh heh, we've got a big job on our hands this time. Good thing they're seriously underestimating our strength and meticulousness.

Soon, the wagons in the caravan stopped, and the lunch break began. Loretta hopped down from the wagon and headed out to scout the area. You could never know when something unexpected might happen, and in this job, mistakes often meant death. No matter how many times she checked her surroundings, it was never enough.

Loretta stopped in front of one of the wagons.

That's the Shabala Trading Company's wagon...

Kygros Shabala, head of the Shabala Trading Company, was known to be blackhearted, cunning, cowardly, and cautious. Loretta had to wonder how he'd walked so easily into the Troll's Clubs' trap, but she'd also been worried for a while now that he had some sort of insurance in place.

After she'd observed them for a while, the canopy hanging over the wagon parted, and a figure stepped out. It was a large man with long, silver hair, who carried a massive great sword on his back. The man held what looked to be an entire pig's thigh roasted whole in one hand. He bit into it with gusto, pulling and shredding through the meat with his teeth. It had been butchered with the thick bone in the center still intact.

"Wh... Who is that beast...?" Loretta couldn't help but ask, her voice wavering. She was certain she hadn't seen him before she'd left the first time. She would've remembered him if she did.

Behind him, the curtain parted again to reveal Kygros. "Lord Volk, where are you going?"

"Being in such confined quarters for so long depresses me... So said my beloved sword, Leral."

Loretta clenched her jaw. She recognized that name. He was known as Volk the Dragonslayer, a swordsman with many legends to his name, including a single-handed victory over a dragon and a duel with the now-deceased hero, Illusia, in which he was nearly killed. He was also rumored to be the strongest swordsman on the continent.

I-Is that really him...? What's he doing here?!

As Loretta's face scrunched in thought, Volk glanced over at her, and they locked eyes. Loretta immediately plastered a smile on her face and called out to him.

"Ah, pardon me, but could you be the famous adventurer, Volk the Dragonslayer?" she asked sweetly. "Wow... I never expected to meet someone like you here! Are you accompanying the caravan to the capital as well? What a surprise!"

"It is faster to run than ride in a wagon full of cargo," Volk stated simply and gave a little snort. For a moment, Loretta's thoughts stopped altogether. Volk pointed a finger at Kygros. "I only bothered to ride along because the old guy told me he'd pay a lot," he said, sounding bored.

T-talk about special treatment!

Adventurers weren't typically paid to accompany merchant caravans unless they had to travel across remote or dangerous areas. In addition, they also usually had to pay for their own meals. The expectation was that adventurers would be grateful for the free transportation.

No way... This beast has to be the real Volk. Kygros wouldn't tolerate being called an old man by anyone else...

Kygros was known for his short temper, narrow-mindedness, and propensity for violence. He was often seen yelling and beating his employees when they made mistakes and his business partners when they had a dispute. But now, in the face of Volk's disdain, Kygros simply narrowed his eyes and smiled goodnaturedly. This was the best proof Loretta had that the silver-haired giant truly was Volk the Dragonslayer.

That sly old bastard! He hired his own personal elite bodyguard before he started recruiting adventurers!

Loretta glanced at Kygros, her eyes hidden beneath her feathered hat. Kygros was the man who'd built the Shabala Trading Company into one of the world's largest merchant associations in his lifetime, and he had excellent instincts. He'd clearly questioned whether the adventurers coming along would be enough to protect the caravan, so he hired Volk separately behind the scenes and tried to keep him out of sight as much as possible. The alternative was fearing the adventurers would complain about unfair treatment or accuse him of coercing them to come without being upfront about the dangers while hiring a personal bodyguard to ensure his own safety.

Should we...call off the hit? Nah, there's no way the boss would be okay with calling it off now.

It wasn't uncommon for bandits to have to call off raids, but many members of the Troll's Clubs were only interested in making a quick profit. This job had taken a lot of persuasion, patient preparation, and meticulous planning to get this far. If she had to call off the hit now, she'd probably have to take responsibility for it.

Nah, this is a good opportunity. It's a good thing I noticed him beforehand. I can catch him by surprise and take him down right before the commotion starts. Besides, that sword... If the rumors about it are true, it should fetch a pretty penny.

Just as Loretta had made up her mind, she began to hear screams from the

merchants and adventurers.

"H-hey, some monsters just showed up out of nowhere! They're coming from behind the wagons...!"

"Those are death scorpions! Watch out, they're rank D+ monsters!"

Loretta glanced in the direction of the voices. It was starting. It had already begun. One of Loretta's companions had shouted to draw the attention of their adventurer guards. While hiding their identity, they had summoned three death scorpions with the magic skill Wide Summon.

Loretta, pretending to miss a death scorpion, would then shoot a spark of magic into the air with a grand sweep of her arm. This would tell her fellow bandits, lying in wait a short distance away, the caravan's exact location.

Just then, a monster about two meters long emerged from the shadows of the Shabala Trading Company's luxurious wagon. It was a death scorpion: a slender, pale, sinister-looking monster with a carapace that resembled human bones.

"All right, I've got this..."

The scorpion was in a perfect position. From here, it wouldn't look strange if she tried to hit the monster with her magic and messed up her trajectory a little.

First, Loretta aimed the tip of her dagger at the death scorpion. Her dagger was made of magical ore, which meant it could assist with activating magic skills.

"Hyaaaaaaaah!"

But before Loretta had a chance to fire off any magic, Volk leapt forward at the scorpion, great sword raised. He sliced at it with a vertical slash, cutting its head and body in half and splattering blood and gore everywhere.

Loretta stood there dumbfounded, unable to do anything, her dagger still readied. She'd heard that Volk was strong, but not *that* strong. Or so fast. *Or* so

fierce with his blade. Loretta could hardly believe the two of them were the same species. She was proud of her fighting skills, but it was clear to her that if she ever crossed swords with him, she'd be cut to pieces without even so much as a chance to resist. His speed and the size of his sword were a foul combination. There was no way she could beat him, no matter how hard she tried.

I-It's fine! There are still two more death scorpions. These hits might seem a little more questionable, but I've just gotta aim at them from a distance and make it look like my trajectory is off!

Loretta set her eyes on another death scorpion. This one was much further away than the last one. Three adventurers were desperately trying to take it down, but they seemed indecisive, so Loretta figured it would be a while before they actually killed it.

At least at this distance, Volk will be out of the way!

Loretta pointed her dagger at the death scorpion once more. "Clay Bo—" "Uraaaaaaaagh!"

"Eep!" Loretta had swung her dagger to use a skill, but she froze, startled by Volk's roar.

Volk brought his sword down and a Shockwave billowed out from it, leaving a scar along the ground as it advanced. The death scorpion Loretta had her dagger pointed at was enveloped in a massive slash that sent it flying into the air. The death scorpion's fluids splattered to the ground, and pieces of the scorpion's carapace, shattered by the Shockwave, fell around Loretta.

At that point, she might have been better off giving up on the plans for a raid entirely; however, her mind was still preoccupied with the question of how to inform her comrades of the caravan's location. It was difficult to know when to cut one's losses when things started to fall through. She still wasn't sure whether the Troll's Clubs would support her decision to abort the mission, but the longer she thought about it, the more her chances were slipping away.

While Loretta was quick-witted, she wasn't great at improvising, and she had a bad habit of making decisions she'd regret later when cornered.

Volk's unusual Shockwave had flustered her a little. Her bandit crew was supposed to arrive just in time to ride the death scorpion ruckus, but on top of Volk's speedy handling of the death scorpions, she'd messed up the timing for the signal and wasn't even prepared to alert the bandits.

She needed to fire her magic signal as soon as possible. Her frustration must've made her desperate to just do it and get it over with. Almost unconsciously, Loretta raised her dagger and pointed it at the sky.

"Clay Bomb!"

A clod of dirt the size of a fist shot vertically into the air, then burst in the sky with a loud bang. Every single merchant and adventurer in the area turned their attention to Loretta, who'd just fired a spectacular burst of magic into the sky for no apparent reason.

"H-hey, what's the big deal, lady?!"

"What're you doing?!"

"You'll attract monsters like that if you're not careful! What're you trying to do, kill us?!"

Voices of condemnation flew at her from all sides. Loretta herself couldn't understand why she'd acted so out of character at such a critical point in time. It would be a while before the Troll's Clubs arrived, so he'd have to find a way to handle the convoy's suspicions until then, while also somehow disabling Volk with everyone on high alert.

Now that Loretta had had more time to think about it, she recognized her mistake. *Ahh, crap. I should've just run away without sending any signals...*

But now that the signal had been sent, the Troll's Clubs would come running. If she tried to run on her own and left her fellow bandits at Volk's mercy, they would hunt her down and kill her. She had to deal with Volk before the Troll's

Clubs showed up; there was no way they'd be able to defeat such a beast in an all-out battle.

"Hyaaaah!" Volk's second Shockwave shattered the final death scorpion. The crowd cheered, and words of admiration fell from their lips.

"Wow, what an incredible sword!"

"I had no idea Volk the Dragonslayer was coming with us!"

"Why didn't you tell us, Master Kygros?!"

The place was beginning to heat up. Volk's face twisted in annoyance; he was clearly not a fan of crowds. Meanwhile, the attention Loretta had garnered was fading fast. This was the perfect time to strike. Loretta closed her eyes and tightened her grip on her dagger.

"...Hidden." A black haze instantly surrounded Loretta. Hidden was a magic skill that concealed the user's presence, making them undetectable by others. It could be used on other people or objects in order to protect or hide them too. It was mainly used to conceal mages, who often struggled with melee combat, when battling monsters. Under the protection of her skill, Loretta ran into the crowd to escape the attention of the people around her.

After a short while, Volk seemed to grow weary of the crowd's cheering. He checked his surroundings, then moved to return to the Shabala wagon. "I'm hungry, so don't bother me. Anyone who enters the wagon without permission will be cut down where they stand."

Loretta, knowing that her best shot for catching him unawares was when he was either sleeping or eating and sure this was her last chance, approached the Shabala Trading Company's carriage.

She was still under the effects of her Hidden skill. With no more of a presence than a shadow, she would approach Volk as he dined and strike him down with a single blow. Loretta carefully constructed her move in her mind. She could do it. She was afraid, but she didn't think she'd fail. Her target was a human just

like her. There was no way he'd be able to deflect her attack while he was eating. Besides, would he carry his massive great sword on his back all the way through dinnertime? Of course not, there was no reason to do so. That meant Volk was currently unarmed.

Her reasoning was simple: His beloved sword, Leral, was heavy. Who would be foolish enough to lug such an obnoxiously long sword around with them when they finally had a brief respite from guarding the caravans? There was no way. Sure, if he had a longsword on his waist instead, there'd be no question of a swordsman like him keeping it strapped on at all times, but with Volk's great sword on his back—even a rest would be a workout.

The dragonslayer's unexpected weakness was that it was impossible for him to carry that great sword on him at all times.

"Shhh! Quiet! In that case, instead of killing the merchants, let's turn 'em into slaves!"

"This caravan is chock-full of expensive loot! Ha ha ha!"

All at once, the area burst into noise.

Huh? Are they already here?!

Stunned, Loretta looked around. The bandits had already rushed to the scene and were attacking the wagons one after another. The noise around her changed to shrieks of fear and shouts of rage.

Loretta couldn't stand there worrying any longer. She hurriedly jumped into the Shabala Trading Company's carriage. Inside, Volk was seated at a table, chewing a massive pork chop.

"Huh ...? Why?"

His beloved sword, Leral, was propped up on the chair next to the one where Volk was sitting with a dignified pose. The chair had been carefully pulled out, and a large platter of carefully arranged food sat on the table in front of it, like the seat had been reserved for the sword.

"Well? Is it tasty?" Volk always had a grim look on his face, but now Loretta saw him smiling kindly for the first time...at his own sword.

Oh, wow... That's terrifying... Seriously, why? What is he doing? What's going on here?

Loretta hid in a corner of the room, frozen in fear at the sight of this unexpected side of Volk the Dragonslayer.

Kygros and his underling urged Volk to go deal with the bandits.

"Lord Volk, I seem to be hearing screams from outside the wagon."

"Surely something bad is happening? Could you get your hide out of that chair and go deal with it?"

I'm so scared. Why aren't they even talking about the fact that he's talking to his sword...?

Loretta stayed hidden, trying to control her breathing, horrified that Kygros had decided to turn a blind eye to Volk's eccentric behavior.

Volk sighed and dropped his food back onto his place. "It seems the bandits have made their way in here too."

Loretta's shoulders shook. It sounded like he'd already realized that she was hiding there. His great sword was out of his hands for now, but he could reach it easily. It was no longer possible for her to make a surprise attack, and the idea that she could beat him in a proper fight was laughable.

Just as she'd started to consider making her escape then and there, the wagon's canvas door was pulled aside, and three of Loretta's fellow bandits appeared.

"Oh! This must be that greedy old geezer's carriage!"

"Yippee! We're rich, boys!"

"Don't kill that fat old man! He'll make a good hostage!"

The three of them were presumably the bandits that Volk had noticed.

Loretta glared at them and resisted the urge to shout.

Come on, guys! I had this all planned out!

The three bandits, each wielding a sword, attacked the still-seated Volk.

"Fools." Volk slowly rose to his feet, then used his hand to snap off the blade of the first sword to swing toward him.

Loretta didn't understand what had just happened. The man whose sword had been snapped stood there in a similarly stunned state, clutching his sword without a blade.

Volk then kicked the first two men in their stomachs and sent them flying straight out of the wagon. He then extended his forefinger and thrust it up toward the third man's neck, cutting a clean hole through his throat, from which blood began to gush in heavy gouts.

"Ah. It seems I overdid it a little," Volk said, nonchalant.

Kygros and his underlings cheered. "A-as expected of Lord Volk! No number of bandits is of any concern to you!"

Loretta, still watching the scene from the shadows, couldn't help her jaw dropping open in shock. Even without a sword, Volk was a beast of a man.

B-but he's on an entirely different level with that sword! I've definitely gotta do something about the sword, at least! Now's my chance, while he's distracted!

It wasn't a bad plan. If Volk sent a Shockwave at the bandits with his sword, they wouldn't even have time to react before they were struck down. However, if he were unarmed, a bunch of bandits surrounding him at once might be able to land a hit or two on him. Either way, they were hopelessly outmatched against him, but when it came time to retreat, whether Volk had his sword or not would make a huge difference in terms of damage.

If Loretta didn't take this chance to secure the sword, she wouldn't get another one. The sword was not in his hands, and since Volk had left his seat to

engage the bandits, he was a good distance away. Even so, she knew she shouldn't take unnecessary risks.

Loretta breathed in and adjusted her stance.

"...Quick." She used her magic to increase her agility. Then her gaze locked on Volk's beloved sword, Leral, and she sprinted toward it at top speed.

"Mm...?"

Volk was the first to notice her, due to her sudden approach. But thanks to the effects of Hidden, he was a little too late. Loretta didn't face Volk directly, so he failed to grasp her intentions. Loretta didn't slow down even as she passed the chair where Volk's sword rested.

She let out a wry smile.

"Pilfer!"

Wind whipped through the wagon, lifting Volk's sword off the chair cushion and into Loretta's waiting hand. Loretta gripped the heavy sword firmly with her right hand, sliced through the wagon's canopy with the dagger in her left, and flung herself out of the wagon.

If Loretta had thought about it a little longer, she should've been able to predict that the act of stealing Volk's beloved sword from him was nothing short of poking a stick through the bushes and awakening a dragon. Her best course of action at this point would've undoubtedly been to get as far away from the caravan as she possibly could, as fast as she could, and leave her fellow bandits in pursuit. But, while Loretta was quick-witted, she wasn't great at improvising, and she had a bad habit of making decisions she'd regret later when cornered.

"Now I've just gotta run away! Even if I pull out of the raid early, if I sell this sword for a bunch of money, I'm sure the boss'll be satisfied!"

Loretta utilized the agility boost her Quick skill had given her to escape from the wagons, dodging fellow bandits, fleeing merchants, and adventurers as she went. Even unarmed, Volk was still a beast. There would be no way to fend him off if he caught up to her. She wouldn't last five seconds against him.

"If only I'd been less conspicuous and faster, I would've got my hands on this sword with no one the wiser!"

"Where is my Leraaaaaaal?!"

Loretta turned to see the wagon behind her soaring straight up into the sky.

She couldn't understand what was happening. The wagon, having reached its peak height in the air, fell back to the ground and broke apart with a crash. The bandits caught in the crash lay on the ground in pools of their own blood. On the other side of the debris and smoke, Volk stood tall, posed as though he'd been the one to throw the wagon into the sky.

"Leraaaaaaa!! Where are youuuuu?!"

Loretta prepared to die.

Suddenly, she heard a vulgar laugh in her ear. "Gheh hya hya! Talk about a big haul! Great job, everyone!"

Loretta looked up to see a large man standing on a hijacked merchant's wagon, pounding the railing vigorously and laughing. He rubbed his long black beard and whistled a cheery tune. It was Domans, leader of the Troll's Clubs.

"Boss!" she wheezed as she climbed into Domans's wagon, moving to the driver's seat. "We need to take this wagon and get out of here! Now! I need to tell you something!"

"Uh, Loretta? What do you think you're doing, jumping into my wagon all of a sudden? Do you want me to execute you?"

"Now's not the time! A... A beast is coming! We need to use this wagon to get out of here as fast as we can! This man, we don't want to mess with him..."

"What? Don't be foolish! You expect me to leave this beast of a man behind? What's he like? Well, beast or not, he's nothing compared to me!" Domans stood, club gripped in his hand.

Just then, a massive horse flew past Domans, destroying part of the wagon. If he'd been hit, he would've been dead for sure.

"You..." Volk's low voice reached Domans's ears.

Domans went white, slowly sat down, and carefully replaced his club.

"Lorettaaaa! Get this wagon moving! The beast is coming!!"

The wagon began to move, picking up speed. "Run, run! High speed! Move, move! Get outta the way or we'll run you over, even if you're one of my men!" Domans roared. Enemies and allies alike scrambled out of the way of the wagon's trajectory.

"Quick! Quick!" Loretta increased the horses' speed with her magic skill. In no time at all, the wagon passed through the merchants' resting area.

"Haa, haaah... What in the world was that beast? Loretta, you've dragged me into some sort of terrible mess, haven't you? I'm glad we got out safely, but if you're going to pin the blame for that creature coming after us on me, the boss of all bosses..."

"N-no, not at all, Boss!" Loretta said, shaking her head at his accusation. "I just, um, wanted to ask you for advice about... O-oh, right! I've got some incredible treasure for you that I'm sure will cheer you up! I don't know much about it, but I'm pretty sure it's a national treasure!"

"What? A national treasure, you say? Where?! What is it?! Is it here?!" Domans demanded, nostrils flaring—a clear sign he was interested.

"Yes, yes! It's right..." As Loretta was about to show him the sword, a chunk of stone flew past her nose. She turned her head slowly...and came face-to-face with Volk, who was running even faster than the wagon.

"You... Even the flames of Hell would seem lukewarm to you!" Volk hissed, his bloodshot eyes open wide in an all-encompassing stare.

"Waaaaah!"

"Gyaaaaaaaah!"

Loretta and Domans both shrieked in terror.

"B-Boss! I have an idea! Let's toss some of this stuff off the wagon to make it a little lighter! That'll make it go faster, and it might even slow that guy down some!" Loretta jumped from the driver's seat to Domans's side, picked up some of the loot from the wagon, and threw it off. She quickly moved on to another package.

"Hmm... A good idea, to be sure, but that won't be enough to throw that beast of a man off our tail." Domans picked up his club and swung it straight at Loretta's legs.

"Wh-what? *Hn, gyaaah!*" Domans's club hit her in the thigh and sent her flying to the edge of the wagon. Her leg immediately swelled and began to turn blue, the skin on her thigh was ripped open, and blood gushed out. Her leg bent in the wrong direction. The bone was clearly broken.

"Boss? A-are you..."

"I told you I had a better idea, didn't I? That's right, Loretta. You're my *decoy*. It hurts my heart to abandon one of my own, but...I don't have much of a choice, do I?" Domans's face twisted into a triumphant smile.

"B-Boss! You can't be serious... Help me!" Loretta extended her hand toward Domans, but he didn't look back at her.

"Gheh hya hya! It's your fault for bringing him here in the first place, isn't it, Loretta? You've gotta take responsibility, don't you? Now, I'm going to free one of the horses pulling the wagon and use it to make my getaway!"

"Y... You..." Loretta's outstretched hand dropped with a thud. She'd managed to prop herself up slightly, but now her body slumped over. At that moment, a thought suddenly occurred to her.

"Ahh, that sword over there is the national treasure I told you about..."

"Oh? Oho ho, this is...! Well, naturally, I'll be taking that along with me as

well!" Domans turned around, tossed his club away, and picked up Volk's beloved sword, Leral, from where it lay next to Loretta. He stepped over to one of the horses pulling the wagon and slammed into the support beam with Leral's scabbard to free the horse. He hopped on and galloped away.

Loretta lay there for about ten seconds before the wagon shook violently. She looked up to see a deadly-looking Volk standing before her.

"Where the hell did you take Leral, you bastard?!"

"Boss took it and left!" Loretta raised her body up as high as she could and pointed ahead at Domans's retreating form. "The big guy with the long black beard!"

"Leraaaaaaaaaa!" Volk kicked off from the wagon and sprinted forward, immediately disappearing from Loretta's sight.

After that, Loretta lay sprawled out in the wagon. The wagon continued onward through the forest with her on board for half a day or so without Volk returning. She assumed he must've forgotten all about her once he got his beloved Leral back and had returned to Kygros and the others. Once she'd concluded that he wasn't coming back, she tried to sit up, but she was too tense and exhausted to move. She opted to remain on her back instead.

Loretta took a deep breath in, then exhaled slowly in a long sigh as she shook her head slightly. "I think I'm going to call it quits with this whole banditry thing..."

Bonus Story 2: Idle Chitchat with a Certain Saint

Having successfully escaped from Eldia, I was flying with the Holy Dragon Seraphim through the island of giant trees, where the Adams lived. Lilyxila, who was riding atop Seraphim's back, and I were taking a breather from our discussion of the fake princess and the Demon King. Once we'd been flying for a while, Lilyxila and I would split up: She was on her way to the Holy Land of Lialum, and I was headed toward the Alban Mine in the kingdom of Ardesia.

That was all well and good, but...I was having a bit of a conundrum. You see, during the long flight, conversation between Lilyxila and I had completely dried up.

On top of that, it might've just been my own imagination, but I felt an awkwardness beginning to develop between me and Seraphim. Should I try and talk to her more? Well, we don't really have anything in common, so...how? Should I bring up the Divine Voice? But they seemed pretty into religion, and I don't wanna offend them by accidentally saying something bad...

I glanced sideways at Lilyxila and her group. There was one other person riding on Seraphim's back: the blonde swordswoman, Alphis. She was glaring back at me with a sour expression. When our eyes met, she immediately turned her head to the side.

What was with her? From the start, she hadn't exactly been super friendly with me. I hadn't done anything to make her hate me, had I? Oh man, what should I do? I was starting to sweat all weird. I was scared my claws would slip and I'd drop Treant if I didn't do something.

Just then, I heard a small giggle from behind me. "Master Dragon...? You seem tense."

It was Allo, riding on my back.

Drop it, Allo. I don't want Lilyxila to know that I'm feeling awkward because I can't carry a conversation with her.

("You're so easily bothered by the tiniest of things,") Partner said in a disgusted tone.

I-I can't help it, okay? And we're talking about matters of life and death here. I feel like we should try to deepen our bonds so we can be comfortable working alongside each other in future missions. I want us to have each other's backs, and that's an important issue to me.

("...Okay, then just talk to her? Why are you making this so hard?")

Because I'm out of things to talk about!! If I had any ideas, I would've said 'em already! And plus, that Alphis lady is staring me down like we're the enemy!

I glanced over at Alphis again. She was glaring at me with cold eyes, but when our eyes met, she looked away again.

Look! See?! Why's she being so hostile?! Every time I look at her, she's staring at me! What, did a dragon eat one of her friends or something?! Why'd Lilyxila choose Alphis to come with her to talk to me? I'm sure she hated monsters just as much before she came. I'm used to being treated with cruelty, so I don't really mind, but isn't she being a little cold for someone who's trying to get me to join her? She really screwed up with her choice of entourage.

While I was worrying about the serious shortage of human resources in the Holy Land, Lilyxila suddenly tapped Aphis on her shoulder and smiled at her. I figured she might've noticed Alphis's moody demeanor. Lilyxila could also use Telepathy, so she could very well have been telling Alphis to be a little friendlier out of concern for me.

Alphis glared and gave me a tight smile. Her mouth curled upward, but her smile didn't reach her eyes. I have a feeling Lilyxila forced her to do this.

...Well, maybe she just had a naturally sullen-looking face. Her demeanor was overall pretty dry, but maybe that was normal.

If that's the case, then maybe it's rude to dwell on it...

"Heh... Heh heh." Lilyxila covered her mouth with her sleeve.

Aphis looked back at Lilyxila with eyes like ice. "Saint Lilyxila, are you..."

"I-It's just, Alphis, you had...the funniest scrunched-up look on your face... Heh heh! It was something like..." Lilyxila pinched both of her cheeks and pulled them out slightly.

"D-don't tease me like that!" Alphis exclaimed, blushing.

I'd expected the two of them to have more of a master-and-servant dynamic going on, but they seemed to be on pretty good terms. They appeared close in age too; maybe they'd been friends since childhood. I felt like I'd just seen an unexpected side of them both.

Lilyxila must've really fallen off the handle, because she was hiding even more of her face behind her sleeve, and her shoulders were shaking slightly. Alphis glanced sideways at me, her face red to the ears.

I decided to turn my head to the front and keep my eyes on the horizon for a while. W-well, maybe it's better for me to place my trust in people like them.

("I thought she was a jerk, but she's surprisingly cute,") Partner said, chuckling and looking intently at Alphis.

H-hey, maybe you should work on that too. Seriously. The only ones you should be making fun of are me and Treant.

Afterword

H ELLO, this is the author, Necoco.

Thank you once again for purchasing *Reincarnated as a Dragon Hatchling*Volume 8! I suddenly remembered the volume number and was kind of surprised to see that almost ten volumes had already been published. I'm hoping to pass the ten-volume mark soon. The goal is already in sight, so I don't think it'll be too much longer.

Lately, I started to wonder how many of my readers actually read the afterword. If you read it every time, you can probably tell that I always have a hard time filling up the space. I'm not sure if there are many authors out there who *are* good at it. There are times when I look at an author's afterword and realize, "Oh, this person is having a bit of trouble," and I feel a great sense of kinship with them. No, really. If you're someone who always reads the entire afterword, it might be fun to read it from that point of view.

I once read an afterword to a very famous work that included the author's own thoughts on the work, and I was really impressed. I would love to write something as intelligent and cool as that in my afterword, but I'm not confident enough for that just yet. But I would like to do it someday! Just be patient, and don't expect too much.

In the past, when I had trouble filling up the space in the afterword and was at a loss for ideas, I talked about my own work in a kind of self-indulgent way, which was a bit embarrassing when I read it back later. It's often said that you should wait a day and reread your novel after you've cooled down, but...it might be a good idea to look over the afterword a bit as well, ha ha!

I don't have the inclination to spend a lot of time looking into it, but it might be interesting to do a survey on Twitter. I think it would be interesting to find out if people read the afterwords or not. I don't know much about it, but it seems to have a voting function... Incidentally, my Twitter ID is @nekoko1228, so please follow me if you feel like it. I tried to make it look like my birthday, but December 28th isn't my birthday or any kind of anniversary. Not that any of that matters, but still...

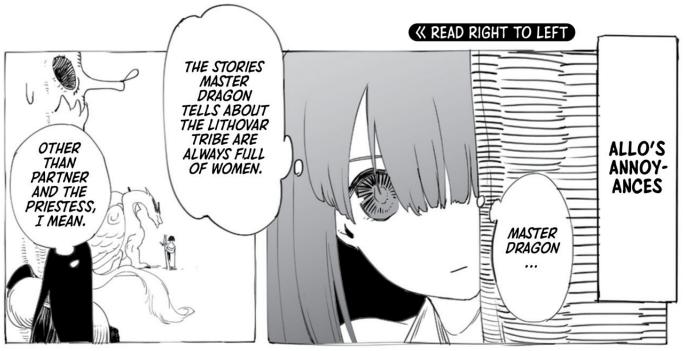
All right, with the introduction, I was able to significantly reduce my writing quota for the afterword. Hang in there, me. Just a little more to go.

The story in this volume is centered around the Royal Capital, Alban. Saint Lilyxila asked Illusia and the others to help her defeat the Demon King, and together they left the Island at the Edge of the World for the kingdom of Ardesia, one of the most powerful kingdoms in the world. What enemies and new friends await them there? And finally, the battle against the Demon King's army begins. What will Treant, left all alone right now, think and do...?

This is the second act of the "Defeating the Demon King" arc. Since I've been spacing the arcs out over two volumes thus far, I was actually thinking I'd put the Demon King's defeat chapter in this volume, but the word count ended up being a lot higher than I'd expected, so I couldn't do it. But rest assured that the next volume, Volume 9, will bring closure to the story of defeating the Demon King. It's going to be a very flashy and turbulent volume, so please look forward to it!

And now, I'll conclude the volume with this: Once again, thank you very much for purchasing *Reincarnated as a Dragon Hatchling* Volume 8! I heard that the manga version of *Dragon Hatchling* is selling well too! Thanks again to all of our faithful readers! I look forward to seeing you again in the afterword for the next volume.

-NECOCO



*SETTINGS MAY DIFFER SIGNIFICANTLY FROM THOSE IN THE NOVEL.

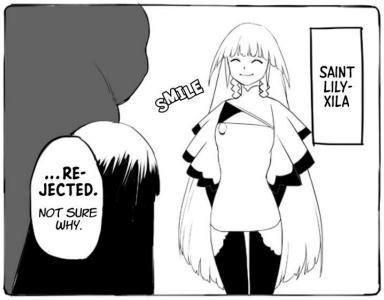




THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT. I GOT CARRIED AWAY AND DREW SOMETHING LIKE A MANGA.

« READ RIGHT TO LEFT















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