

NOVEL

2

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REINCARNATED AS A

DRAGON HATCHLING

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REINCARNATED AS A
DRAGON
HATCHLING

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Seven Seas Entertainment

**ORANGURANGS**

Monsters who go wild for the dragon's jerky.

**MELTIA**

Mysterious swordswoman.

**MARIELLE**

Half-elf village chief.
Myria's mentor.

**BLACK LIZARD**

Enemy turned friend, a monster who's earned the dragon's trust. Master of poisoning and curing poison.

MYRIA

A kindhearted girl who lives in the village near the forest. Has a soft spot for the dragon.

CAST

DRAGON EGG

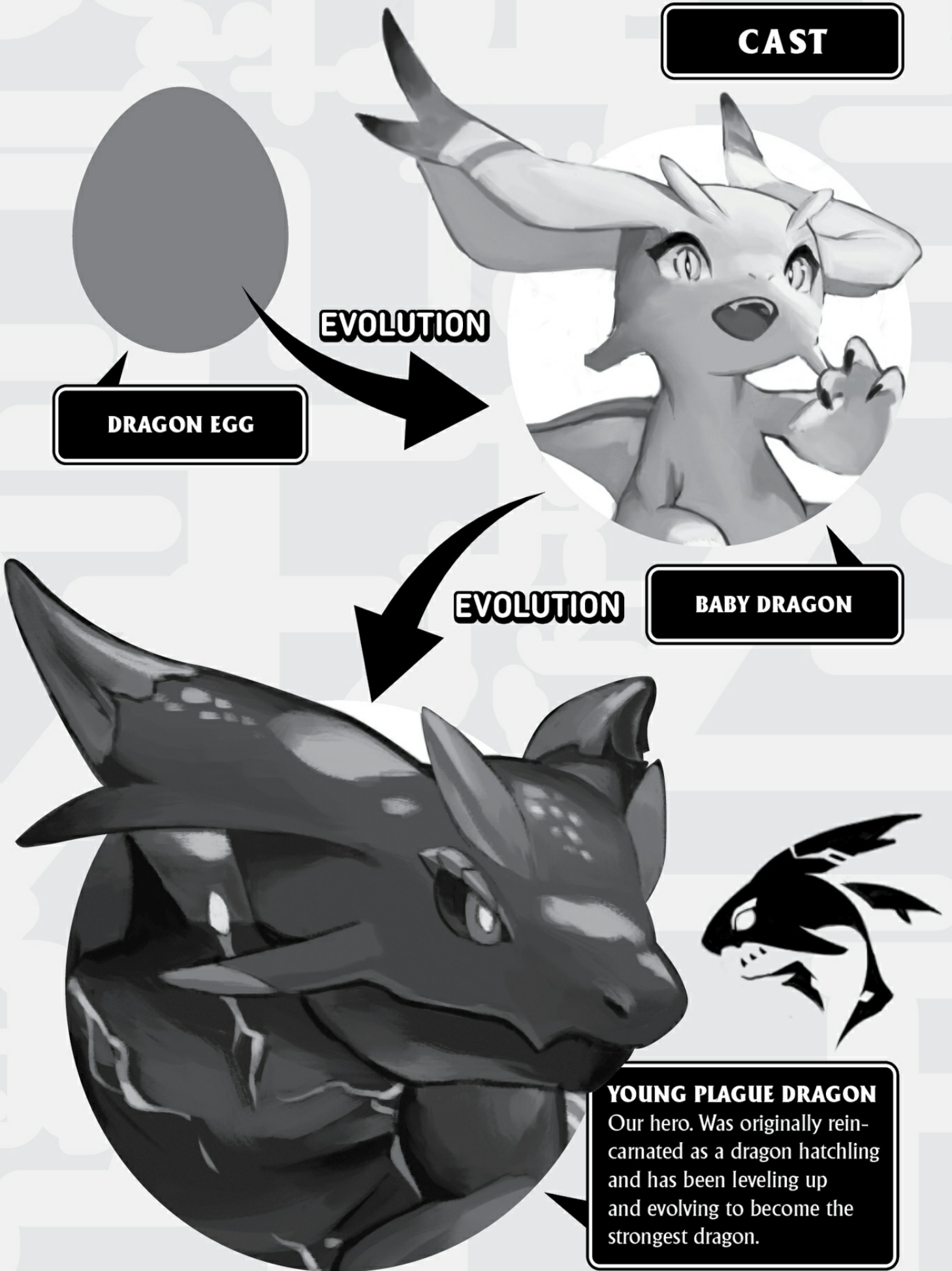
EVOLUTION

BABY DRAGON

EVOLUTION

YOUNG PLAGUE DRAGON

Our hero. Was originally reincarnated as a dragon hatchling and has been leveling up and evolving to become the strongest dragon.



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THE STORY SO FAR

Our hero woke up in an unfamiliar forest, reincarnated as a dragon egg. A mysterious voice, “The Divine Voice,” spoke to him inside his head and urged him to get stronger. Spurred on by the voice, he leveled up by steadily defeating the strange and dangerous creatures he came across.

Things went well for a while as he evolved from dragon egg to baby dragon, but his next evolution was trickier: Lured by a skill called “Human Transformation,” he chose to evolve into a Young Plague Dragon, described as “the first step towards becoming a wicked dragon that brings disaster wherever it goes.”

He pushed aside his doubts and made his choice...but didn't receive the skill he wanted. At a loss, our hero decided to battle more monsters in the forest and level up even further. During his adventures, he met the Black Lizard who, after a fierce battle, became his first friend.

The two of them worked together to defeat the fearsome enemy twinheads. But when he leveled up after the battle, our hero was shocked to finally receive the skill he had coveted so much, Human Transformation...

Tensei Sitara Dragon no Tamago datta-
Saikyo Igai Mezasane Volume 2
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Chapter 1:

The Swordswoman Meltia

Part 1

THE BLACK LIZARD AND I returned to my cave. We ate some of my hoarded jerky before falling asleep. Well, to be more precise, I *pretended* to fall asleep, patiently waiting until I was sure the black lizard had passed out.

Unexpectedly, it rolled from its corner all the way over to me. I wanted to get up but not at the cost of waking my friend. I stayed put.

The lizard nuzzled against me, and I took care to keep my claws sheathed as I gently patted its head. It twitched slightly and made a noise of contentment.

“Kssh, kssh.”

I kept it up for about five minutes, until the black lizard’s breathing grew deep and even. *Perfect*. I doubted it would wake for a while. I stood up slowly, making as little noise as possible.

I wasn’t doing anything bad; I just wanted to try out my new Human Transformation skill and didn’t want to startle the black lizard by suddenly turning into a human. It might’ve freaked out and attacked me. I was just acting out of an abundance of caution. That’s all.

“Kssh...”

The black lizard stretched out one of its front legs in my direction. It was sleeping deeply, so the action was probably involuntary, but it still gave me pause. Even made my heart ache a little. I wondered if the black lizard could get used to village life.

Probably not. Even if the humans left the lizard alone, they’d still probably be too afraid of it.

Well, as long as I had the black lizard, I wouldn’t be going to the village anyway. So it wasn’t worth worrying about.

Human Transformation was just a silly skill, after all. There might come a time when I needed to use it quickly, and it wouldn’t be a bad idea to perform some quick research to make sure I was comfortable using it. I was being smart, that’s

all. I needed to go into situations with as many tactics at my disposal as possible. This world was survival of the fittest, and it was absolutely essential to understand everything I was capable of.

Not to say that thoughts of visiting the village, or raising my language skill, or seeing Myria again didn't factor in, but right now my number one motivation was to check out my new ability.

I still felt a bit guilty as I left the cave and made my way to the lake, the only place I could check my reflection.

But seriously, though...what should I do?

Why did I have to get the Human Transformation skill *now*, of all times? When I was finally starting to not even care? Was this always the plan? Some kind of monkey's paw scenario?!

Hey, Divine Voice. You really have an incredibly nasty personality.

Well, I still wanted it. I just wished...I just wished I could have gotten it a little bit sooner. Although, did Divine Voice actually have any control over what skills I get? Ugh, what if I didn't have it at all? What if it was just wishful thinking on my part? Nothing more than a mirage? I figured I'd better check again, just in case.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 37/40

HP: 161/161

MP: 157/157

Attack: 141

Defense: 120

Magic: 140

Agility: 129

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 2

Divine Voice: Lv 3

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Fly: Lv 2

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 1

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Falling Resistance: Lv 4

Hunger Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 5

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Dark Resistance: Lv 2

Light Resistance: Lv 1

Fear Resistance: Lv 1

Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 2

Paralysis Resistance: Lv1

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 6

View Status: Lv 5

Baby's Breath: Lv 5

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 2

Disease Breath: Lv 1

Venom Fangs: Lv 1

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 1

Dragon Tail: Lv 1

Bellow: Lv 1

Meteorite: Lv 1

Nutcracker: Lv 2

Human Transformation: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 3

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 2

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 5

Itty-bitty Hero: Lv 2

Wrongdoer: Lv 3

Calamity: Lv1

Chicken Runner: Lv 2

Mr. Chef: Lv 3

Dastardly King: Lv 1

Stalwart: Lv 1

Giant Killer: Lv 1

Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4

There it was. I really did have it.

I had to face the question. Let's say I *did* become a human. Then what?

I didn't want to say goodbye to the black lizard, but I couldn't honestly claim that, if I became human, I'd still be happy living in a cave. Maybe I could take the black lizard with me to the village. But things would probably end badly if I brought a monster into town! Maybe I could alternate? Live in the village for three days, then come back and live in the cave?

I'll just check the details of the skill before I get ahead of myself.

Normal Skill "Human Transformation." Allows the user to transform into a human. While the skill is in use, HP, attack, and defense are reduced by half. Continuously drains MP during use.

Wh-whoa, that's rough. If it drains MP the entire time, I probably can't even stay in the village for long. I'll only be able to drop by for a little while.

But even that would make a huge difference. I could defeat monsters in human form and rescue people. Then once I gained their trust, I'd confess that I was actually a dragon. Oh, that would be awesome! Imagine not being attacked on sight! Honestly, just being able to talk normally would be enough to make me cry with happiness.

If I chose an evolution with incredibly high MP, it was possible that I could spend half my life as a human. *Wow, I'm actually starting to get excited about this.*

I hope I'm good-looking. Wait. What if I transform into a girl? My previous life was still so vague, I couldn't even be sure I used to be a guy. What if I was actually an incredibly beautiful woman? I'd just end up stealing looks at my reflection in the river every time I passed by.



I turned to the lake. There it was, my bumpy dark hide, my sharp claws, my vicious fangs, the wings growing from my back. I was so frightening that sometimes I got the shivers just looking at my own reflection.

A full moon hung in the sky, casting me in a silvery glow.

Was I really going to turn into a human? Could I? Should I?

What if turning back into a dragon proved too difficult? The black lizard was so important to me now, but what if my perspective changed once I became human? What if I started seeing it as just another monster?

I pushed away my doubts. Not because I thought they weren't problems worth considering, but because I was afraid to fall too deeply into dark thoughts. Agonizing over it wouldn't help. I just had to do it and see what happened.

"Human Transformation."

The instant I said the words, my body was racked with pressure, bowing in as if I was growing smaller. My skin began to lighten, unbelievably intense pain roaring through me. It felt like burning-hot plates of metal were being pressed against me.

Ow, ow, ow! Hang on, that hurts! It REALLY hurts! I'm gonna die!

But no one was listening.

"Raaaaaaaaar!"

I stood at the lake in the pitch-black night, screaming. I fell facedown and threw up everything in my stomach.

Ughh, did I do something wrong?

I chanced a look at the surface of the water and saw a creepy human figure covered in reddish-black scales. The fangs and claws were mostly the same, just a little smaller. The scales covered my eyes, too, impairing my vision. My mouth was ridiculously large for a human face.

Hang on a second, that thing looks even more grotesque than the Young Plague Dragon! How many times do you have to lift me up only to crush me

back down, Divine Voice? How long until you're satisfied? I spent all that time worrying for nothing!

How the heck did other Young Plague Dragons even use this skill for evil, huh? How in the *world* was I supposed to fool anyone with this monstrous appearance? Even someone with terrible eyesight a hundred meters away would think a demon was coming for them.

So, what? Did I just really suck at it? I figured the only disadvantage of Human Transformation was that it lowered your attack and defense by half.

I'd better check on that.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Human Form Lv 1

Lv: 37/40

HP: 80/161

MP: 142/157

Attack: 70 (141)

Defense: 60 (120)

Wow, my MP really is draining fast. It's going at, like, 1 MP per second!

So I could literally only last about two and a half minutes? Even if I somehow managed to look like a real human, I'd have enough time to say hello and then I'd have to run away! They'd think, "*What a weirdo,*" and it'd be over. Ugh, I felt awful, like my dragon body had just been forced into a human shape. *I think my organs are all in the wrong spots.*

I canceled the skill and collapsed on the shore, exhausted. I was *never, ever* going to use that skill again.

Part 2

The Swordswoman

LADY MELTIA, are you really sure you want to accept a C-rank job? No one else can come with us this time, so it's only Yuno going with you today!" Yuno voiced her complaint in her usual drawl when I returned with the job request.

Yuno was a Canis-human, a dog-human hybrid. They were discriminated against in some societies, but as far as I was concerned, they were just normal humans with dog ears and tails. We had different views, but that was to be expected.

"Yes," I allowed. "But when it's just the two of us, I can always count on you to dash off and leave me whenever things get tough."

"Hmmm...? I'm not sure if Yuno is actually that fast...oh! Does that mean you don't trust Yuno? That you wouldn't care if Yuno *died*?!"

Heh... She was really starting to pick up on this double-act thing. The other day she called me hardheaded, so I started to pout, and she totally played along with it. Being able to pick up on your partner's moods was crucial for adventuring pairs. You just can't have a good partnership without trust.

Hang on a second...is Yuno crying?

She was right; it was a bit dangerous for us to accept a C-rank job, but this one was out of the ordinary. Just reading through it, it didn't seem likely we would face any monsters higher than C-rank, which was less dangerous than a typical job of that rank. There was something else that piqued my interest as well.

Find a Missing Person

—Rank C—

Location: Noah's Forest

According to village rumor, a man who was presumed dead has been spotted in the forest. I want to know whether this is true. Meet me in the village on the

forest's edge to discuss details. Ask for the village elder, but please be discrete. Do not tell any of the other villagers about this request.

I knew of Noah's Forest and of the nearby village. The inhabitants viewed the forest as sacred, and few of them dared venture very deep. Or so I'd heard.

There was a shrine in the outskirts, just before village superstition kicked in and people refused to go any farther. In the last several years, even the superstition had relaxed somewhat, and now adventurers occasionally entered the forest without permission. But in my opinion, there was no profit in going out of your way to hunt in a place where you'd piss off an entire town.

Rumor was that in place of humans, all sorts of strange monsters and plants sprang up there, though I'd never heard anything specific. Most people believed it was probably like any other forest; unlikely to throw anything at you more powerful than D-rank monsters.

Supposedly, a couple of B-rank Rock Dragons made their home there, but they were slow and fairly even-tempered. Quite easy to avoid. Most exploration didn't even require combat, and a lot of job requests were easy ones. The same stuff you'd get in any other forest.

They probably didn't even bother posting high-rank jobs, since the forest was so out of the way. Or maybe there were stronger monsters in that forest than other adventurers let on.

Most likely the former. If there'd been a direct sighting of some fearsome beast, the posting wouldn't be so vague. It would declare a monster hunt, not a ghost sighting.

And if I was right, that just made this an even sweeter deal. I'd always been interested in Noah's Forest—I wanted to see it at least once, but I didn't want to end up on the village's bad side. This job appeared to be posted by a village elder, so I'd have their blessing to explore. It was basically a free pass. I could even do a little bit of hunting and gathering while I was in there.

"Don't worry, Yuno. I doubt it'll be as dangerous as you're expecting." I held up the posting, and she snatched it from my hands, clutching the edges of the

paper and scanning the words.

“What is this? Ghost hunting?! There’s *no way* we should do this!”

“Hicks and religious people just tend to believe stories like this—there’s nothing to it, I’m sure,” I said. “The client just wants us to clear up the rumors. They’re probably thinking that if adventurers from the Royal Capital refute the sighting, the rumors will stop. I’m guessing they set it at rank C to discourage any amateurs from showing up. Less likely to be believed.”

This was just a theory on my part designed to convince Yuno, but I had a hunch I wasn’t too far off. It would explain a whole lot of things that didn’t add up.

“B-but what if there’s a necromancer or something!”

“Not possible. If there were monsters that strong out there, they wouldn’t be messing around asking for a ghost hunter. The village wouldn’t even be standing. You don’t need to worry about that.”

“*What?* Would Yuno even get out of that alive?”

Apparently Yuno was not enthusiastic. The complete opposite of myself; shady requests like this got my blood pumping.

“Sorry for pressuring you to come, but this is easy money. I’m looking out for you.”

I had no intention of pairing up with some stranger on this job, so if Yuno wasn’t coming with me I’d have to back out. I shouldn’t have accepted it without asking her. It just seemed so perfect—a free pass to Noah’s Forest and some quick cash on the side.

“D-do you really get that much money from a C-rank job? Yuno’s never taken one before...”

“Hm, really? I’m pretty sure we’re talking around 30,000G minimum.” The instant I said the number, Yuno’s eyes lit up. *Heh. This round goes to me.*

Part 3

The Swordswoman

A FEW DAYS LATER, Yuno and I arrived at the village near Noah's Forest. I asked the first person I saw for the elder and was promptly led to an odd house on the outskirts. It had a pointed roof with a weather vane at the top. Not to be rude, but it looked like a witch's house.

Flower beds lined the low fence, but the effect was sad rather than cheerful. Three crosses stabbed the earth, side by side. Graves? We'd already passed the cemetery on our way here.

"Um, um, Meltia? I thought you told me there wouldn't be any necromancers?" Yuno's tail drooped, and she hid behind my back, clutching at me.

I rang the bell, and the door opened on its own. *So...do we just go in?*

Two young girls sat across from each other at a table in front of the fireplace. One had brown bobbed hair, and the other bright orange braids and a harsh look in her eyes.

"Seems I have a visitor. Leave us, Myria," the girl with the braids said with maturity that was at odds with her appearance. The girl she called Myria bowed her head and excused herself to another room.

"Um, um...we were told that the oldest person in the village was the client..." Yuno said hesitantly.

The orange-haired girl nodded. "Yes, that's me."

The girl told us her name was Marielle, and her half-elven ancestry meant she had a much longer life span than most humans. Elves tended to be clannish, and I'd never heard of one having a child with a human before, but I supposed anything was possible. I ignored Yuno's overreaction and pressed Marielle for more information about her request.

She told me that three villagers had gone into Noah's Forest to hunt a Rock Dragon. One died, and one was still missing. Recently, two people came forward and claimed they'd seen Doz, the missing man, near the edge of the

forest. Marielle ordered them to keep quiet about it so as not to cause a stir, but it was too late and the rumor spread throughout the town. It wasn't the rumor itself that was problematic; Myria, the other girl from earlier, felt responsible since she was the only survivor of the ordeal. Ever since she first heard the rumors, she'd been sneaking off deep into the forest to look for Doz.

Marielle had posted the commission to discover if there was any truth to those rumors and to get Myria to stop looking. She wanted me to tell the other villagers I was an adventurer who was merely curious about the local flora. That was the best way for me to gain access to Noah's Forest without arousing suspicion.

If I told them I got permission from the village elder, that would create its own set of problems. Best just not to call any attention to my presence. I doubted any of them would give me trouble, although I would have preferred to have Marielle's blessing publicly. It would make me feel less like an unwanted guest.

After talking to Marielle, we took a stroll around town to gather information before embarking into the forest.

I tracked down the two people who claimed they had seen Doz. They both agreed that he was dragging one leg, ghostly pale, and clearly not in his right mind.

Next, I visited a few street vendors and the local tavern. I did check the town cemetery to make sure none of the graves were disturbed, just in case. Didn't seem like a necromancer was involved in this one.

I quickly learned that Marielle was right. Only the older villagers appeared to have a problem with adventurers exploring the forest. Most everyone else treated my arrival like it was the biggest event their humdrum country town had seen in a while, which it probably was—and all welcoming for the most part. I was probably just overthinking it before. Any ill will would be garden-variety backwards thinking.

If there really was a huge dragon involved, the commission should be a B-rank or higher, but I was leaning toward thinking that actually had nothing to do with this case. The ghost and the dragon just didn't seem to line up. I headed to the library to research the town's history and traditions, but Yuno's short attention

span soon had her stacking up the books and playing with them. We got kicked out in less than an hour. Couldn't be helped.

With my curiosity still unsated, it was time to head into Noah's Forest.

Part 4

The Swordswoman

QUICKLY, I realized that this place was far more dangerous than the rumors let on. Smooth sailing at first—we ran into a few wolves, some walking mushrooms, other easy stuff we could take care of in no time—but after circling around a cliff deeper in the forest, we were immediately attacked by a giant spider. We managed to lure it into a pincer formation, but it might've been a close one if Yuno hadn't been with me.

We walked for a long time. When it began to get dark, Yuno found one of those glowing mushrooms that grew in the forest to use as a source of light. We hadn't found a single clue as to Doz's whereabouts. Maybe it was just a dumb rumor after all.

"Yuno really doesn't think he's gonna be this deep in the forest..." Yuno mused.

"This isn't for the commission. I'm here purely out of curiosity. The monsters are getting stronger, though, so we should probably turn back," I admitted.

Yuno glared at me. "Yuno had a *feeling* that's what was going on!"

But just as we started to turn around, I saw something odd in the distance. It was a cave, which wasn't out of the ordinary in and of itself. But there were two statues standing at the entrance of the cave. One was shaped like a dragon, the other a human.

A shrine stood at the boundary between the forest and the village, but this wasn't like that. I hadn't heard one word about the villagers here worshiping dragons.

“Let’s check that place out first, and then we can leave,” I said.

Yuno sniffed the air. “Hm? That’s meat, isn’t it?” I followed her gaze and saw a bunch of meat skewered on a bare tree. I was so focused on the statues I didn’t notice it before. Was this a tree that grew meat on its branches?

“U-um,” she continued, “Yuno remembers hearing about a bird monster that does that with their food?”

“Really? Would a bird strip all the leaves off the branches? The meat even looks like it’s been cut into bite-sized pieces.”

“Hm...”

“I just can’t imagine humans living this far out in the forest,” I said thoughtfully.

What if the missing man lived here? The villagers said he wasn’t in his right mind, after all...

“There’s something weird about this commission, okay?!” Yuno said. “Let’s cancel it! Cancel it! Yuno *told* you from the beginning it was a bad idea to take on a C-rank commission by ourselves!”

“Let’s just watch for a bit. This place is too suspicious to ignore.” I headed toward the cave, Yuno following begrudgingly after me.

Up close, I realized just how well-made the statues were. They were incredibly detailed. Did some famous artisan make them? I had no idea how old they were, but they looked like they were in good shape. Had they been enchanted to protect them from damage? I wouldn’t be surprised if someone told me they were ten years old, or even a hundred. The only thing I was certain of was that these statues were heavy with significance.

“What’s wrong? What are you staring at?”

“...There’s not a scratch on these statues. Whatever they’re made of, it contains very strong magic.”

Yuno put down the glowing mushroom along with her hammer. She patted the statue with both hands, making curious noises. She picked up a tree branch and began tapping one of the statues with it. The branch broke into pieces and

went flying, yet there was still not a dent in the statue's clay.

"Hm!" She lifted her hammer, grasping it with both hands.

"You'll probably just break your weapon," I warned. Yuno made a disappointed face and shifted the hammer to one hand, scooping the glowing mushroom back up.

"So, um...are we going?"

"I think there's a good chance this place is connected to the job. Just be prepared to run at my signal, okay?"

"Okaaay..."

Since Yuno was the one holding the light source, she went into the cave first. The space wasn't large. A few steps in and I felt something furry and organic at my feet. Monster! I raised my sword into the air with a metallic *shing!*

When nothing happened, I looked down. It was just a rug made of an animal's pelt. "Damn. That startled me." But what in the world was a rug doing out here in the forest? I squinted down at it. It wasn't high quality—it hadn't been preserved very well at all, and it was pretty beat up.

If the cave's ambient temperature was a little hotter, it would surely attract bugs. This would definitely not hold up for years like the statues outside. That narrowed things down; whoever placed this rug here did so recently.

Was it someone from the village? Nah, doubtful anyone there was capable of making it out this far all by themselves. A group, perhaps? But multiple missing people would attract attention.

Was this a forest shrine that bandits had commandeered as their hideout or something? What in the world *was* this place? Nothing I'd gathered about the area gave me any clues. The best plan would probably just be to ask Marielle. She had to know something.

Part 5

The Swordswoman

I CONTINUED MY SEARCH of the cave. The interior walls were bricked, and clay pots lined the back wall. I thought about checking their contents, but this wasn't really the time to poke around. The cave's occupant could return at any moment.

I glanced at Yuno. "Let's go back. I don't like this place. We shouldn't stick around for too long."

"Yuno is so relieved to hear that, Meltia! Honestly, it's uncomfortable just being in here... Call it animal instinct, but Yuno thinks she smells poison..."

The instant the words left Yuno's mouth, I heard a growl from the cave entrance. It sounded like a dragon's roar. I quickly clapped my hand over her mouth to shut her up. We both knew what would happen if a dragon found us in this cramped little cave. I waited for a few more seconds and then let Yuno go.

"We can't risk it. We've got to wait until the dragon gets farther away."

"O-okay..."

A sudden rustling noise rose from the back of the cave. Yuno swiftly directed the glowing mushroom's light.

"Kssh..."

And then we saw it—a big black lizard flicking its tongue out at us, hissing.

"Wh-what is that thing?!"

"Keep back!"

This was a D-rank monster known as the Venom Princess Lacerta. It wasn't just incredibly dangerous due to its strong venom—which was certainly enough—it was also highly intelligent. In a stroke of luck, the Venom Princess Lacerta ran straight past us and out of the cave.

The fight itself wouldn't be difficult with the two of us, but if we made one wrong move and killed it too quickly, it could die without curing our poison first. Without a doubt, this was the most dangerous D-rank monster in existence.

“Seriously...what is going on here?” I literally could not get out of here soon enough. But the dragon might still be outside. I figured we should give it a few more minutes.

“Lady Meltia, there are spices or something in this pot. A kind Yuno’s never seen before.”

“Spices? Why would there be spices...?” I peeked inside the pot Yuno indicated and found a large quantity of red powder inside. The scent of it immediately cleared my sinuses and I was suddenly starving. I remembered smelling this scent once before, when I was working as a bodyguard for a merchant. “Don’t tell me this is Red Gold!”

“What? Wait, you mean piperis?”

Piperis was a type of plant-based spice, and it sold for such a high price that merchants called the dried powder “Red Gold.” Rumor had it that some nobles had made their fortunes raising piperis plants. Merchants loved the stuff because the value could fluctuate so much depending on the country of origin and the environment where it grew. It was so valuable, in fact, that certain regions even offered loans to kick-start the piperis trade. The business could get so cutthroat, I’d heard of people ending up dead over it.

“I’m going to take some home! Just enough to fill a little bag...”

“Stop that! Piperis is big-time trouble!”

I was starting to see the full picture now. This had to be a shrine that villagers made long ago. It had to be. I wasn’t sure why they’d built it so far out in the forest, but I knew sometimes very devout worshipers chose to build devotional monuments in dangerous places to demonstrate the depth of their faith. This must be something like that. Or maybe when the shrine was built, there weren’t so many monsters.

More recently, though, bandits must have moved in. They probably attack traveling merchants and steal the Red Gold, then hide out here until things blew over and they could travel again.

Whatever the case, we needed to get out of here without tipping them off and then warn other adventurers off. If there was that much Red Gold here,

then the traveling merchants must be hiring a lot of protection. So not only would the bandits have to be strong enough to defeat the bodyguards, they'd also need to be confident enough to put their hideout in the middle of a forest overrun with monsters.

Yuno and I couldn't take them on alone. Fortunately, they were all gone at the moment, but if they came back...well, that didn't bear thinking about. I glanced involuntarily toward the entrance, just in time to see a huge black tail flick past. The dragon was waiting for us.

I silently looked over at Yuno. Her face was tense as she stared back at me. "U-um, that t-tail..."

"Yep. It's still small, but it's a Plague Dragon. Doesn't look like we're gonna be able to get out of this one without a fight."

"Eek! A Plague Dragon is a *really* bad kind of dragon, isn't it?! Why is it in this forest?! Yuno doesn't wanna fight it!"

"Calm down, Yuno. One of that size is probably less than a D-rank. Or should be." I frantically racked my brain for every shred of information I knew about Plague Dragons. There wasn't a lot of trustworthy intel... That was how rarely people survived an encounter with one. There were certainly anecdotes about them, though, and I so wanted to believe they had all been exaggerations.

The stories said any human who saw one would fall ill and die a painful death. Plague Dragons were unusually cruel and enjoyed taking human form to torture victims, but I didn't see how that information was helpful right now. And if it was true, well, there was nothing I could do about it.

I'd rather be in the dark than utterly without hope, after all.

"It's going to get tired of waiting eventually and show itself. When that happens, I want you to run in there and get the first attack. Find a way to force it into a slip-up, and then I'll land the finishing blow."

"O-okay!!" Yuno tossed aside the glowing mushroom and gripped her hammer with both hands. She snuck toward the cave entrance while I followed a few steps behind her with my sword at the ready and my senses sharp.

Yuno brandished her hammer, a scowl on her face and brows twitching. She

had good instincts; she must sense the enemy approaching. Sure enough, the monster outside finally showed itself. Its skin was reddish-black and tough. Humanoid, but with no eyes, nose, or ears. Its mouth was wide, splitting across its cheeks, a row of sharp fangs peeking out from inside.

The monster raised its sinister, sharp claws and smiled. I was sure this was the dragon we saw before.

I thought back to my Plague Dragons knowledge. The rumors that said they assumed human form to torture their victims. So it was true, then? That meant the dragon viewed us as easy prey. And it was planning on torturing and killing us now.

We couldn't win. It was impossible. The dragon would toy with us and then come in for the kill. Part of me considered putting my sword to my own throat and doing the job myself. How many years had it been since I'd felt this way in the face of a monster?



Before I could seriously consider suicide, I caught a glimpse of Yuno's anxious face. Her life was in my hands. That realization helped me pull myself back together.

"Don't hesitate, Yuno!" I called to her. She tightened her grip on her hammer.

"O-okaaaay!" She raised her weapon in an arc and hit the monster with a blow to the stomach.

"Arghh!" The dragon flew backward but somehow managed to land on its feet. I stepped forward, my blade gleaming in the moonlight. This would use up most of my remaining MP, but at least we wouldn't die.

"Lucent Luna!" The moonlight infused my blade, forming balls of light that shot out towards the monster, exploding into tiny points of fire.

The monster lost its balance and flew into the air before hitting the ground hard on its stomach.

"R-raar..."

No way it was coming back from that attack unscathed. Still, I couldn't let my guard down. Yuno swung her hammer, intending to land the finishing blow, but I gave her a hand signal to stop her. The Plague Dragon should show its true form soon. It might be trying to appear weak to make us lower our guard, opening ourselves up for attack.

Once it returned to its dragon form, its scales would harden and its movement would improve. This was our chance to run away before it could counterattack. I glanced at Yuno. We made eye contact, and I nodded. Then we both took off, sprinting back toward the village.

Halfway there, I chanced a look behind us, but I couldn't see the dragon chasing us.

Part 6

I LEFT THE LAKE and walked along the dark road home. My legs felt as heavy as my hopes had been high. Argh, my entire body still hurt. I had no idea using Human Transformation would be so painful. Was this a sign warning me to stay a dragon for the rest of my life? *Now I feel like this was all just designed to traumatize me.*

From now on, if I got a weird skill, I was going to make sure to look into it more before I used it. There was a skill to decapitate yourself, after all, and I wouldn't be surprised if my entire body just split apart if I tried it.

Maybe I just wasn't cut out for being human. Or maybe I needed to raise my skill level? How many times did I have to torture myself with the transformation before I leveled up? This was like some real military-level training nonsense.

My cave came into view, and I saw a faint light bloom from near the entrance. What was that? A floating Light Shroom? Light Shrooms had a natural glow, and I used them as light bulbs in my cave. I dimmed them at night by putting a graywolf pelt over them.

Obviously a Light Shroom wasn't just levitating by itself. I squinted to try to see inside, and made out the figures of two women examining the entrance to my cave. The shorter girl was holding the Light Shroom like a flashlight. In her other hand she held a ridiculously large hammer. *Wait a second...she has animal ears growing out of her head! Is she half animal? Although I'm not sure why I feel surprised—I'm a dragon, after all.*

The other girl was wearing thick armor. She looked very slender, but moved about in it just fine. So...a dog girl and a swordswoman. Finally, some humans had shown up at my humble abode. This was my chance to prove what a cultured, peaceful, and friendly dragon I was. I just had to wait for the perfect time to make my appearance.

I ducked behind a tree to watch. They were examining the statues outside of my cave so intently. *Ooh, they're surprised! They're definitely impressed with*

my incredible workmanship! I feel so happy and overwhelmed!

They both looked so shocked, speechless with their mouths hanging open. *Heh heh, I took apart and remade those statues so many times, so they're perfect.* Same for the pots, but I was proudest of the statues.

I watched, grinning wider. The dog-eared girl put her hammer and the Light Shroom down and began feeling the surface of one the statues.

Well, I couldn't blame her. *Touch it as much as you want!* But as soon as I silently gave her permission, I watched in horror as she picked up a tree branch and began smacking it against the statue.

Hey, what do you think you're doing?! I didn't say you could do that!

Obviously, the tree branch broke first, but I still didn't love watching this happen. If they hurt that statue, I would legitimately cry. Why would they do something so horrible?

After that, the girl picked up the Light Shroom and aimed it in front of her as the two of them hesitantly entered my cave. My rug and my pots were inside, along with all the spices, salt, and jerky I'd gone to all that trouble to gather. I was so curious to see their reaction that I left my hiding spot behind the tree and snuck closer to the cave.

Oh no, the black lizard's still sleeping inside!

"Raaar!" I roared into the cave, before hiding again. I hoped it would be enough to wake the black lizard and get it to safety.

"Kssh!"

"Τι είναι αυτό!"

"Μαύρη Σαύρα!" Three separate screams rent the air.

The black lizard raced out of the cave and jumped towards me. *"Kshh! Kssh!"*

I patted its head to calm it down as it shrieked, then shifted my attention back towards the cave. The two girls were near the back looking at my pots and talking. I considered strolling in and saying "Actually, those are mine," after which they would exclaim, "Ooh, what a clever, human-like dragon you are!" But I decided against it.

Yeah, not in a million years.

They'd just think I was some random monster who wandered into the cave by accident. I kept my eye on my two guests as I racked my brain, coming up with different scenarios and then dismissing them.

"Kssh?" The black lizard gave me a curious look as I agonized over the decision. The second I turned my attention to it, Dog-Ears looked in my direction. I quickly ducked out of the way and pressed myself against the outer wall of the cave. That was a close one. She almost saw me. But what should I do?

I put *so much* effort into the interior of my cave to make life more comfortable, but I also did it to prove to any passing human that I was more than just a monster. I couldn't lose this opportunity. I had to do something. I had to use Human Transformation again. It was the only way.

I couldn't deny that I looked pretty horrible, but it *did* give me a human-ish form. Anything was better than looking like a dragon. And maybe it wouldn't be so bad now that I'd had some practice?

"Raar."

"Kssh?"

I made a little noise and patted the black lizard's head. I wanted to reassure it so it wouldn't freak out so bad when it saw me transform.

"Ksh, kssh!" It let out a cry, perhaps sensing something was going to happen.

Don't worry. Even if I succeed in turning myself into a human this time, I won't leave you, Black Lizard, I thought as I patted its head once more.

Or maybe I was saying that more to convince myself. I took a deep breath and focused all my energy into visualizing a human form. *I can do this. I know I can do this. I must not have been trying hard enough last time.*

Normal Skill "Human Transformation" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Seeing those words pop up in my head was encouraging, at least. Heat spread throughout my entire body, followed by intense pressure. Perhaps it was because I was getting used to it, or my body was adapting, but the pain wasn't as bad this time.

I can do this! This is going to work!

I couldn't see myself, but I was sure I looked much more human than before.

"Kssh!" It sounded almost like the black lizard was trying to stop me. I turned slightly but then fixed my gaze forward as I entered the cave.

The two women were much closer to the cave entrance than before, but now, their faces were heavy with fear and panic. If I had to describe it, I'd say it looked like they'd just seen a terrible, frightening monster...

Hm? Was there a monster behind me?

"Μην αφαιρείτε την απόλυτη!"

"Είναι φυσικό!"

They both screamed, and the dog-eared girl jumped at me, swinging that stupidly large hammer and whacking it right into my torso. I was in human form, which meant my attack and defense powers were halved. Normally an attack like that wouldn't even make a dent, but in this state it could be a fatal wound.

"Arghh!" I took the full force of the hit and flew backwards into the air, but managed to land on my feet. The swordswoman, who stood behind the dog-girl, pointed her sword at the exit of the cave.

"Φως του φεγγαριού!" She screamed something, and moonlight bounced off her sword, manifesting countless balls of light that spun out and attacked me. I took about five hits and flew backwards again, this time landing on my stomach.

"R-raar..." Now that I was weakened, the dog-girl raised her hammer to finish me off, but for some reason the swordswoman stopped her. They ran away instead.

"Ksh, ksshhh!" The black lizard had been watching the fight from outside the cave, but now it looked back and forth between me and the two fleeing girls. It

tried to give chase, but I grabbed its tail and managed to stop it.

My body assumed its usual shape as the girls disappeared from view. I was a dragon again, cowering on the ground.

“Raar...”

“Kssh.”

The black lizard’s tongue lapped against my cheek comfortingly. Even though I had all but betrayed it, turning into a human like that.

“Ksshh!”

It let out another cry, this time looking towards the statues at the cave entrance. One was a dragon, and the other a human, but the lizard was focused only on the human statue. I wondered if it knew what I had planned. It hadn’t seemed surprised when I transformed, and now it seemed like it was trying to console me. I was starting to think the black lizard was a lot more intelligent than I had previously believed.

Chapter 2:

A Gang of Orangurangs

Part 1

I SLEPT LATER than usual the next morning. The previous day was rough, and I wanted to recover as much HP as I could.

“Kssh... Kssh...”

I figured the black lizard would get up before me, but when I opened my eyes it was still sleeping by my side, its deep, contented breaths in my ear. Well, its nap was interrupted yesterday when the humans came. Maybe it was tired.

I caressed the lizard’s head, and it nuzzled my hand. It had a happy look on its face. I wondered if it was having a good dream. Lately, I woke up next to the black lizard almost every morning.

I checked View Status to see if my wounds from yesterday were healed yet.

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 37/40

HP: 148/161

MP: 157/157

Still a little short of fully recovered, but it would do. I’d be able to get through the day just fine. Though I had a feeling it was past noon, so the day was already half over. Well, sleeping in for a change wasn’t a problem. It wasn’t like I’d made plans with anyone, and I didn’t have a schedule. I could sleep the entire day away and no one would complain.

I figured I’d check the black lizard’s status while I was at it.

Species: Venom Princess Lacerta

Status: Sleeping

Lv: 23/35

HP: 120/120

MP: 143/143

Hmm, hmm. Looking good. Strange; we defeated the twinheads but the black lizard only went up three levels. I guess I was expecting it to grow faster than that. Maybe I just had a skewed perspective since I always got so many wild skills when I level up.

I wondered when it would evolve. Honestly, if the lizard got stronger, there'd really be no reason for my presence. Even during our battle with the twinheads, I was little more than bait.

After the black lizard woke up, we both ate some jerky. Once we were finished, I set an empty pot in front of it.

"Kssh?"

"Raar."

It tilted its head and gave me a puzzled look. *"Kssh?"*

"Raar!"

"Kssh!"

We exchanged cries and gestures; I was attempting to ask the black lizard to produce some more poison for the jerky. Eventually, I somehow got the message across. It made a happy noise of agreement.

I was sure those orangurangs were going to come back for my jerky soon, and I wanted a trap ready to assure them they'd made an enemy. They always came in a group of four. If I could poison one of them, the black lizard and I could take care of the other three.

Right now, I was level 37 of 40. Only three more and I could evolve. Those monkeys would probably put me over the top. If I could just evolve, I'd be freed from this terrible form, and my chances of getting whacked in the stomach with

a hammer upon first sight would go way down. The black lizard was smart, so I was sure it would recognize me if I evolved in front of it.

Obligingly, it went to the back of the cave and poked its head into an empty pot, filling it with poison. Last time it did this, it scratched me a bit when I tried to watch, so this time I respectfully turned my back. I figured it didn't want me to witness it yakking up all that poison from its body. In battle, it seemed to spray the poison so easily that I hadn't realized there was a whole process to it.

The poison it made was perfect. First of all, the color was faint. The kind I made before had changed the jerky's hue, but this would be invisible. Not only that, but it hardly had an odor at all. I'd used a ton of piperis when I made mine to try to cover up the smell, but the orangurangs probably had a much better sense of smell than I did.

Poison masters were just in a different class. I dipped the jerky into the pot, mixing in the dried meat one piece at a time. I made an X shape with the branches outside to mark it, to make extra sure I wouldn't eat it by mistake.

Afterward, my hands burned from the poison, but the black lizard licked my fingers and cured me easily. The two of us hid near the cave entrance, keeping an eye on the tree where we'd strung up the jerky. Now that the orangurangs had gotten a taste for salty meat with a spicy aroma, I was sure they'd be back. But as time passed and they didn't show up, my irritation grew. *Should I put more meat out, or add more piperis to entice them?*

"Kssh!" I wasn't the only impatient one because the black lizard hissed and started fidgeting. I idly entertained it for a while, but then the stakeout began to get really annoying. Before long, the two of us were wrestling each other on the ground.

"Ahh-ahh, ooh!"

I'd practically forgotten what we were doing in the first place, when suddenly I heard a pained cry. The orangurangs were here. I quickly slipped out from underneath the black lizard and sat up.

"Ahh! Ahh!"

"Ah-ohh!"

“Ahhh!”

One of the orangurangs was foaming at the mouth, and the other three surrounding it were hopping from one foot to the other. It almost looked like dancing, but they were clearly in distress. Watching it all go down was kind of funny, even if I knew they were suffering. Time to check and see if the poison was taking effect.

Species: Orangurang

Status: Poison α (Major)

Lv: 16/30

HP: 68/96

MP: 83/83

Yes, it's working! It's working! The monkeys' attack power wasn't actually that high. They had a diverse set of skills, but their overall stats were weaker than the claybear's. I could take care of two of them single-handedly. One was too poisoned to fight, so that just left three. The black lizard and I could handle them, easy. Now was my chance to get rid of those filthy jerky-stealers. I would turn them into my dinner and a boatload of experience points.

Part 2

WE LEFT THE CAVE and showed ourselves to the orangurangs. The instant they saw me, they looked at their poisoned comrade and appeared to put two and two together. They knew I was responsible.

“Ah-ooh!”

“Ahh!”

“Ah!”

The three monkeys howled with anger and leapt towards us, their long red fur blowing in the wind. I figured I should check their stats.

Species: Orangurang

Status: Normal

Lv: 17/30

HP: 98/98

MP: 45/45

Attack: 82

Defense: 51

Magic: 60

Agility: 92

Rank: D

Special Skills:

Earth Type: Lv —

Group Attack: Lv —

Nimble: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Falling Resistance: Lv 3

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 2

Scratch: Lv 3

Stone Throw: Lv 4

Monkey See, Monkey Do: Lv 2

Clay Wall: Lv 1

Monkey Whistle: Lv 3

MP Transfer: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Forest Acrobat: Lv 2

Co-op: Lv 2

Loyalist: Lv 4

Their levels varied a bit, but their stats were mostly the same. Their skills and stats were well balanced, but nothing jumped out at me. Their best skills were the co-op ones. The twinheads we fought before had average stats of over 140 and a ton of skills; it was an all-around fierce opponent. Maybe that was influencing my opinion of these monkeys, but this just didn't seem like a tough fight.

"Raar!"

The black lizard jumped into action at my signal. Time to use its Clay Gun as backup again.

"Ahh!"

"Aah!"

I easily evaded the two that tried to come at me with a Scratch attack and then tripped them with my tail. They hit the ground with a loud thud. I turned my attention to the third one.

“Aaah!” It folded its arms and barreled towards me with a forceful punch. I used its momentum to my advantage and countered with a Dragon Punch to the gut.

“Ooggh!” It flew backward and grabbed a tree branch with both hands, swinging all the way around it like a high bar, before landing gracefully on the ground. A bold move, though it definitely took some damage from my punch, clutching its stomach in pain. So far, there hadn’t been any need for the black lizard to intervene.

I wasn’t expecting it to be so easy! I had leveled up a lot recently. I was much faster, and thus able to deal with any unexpected movements. The orangurangs didn’t pack the punch that claybears did, so I wasn’t worried about them knocking me out with a single counterattack. They didn’t have any wacky special skills or extreme strength like the twinheads did. I couldn’t think of a single reason why this battle would be tough.

Chances were I could handle it all on my own. Knocking one of them out with poison put me at a huge advantage. Their strategy as a trio seemed off, too. They were probably more used to working as a group of four. As the three of them regrouped, they moved to surround me. Normally they’d have all four sides covered. Well, one of them could still move around to my blind spot, so I’d have to be careful.

If things went south, the black lizard could use Clay Gun to back me up. Plus, clearly the monkey who took me on from the front was hurting from my punch.

I’d have this wrapped up in no time.

I could tell they were being cautious of the black lizard as they closed in on me, even though the lizard wasn’t making a move yet.

“Raaaaaaar!”

I mustered up my most intimidating roar, using Bellow directed at the ground in front of the orangurangs. Apparently that punch had finally made them realize the difference in our abilities. They froze up, giving me a big in. Their incomplete battle formation crumbled. I turned around and threw them a menacing glare.

“Ahh!”

“Aah!”

One of the monkeys lunged at me in desperation, but I caught it easily while nailing the other one with a swing of my tail. The first one threw off my grip and tried to scamper behind me, but I matched its movements and closed in, nailing it with a fist in its face.

The orangurang fell to the ground behind me but quickly curled up into a ball and sprang to its feet. These guys definitely knew the right way to recover from a fall. But that didn't mean they weren't taking any damage. This battle was already decided.

I'd knocked about half their HP off—one more hit to each and it was game over. As a final gambit, the three of them put their backs to each other in one solid unit.

Oh, were they planning to run? But I really had my heart set on monkey stew tonight. *Sorry, but graywolves just aren't gonna cut it. I'm going to eat the three of you and enjoy every bite.*

Simultaneously, the orangurangs put their fingers in their mouths and whistled. The three whistles overlapped, joined by a fourth, as the poisoned monkey lifted its head despite its agony.

The sound grew louder all at once, reverberating inside my brain. This had to be their Monkey Whistle skill. Was it gonna give me a weird status effect? I wasn't sure what they were trying to accomplish, but I needed to make them stop ASAP. I doubted they were going to show off their skills and then run away.

I threw myself into Roll, spinning towards the nearest monkey. It evaded my telegraphed move easily, but my goal was to get them to stop whistling, which I did.

The noise stopped, its echoes following a few seconds later. My relief, however, was short-lived. An incredible commotion of footsteps and screams kicked up, coming ever closer. I turned to see an orangurang about twice the size of the others running straight for me.

Uh-oh. That whistle was a Call Allies skill?! And now the boss is coming?

The huge monkey had a scar across one eye, adding to its intimidation factor. It was clearly on a whole different level from the other four. The black lizard, who had up until now been hiding in the shadows, quickly came to my side. Taking advantage of our distraction, the other three monkeys picked up their poisoned comrade and carried it off to safety.

The orangurang boss glared at me with cold, vacant eyes. A chill ran down my spine, and I instinctively took a step backwards.

Dang it! Every single time someone realizes they can't beat me, they just call in a friend!

Part 3

THE ADDITION of the boss made this a two-versus-five situation. Well, one of them was extremely poisoned, so I supposed that was two versus four. Before, I could make up for the numbers disadvantage with my superior stats, but there was no telling what would happen now that the boss had entered the fray. Might as well check its stats.

Species: Giant Orangurang

Status: Normal

Lv: 27/40

HP: 198/198

MP: 140/140

Attack: 123

Defense: 82

Magic: 110

Agility: 122

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Earth Type: Lv —

Group Attack: Lv —

Nimble: Lv 4

Resistance Skills:

Falling Resistance: Lv 3

Physical Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 4

Mega Claws: Lv 4

Stone Throw: Lv 4

Monkey See, Monkey Do: Lv 3

Clay Wall: Lv 2

Monkey Whistle: Lv 3

Rest Wide: Lv 4

Quick: Lv 2

Power: Lv 1

Telepathy: Lv 4

Title Skills:

Forest Acrobat: Lv 2

Co-op: Lv 2

Clan Boss: Lv 5

Loyalist: Lv 3

Supporter: Lv 3

It had a lot of HP, but overall its combat abilities weren't that great. I mean, they were good compared to an ordinary orangurang, but I had it beat in attack and defense.

I was most concerned about that special skill "Supporter." Quick and Power seemed like pretty straightforward boost magic. And I was guessing Rest Wide was a recovery spell that could affect several party members at once. So not only could he heal the monkeys after I went to all that trouble of knocking down their HP, now it was going to boost all their stats, too? How was that fair?

Fortunately, the Giant Orangurang didn't seem to have any specialized attack skills. I'd just have to hit before it tried anything stupid.

“Raaaaaar!” I jumped right at it and used Baby’s Breath. *I’m gonna trap you and burn you up, you big monkey!*

“Ksssh!” The black lizard backed me up with Clay Gun, shooting clay bullets at the Giant Orangurang.

“Ah-aah-ooh,” it uttered softly. The three other monkeys came out of hiding and quickly stepped in front of it.

“Ahh!”

“Ahh!”

“Aaah!”

They lifted their arms and stomped the ground, and a large earthen wall rose out of it, blocking my hot breath and the black lizard’s clay bullets.

Well, that must be Clay Wall. The three of them were combining their powers to make a barrier around their boss.

“Ah-oh.” The Giant Orangurang made a noise, and light appeared from behind the clay wall. It had to be healing its allies.

I needed to take out the boss or there would be no end to this. But I still had to deal with its minions and their wall.

Crap, and it would probably boost them and make them stronger, too. *I’ve gotta do something. Circle around behind? No, it’ll be faster if I just knock it down!*

I curled up into a ball and used Roll, heading straight for the wall. It deflected me, but I did feel it give. As I hurtled through the air, I stretched out my body and landed on my claws. And just as my legs hit the ground, the wall began to crumble.

“Ahh!”

“Ahh!”

“Aaah!”

On the other side, the monkey minions appeared to have completely regained their morale. They’d obviously received magical boosts in addition to recovery.

They quickly surrounded me and the black lizard, moving much faster than before.

“Ahh!”

“Ahh!”

Two monkeys came at me from either side. I evaded the one on the right and guarded against the other with my arm. Its claws swung at me with incredible force, ripping off scales and piercing into my flesh.

“Raar!” I flinched and bent backwards, kicking off the ground from my blind spot. The three monkeys were closing in on me. Oh hell.

They’re gonna bulldoze through me just with sheer numbers!

“Aagh!” A rock whizzed past, and the third orangurang collapsed. Nice going, black lizard. That was a close one.

“Ahh-ooh!” The orangurang who scratched me took hold of my arm again. I didn’t resist; I waited until its grip on me was firm and then bit down on its shoulder as hard as I could.

“Aghh!” But it didn’t let go, and it was so entangled with me that I couldn’t move. And that was when the Giant Orangurang took the opportunity to aim a punch at me. The black lizard charged into it with Roll. The Giant Orangurang took the impact in the chest and staggered.

I took my chance and used Roll in midair, my orangurang luggage still hanging on. The centrifugal force flung the monkey off me, and it hit the ground hard.

“Ahh-ooh!” it screamed, rolling around and clutching its head.

Heh heh. I bet that one hurt.

From my vantage point, I could only keep track of the Giant Orangurang and the black lizard. I turned just in time to see the other two orangurangs hurling rocks.

“Urgh!” One struck my cheek, and the other got me straight in my left eye. I grabbed at my face as the Giant Orangurang pushed the black lizard off and started running at me. Crap, I was completely on the defensive now; it was all I could do just to figure out the position of my enemies. Desperately, I unfolded

my wings just as the Giant Orangurang punched me, using the force of the attack to propel myself backwards and away from it.

The black lizard used Roll to escape from the boss monkey and join me as soon as I landed. It must have taken some hits, too; it was covered in cuts. I checked its HP. Down to half.

Apart from agility, the black lizard had exceptionally low stats. It was best suited to performing long-ranged attacks and then finding an opportunity to charge in. But since we were way outnumbered, that tactic put the brunt of the responsibility on me and my favored physical attacks. We were still losing, even with the lizard's backup.

Okay, so, starting with the boss was the wrong move. I needed to go against the usual rules of combat and ignore the biggest threat in favor of picking off the minions one by one.

Speaking of the minions, they were gathering around their boss. *Don't tell me it's going to heal them again?* I ran to try to stop them, but the three monkeys all started throwing rocks. I dodged as many as I could without sacrificing speed, which meant I ended up taking some hits.

"Raaar!"

I inhaled to let out a blast of Baby's Breath, but the three orangurangs converged back into a familiar formation.

"Ahh!"

"Ahh-ooh!"

"Ahh!"

Another clay wall appeared between us. I curled up without losing momentum, using Roll to charge into the wall. I bounced off it just like last time, then landed. The wall collapsed, revealing the three monkeys—once again all healed up.

I-Is this just impossible? Back to square one, and we were the only ones hurting. I glanced towards the black lizard. I couldn't let it get in close range again. Should I try to face all four of them alone? No, there was just no way I

could do it. But there had to be some way out of this. I *had* to think of something.

Part 4

THREE ORANGURANGS with one Giant Orangurang leading and healing them. The orangurang who ate the poisoned jerky...I could probably put out of my mind. The giant one was periodically healing it, but I still doubted it could even get up.

Species: Giant Orangurang

Condition: Quick Power

Lv: 27/40

HP: 198/198

MP: 54/140

The Giant Orangurang had more than a third of its MP left. Beyond unfair, really, that it still had so much left after using Boost and Recovery so many times. I could wait it out until its MP was completely drained, but I didn't know if I could last that long.

I needed to use a strong skill like Nutcracker to take out all the minions at once, but I didn't know when I'd get the opportunity. I'd managed to knock one unconscious, but the other three were still prepared to gang up on me. The chances of grabbing a squirming monster and flying up in the air for a one-on-one fight were basically zero. The monster would have to be already immobilized with no other threats around.

And even if all those conditions aligned, the best I could do was take out one of the monkeys. Sure, it would make the battle easier, but it just wasn't worth risking the damage I'd take in the process.

If only I had some way to recover health myself. I checked the three orangurang minions' stats—of *course* they still had plenty of HP and MP left. One of them showed Poison α (Major) as a status condition, but as far as I could

tell, it was still moving normally. The black lizard's Venom attack must have only been a scratch, so the effects would take time to show up. The black lizard's battle strategy had been the same since we first met—a sudden attack with a direct hit followed by a retreat and waiting out the poison.

If this battle was like the one against the twinheads, where the lizard could draw the enemy's attention so I could attack, it would be a different story. But we were outnumbered. The black lizard was forced to abandon its surprise attack and join me on the front lines. Double Poison was an option, but it would affect me, too, and there was no guarantee the black lizard would have a chance to cure me in time.

My friend's HP and defense wasn't very high, so we had to default to a long-distance attack with Clay Gun. This wasn't good.

At that point, I was considering abandoning the cave. I was attached to it, of course, but I wouldn't risk my life for it.

I checked on the enemies again.

The Giant Orangurang had a third of its MP left. Of the four monkey minions, two still had plenty of HP and MP, one had a light case of the special poison, and the fourth had been downed by the poisoned jerky. Was there some way for me to take that one hostage? Make it my monkey prisoner?

The Giant Orangurang was using up its recovery magic on the downed one to keep it alive, even in the midst of battle. Clearly its loyalty to its comrades ran deep—my hostage plan should work. And the black lizard could heal my poison.

I studied the Giant Orangurang to check its particulars. It was the boss and highly intelligent, so it should be open to negotiating.

Giant Orangurang: D+ Rank Monster. Evolved orangurang who has won a duel against the previous leader. That is the only method for evolving into a Giant Orangurang. Since they are so closely linked to evolution, orangurangs regard duels as sacred. Learns many Recovery Magic skills to support the group.

Wait, so do they just instinctively know the requirements for evolution? That sounded a little suspicious, to be honest, but I could worry about it later. If they regard duels as sacred, they must be smart enough to bargain.

Hmm...that Telepathy skill of the Giant Orangurang's...I wonder.

"Raaar!"

I roared once, conveying with my voice and expression that I needed backup. The black lizard ran into the brush. The orangurangs split up, two heading towards me, the third going after the lizard. I was anxious for my friend but also grateful that we could share the responsibilities of battle. No way just one orangurang could catch the lizard.

The monkey coming at me on the right was the one with Minor Poison α , its movements slightly sluggish and awkward. I faked to the left then raced past the orangurang on my right. I dodged the Giant Orangurang with Roll, then quickly jumped out of it. I circled round behind the incapacitated, jerky-poisoned monkey and stabbed my claws into its throat.

"Ahh...ahh...ahh..."

The orangurangs' faces twisted with rage, all three of them rushing me at once. I knew from the beginning that I couldn't negotiate with *them*, but how about the Giant Orangurang? The one with Telepathy?

I ignored the three minions and focused on the boss. This had been a losing battle from the very beginning, and if I missed my shot here my only choice would be to run away. Now that my enemies' attention was focused on me, the black lizard could easily retreat.

"Looks like you understand my skill. Yes?"

The Giant Orangurang's thoughts reverberated in my head. I wasn't hearing words...it felt deeper than that, more basic. I felt its emotions and personality lapping at my mind.

So this was Telepathy.

My bet had paid off. Once the other orangurangs saw me and the boss communicating, they all froze. But now I knew I had my work cut out for me. I now fully understood the Giant Orangurang's anger, its wild pride, and its intelligent, primal personality.

Part 5

I TRIED TO GET my thoughts in order to respond to the Giant Orangurang's message. I was sure I couldn't use logic to negotiate with it. If it wanted a logical resolution, it could have used Telepathy from the very start. But if I just charged in, a fight would be unavoidable. I'd have no choice but to run away and abandon my cave.

My claws remained lodged in the poisoned monkey's throat as I sorted through my thoughts and visualized sending them to the Giant Orangurang.

"This monkey will die from the poison if left untreated. But the black lizard can cure it. In exchange, please let us go."

I watched the Giant Orangurang as I answered it. It barely reacted. Did the telepathy not work? Maybe you had to have the skill to send messages, and everyone else could only receive them? If that was true, I was screwed.

"Impossible. Once I have engaged in battle with an enemy, I never let them escape. Sacrifices may be necessary to gain myself the advantage."

Well, at least I could be sure it heard me now. A conversation was possible.

"If the black lizard and I fight with all our strength, I'm fully confident it'll end in a draw."

I wasn't bluffing. I could draw the attention of the other monkeys and let the black lizard unleash the poison cloud on all of us. That would leave us at a complete standoff.

"The weak get picked off and die in obscurity. That is our principle. We ascend to the rank of chief after killing our own forefathers."

It was no use. I was able to communicate with it, but its mindset was still 100 percent monster. And to be perfectly blunt, I didn't get it.

"Wait! In that case..."

"Enough. This is nothing but a waste of magic."

If I didn't do something, it would shut down the telepathic link. And then I'd be forced to outrun the others, who he'd already given a huge speed boost. If I used Roll, I could probably beat them at top speed, but the Giant Orangurang had the skill Nimble and the title skill Forest Acrobat, so if I factored in the time I'd lose from having to dodge it and other obstacles, it would end in a complete wash.

Wasn't there anything else I could do? Some magic words that could flip the situation in my favor? What about the jerky? Nah, I doubted it could be bribed like that. I considered all the information I had—the thoughts we'd exchanged with Telepathy, the Giant Orangurang's temperament, and the knowledge of the orangurangs' customs that I'd learned from the Divine Voice's description.

I sent one more thought to the Giant Orangurang, on the verge of throwing in the towel.

"Th-then I challenge you to a duel."

I had only a vague idea of what a duel might consist of in the orangurang world—a ceremonial fight used to decide who would be their boss and how they would evolve. Under normal circumstances, I doubted they would ever even consider accepting a duel from another species of monster. But somehow I got the vibe that the Giant Orangurang might give me a chance.

And if it said yes, I'd knock this down to a one-on-one fight; no more worrying about being outnumbered. I'd bash its head in so it couldn't use Recovery Magic anymore, and then taking care of the four minions would be a piece of cake.

The boss still didn't answer.

"If it turns into a melee, I'm sure the black lizard will take you down with it. If you accept the duel and defeat me easily, then there's nothing for you to worry about. Isn't that the best option for you? If you accept, the black lizard can cure your two poisoned minions. It's a win-win situation for you."

"Duels are traditionally reserved for choosing new leaders or resolving conflicts with other clans. There is no precedent for this...but there are no rules against dueling another species. As long as you and the black lizard are a clan, that is."

Wait...did it really agree? Or was it pretending? Maybe it was planning to make the black lizard heal its minions, and then they'd all attack us at once.

No, I didn't think so. From everything I'd gathered about the Giant Orangurang's personality, it wasn't the type to lie about things like this.

"Fine. I accept. They will not touch you until the duel is over. These duels are a sacred ceremony for us—a clashing of souls. I do not intend to dishonor our tradition."

After sending me that thought, the Giant Orangurang glanced over at its three minions, who still stood there motionless.

I politely let go of the poisoned monkey's arm and stepped back a little. The other monkeys crept in to retrieve their exhausted comrade. Then all four of them backed away.

I looked at the black lizard, trying to urge it to cure the monkeys' poison. It hesitated for a moment, as if unsure if that was what I really wanted, before slowly approaching the orangurangs and curing the two poisoned monkeys.

"Ah?"

"Aa."

The orangurangs exchanged glances, speaking softly to one another. The black lizard sensed something, because it tried to back away.

The two orangurangs grabbed hold of the black lizard.

"Kssh! Kssh!"

"Raaar!"

I roared with anger at the Giant Orangurang.

"Don't get the wrong idea. That black lizard has no stake in this duel. If you win, I will free it."

I'd considered telling the black lizard to poison them all in case things went downhill for me, but apparently that was no longer an option. The Giant Orangurang and I had a firm grip on each other; doubtless it guessed what I was planning.

I had to focus. On pure stats, I had it beat, but I couldn't overlook all the Giant Orangurang's stat-boosting and recovery magic. My HP was already down. Though I was the one who had suggested it in the first place, this would be a tough fight. But unlike our previous situation, this was a fight I had a chance at winning.

Part 6

I FACED THE Giant Orangurang.

“Ah!”

“Ah-ahh!”

“Ah-ooh, ah!”

“Aa!”

The minions made noises as they held the black lizard down, excited to see some bloodshed. A duel really was serious business to their species.

“Ah-oh...”

The Giant Orangurang let out a soft noise and lumbered toward me. I went ahead and checked its status again.

Species: Giant Orangurang

Status: Quick Power

Lv: 27/40

HP: 198/198

MP: 49/140

Damn, its status boost was still there. I thought for sure it would’ve worn off by now. And all that Telepathy only burned off 5 MP. I should’ve dragged it out longer. Whatever. No sense in dwelling on the past. If I kept pushing, it probably would have rejected the duel.

I didn’t have any time for regrets—I had to figure out my next move. Most pressing was getting its MP down. That was what made monsters with recovery magic so dangerous.

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 4

Giant Claws: Lv 4

Stone Throw: Lv 4

Monkey See, Monkey Do: Lv 3

Clay Wall: Lv 2

Monkey Whistle: Lv 3

Rest Wide: Lv 4

Quick: Lv 2

Power: Lv 1

Telepathy: Lv 4

Its skills were basically the same as the normal orangurangs'. I desperately wanted to believe it wouldn't use the Monkey Whistle to call in more reinforcements. If I beat this guy only for an even bigger orangurang to show up, it'd all be over.

Despite its aggressive temperament, the Giant Orangurang seemed to predominantly use backup magic. I hoped when it came down to a one-on-one fight, I'd have the advantage. Of course, I was already weakened myself.

If my assumptions were right, Rest Wide used up around 10 MP, and HP Recovery cost about 80.

So in a normal fight, the Giant Orangurang could use Rest Wide about five more times. But I was hoping to force it to use some other skills instead. First order of business was getting Quick and Power off it, though. Back when I fought the Giant Potortoise and it used status effect magic on me, it didn't last long at all. It might be best to buy some time at the beginning of the battle.

The Giant Orangurang moved toward me, hunching down on all fours instead of walking upright. Its arms pushed off the ground, boosting its speed and closing the distance between us even quicker.

There was just no way to do this as long as it had Quick. If it came down to a punch-out, I'd be at a disadvantage without recovery magic.

I took a step backwards and used Baby's Breath. The Giant Orangurang dodged it easily, then charged past me.

I didn't understand what it was trying to do; I just looked up in time to watch it sailing over me. Then I saw the tree.

I spun and readied myself for its next move. It kicked off the tree, angling itself right towards me.

Breath wouldn't be a fast enough counter, and at this point I couldn't risk taking damage in exchange for a single hit, since it could just heal itself. The Giant Orangurang had to know that, too.

I wrapped my wings around myself in defense, feeling the Giant Orangurang's weight hit me as it landed, sending me sprawling from the impact. The boss didn't relent, intent on hitting me as hard as it could.

This guy was just ridiculously strong and moving completely differently from when it fought with the group. I imagined its hesitation was due to the black lizard.

I kicked off the ground hard and spread my wings, alighting on a high branch.

"Ahhh!"

The Giant Orangurang punched the tree, shaking it violently and knocking me off. I grabbed wildly for the branch, clinging to it. My opponent climbed the tree with incredible speed.

Damn it! The magic still hasn't worn off yet!

I let go of the branch, letting myself fall. The boss immediately changed direction and came after me. I used Roll to keep out of its grasp.

The Giant Orangurang hit the ground with a tremendous thud.

"What's the matter, Tiny Dragon? Fleeing in terror doesn't make for much of a duel. It's sacrilege against the ceremony, not to mention rude."

Its Telepathy message sounded irritated, but I didn't really give a crap about

its feelings right now. If I stopped, it would crush me. *At the very least, just stop using recovery magic!*

That's what I wanted to say, but the other monkeys looked at me and tightened their grip on the black lizard. I kept quiet.

"Ahh!"

"Ahhh!"

They pointed at me and jumped up and down with obvious laughter. Wow, uncalled for.

Since I'd agreed to their rules, I was worried that they'd do something bad to the black lizard if I disrespected the duel.

Fine, then. If you're really dying for some punishment, you got it.

I slowed down Roll, letting the Giant Orangurang draw closer. When it was in range I was forced to dodge its hands as they came at me from the left and right.

Gotta find a suitable tree... Oh, that one's good!

It was the perfect height and looked pretty sturdy. The branches were ideally positioned, and the trunk was just the right shape.

I made a beeline straight for the tree. Behind me, the Giant Orangurang sped up. I rammed myself against the trunk, using my scales like spikes to help me climb.

"Ahhh...?"

The Giant Orangurang paused as it tried to figure out what I was doing. And in that moment, it let down its defenses.

I took my chance and swung off a branch above me, propelling myself at the Giant Orangurang's face.

I remained in my Roll in midair but stretched out my tail and whacked the monkey across the face. At the speed I was going, it was like getting hit with a whip.

"Aghhhh!"

The Giant Orangurang curled up to protect its face.

I pulled my tail back in, tackling the back of its head with Roll, and then sprang out of range of retaliation.

“A-ahhh...” The Giant Orangurang slowly shook its head as if trying to make sure it could still move its neck. Lacerations from my tail covered its face. It ran its finger along the deepest cut, smearing blood and narrowing its eyes at me.

“Ahh-oh.”

Yep. Looks like it worked. Now let's see what's left.

Species: Giant Orangurang

Status: Confusion (Temporary, Minor)

Lv: 27/40

HP: 43/198

MP: 48/140

Oh, that whittled down more than I expected! Turned out direct hits work. Now that its HP was low, I expected it to use Rest Wide. My goal was in view. And hey! The boost magic was worn off, too! Hurling myself right at its face was worth it, then.

Part 7

NOW THAT the Giant Orangurang's status effects had worn off, I had my chance. I needed to end this fast. I curled up and jumped into a Roll to bring myself closer. It meant I had to take a path straight towards the boss, but now that it no longer had Quick, it wouldn't be a problem. I'd circle around and tackle it from its blind spot, and it'd be all over.

"Ah...oh."

The ground rumbled as I approached, a huge mound forming and knocking me backwards into a tree.

Ow. But fine. Pushing the Giant Orangurang into using Clay Wall was good, actually. The wall it made was huge, even bigger than the one all three of the minions made. Surely it must've taken up a ton of MP. Now if I could just get it to use recovery and boost one more time, its MP would be gone.

This was my chance. The two of us squared off across the earthen wall, the huge monkey staring right back at me.

Species: Giant Orangurang

Status: Quick (Major)

Lv: 27/40

HP: 43/198

MP: 8/140

What...? It didn't use recovery magic. Crap, it just used its MP to raise its speed! It must've figured there was no sense in drawing this out; it wanted a fast duel. I was fully confident that no matter how many times it used recovery magic, as long as its status boosts were gone, I'd be fine. The other way around, though...

“Ahh!”

The Giant Orangurang kicked off a nearby tree and threw itself toward me. There was nowhere for me to go and no way to dodge. Quickly, I stretched out my tail and felt it touch a branch. I grabbed on, swung myself around that branch, and curled into Roll, building myself up to an incredible speed.

“Waah!”

I used all my body weight to counter the Giant Orangurang’s attack. It hit the ground and landed hard, splayed out in the dirt. I climbed back onto the branch and wiped the cold sweat from my forehead.

That was a close one—it almost had me. But now I understood that when the Giant Orangurang was moving this fast, it lost most of its control. Its movements became simple and easy to read, and it appeared exhausted. My barrage of attacks was working.

I figured that boost magic was a net positive, but it seemed to put a huge strain on the creature’s body. Still, I didn’t want to keep doing risky evasive maneuvers while it was this fast. Luckily, its drained MP meant it wouldn’t be raising its attack power. My best bet would be a head-on attack. Countering with small hits on the run would tire me out. Plus, only countering meant I had to give up the chance for the first strike.

My best option was: it punches me, I stand my ground, I punch back. A meathead strategy, but its HP was already pretty low.

I landed and squared up. *Bring it on. I know this is what you want—a head-on fight, even though sneaking and dodging and waiting for an opening is really more my style.*

“Raaar!” I opened up with a good Bellow.

The boss monkey bared its teeth in a chilling smile.

“Ahhhhh!” It howled and charged me, kicking off the ground at the absolute last second and stretching out its arms. *Starting with claws, huh?*

I pulled my tail back in and let it dig in its claws. Some of my scales tore off, but it was better than losing flesh.

I continued guarding with my tail and punched the big monkey right in the face.

“Ooghh!”

I did it!

Normal Skill “Dragon Punch” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

This should be it! A win for me!

Its eyes opened wide, and it fell backwards.

“Oh-ahh!” At the last second, it regained its balance with one swift movement.

H-hey, you’ve gotta be kidding me! That punch should have taken care of the rest of its HP! As my mind raced, the Giant Orangurang swung its fist. I guarded too late, and it got me right in the face.

“Raaar!” My consciousness flickered. This jerk literally hit me while it was passing out?! *“Graaaaar!”* Another backhand blow caught me in the chin. Losing the battle of speed hurt. A lot. Damn it. Winning made me let my guard down.

The monkey boss slowed, winding up for another punch. If it hit, I’d be in trouble. It telegraphed its strikes, but there was still no way to completely avoid it. I had to strike now.

It *had* to be close to death. Had to be. I just needed to get one more punch in. I didn’t even aim, just let a Dragon Punch loose straight ahead. The monkey’s face crashed right down on top of my fist.

My hand stung. I stared into its face. That was it, right? But then I felt something hard driving into my forehead and an incredible impact as I hit the ground.



“Kssh! Kssh!”

“Ahh!”

“Ah-ah!”

“Ah-ooh!”

“Ah-oh, ahhh!”

I heard the black lizard scream, and excited whoops from the monkeys overpowering it. It sounded like they were celebrating.

Huh. I...lost?

Gained 162 Experience Points.

Special Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — has gained 162 Experience Points.

Young Plague Dragon Lv 37 has become Lv 39.

I-I won? I did it. Only one...level...left to go... Ah, it’s no use... Feels like I’m... fading...

Gained Title Skill “Clan Boss” Lv 1.

Chapter 3:

Life with the Red Monkeys

Part 1

WHERE AM I? What's this soft thing? My fur carpet?

I sniffed. I could smell the stink of animals...the faint scent of piperis.

"Kssh! Kssh! Kssh!" I opened my eyes to find the black lizard right in front of me.

I was in our cave. I rubbed at my forehead. My memories felt vague, although I wasn't sure if it was because I'd used up all my stamina or because I'd totally passed the heck out.

Let's see, I proposed a duel to the Giant Orangurang... We got into a punch-out and it knocked me out...but then I got experience points...

If I'm alive, that must mean I won? Guess I should check my status...

Species: Young Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 39/40

HP: 55/167

MP: 144/163

I wasn't fully healed, but I had recovered quite a lot, and evolution was right within my grasp. So I *did* win.

The orangurangs seemed to have kept their promise, because they'd left. No more stealing my jerky. The experience of watching their boss die in front of them would probably be enough to keep them away from my cave from now on.

"Kssh!" The black lizard jumped happily on my chest.

I pet its back as it curled up. The site of the battle was close to the cave, but I

was still surprised it managed to get me back here. As soon as I'd had that thought, the black lizard let out an uncomfortable "Kshh..."

Hm? What is it?

It got up and looked across the cave. I rolled over to follow its gaze. Four orangurangs stood all lined up in a row.

"Ahh!"

"Ah! Ah!"

"Ah-oh, ah-oh!"

"Ahh!"

The monkeys swung their arms up and down emphatically, whooping with excitement.

Huh? What do these guys think they're doing in my home? Hang on a second, something's not right here.

The black lizard glanced at the monkeys and then back at me. Not in confusion but more like, *"What the heck are we gonna do with these clowns?"*

I had the same question. Why were they even here?

"Raar!" I jumped up with a roar, but instead of running away, the orangurangs drew closer. They formed a line and went to their knees, bowing their heads to me.

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Knock that off. What kind of weird prank is this? What should I do, knock them all out at once for the experience? That should give me plenty to hit my evolution conditions.

Seriously, though. Why are they acting so weird? Almost like...I'm their boss or something.

W-wait a second.

I appeared to have overlooked a crucial detail.

"Duels are traditionally reserved for choosing new leaders or resolving conflicts with other clans."

I thought back on my telepathic conversation with the Giant Orangurang. If the clan boss lost during a duel, did the winner become the boss of that clan?

Giant Orangurang: D+ Rank Monster. Evolved orangurang who has won a duel against the previous leader. That is the only method for evolving into a Giant Orangurang. Since they are so closely linked to evolution, orangurangs regard duels as sacred. Learns many Recovery Magic skills to support the group.

So its evolution pattern changed after a duel? It seemed unlikely to me, but I had a feeling that was right. Evolutions depended on a monster's skills—especially their title skills. The Giant Orangurang had the skill Clan Boss: Lv 5. And if it earned that title skill because it won a duel, then... I hastily checked my own skills.

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 3

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 2

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 5

Itty-Bitty Hero: Lv 2

Wrongdoer: Lv 3

Calamity: Lv1

Chicken Runner: Lv 2

Mr. Chef: Lv 3

Dastardly King: Lv 1

Stalwart: Lv 1

Giant Killer: Lv 1

Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4

Clan Boss: Lv 1

Welp, there it was. Right on the bottom. I didn't even notice it before.

"Ahh!"

"Ahh-ooh! Ahh-ooh!"

The orangurangs whooped noisily. They must've been celebrating their new boss. I doubted turning down the position was an option. After all, they regarded the duel as a sacred ceremony.

"Kssh..." The black lizard watched me sadly. Did it think the orangurangs would take its place in my life? Apparently...and it didn't like that one bit. Well, we *had* fought a life-or-death battle before teaming up.

The weirdest thing about this was that the orangurangs just...accepted me. All over some silly duel.

"Shh! Kssh!" The black lizard opened its mouth and showed me its fangs. Then it tipped its head to the side and narrowed its eyes at the orangurangs. It was trying to ask me if it should get ready to fight. True, the minions would be super easy to pick off now that their boss was gone.

But they didn't seem to want to fight us. And as long as I had this new title skill in my back pocket, I doubted they ever would. They were a lot physically closer to humans than I was; they could be pretty handy for doing chores and keeping this cave tidy, not to mention their hands were probably better for ceramics.

I'd ply them with a bunch of jerky and work them like dogs. Wow. This might actually be the best thing that could have happened.

“Raar.” I told the black lizard that I’d decided not to fight. It shot the monkeys a threatening look but reluctantly hid its fangs.

Part 2

THE ORANGURANGS were surprisingly useful. All four of them went outside and hunted monsters for me. Apparently, boss orangurangs didn't do much of their own work.

"Ahh!"

The orangurang bowed its head and lay today's spoils in front of me. A bunch of graywolves, giant rabbits, and fruit. Hey, not bad!

"Ahh, ooh."

I looked up the details of the fruits, interrupted by one of the orangurangs happily reaching out toward me. I thought it was trying to shake my hand or something, but instead it let its gaze linger outside the cave. Ohh, the jerky. They really liked that stuff.

"Raar." I gave them my permission and the four of them scrambled outside.

Immediately I felt uneasy. They wouldn't take all of it, right? If they started eating more than they brought in, I'd have to kick them out.

I tore my claws into the fresh meat, tossing the innards and bones into a pot to discard later. I was an old hand at this by now; I put the meat into the jerky pot, added salt and piperis, then mixed it around.

"Ahh?" One of the orangurangs approached, holding out some jerky. It had two pieces in its left hand and one piece in its right. *Well, I guess three pieces is okay.* It bit into the one in its right hand and chewed noisily.

The monkey appeared highly interested in what I was doing. Maybe I should teach it how to make jerky for me. I explained the process with gestures and demonstrated how to salt and dry the meat. I showed it the pots containing the salt and the piperis, going through all the steps.

"Raar."

"Ahh?"

“Gaa!”

“Ah-ah!”

“Raar?”

“Ah-oh!”

After I was sure it understood, I cut up more meat in front of it, added salt and piperis to the pot, and mixed it around. Then I stepped back and pointed to the pot.

“Ah-oh.”

The orangurang jumped to it. It got a little haphazard with the pots, so I pretended to use Breath as a threat. *Perfect. This is how you train a monkey.*

Once the pots were full of salt and piperis, I lined them up in the corner of the cave. The jerky had to sit for a while before I could string it up. Once I taught them how to do that, the monkeys would know the entire process.

Now that they were hunting and cooking for me, what would I do? *I guess I just have to use Monkey Whistle and they'll come running.* Well, nothing wrong with an easy life. It was good to be the boss.

Didn't have to lift a finger to get my dinner. Once I had all my HP back, the black lizard and I could go out and focus on leveling. All that had changed was that our lives were getting a little more stable.

My HP wasn't going to replenish completely today, so I figured I'd use the claybear's magic clay and work on some pots or something. Now that I had four more roommates, I needed more containers to store the extra food.

I took the magic clay outside and began to knead. And once again, a monkey came up to me. This one had little bits of jerky stuck all over its fur. Well, whatever. Making jerky was way easier now, so I didn't mind if it ate a bunch. More pressing was its sudden interest in ceramics. The orangurangs had the Nimble skill, their fingers long and narrow. They were way better equipped for ceramic artistry than I was with my scaly, lumpy hands.

It was frustrating that these hands would hold me back from becoming a true artist. I hated to give up on the dream, but it made sense to let the monkeys do

it instead.

I combined some regular clay with the claybear's magic variety, showing the orangurang how to make a pot shape. After it was molded, I brought out some charcoal from the cave, buried the pot, and fired it with Baby's Breath. Once the coals glowed white, I smothered the fire with sand and pulled out the finished pot.

Now that I'd shown the orangurang the process, I urged it to give it a whirl. But the monkey just couldn't seem to get the pot shape right. I gave it a step-by-step tutorial, but it still didn't turn out great. At least it could handle the basics, and I could overlook the aesthetics for now. We could still store stuff in it even if it looked like garbage.

"Ah-ooh..." A tear ran down the orangurang's face as it looked back and forth between my pot and its misshapen one.



H-hey now, there's no need to cry! I practiced tirelessly to get to this point. Everyone's like this at the beginning. You have the Nimble skill! You'll surpass me in no time.

I had the orangurang fetch charcoal from the cave before burying the pot. I fired the whole thing with Baby's Breath and had the monkey pile sand on top. Finally, once the coals cooled off, it dug out its pot.

We took our creations down to the river. Once there, I got a prickling feeling, like I was being watched. I turned, expecting to see a monster. But it was just the black lizard, glaring hatefully at the orangurang from among the trees. It saw me watching, then vanished back into the brush.

What the heck was that about? Could it have been a different lizard? Nah, probably not. It was the exact same size as my lizard. We'd spent so much time together I was sure I would recognize it anywhere.

Well, at any rate...time to wash the pots. I rinsed off sand and soot, watching it swirl away in the current of the river. The orangurang mimicked me, doing the same with its own pot. The shape was pretty warped, but now that it was clean, I was surprised to find that the color of it was actually perfect. The monkey appeared to notice as well, patting the finished pot happily and nuzzling it against its cheek.

All right. I'll put this guy in charge of pottery. I was confident this monkey would become a great artisan. I'd just have to get it all trained up.

So, if I had one orangurang in charge of food and one in charge of pottery, I should figure out some responsibilities for the others. Maybe I could get them to paint a mural on my wall or something. Or a smiling picture of me as a dragon that I could carry around so humans wouldn't attack me.

I idly poked at the magic clay and thought about all the other improvements we could make to the cave, when I noticed the black lizard across the way, frantically trying to mix up clay on its own.

What's it doing? Playing? I could walk on my hind legs, but the black lizard was still very much a four-legged monster. Pottery really wasn't in its skill set.

"Raar..."

The black lizard leapt up guiltily, dropping the clay and streaking towards the forest. *Huh? Wait, is the lizard interested in crafting, too?*

Part 3

“**KSSH! Kssh! Kssshhh!!**” I woke up to the black lizard’s cries. Morning already? It sounded so agitated that I wondered if a monster had wandered into the cave. I tried to sit up but found I couldn’t move. Something was constricting my breath. And it smelled, too.

Huh...?

The four orangurangs were all sleeping on me in a pile. *Come on, guys. Give me some space!* First the black lizard, and now the monkeys were getting all clingy? Seriously?

All four of them were snoring loudly and showed no signs of waking. *C’mon, get up!* Their limbs were so entangled with mine that I could barely move.

“...ah-ah, ooh.”

“...ah-ooh...”

Yeah, they’re not gonna wake up. Might as well just go back to bed.

“Kssh!” The black lizard let out another cry as I closed my eyes. I opened them back up in time to see it bite one of the orangurangs.

“Ahh-oh!” It jumped to its feet, the other three jumping up in solidarity. The orangurang’s status now said “Poison α.” *Aw jeez.* It took some doing, but I persuaded the lizard to cure the monkey.

The black lizard *really* did not like our new housemates. I needed to resolve this conflict, but I wasn’t sure how. I couldn’t just kick the orangurangs out—not after I promised one of them that I’d make it a master potter.

I took the orangurang in charge of food over to the pot and showed it how to brush the salt off the meat and carry it outside to string up on bare branches. We ran out of room on my usual tree, so I used Baby’s Breath on one nearby to strip the leaves. I showed the orangurang how I cleaned the burnt leaf litter off the branch and removed the smaller twigs, then strung up the rest of the jerky. We’d be good on food for a while.

The pottery orangurang came outside and started to knead some clay. *Yeah, that's the spirit! I can't wait for the day you surpass me.*

For my next project, I wanted to start expanding the cave, but I definitely couldn't dig at the earthen walls with my claws; I'd trigger a collapse if I wasn't careful. What I really needed was a tool, some kind of shovel. I guessed I'd just have to make one.

I sat beside the potter orangurang where he was hard at work and started making a shovel out of the magic clay. It would've been better to use metal or something, but I doubted that sort of resource was available out here in the forest. None of the pots had so much as a scratch on them so far; hopefully a shovel made out of the same material would hold up. I just needed to make sure the tip was very sharp.

The potter orangurang didn't seem to be having much luck with its project, so I alternated between forming my tools and helping it out. Altogether, I made five shovels and a hammer. The memory of the dog-girl whacking me was still fresh in my mind. I just copied what I could from memory.

When I was done, I buried them all and fired up Baby's Breath, noting that I was starting to run low on charcoal.

While the shovels were cooling, I took everything valuable out of the cave—the wolf pelt rugs and the bricks lining the walls. I swung my hammer against the rock, encouraged when cracks appeared. I ordered the four orangurangs to help me, and we got to work.

This dirt is strangely hard to dig.

As we continued, it steadily became clearer that I was the worst at this. My claws just weren't made for using tools. Darn primates and their opposable thumbs!

All this was doing was tiring me out, so I compromised and carried the displaced dirt outside. The black lizard was sulking in the corner of the cave, eyes closed like it was sleeping, though I caught glimpses of it watching me. It wasn't fooling anybody.

I'm sorry, black lizard. But once this expansion is over, we can go out hunting

again! I wanna search the forest for something I can use as ink, anyway.

We finished digging out a section of the cave and moved on to the ceiling. I flipped over some unused pots and had the monkeys stand on those to reach, digging until light started pouring from the ceiling. *Hmm, looks good.*

If I made a chimney out of brick, I could do my cooking inside. Plus, it would look cool. I started stacking up the bricks, sealing the gaps with magic clay. Finally, I fired it all to strengthen it.

I made the chimney and fireplace, then laid down an extra graywolf pelt in front of the hearth. There. Done. Honestly, the orangurangs were pretty impressive. They had human hands and monster bodies, and once they raised their skill levels, they'd be as talented as any master engineer.

Now that they'd left off their work, I could tell they were tired. Three of the orangurangs were yawning and sweating.

Great job, great job! Eat as much jerky as you want. You ended up doing all of the physical labor, after all. And you made all the food... You really don't need my permission.

The potter orangurang ambled out of the cave. I thought it was just going to get the jerky, but instead it settled down to quietly make pots. Wow, it was so serious about its craft!

Chapter 4:

The Three-Eyed Mahawolf

Part 1

THE NEXT DAY, I resolved to go out hunting with the black lizard. Honestly, I just wanted to make pots and statues with the potter orangurang, but the black lizard had attached itself to me ever since I woke up this morning, refusing to leave my side.

It must've been feeling neglected with me spending so much time with the orangurangs. Hopefully, a good hunt would relieve some of its boredom.

For myself, I was hoping for the experience to evolve, of course, but more than that I wanted additional materials for home improvement.

"Kssh..." The black lizard didn't seem too thrilled, honestly. It seemed kind of annoyed. Did I screw something up? The orangurangs seemed pretty happy.

"Ah-ah, ah-ooh!"

"Ahh-ooh!"

"Ahhhhh-oh!"

"Ah, oh!"

They carried the shovels and hammer, walking enthusiastically behind us. They were very excited to be using tools, swinging them around wildly as they scanned the forest for monsters.

I checked View Status—the shovel's Attack power was +18 and the hammer's was +28. A 28-point attack boost was a lot, almost three times more than the orangurangs' base stats.

I attempted to swing the shovel myself, but it only got in the way of my attack. I'd stick to fighting with my bare hands and leave the tools to the primates.

I couldn't wait to see them go wild with those things.

"Kssh..." The black lizard let out an angry cry and looked up at the sky. Was something wrong? I wished we could communicate with words.

We plodded along the path, picking off monsters and introducing the orangurangs to valuable plants. I was glad to have the monkeys around—there really was power in numbers. They could whack off a graywolf's head with one swing of the shovel. It was barbaric. The spoils were great, of course, but since I didn't have to lift a finger I wasn't getting any experience points.

Wow, I need to make a basket out of branches or something. My hands get full so quickly.

I continued gathering plants, and by the time we started heading back I didn't have a scratch on me. All this hunting and no experience to show for it.

The black lizard wasn't going to the trouble of hiding its annoyance and kept glaring at me. It clearly hated this situation. Next time I'd make the monkeys stay home so we could go out on our own.

I had just turned toward the cave when I heard faint screams in the distance. Like someone calling for help.

I'd heard that voice somewhere before... Was it Myria? Had she come back to the forest? But why? She hadn't seemed too thrilled about it last time she was here. I wanted to go help her, but if I showed up with a bunch of heavily armed wild orangurangs and the black lizard, I had a feeling things would devolve into an all-out war.

They were smart enough to do what I asked them to, but if we were attacked I doubted they'd be able to hold themselves back. I needed to go alone.

If it was only Myria, I wouldn't need to worry about an attack, but there was no way to confirm she was alone. Besides, I looked different from when she saw me last. My baby dragon form probably stirred some sort of maternal instinct in her or something. But now I was a legit monster. I doubted she'd even recognize me as the small, cute dragon she knew.

"Raar!"

I let out a roar and ran towards the screams. The orangurangs jumped to follow behind me.

"Raaaar!!"

They stopped in their tracks. I turned and pointed towards the cave.

“A-ahh!” They definitely didn’t understand my reasoning, but they still followed my instructions.

“Kssh!” On the other hand, the black lizard didn’t stop. It was far more intelligent than the orangurangs, and I figured it would suss out what I wanted immediately. But I didn’t have time to convince it to leave. Myria could be killed and eaten by a monster by then.

I used Roll to pick up speed, attempting to leave the black lizard behind. But it used Roll and chased after me.

Ugh, come on! I don’t have time to race with you right now!

Chances were it couldn’t keep up with me over this terrain.

“Kssh! Kssssh!”

It wasn’t as fast as me, but I also wasn’t pulling very far ahead, no matter how well I knew the terrain, how fast I could change speed, or our differences in technique. Man, if it kept going at this rate, it was going to crash right into a tree.

I swung wildly to the left and right, trying to fake it out. I chose the most difficult route and launched myself into the air.

The black lizard was not expecting that and crashed into a rock. It fell out of Roll and hit the ground hard.

“Kssh... Kssh...”

I stopped Roll and ran over to the lizard. *“Raar!”*

“Kssh...”

The black lizard let out a weak cry, but it had plenty of HP left.

Myria screamed again. I couldn’t stay here any longer. Myria’s voice was the only one I heard. She was either alone or her companions were unconscious. With her stats she couldn’t even take on a graywolf by herself. She was a healer, and she wasn’t that fast, either.

I rubbed the black lizard’s back, trying to impart my apology, then blasted off

in the direction of the screams.

Guilt racked me as I ran. *I'm doing the right thing, aren't I?* If I brought another monster to save a human, it would complicate things.

The black lizard was mildly injured, while Myria might be dying. This wasn't even a contest—the latter needed me way more than the former.

Going alone was the only foolproof way to avoid misunderstandings. If Myria got spooked and attacked me, I could deal with it. *Hey, if I were a human and a dragon came up to me, I'm sure I would react badly, too.*

But the orangurangs and the black lizard...if someone threatened them, they would fight back the same way they'd fight any other monster. I couldn't realistically ask them to go against their natures and take damage. And I knew from experience what happened when a monster tried to peacefully approach humans—it could end extremely badly. I had to go alone.

As decisions went, it was pretty small-scale. But it alluded to a whole other issue—I couldn't keep sitting on the fence between humans and monsters forever.

What did I want to do? Did I still want to become human? Or was I satisfied with the way my life was now?

Title Skill "Itty-Bitty Hero" Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

Title Skill "Wrongdoer" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

A message from the Divine Voice filled my head, interrupting my thoughts... almost like it was taunting me. *Really classy, as usual.*

Should I cast away all human ties and live my life as a monster? Or could I really keep living halfway between? Well, I wasn't going to come up with an answer right now, so I cleared my head and ran towards Myria's voice.

Part 2

MYRIA'S SCREAMS came from across the chasm. I sped up Roll and used Fly to get enough air, and then used a blast of Baby's Breath to launch myself to the other side.

I found her as soon as I landed. The chestnut-haired girl was surrounded by four wolves. Her clothes were torn, but luckily none of her injuries looked fatal.

I doubted she went looking for a fight; these wolves must have ambushed her. They were covered in tough, blue fur and boasted a third eye on their foreheads. They were much bigger than graywolves, although their stance and bearing made me wonder if they were an evolved form.

Mahawolf: Rank D. These wolves are able to share information gathered from their third eye with members of the same species nearby. They use this power to hunt prey more efficiently.

Since it was a weaker D rank monster, I figured I could manage on my own. But the Divine Voice's explanation made it sound like they could call allies in very easily. I went ahead and did a status check.

Normal Skill "View Status" Lv 5 is unable to provide complete information.

Huh?

Species: Mahawolf

Condition: ****

Lv: 9/28

HP: 58/58

MP: 35/35

Attack: 52

Defense: 31

Magic: 63

Agility: 62

Rank: D—

Special Skills:

Group Attack: Lv —

Third Eye: Lv —

Magic Energy Transmission: Lv 2

Magic Energy Reception: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Earth Resistance: Lv 2

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 2

Piercing Gaze: Lv 2

Fire Nails: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Savage: Lv 2

Wh-what was that status condition?! Did the third eye have something to do with it? Their stats were lower than the orangurangs', but that hidden status condition made me nervous. It filled me with a sense of déjà vu. Had I seen a status like this before?

I didn't have time to hesitate.

"Raaaaaaaar!" I roared loudly, drawing the mahawolves' attention. Myria's face crumpled with hopelessness when she saw me, all the color draining out of her right down to her lips. Her big eyes grew even bigger with alarm.

"Ιατί συνέβη αυτό."

Talk about out of the frying pan and into the fire. I was prepared for her fear, but it still hurt. She trembled as I approached, taking a clumsy step backwards.

Aw, come on. You don't have to be afraid!

"Awoooo!" The four mahawolves turned on me.

I let loose a burst of Baby's Breath, and the two lead wolves couldn't evade it in time. They ate the gust of fiery wind right in their faces.

"Oooh!"

"Grooowoo!"

They howled and writhed in pain, struggling to escape the fire. Both of their status conditions showed Burned. The other two wolves split up and ran to either side to avoid the attack. Now they closed in on me, attacking from two directions.

"Awoo!" The mahawolves each tried a bite attack, but I blocked with my wings, unfurling them swiftly to send them flying with the back draft. They hit the ground, then scrambled back up and scampered away. I wanted to chase them down, but there was really no point. I'd been afraid they would call in allies, but if they were going to, they would have done it already.

Instead, I focused on the two weakened by Baby's Breath. I tore into their necks with my claws, delivering the final blows.

Gained 36 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 36 Experience Points.

Young Plague Dragon Lv 39 has become Lv 40.

Young Plague Dragon has achieved MAX Lv.

Evolution Requirements have been fulfilled.

Ahh, finally. If only I'd leveled a little sooner, Myria wouldn't have to see me like this. She's out of danger now, though, so maybe I should just leave? On second thought, there are way more monsters out here that would love a bite. I'm not even sure what she's doing in the woods. Maybe I should escort her back to the village. If I just evolved, I could be less intimidating.

As I racked my brain, Myria stared at me. “Προηγούμενο...?” She was frightened, but after I took care of the wolves and made no move to attack, she seemed to realize I had saved her. She stood, legs trembling, and reached out to me with both arms.

Huh? What’s going on?

That gesture...I remembered it from somewhere. Was she imitating what I did the first time we met? Back when I was a baby dragon, I was so happy when I saw humans again for the first time that I stretched my arms out and waved at them.

Does she recognize me?

She looked uncertain, though. I’d changed a lot since then. But maybe, just maybe, she was starting to remember.

“R-raar...” Myria imitated my cry.

I raised my hands and waved at her.

Her face sparkled, and she threw her arms around my stomach. “Ευχαριστώ για τη βοήθεια!”

H-hey!

I was so startled by her hug that I just stood there and took it. I wondered if she only saw me as an animal. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but a girl hugging me suddenly made me feel a bit shy.

Still, what was she doing out here in the forest all alone? I thought about taking her back to the village...no, I didn’t want to cause a commotion and make trouble for Myria. I would just take her as close as I could safely manage.

I turned towards the cliff, remembering the injured black lizard. Its wounds weren’t serious, but it hurt my heart to think that I’d just left it there.

I needed to check on it and apologize...and soon. I considered doing it before I even took Myria back to her village, but I just couldn’t leave her in the forest alone. There was no way to take her back across the chasm with me and also no guarantee the black lizard and the orangurangs wouldn’t attack her. I didn’t know if she’d come alone or gotten separated from some other humans. /

should start by asking her what happened.

Even though its level was at rock bottom, I did have the skill Grecian Language. Maybe if I tried really hard, I'd be able to make her understand.

"Ra—"

"Awoooo!"

The mahawolves' howl drowned out my voice.

Five of them appeared out of the trees, their average level collectively higher than the last group. I could beat them, but it would put Myria at risk. I needed to run from this battle.

"Raar!"

I hunkered down and gestured for Myria to climb on my back.

Part 3

I RAN THROUGH the forest, hunched over slightly so that Myria wouldn't slide off. I was afraid to go too fast, but if I didn't speed up we'd never outrun the mahawolves.

"Awoo!"

"Graaaooo!"

Dang it! Now there's six of them!

The new ones must have joined up with the group already chasing us. At this rate, their numbers would just keep growing. I had to shake them as soon as possible. Why were they so intent on chasing me in the first place?

I'd already showed them what I was capable of. Still, they didn't bring any bigger, stronger wolves; they were all around the same strength. It didn't make sense. Even graywolves weren't this dense. They'd keep attacking, I was sure, but as soon as I killed one, the rest would scatter. Did it have something to do with that weird status condition?

Are they excited? Confused?

If I couldn't even access the information with Lv 5 Divine Voice, it had to be an incredibly strong skill. Maybe something to do with that special skill "Magic Energy Reception." I didn't like the sound of that. I was worried they'd use it to call in a really terrible boss or something.

Maybe I should stash Myria somewhere safe and go hunt down this boss? But if it was watching me with their Shared Sight ability, it wouldn't matter how much I searched. I wouldn't be able to find it if it didn't want me to.

"Πίσω!" Myria shouted something. The mahawolves were running faster, closing in on us.

Uh-oh, I got distracted. I needed to put aside all the questions for now and figure out how to handle these guys.

"Raar!" Hang on!

I roared and felt Myria tighten her grip around my shoulders. I pulled away from the mahawolves in a burst of speed, Myria clinging on. I couldn't keep going this fast—she'd fall off, and I needed to conserve my stamina in case of an attack. If I couldn't shake them, I'd have to fight them.

I spotted a small cave up ahead. Perfect—this would stop them from surrounding us.

“Είναι ένα αδιέξοδο...?” Myria whispered something into my ear, anxious.

“*Raaar!*” I tried to roar reassuringly as I sped into the cave. Once inside, I slowed and set her gently down in the corner. Then I turned to prepare my counterattack.

The cave was a little dim, though not deep enough to be completely dark, and my eyes adjusted quickly. This was an ideal arena. As long as I prevented the mahawolves from sneaking past me, Myria would be safe.

“*Gaaaar!*”

The mahawolves howled. They were here.

“*Raaaar!*” I ran back and forth in the cave's opening, flapping my wings, hovering just a little off the ground. My wingtips almost touched the cave walls. It wasn't a perfect fit, but it would be hard for them to get past me.

I curled up my wings and charged, plowing into three of the mahawolves at once.

“*Grooo!*” They screamed as they were flung into the ceiling and walls. I made a sharp turn, whipping my tail into the remaining three. One of them tried to stand, so I slashed its neck with my claws, raised its body above my head, and slammed it to the ground.

In no time at all, six mahawolves lay dead on the cave floor.

Cannot gain experience points at MAX Lv.

Well, that was a waste. I wished I'd evolved first, although I knew I shouldn't decide rashly or I'd regret it for the rest of my life. In the heat of the battle, I might've gotten frustrated and gone with whatever instead of thinking strategically. No experience is worth that kind of mistake.

I crept toward the entrance of the cave. I didn't sense any other monsters out there, but I wanted to be sure.

The forest was deserted. The danger had passed.

Still, something felt weird. Why did they track me down like that? And what was that blurred-out status condition they all had? I was probably overanalyzing the whole thing, honestly. Most likely they just wanted vengeance for their fallen comrades.

Should I search for a potential mahawolf boss or take Myria back to the village? If she was being targeted, she would be safest at home. I had no idea what was going on with her, but I needed to find out. She might know something about the mahawolves.

I'd ask her to explain it to me simply enough that I could understand it with Grecian Language Lv 1. I checked outside one more time to make sure we were safe before returning to the cave.

Before I did anything, though, I wanted to check my evolution paths. I needed to know if there were any potentially life-saving special skills among the options. I didn't want to make a hasty decision, but this was a bizarre situation.

Part 4

THROUGH THE GLOOM of the cave I could faintly see Myria fidgeting. She took a step and promptly ran into the wall, hitting her head and falling down. Could she not see in here at all?

I could see all right... Maybe dragon eyes worked different from human ones? Well, that wasn't important right now—I could ponder the difference between humans and dragons later. I hoped the place wasn't so dim that we'd missed any threats, but that probably wasn't worth worrying about.

All right, Divine Voice. Hit me. Show me my evolution options.

Text filled my head.

Display Evolution Options?

Yeah, go ahead.

Future:

Jormungand Rank C+

Little Arc Dragon Rank C

Artificial Dragon Rank C—

Rolling Dragon Rank C—

Dark Drago-human Rank —

Present:

Young Plague Dragon Rank D+

Past:

Baby Dragon Rank D—

Dragon Egg Rank F

So I had five evolution options this time? And no Plague Dragon? Not that that was a *bad* thing.

All right then, let's check them out in reverse order.

Dark Drago-human: Rank —. Low-ranking dragon-human. Not a monster but a demi-human. Its body is covered in black scales.

What? A *demi-human*? I wasn't even sure what that meant, but it *is* a human, right? If I were a dragon/human hybrid, I wouldn't have to use Human Transformation to speak to people or get shot with arrows when I go to town!

Hang on a second. This is the Divine Voice that we're talking about. It must be some sort of trap. I really shouldn't be cynical, though, or I'll never get anywhere. But still... Well, I had a lot of thoughts on the matter, but I might as well check the rest.

Rolling Dragon: Rank C-. A dragon whose strength lies in its speed. So fast it can't be seen by the average person. The speedster of the dragon world.

Speed, huh? That must have to do with Roll. Hah, right, it says right there in the name.

I did like using Roll, but not *that* much. Although now that I thought about it, my speed always was my greatest asset in battle. Even the Giant Orangurang abandoned all its other skills in favor of boosting its speed. So I guessed it was pretty valuable.

So yeah, I'd used Roll an awful lot to get to this point, but I wasn't sure I wanted it to be the skill I centered my whole life around.

Artificial Dragon: Rank C-. A dragon that possesses six dexterous arms. Has a mask-like shell on its face that offers protection from attacks to its head. Its true stats are low, but unlike most dragons, it can wield weapons.

Dexterous hands...hmm. That would come in real handy when I was crafting. I knew how much weapons could help in a fight thanks to the orangurangs, and the thought of wielding a different weapon in each of my six hands sounded

epic.

But I wasn't going to lie, the thought of gaining two entire new sets of limbs was a bit unsettling. That was a bit of a deal breaker. Though I'd take it over growing a whole new head like the twinheads.

Little Arc Dragon: Rank C. A Light-type Dragon. Possesses extremely high intelligence and can skillfully use both white and light magic. Legend has it that long ago, heroes rode on Little Arc Dragons to travel.

If I remembered right, Little types were strong but didn't have much room for growth.

But if there were legends about heroes riding them, did that mean people revered them?

That might not be too bad. And I'd love to have white magic—I'm guessing that means recovery magic, right? I'm surprised something good like a light dragon would show up as an option for a Young Plague Dragon, though. It sounds like the complete opposite.

Was it because I leveled up Itty-Bitty Hero?

Jormungand: Rank C+. Also known as the Poison Serpentine Dragon. Resembles a thick snake with scales covered in deadly poison. Its combat ability is low, but it is said that any foe it faces will die of poison. The poison it excretes can form an independent monster that the Jormungand can control. Any patch of ground touched by this monster turns barren.

Wow, that sucked. Another bad draw. A chaser to the Young Plague Dragon, obviously. The Jormungand sounded way worse, the very epitome of evil.

So Artificial Dragon is out, and Jormungand isn't even in the running. I don't wanna be some poison-bomb dragon, or a snake for that matter. What's so C+ about it, anyway? Who the heck would choose this?

So I'm considering the Rolling Dragon or the Little Arc Dragon. That last one sounds best, except for the fact that its growth stops there. And then there's the temptation of human form and the Dark Drago-human... It was difficult to imagine evolving as a human, but maybe once I did it, the Dark Drago-human would be the final form?

Would the black lizard still like me if I became a human? If I lived in the human village, visiting the lizard would be complicated. It might just leave me altogether.

I was so deep in thought I almost walked right into the cave wall. *Whoa, that was close. Hang on, I can't see Myria. Where is she?*

“είναι υπό...”

Her voice came from just below me. Myria lay on her side by my feet. She hadn't moved after crashing into the wall.

Whoa! Good thing I didn't step on her. I picked her up and took her out into the light. I needed to figure her stuff out before I thought about anything else.

Evolution options required some very careful thought, after all. Besides, I wanted to evolve in front of the black lizard to make sure it recognized me after I changed. Though, I figured anything could happen between then and now. I knew I might have to make a snap decision if there was risk of another villager spotting me.

Part 5

I SET MYRIA DOWN outside the cave. I wanted her to teach me more Grecian.

I remembered hearing somewhere that non-verbal communication was surprisingly important, so I'd try my best to use body language, gestures, facial expressions, and tone. I already had Grecian Language Lv 1. If Myria could teach me simple terms, I could learn more. If raised my Grecian Language skill, I might be able to talk to other humans more easily in the future. I wanted to use this opportunity to learn as much as I could.

“Αυτό είναι το δέντρο...” Myria pointed to a tree and spoke. I hung on her every word. This continued for about thirty minutes, and with every object she pointed to, I felt like I was grasping more and more. This definitely wasn't a waste of time.

I was grateful to Myria for not getting sick of teaching me.

“Αυτή είναι η πέτρα...” She pointed to a rock. *Hm, I feel like I'm really getting the hang of this.*

Special Skill “Grecian Language” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

There it is! Finally!

If she spoke very slowly, I was able to piece things together.

“Um...and then **** so I ****...” I was still missing some of the words, but I got the gist. And I'd start understanding more and more the longer we talked.

“Raar!” Problem was, I still couldn't talk.

“**** understand what I'm saying?” Myria looked at me with surprise. I felt a rush of triumph. *That's why you shouldn't underestimate a dragon!*

Well, now that I understood the basics of what she was saying, I could ask her what was wrong.

She didn't seem to be in a rush or particularly upset, making it seem less likely that she got separated from someone when the monsters chased her. She must

have come into the forest on her own, and I couldn't imagine her doing that without a very good reason.

"*Raar?*" I looked at Myria and tilted my head to the side.

She blinked. "Umm..." She paused briefly. "You want to **** why I **** the forest?"

I nodded.

"...I'm looking for someone. I made sure **** wasn't watching and **** out alone to come here. Um, you haven't seen any other people out here, by any chance?" Reluctance clung to her words.

She's looking for someone? Maybe those two girls who showed up to my cave the other day? I thought about the swordswoman and the dog-girl and mimicked dog ears on top of my head.

"Those people came to the village ****! They're back there now. They said they had to come home because **** and ****. But I'm not looking for them... I'm looking for the **** named Doz, the man I was with last time."

Doz? I swear I saw that name somewhere... Oh, that's right! That was the kinda mean-looking dude I saw with Myria when I first met her. I saw his name on his status. I thought the Little Rock Dragon killed him, though?

I didn't see him die, but his leg was trapped under a tree and he couldn't move. He couldn't have gotten out of that situation easily. Even if the Little Rock Dragon had left him alive, with that injury he would have been easy pickings for other monsters.

"*Raar.*" At least this meant that Myria wasn't in a real crunch for time. I could bring her back to the village. I only knew a little bit about the situation, but the chances of her finding Doz were incredibly slim. The fact that none of the other villagers were out looking for him just supported my theory.

To be blunt, there was nothing Myria could even do for him with her stats. She just wasn't safe alone in the forest.

After I took her home, I could search for Doz. Maybe I'd find his body by the site of the Little Rock Dragon fight. It might upset her, but at least then she

wouldn't have to come back into the forest.

Maybe if the black lizard, the orangurangs, and I all worked together, we could defeat the Little Rock Dragon. I didn't have the recovery magic to go up against a huge attack like Tremor, though.

I couldn't take Myria with me as my White Mage, so I considered just evolving into a Little Arc Dragon after all.

Oh crap, the black lizard! I abandoned it, injured, in the forest!

I'd been sitting around leveling up my Grecian Language skill this whole time. I needed to take Myria home and go help the black lizard. How could I have forgotten about it? Did I feel guilty, or was I just so excited for the chance to connect to a human again?

Agonizing over it wouldn't help, though. Right now Myria needed to get home so I could hurry back to my friend. Then I could take the time to solve the problems in front of me and really consider things. I leaned over to let Myria climb on my back.

"U-um, Mr. Dragon? Do you have a name?"

"*Raar?*" I made a silly noise in response. I couldn't tell her my name even if I had one I remembered. I shook my head to indicate no.

"O-oh. Well, what should I call you?"

I'd never even thought about it.



“Young Plague Dragon”? Nah, I didn’t want that. Hang on, did this mean she intended to see me again?

That made me happy, but wasn’t it a little dangerous? Or perhaps she meant I could come to the village with her? I doubted the other villagers would be okay with that. But let’s say it worked out somehow—what about the black lizard? Would I go back and forth between the village and the forest?

“Raar!”

“Eek!” Myria jumped when I let out an excited roar. *Please! I’d love it if you came up with a name for me!* I felt like we were growing closer.

Special Skill “Grecian Language” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

Ooh, my skill went up again! *Maybe I should choose to become a dragon-person. Then I really could go back and forth between the village and the forest.*

Myria tapped her chin and cocked her head thoughtfully. Then she clapped her hands together.

“How about Illusia? It’s the name of my favorite flower.”

“Raar! Raar!” I nodded twice in agreement. If I was going to start interacting with humans more, I’d definitely need a name. I should go out looking for an Illusia flower later. Check out my namesake.

Choose “Illusia” as your name? Once a name has been chosen, it cannot be changed.

What? Divine Voice had something to add? Its words nagged at me a bit, but there shouldn’t be anything to worry about...right?

Name has been set to “Illusia.”

I knew all too well how crafty the Divine Voice was, but...how could something like *this* cause problems going forward? I tapped myself on the chin, snapping myself out of it and pushing through the negative thoughts.

“Raar!” Once again, I leaned down to let Myria climb onto my back.

“O-oh, thank you, Illusia!” She bowed politely to me and climbed up.

Having a name felt good. Maybe it was because I hadn’t had a proper

conversation with someone since I came to this world, but just hearing someone refer to me was a little emotional. Really hit me in the heart. The only other time I'd spoken at all was with the Giant Orangurang via Telepathy.

I didn't count my inner dialogue with the Divine Voice as conversation. That gave it too much agency, which I wasn't crazy about.

The Divine Voice was definitely useful, and I had no choice but to rely on it. But sometimes the information it gave me felt...biased. Like its own will was peeking through.

Anyway, it was time to figure out exactly where we were. I didn't know this area very well, although I was pretty sure I'd run through when the Giant Taranturouge was chasing me.

Let's see, I came from that way, turned a corner, and then found this cave...
"Graaah!" A howl interrupted my thoughts. Great. Another mahawolf.

Blue fur, purple gums. Saliva dripped from between its sharp fangs. Its third eye was firmly fixed on me.

Just how stubborn were these guys, anyway? Taking care of a lone wolf would be easy, but I was growing increasingly irritated about missing out on the experience points.

What was driving them to do this? Even if they were all connected by the third eye skill, they had to know they didn't stand a chance one on one.

I checked its status—its level wasn't high. Same skills as the other wolves I defeated. And the same strange, hidden status condition.

"Awoooo!"

"Eek!"

Myria was so startled by the mahawolf's scream that she nearly fell off my back. I shifted my body weight to catch her. The wolf used that opportunity to close in on me.

Let's see...its skills are Bite Lv 2, Piercing Gaze Lv 2, and Fire Nails Lv 1. Piercing Gaze was a bigger danger than any of the close-range attacks. Our stats were unbalanced enough that I wasn't afraid of skills I recognized.

“Raar!” I roared and felt Myria tighten her grip on my scales.

I kicked off the ground and took flight to evade the charging mahawolf. Flames spewed forth from its claws, slicing through the air. So that was Fire Nails, huh? Pretty cool to look at, but nothing to worry about. I kicked the mahawolf right in the face. I was still a little concerned about Piercing Gaze, but if I made sure to stay away from eye level I would be fine.

“Groo!”

I whipped my tail at the mahawolf and sent it flying. But before it could be thrown out of my reach, I brought my fist right down on its head with a sharp punch and felt its neck snap. It dropped to the forest floor and lay there motionless.

I won. I curled my legs as I landed, lessening the impact for Myria.

“W-wow,” she breathed. I had to admit, it felt pretty good to hear that, but I did my very best not to let it show on my face.

Seriously though, why were they so intent on coming after us? Myria didn’t seem to know, so maybe I was their target? If that was the case, we should split up for safety, before they attacked me in a big group again.

I beat that lone wolf handily, but if a bunch of them surrounded us, it would be difficult for me to protect her.

That was true for *any* group of monsters, really. But Myria’s stats were clearly not designed for her to walk around the forest alone. No scenario was completely safe here. I decided to go back to the cliff and follow the river back towards my cave.

All right, I just have to go straight from here. The village wasn’t small, so as long as I headed in the right general direction, I was sure I’d find it.

After a while, I heard loud footsteps coming from nearby, loud enough to belong to a pretty big monster. *As big as a Giant Orangurang? No, it sounds even heavier. What if it’s the Little Rock Dragon?*

No, probably not. The Little Rock Dragon wasn’t the type of monster that moved around a lot. It was slow, preferred long range attacks, and wouldn’t

bother to chase after prey when it ran.

I had no real reason to think the footsteps were coming after me, so I tried to put them out of my mind. More importantly, I needed to do something about the *new* mahawolf. This one was also alone, creeping quietly through the brush as it tailed me.

Was it waiting to join up with its pack so they could all attack me together? It was probably broadcasting my location to its friends. I needed to take care of it right now.

Part 6

THE MAHAWOLF continued to tail me as I ran through the forest. I couldn't lead it towards the village—I needed to stop and fight it. I'd defeat it quick and easy with Myria on my back.

I dropped my speed, letting the wolf draw in closer.

"Raar!" I let out a little roar and felt Myria clutch tighter. I whipped around, feet skidding across the ground until I came to a stop. Dust flew in all directions.

Realizing I had spotted it, it finally showed itself on the side of the path.

"Awooo!"

These guys sure were assertive. *You've been found out, so be a good boy and run away, okay?* Again, its level wasn't very high. I could take care of it, run to the village, and pick up its meat on the way back to bring to the black lizard and orangurangs.

The mahawolf lunged at me, and I blew a blast of Baby's Breath in its direction. It stepped aside to avoid it, but I'd been expecting that. I ceased my Breath attack and whipped my tail at the mahawolf's feet. It rolled into a defensive crouch and then quickly got back up again.

"Grooooooh!" It howled, lunging at me again.

Huh? My attacks didn't seem to faze it at all. Was this a Berserker type or something? Was it some kind of machine? Surely that was impossible. I saw them bleed.

"Raar!"

It jumped at me straight on, and I countered with a Dragon Punch. I let loose a swift uppercut, knocking it in the chin. It collapsed at my feet, face crushed.

Seriously, give up! Don't tell me there's another one nearby. I strained my ears. Hm? Those loud footsteps that I figured were headed in another direction were getting closer.

No, wait—not closer to us. They were just headed in the same direction... towards the village. This was bad. Time to hurry and take Myria home, then double back and figure out whose footsteps those were. And I might have to fight.

From the volume, it had to be at least a D-rank monster. Or maybe C. If it was stronger than the twinheads, I couldn't take it on alone. At least it didn't sound particularly fast. Maybe I could rig something up to make sure it didn't get to the village.

Right now I didn't have enough information. It was obvious that I couldn't bring Myria to a fight with this sort of monster. That decided, I started to move again. But then I sensed something—a large group of monsters.

You've gotta be kidding me! More mahawolves?! Listen, I don't have time to deal with you right now!

I figured since I'd knocked out the vanguard and the boss lost its surveillance camera, it would be forced to actually show up.

Five mahawolves surrounded us. This wasn't good. If I made one mistake, I would put Myria in danger. And I couldn't waste too much time fighting them while that giant mystery monster lurked nearby. If I didn't hurry, it would catch up to me. I also couldn't lead a pack of mahawolves to the village. It wasn't the *worst* situation imaginable, but it definitely wasn't great. I had a feeling their boss would be pretty nasty. Was it specifically targeting me? It seemed to know me well enough to predict my actions.

"Raaaar!" I turned and roared. *I know you're out there! Show yourselves already, mahawolves!*

If I had to take on a bunch of them, I'd rather guide them to an enclosed location like my cave, where I could set Myria down and just let loose. But I had to see what I was up against. I needed to know if there was a higher level mahawolf in this group.

I heard them move in response to my roars. *Here they come.*

"Eh heh heh heh, heh heh, hee hee hee..." The quiet was broken by disturbing laughter. It was hoarse and depraved, yet weak. So thin it might disappear with

a gust of wind but filled with incredible malice.

Was it...human?

Suddenly the mahawolves emerged from the trees all around us. One, two, three...four of them. A fifth slowly showed itself. A big one. And riding on top of it was a man so gaunt he looked like barely more than a skeleton. His clothes were tattered and covered in dirt, and even the sword at his hip was discolored. His eyes were unfocused, which, combined with the rest of his appearance, was creepy as hell. He seemed unconcerned by the saliva dripping from his mouth.

In one of his arms he held a small ball of earth, about fifty centimeters across.

What is that? What in the world is going on?

The entire tableau was so weird it took me a few moments to realize that I knew this guy. The skeletal figure riding the mahawolf was the missing man Myria was searching for. This was definitely Doz.

Part 7

“D-DOZ! H-HOW...?” Myria called out to him. He reacted slightly to his name but didn’t lose the

ghastly smile. What was wrong with him? Was he under a weird status condition like the mahawolves? I used View Status to check it out.

Doz Doglemaad

Species: Earth-human

Status: ****

Lv: 21/45

HP: 47/68

MP: 24/24

Attack: 67+5

Defense: 52+2

Magic: 20

Agility: 51

Equipment:

Weapon: Dirty Sword: F

Armor: Golden Copper Armor: F

Special Skills:

Resistance Skills:

Normal Skills:

Title Skills:

Novice Warrior: Lv 7

His equipment had deteriorated, but his level was higher than the last time I saw him. And that wasn't all. His skills were entirely gone. Was that even possible? I remembered him using Shockwave on me. He didn't even have his Grecian Language skill anymore. Did that mean he couldn't talk?

"Hee hee..." The mahawolf carrying Doz came straight towards me. He reached for his sword, but it was so rusted it wouldn't come out of its sheath. He clicked his tongue in annoyance and raised the sword, scabbard and all. He still held the mysterious ball of earth in his left arm.

The four other mahawolves didn't move a muscle. Were they gonna leave it up to their boss? I kept my eyes on Doz and unsheathed my claws.

"Doz! Please, snap out of it!"

Doz didn't listen to Myria. Instead of calling off the mahawolf boss, he urged it faster.

"Raaaar!"

I blew out a spray of Baby's Breath. The mahawolf boss leapt through it, claws aimed at me. Flames spewed forth from the sharp points. I lunged forward and quickly grabbed its front paws, holding the mahawolf still.

"Hee hee haa!" Doz brandished his sword, taking advantage of my full hands.

"F-Fire Magic! Fireball!" Myria aimed her staff at Doz. Flames shot out of it and flew straight towards him.

"Kee hee! Hee!" Doz deflected the fireball with his sword. At the same time, I shoved the mahawolf as hard as I could.

"Awooo!"

It lost its balance and staggered backward, but managed to keep its footing. Doz, though, was entirely focused on the fire magic and fell off the wolf's back. The mystery ball of earth was jarred out of his hands, and he scrambled to lie on top of it, glaring at me.

"Hee gee, aah-ahh!" He sat up and pointed his sword in my direction.

Three of the four mahawolves lying in wait came charging towards me, as if obeying Doz's commands.

The mahawolf boss bared its fangs and howled.

I needed to think about Myria's safety and find somewhere that gave me more of an advantage. The mysterious footsteps were coming closer, but if I ran, I'd just be letting Doz go. And I couldn't risk letting him run loose.

The oddly stubborn mahawolves, the unstable Doz, and the mystery giant monster. Something weird was going on.

"Raaaar!"

I backed up, careful to keep the mahawolves in check so they didn't surround me. Should I run to better terrain or take Doz on here? I went back and forth, finally deciding to drag the situation out. I knew it could be a bad move, but there was no good answer here.

The one mahawolf who hadn't made a move yet suddenly sprang over to Doz's side. The swordsman carefully scooped up the ball of earth and got on the mahawolf's back, then gestured in the direction of the village with his sword.

"Hee hee, heh heh haa!" Doz giggled and then took off towards the village.

So that's what he's after? Should I go after Doz and leave the mahawolves for later?

"Awoooo!"

Argh, he left the mahawolf boss here! So he left me with an enemy, hoping to stall me.

That made me want to ruin his plans even more. But going after him would put myself and Myria at risk. Or worse.

"I-I think Doz was carrying a Rock Dragon egg. If he takes that to the village... it'll be a disaster..." Myria murmured, distressed.

A Rock Dragon egg?! Wait, so then those footsteps...

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

An ear-splitting roar announced the arrival of the Little Rock Dragon. Was Doz

leading the dragon to the village on purpose? He was riding a mahawolf, so outrunning

it should be easy. He must've been taunting it to get it to chase him.

There was no way I could take on that dragon by myself. I had to get the egg away from Doz before the Little Rock Dragon followed it to the village.

"Raaaaaar!"

I knew it was pointless, but I roared at the three approaching mahawolves and their boss. They kept coming, looking for an opening. Now that the Little Rock Dragon had shown itself, I couldn't risk fighting them here and now. If the dragon attacked while I was in the middle of another fight, I'd be dead.

I needed to put some distance between me and the dragon first, then I'd get the egg away from Doz. That was my only option. Thankfully, the Little Rock Dragon was slow—I would hopefully have enough time.

Part 8

“R_{AAAR!}”

For now, I searched for a good spot to take on the mahawolves as I ran towards the village. But I just wasn’t finding anything.

“Graaaah!” The mahawolf boss was fast for its size. It quickly passed its three minions and chased after me on its own. I couldn’t afford to lose any speed—I booked it at about 80 percent of my top speed, feeling guilty for sprinting with Myria on my back. I thought I’d be able to catch up to Doz at this pace, but I didn’t see him anywhere. Did he change course on purpose?

He clearly wasn’t himself, and I imagined it was because of that weird status condition. I wouldn’t kill him—I thought it might be possible to reverse it and get him back to normal. Still, rendering him harmless while keeping him alive was going to be difficult.

I ran the risk of being attacked on two fronts; I couldn’t face Doz until I took care of the mahawolves.

“Awooo!” The distance between the boss and his underlings was growing. Could I take him on alone? *Ahh, but Myria...* “If I’m g-going to get in the way while you’re fighting, I can get off. I can protect myself just fine!”

I hated to say it, but I highly doubted that was true. Someone with Myria’s stats would die from one swipe of the mahawolf boss’s claws, and we weren’t close enough to the cliff for me to get her to safety.

“P-please! Save the village! I’ll give you anything! Please, Illusia! If you don’t do something, everyone will...!”

She wanted me to put the safety of the village over her own well-being. How could I deny such a sacrifice?

“Raar.” I gave a little roar and put on the brakes. I used my tail to maneuver in the mahawolf boss’s direction and then let Myria clamber down.

The three other mahawolves lurked beside the boss. Guess they weren’t as

far behind as I'd thought.

I wanted the boss alone. Speed was of the essence here.

"Gwooooo!" I blew a blast of Baby's Breath as the mahawolf leader leapt towards me. It jumped straight up in the air to avoid it, just like it did last time. I whipped out with my tail, and its body twisted, skillfully avoiding that blow, too. It whirled back and slashed its fiery claws towards me. For being so big, it was pretty agile.

"Raaar!" Still, it couldn't move like a dragon.

I hunkered down, slipping below the mahawolf boss. I took its Fire Nails on my back. It ripped into my flesh down to the bone, but in exchange I tore deep into its vulnerable belly with Paralyzing Venom Claws.

"Raaar!"

The mahawolf botched its landing, slamming into the ground on its stomach. It got up quickly, front legs trembling. The paralyzing venom was starting to work.

I really didn't want to use one of my dangerous skills like Calamity, but this wasn't the time to hold back.

I'd never used this before, so it had a low skill level and I wasn't sure how it would go, but I only needed it to work for a few seconds. I grabbed the mahawolf boss to still its front legs, then dug my claws into its shoulder.

"G-gwoooo..."

I kicked off the ground and flew into the air, then spun into Roll as I descended. I slammed the wolf's head at the ground, falling into a midair Roll combo with a Nutcracker finishing blow.

"Woooogh!" The mahawolf boss let out a scream, strength all but gone. Heck yes, that took care of the boss. Now for the three small fry. Wow, I really felt the impact of Nutcracker on my neck. But that was fine, I'd just have the orangurangs give me a massage later.

The three mahawolves spread out. They wanted to go after Myria, so they were trying to keep me in check. Wow. Jerks.

“Roaaaaaar!”

I made the first move, using my speed to give me an edge as I jumped into the sky, folding my legs and arms. I tackled the rightmost mahawolf with Roll.

“Awoogh!”

The mahawolf let out an agonized cry and lay there, unmoving. I made a U-turn and rammed right into the center mahawolf that was aiming for Myria.

“Graaah!”

It didn't die, but I had its back leg in my grip. If it couldn't move its legs, it couldn't come after me.

Now for the last mahawolf, the one chasing Myria. She ran as fast as she could, but she just didn't stand a chance.

“Graaah!” The mahawolf pounced.

“Eek!”

Its claws cut into her shoulder and tore at her clothes. A raw wound opened across her pale shoulder.

“Awoooo!”

The mahawolf prepared for another strike. I bit *hard* into its back.

“Aaaaaaah!” It howled in anguish and shook its head back and forth, pawing at the ground.

My neck hurt from Nutcracker, but I ignored the pain and kept hold.

“Raaar!”

“Awooo!”

“Grooo!”

“Grawwoooo!”

“Wooogh!”

“Nghooo!”

I held on until the cries stopped, and then I poked at the mahawolf's corpse.

That should be enough to dissuade any other wolves. Now, I'd try to catch Doz at the village.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!" I had to get that egg back before the Little Rock Dragon caught up, or we'd all be in trouble.

And there, just ahead, was the village.

Chapter 5:

Little Rock Dragon

“HAAH, HAAH...” Myria’s breath was ragged, and she clutched her shoulder. The bloody flesh I glimpsed from between her fingers looked bad. I checked her status. Not only did it say Bleeding, she didn’t have much HP left. But she should have the MP to cast her recovery magic.

“White Magic, Rest.” A warm ball of light floated up and wrapped around my neck. The pain from Nutcracker immediately abated.

“R-raar?!”

Myria was clearly much worse off than I was. “Your neck...looked like it hurt a lot,” she choked out through teeth gritted in pain, smiling slightly. “Let’s go back to the village. I’m fine.”

Clearly, she wasn’t. Blood flowed from between her fingers. The forest contained all sorts of plants that could stop the bleeding—I could find them quickly, but I doubted I had any time at all.

I glanced behind me and saw the Little Rock Dragon.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!”

I checked its status and realized something terrible. Its status condition was Fury, which I had been expecting—that wasn’t the surprise. But its level was *much* higher than the last time I faced it. Even if it wasn’t the same one, it was much stronger than the Little Rock Dragon I had seen before.

With a good battle strategy, I’d thought I could put the odds in my favor despite our difference in status, but that was before I saw those stats. It didn’t matter what kind of clever tactics I came up with; this dragon could trample me with pure power alone.

“Illusia!” I heard Myria calling my name and snapped back to reality. I leaned over so she could climb onto my back, and we took off for the town.

On the outskirts, we found five villagers on the ground. Two of them held

broken bows, and the other two had farming tools. The fifth's spear was planted in the ground and he was leaning on it, struggling to pull himself to his feet.

One of the five were already dead—the youngest of them, a child clutching a spade. I checked his status and confirmed it: his HP was 0/12. I regretted it immediately and looked away.

“Why?! How did this happen...” The villager finally managed to stand. A mahawolf was watching him with its third eye, licking its chops hungrily. It must have been the one Doz was riding. He'd just left it here on the way into town.

“Raaaaaar!”

I let out a Bellow from behind the mahawolf to draw its attention to me instead of the villagers. They noticed me, too. The man with the spear's eyes widened, and he dropped his weapon from nerveless fingers. He crumpled to his knees beside his weapon.

“Y-you've g-gotta be kidding me! Wh-why is there a dragon here now?!” He grabbed at his head, letting out a howl that turned into sobs.

Myria was still on my back, but it seemed he hadn't spotted her yet. I wasn't entirely surprised by the reaction, but it did hurt.

I lunged at the mahawolf, knocking it upside the head with my tail, and mercilessly finished it off. I got that same message about how I couldn't receive any more experience because I was at MAX level.

“Everyone, please calm down! This dragon has come to save our town!” Myria hopped off my back and gently rested a hand on the crying man's shoulder. She then ran over to the child with the awful injuries.

“Annis! Are you all right? Hey!” Annis was the child with 0/12 HP. I'd learned his name when I checked his status. I bit my lip, feeling awful.

“Annis! Annis!”

“Raar!” I gave a little roar, indicating that we should move on. We needed to stop Doz. If the Little Rock Dragon got to the village and wreaked havoc, who knew how many people he would kill?

“Wait! Illusia, if I don’t go with you, it’ll cause even more panic.”

The thickly bearded villager with the spear had stopped crying. “I’ll go with the dragon, Myria. You take Annis and run! The village is too dangerous right now!”

“But—!”

“Hurry up and go! I’m trained for these kinds of situations!” The villager turned towards me. I could sense his suspicion—I doubted he could ever completely trust a dragon. “Your name is Illusia? We’re counting on you, Illusia.” Very hesitantly, he reached his hand out towards me. I raised my arm to show him my claws, then shook my head. Unfortunately, I wouldn’t be able to shake his hand.

He pulled back, looking slightly embarrassed. But that did seem to break the tension a bit.

“*Raar.*” I roared gently and bowed my head, leaning over.

“You mean I can get on your back?”

“*Raar!*”

The man climbed on and I took off toward the middle of town. I checked his status and saw his name was Gregory. His leg was injured and he was Bleeding, but he had enough HP to be up and walking around. Under his thick beard he looked to be in his early-to mid-twenties.

“I never expected to see a Dark Dragon side with humans,” he muttered softly. I guessed he meant I was a Dark-type Dragon. I did have Dark Resistance as a special skill.

“*Raar.*” I answered with a short roar.

I thought I heard Gregory laugh.

“Eek! A dragon!”

“Is that *Gregory* riding it?!”

Some villagers tending crops cried out as we cut across the field.

“Sorry, Illusia, but can you stop for a moment?” Gregory asked, and I obliged.

“Hey! Did you see any monsters or Doz coming through here?”

“Monsters?! This village is under the gods’ protection, so only stupid, lost monsters would show up here, and even that doesn’t happen very often.”

“Did you see Doz? He might be leading them in here!”

“Yeah, I saw him!” the villager responded. “Just a little while ago. I called out to him, but he ran past me! He went towards the watchtower! Wh-what’s going on?”

“You guys should get out of here,” said Gregory. “Go seek shelter on the west side of town. It should still be safe there. Illusia, let’s go!”

“Raar!”

We didn’t have time to explain. Doz might be rampaging through town with his sword for all we knew. I looked for the tall watchtower and ran for it as fast as I could.

Part 2

THE WATCHTOWER STOOD in the center of the village. Buildings lined the road leading up to it, and I could see a public well. Unlike in the fields, here there were signs of trouble—screams and shouts, complete pandemonium. Several villagers lay bleeding in front of the watchtower. Doz stood in the midst of all this, that weird ball of earth at his feet—the Little Rock Dragon’s egg.

Doz’s sword was unsheathed. He’d apparently worked out how to remove it from the rusty scabbard. He must’ve cut down the humans who’d fallen.

Well, more likely he stabbed them. The blade was so dull I doubted it could cut much of anything.

“Put down your weapon! What in the blazes has gotten into you?!” Three villagers armed with bows gathered around Doz. He languidly shifted his grip on his sword, paused for a moment, and then suddenly sprang forward.

“Hee hee hee hee hee!”

“Don’t hesitate! Shoot him!” Three arrows were loosed. Doz batted them away with his blade and closed in on the villagers.

One arrow managed to pierce Doz’s shoulder, but that didn’t stop him. He didn’t even slow down. Maybe he couldn’t feel pain anymore.

He ran them down and *walloped* them with his sword. The action was so violent that this was the only way I could think to describe it. He knocked all three of them down before stabbing one in the back. The man let out a scream of agony as he died.

Doz had no skills, but his stats were far higher than any of the villagers’. They were powerless to stop him, even with weapons.

“Hya, hee hee hee!” He let out another crazed peal of laughter when he saw me, almost as if he’d been waiting for me.

“*Raar!*” I hunkered down to let Gregory climb off.

He started to say “I can take care of—” but stopped short. His leg was injured

and he wasn't at full power—he had to have known how outmatched he was. Doz's stats were way beyond Gregory's.

Doz must have leveled up during his time missing, and he was probably stronger than Gregory even before that. Gregory couldn't take Doz one-on-one.

The village was in shambles. Some people were running, some watching from afar, others injured and trapped, still more carrying those injured to safety. Gregory pointed at me, explaining my presence to the people around us. That didn't eradicate their fear, but it did lessen it a bit.

Doz had left the Little Rock Dragon's egg at the foot of the watchtower. I thought I could get it without fighting him, but if I didn't do something fast, the bodies would keep piling up. I had to stop Doz's rampage.

"Hee hee, hya ha ha!" He brandished his sword high as I came closer, and I took the blow to my head. "Hee hee hee...haa?" His warped grin faded as his sword bounced off my scales. That rusty thing had no chance.

The recoil only surprised Doz for a moment before he came charging at me again.

"Gaa gah haa!" I hit him, hearing his joints creak as he fell backwards, head striking the watchtower.

HP: 9/68

Crap. I'd nearly knocked him unconscious, but he still hadn't let go of his sword. His body was hanging on by a thread. He stood up jerkily, like a broken marionette forced up by the puppeteer pulling on its strings.

Doz's mouth flapped, but no words came out. He staggered, his legs not working right. He lifted his sword a bit, but his upper body crumpled. The blade sank into the ground. He grabbed at an injured child and clung on to him, rolling across the ground.

"N-no! H-help me! Help!"

"Hya hya, hya ha hah!" How could he move like that when he was nearly

dead? Were his pain receptors just broken? Doz pressed his blade to the child's stomach, slowly sinking it into his flesh. The child's screams echoed.

I started forward, but he tightened his grip on the bleeding boy's side. His screams grew hoarse and thin.

"Hee hee, hee hee hee!"

Doz had a hostage now. And if this stalemate continued, the Little Rock Dragon would descend. I looked toward the egg, and Doz's eyes flashed. He knew what I was trying to do, and he was forcing me to choose between going for Doz or stealing the egg. Either this child would die or the Little Rock Dragon would run roughshod through the village.

Doz abandoned his sword and yanked the child up to his feet, then grabbed the egg. He was now unarmed, but it still wasn't safe to act—it would only take him a few seconds to strangle the boy with his arm hooked around his neck like that. He began climbing up the watchtower's ladder one-handed. The child couldn't scream anymore with the pressure on his neck, but his face was draining of color, tongue lolling horrifically.

The other villagers screamed at the sight.

"*Raaaaaar!*" I roared and ran for the tower, grabbing the bottom of the ladder and yanking it sharply. It was a simple ladder, made of rope with wooden planks as footholds. Easy to fall from.

A dangerous bet, but better than doing nothing.

Suddenly the child tumbled down. I let go of the ladder and caught him, and Doz took that opportunity to scramble to the top. That jerk had honestly planned to throw this kid off the tower!

The child was seriously wounded but still alive, with enough HP to make it through this. Doz didn't have a hostage or an escape route. I was ending this *now*.

"Hee hee hee...hya hah hah hah!" His shrill laughter filled the air. He was looking towards the fields, and a moment later I knew why.

"*Raaaaaaaaaaaaaar!*"

I was out of time. The Little Rock Dragon was here. Doz must have climbed the tower to show the dragon that he had its egg. Doz wasn't in a clear state of mind, but his actions weren't random, either. They had a very clear purpose.

But all wasn't lost yet. I could still lead the Little Rock Dragon far away from the village as long as I could get my hands on that egg.

"Hya ha ha hah!" Doz lifted the egg up high with both hands, taunting the dragon. He staggered back a few steps. I thought he was resting his back on the fence of the watchtower, but then he turned and just dove right off.

Doz's body plunged to the ground. He threw himself off on purpose! I quickly put the child down and started running, making eye contact with him as he fell. That deranged smile was still on his face, and not a single drop of fear. But now that I finally got a look at him from up close, it confirmed my suspicions. That smile wasn't human.

I frantically reached out, but it was no use. Doz's head and the Little Rock Dragon's egg slammed into the ground right in front of me with a tremendous crash. Doz's brains mixed with the contents of the egg, an embryo that hadn't even been fully formed.

Once again, the dragon's roars shook the surroundings. It was furious, all control gone.

Part 3

THE VILLAGERS, realizing what the Little Rock Dragon's arrival meant, began to flee, but there were still so many left behind. Some had remained to fight off the dragon, and others stayed to care for the wounded or try to get their families to safety. If the Little Rock Dragon attacked here, there would be carnage. It had the Tremor skill, an attack with a huge range that split the earth and destabilized everything around it. A normal villager wouldn't be able to withstand that.

I checked the Little Rock Dragon's status again while I tried to figure out what to do.

Species: Little Rock Dragon

Status: Fury (Major)

Lv: 24/55

HP: 262/262

MP: 93/117

Attack: 183

Defense: 248

Magic: 107

Agility: 54

Rank: C

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 4

Breath Boost: Lv 2

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 2

Earth Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Fire Resistance: Lv 5

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Sand Breath: Lv 4

Bite: Lv 4

Stone Claws: Lv 4

Regenerate: Lv 3

Tremor: Lv 4

Stone Breath: Lv 6

Clay: Lv1

Dragon Tail: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Final Evolution: Lv —

Just as I thought—way more powerful than last time. Its stats were so outrageous it made the twinheads look cute in comparison. Its defense had increased, and its attack power was scary.

Its lowest stat was agility, but that wouldn't help us much. It was slower than a mahawolf but much faster than the average villager could run.

Besides, it had that long-range attack to make up for the low agility. It wasn't like I could just scamper up, punch it, and then run away. I had the villagers here to think about. Any extended fight would put them in unnecessary danger.

This was the worst situation possible. I should've killed Doz when I first saw him. I had another chance a few minutes ago, too. With a little more force, I could've knocked him off that ladder and stolen the egg back. Did I let my desire to be accepted by the villagers get in the way? Was that why I saved the child

and let Doz go?

“*Raaaaaar!*” I screamed, venting my frustration and confusion. The Little Rock Dragon glared at me. Then it spotted the remains of its egg.

“*Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!*”

It lifted its leg high and stomped on the ground, not just once, but again and again and again. This was the skill I feared the most, the one I least wanted him to use in the village...Tremor. The earth split and sucked several unwitting villagers into the chasm, accompanied by shrieks and screams. Screams from people whose legs had gotten crushed and couldn't move, begging for help. From people paralyzed with shock when they saw their friends die in front of them.

A child attempting to treat his grandfather's injuries fled in tears. The elderly man reached out towards his grandchild and died with his arm outstretched.

I pushed off the ground, spread my wings, and flew towards the Little Rock Dragon, who was at least twice my size. It swung its tail towards me, and I beat my wings and dropped, evading the attack. I felt a draft from the tail as it passed by my right side. I sped up, slashing a huge line across its body with Paralyzing Venom Claws...or at least that was what I tried to do.

Instead, my claws bounced off the surface of its body. I was shocked but kept gliding to maneuver behind the dragon. I checked its HP. I barely did any damage at all, and Automatic HP Recovery would heal it easily.

My mind raced. What skills did I have? Roll and Dragon Punch weren't strong enough.

Venom Fangs?

Nah, I doubted my teeth would penetrate its scales, and even if I managed to poison it, my venom was too weak to make a dent in its HP recovery skill.

I could use its size against it with Nutcracker, but the problem was picking it up and getting it into the air in the first place.

I had nothing. I had absolutely nothing to attack the Little Rock Dragon with.

I hovered behind it. *I need to test my skills to see what might work, but what*

should I start with?

I froze up, and in that moment, the Little Rock Dragon lifted its foot and stomped on the ground. Once again, the earth split open. I felt the shockwave despite not touching the ground—it shoved me higher into the air. I quickly curled into a ball and managed to avoid careening into a building. Thank God I was so good at using Roll.

By the time I stretched myself back out, I saw a huge, rocky mass coming straight at me.

The Little Rock Dragon's tail.

The stony whip hit me hard.

"Raaargh!"

My mind went completely blank the second I felt the impact. Blood spurted from my mouth. I watched it splatter.

That 183 attack score wasn't just for show. Between that and its defense, it was the toughest thing I'd ever faced. I'd crossed many dangerous bridges before, but this was the first time I'd ever really had my feet held to the flames.

I bit my tongue with the tip of my fangs to stop myself from losing consciousness. I looked up and saw the dragon; it looked even bigger from this angle.

I was stuck, struggling to get to my feet, with an intense, sharp pain in my stomach. Wow, I'd taken a lot of damage. The adrenaline rush was wearing off, and now I felt my injuries all at once, all through my body. It lifted its tail again and swung it down, taking advantage of my incapacitation.

The pain distracted me, and I was too late to evade its tail.

But just as I thought I was done for, the Little Rock Dragon stopped. It tipped its head to the side and then looked away.

"Don't run away! Help the Dark Dragon!"

"This is our village!"

"It might be useless, but shoot! Shoot as much as you can! He must have a

vulnerable spot somewhere!”

Armed villagers charged towards the Little Rock Dragon, with Gregory in the lead.

Part 4

THE VILLAGERS LINED UP in a row with their bows at the ready, firing a volley that the Little Rock Dragon easily batted away. It turned towards the villagers and lifted its tail. Gregory sprang into action.

“Take this!” He swung his spear up with great force and stabbed at the dragon. It batted that attack away, too. Its eyes flashed with annoyance, attention now fully off me. I was sure that from its point of view, I was just another minor annoyance it could easily crush.

And that didn’t bother me at all. In fact, I liked it.

“*Raaar!*” I pushed through the pain and let out the most intimidating roar I could. I kicked the Little Rock Dragon and pushed off it with one foot. It took a beat to look up at me, so I used that split second to kick it in the head as hard as I could.

“*Uraaaaaaah!*”

Wow, that actually did something! The dragon thrashed its head violently from side to side. Compared to its giant, rocky body, its neck was surprisingly slender. Hm. Was its neck its weak spot? Maybe if I punched that heavy head hard enough I could snap it?

Title Skill “Klutz” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Title Skill “Itty-Bitty Hero” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Not bad, but this really wasn’t the time. *Don’t interrupt me in the middle of a battle, Divine Voice.* I spun in midair and got into position, then made a clean landing onto the Little Rock Dragon’s face, making eye contact as I did.

“*Graah... Aaaaaaah!*” The dragon groaned and then let out a loud scream as an arrow pierced its eye.

“Its eyes! Aim for its eyes! Illusia—the small dragon—and I will distract it while you shoot its eyes!”

“All right!”

“Got it!”



I could do this. I could figure out a way to make up for the vast difference in our stats.

I needed to check the Little Rock Dragon's remaining HP and calculate how many attacks I needed to land. I had to distract it from the villagers at all costs.

Species: Little Rock Dragon

Status: Fury (Major)

Lv: 24/55

HP: 241/262

MP: 81/117

The numbers stunned me. Those two huge hits had only done 21 points of damage? Simple math told me I needed to land ten more hits *and* hope for ten more arrows to the eye. And if that wasn't enough, it had Automatic HP Recovery.

There was no way we could deal enough damage to beat this dragon.

It began to gather energy in its foot, and I knew it was about to use Tremor again.

"Raaaaaaaar!" I roared out a warning to the archers, and they backed away from the dragon as a group. The monster slammed all four of its legs into the ground. The archers weren't far enough away to avoid the worst of it, let alone Gregory on the front lines.

No way they'd survive this Tremor with their stats. I rushed to Gregory's side, but it was too late. The earth was already starting to ripple outwards with the dragon at its epicenter. Gregory was sucked into the splitting earth, his upper body twisting as he was caught.

"Arrghhh!" Bones cracked as Gregory screamed in agony. His injuries were terrible. He'd die if this battle got drawn out any longer.

Even the villagers I'd managed to warn hadn't made it out unscathed. The

edge of the earthquake caught them, leaving them injured.

It was no use. We couldn't win, no matter how hard I clawed my way to victory.

I planted my feet and reached out for Gregory, but the Little Rock Dragon used that opportunity to whip its tail at my back. It knocked me into a building, sending a splitting pain down my spine. I didn't have much HP left.

My head felt fuzzy, and my vision blurred. My throat was burning and incredibly dry.

Was this it?

Wasn't there any other way? Anything I could do?

Ru

n.

Wh-what?

R.

U.

N.

Ugh, it's just the Divine Voice. This happened before...heh. Brings back memories. That was the first time I faced off against the Little Rock Dragon. My level and stats were way higher now, but I still didn't stand a chance.

Well, at least I was able to do a little bit of damage this time, even if it wasn't anything to brag about.

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Now able to consume all MP and run Laplace to view results of simple simulations.

Huh? Divine Voice leveled up? At a time like this? What the heck for?

But.

No matter how much I tell you to run.

You surely.

won't run away.

Huh? It sure was being way more direct than it ever had before. Could it speak more clearly now that it was leveled up?

It's a shame. I expected more from you. But it seems this is goodbye.

You were special in so many ways.

I was looking forward to watching you.

But.

I had a feeling this would happen eventually.

What in the world? Don't you dare tell me you only leveled up so you could talk trash!

It happened a little sooner than planned.

That's all.

I was just testing you. Perhaps it was significant.

The words kept flowing into my head.

Shall I be blunt?

There is no other way to survive.

except for flight.

Don't just decide that for me! And stop forcing your way into my head; it's rude!

Then. Have a nice long sleep.

I never.

got tired.

of watching you.

Could this guy be any more patronizing?

I don't think I've had.

this much fun.

in a long time.

Who are you?!

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 4 is unable to provide that explanation.

With that final, stilted, condescendingly polite message sent through my brain, the Divine Voice fell silent.

The Little Rock Dragon stalked me through my blurred vision.

You’ve gotta be kidding me!

I couldn’t let things end here. I couldn’t let the Divine Voice be right. What the heck did it mean, it had fun? It was watching me like my life and death was a game!

I bit my own arm to snap myself back to reality, dragging my consciousness from the brink. The pain of my fangs lingered and blood flowed. I stood up on trembling legs.

Part 5

I HAD BASICALLY no HP left, and I was in such bad shape that I could barely move. Even if I were at full health, all I'd be able to do was run around and try to get a couple of lucky shots in at its head. And then I'd have to pray I didn't misread the timing of its Tremor attack and eat a face full of tail.

My vision was foggy. My legs shook. I couldn't fight in this state. There were so many villagers on the verge of death scattered around, and if I didn't end this soon, all of them would die. One more attack from the dragon would wipe us all out.

Gregory especially was severely injured. He'd been too close to the Tremor epicenter.

I had no other choice. I had to evolve, even if I risked my stats plummeting when my levels reset.

I didn't want to scare the villagers or risk the black lizard not recognizing me, but I had to do it. If I evolved into something with recovery magic, I might be able to actually move around again. I thought back to my choices.

Future:

Jormungand Rank C+

Little Arc Dragon Rank C

Artificial Dragon Rank C—

Rolling Dragon Rank C—

Dark Drago-human Rank —

The demi-human was off the table. I'd longed to be human, but in this battle a human form would be next to useless. Worst timing ever, but that dream was dead.

Rolling Dragon was on my list of candidates, but I couldn't think of any way it would give me an advantage over the Little Rock Dragon. I already had speed. What I needed was ferocity. Power.

Couldn't do Artificial Dragon, either. I knew it would be very convenient to have capable hands, but not much beyond that. I remembered the Artificial Dragon's stats being pretty bad, too.

So that left me with the Little Arc Dragon or Jormungand. They were the only sensible options, with the highest ranks and best skills.

As a Little Arc Dragon, I could heal the villagers on the verge of death. They'd be able to run away, and then I could drag this fight out as long as I wanted. We would trash the place, but at least we'd avoid more death.

I remembered the Divine Voice saying that Little types had less potential to grow, but they became very strong, very quickly.

Now, let's take a look at Jormungand.

Jormungand: Rank C+. Also known as the Poison Serpentine Dragon. Resembles a thick snake with scales covered in deadly poison. Its combat ability is low, but it is said that any foe it faces will die of poison. The poison it excretes can form an independent monster that the Jormungand can control. Any patch of ground touched by this monster turns barren.

If I evolved into Jormungand...there might be some hope of victory. I could stop the dragon. The beast might've resembled a rocky hillside, but it didn't have Poison Resistance. On the other hand, the earth around the village would become barren, and people would die.

And unlike the Young Plague Dragon, I had a feeling once I went down this path, there would be no turning back.

I could never come back to the human village.

My only choice was Little Arc Dragon. It would let me heal Gregory, who currently looked like he was on the brink of death. Still, I couldn't be sure, since there was no way to view the skills and stats of a form before I evolved.

I wanted to know more details. How could I defeat the Little Rock Dragon?

How could I save the villagers? I thought I'd made my choice, but now I was getting cold feet.

Come on, Mr. Vague Explanation. Help me out here! Give me some proof that someone is actually looking out for me. My mind raced, and I felt more strength leave my body.

I got the same feeling when I used Baby's Breath, a sense of deep fatigue.

Did my MP go down? Like, a lot?

Gained Title Skill "Laplace Interference Authority" Lv 1.

Huh?

Laplace...I vaguely remembered hearing the Divine Voice say something about that when I leveled up. A simulation...?

Probability of victory if Little Arc Dragon evolution chosen: 4%. Probability of successful rescue of all remaining survivors: <1%

That felt like getting punched in the head. All the resolve I'd mustered cracked to pieces inside of me.

Probability of victory if Jormungand evolution chosen: 98%. Probability of full destruction of village: 94%.

Hey, enough already! Stop messing around. Are you trying to break my heart? Did the Divine Voice talk to me just for this? Was it messing with me?

Probability of victory if Rolling Dragon evolution chosen: <1%. Probability of successful escape from battle: >99%.

"Raaaaaar!"

I said, stop!

I roared, and the screen inside my head disappeared. Hearing my scream, the Little Rock Dragon paused, changing direction and charging for me. It planned to take care of me once and for all.

I couldn't trust the Divine Voice's predictions; I had to choose the Little Arc Dragon. I couldn't just run away from this. I'd evolve and save Gregory. His injuries were terrible, and he was bleeding so much, steadily losing strength. If I

didn't heal him soon, it would be too late.

He was the second human ever to call me by my name. I had to save him, no matter what.

Part 6

“RAAAAR!” I roared to pump myself up before taking off running at the Little Rock Dragon. My body felt heavy, and I was bleeding. My vision streaked, but I could still move.

If I evolved into the Little Arc Dragon, I could heal myself. That would not only put me in a better position with my HP but also improve my overall condition.

I couldn’t evolve yet, though. I had to pull Gregory out of the Tremor chasm. My body would change when I became the Little Arc Dragon, and I couldn’t be sure I’d even be able to physically save him anymore. I’d rescue Gregory, evolve, and use my recovery magic to heal him and the other villagers.

Then I’d draw the attention of the Little Rock Dragon and save everyone.

Many others besides Gregory were injured or stuck in the chasm, but he was the closest to death. I could alternate between Roll and my new recovery magic to buy a little time for the villagers to escape to safety. I might not be able to defeat the Little Rock Dragon, but I could at least save the others.

Probability of victory if Little Arc Dragon evolution chosen: 4%. Probability of successful rescue of all remaining survivors: <1%.

The Divine Voice’s screen popped back up in my mind.

Don’t think about it, don’t think about it. Just forget about it.

The Little Rock Dragon took a deep breath, its body puffing up like its insides were pushing their way out. It had an attack called Sand Breath, but I’d never seen it in action before.

I was the only one in its attack range, so I used Roll to race to the dragon’s feet. Now I was so close the breath attack wouldn’t touch me. A gust of sandy wind whipped up as I went. I uncurled my body.

“U-ugh...” Gregory groaned with pain from the chasm. I grabbed his arm and pulled him out, but I still had to evolve into the Little Arc Dragon if I wanted to heal him.

Probability of victory if Little Arc Dragon evolution chosen: 4%. Probability of successful rescue of all remaining survivors: <1%.

What if it was true? What if I managed to stop the Little Rock Dragon but couldn't save the villagers? My doubts made me pause, but I shook off my hesitation and was just about to evolve when I felt a light touch on my foot. Gregory's hand.

"Don't...worry about me." His voice was small and weak, but for some reason he still sounded firm and powerful. "I don't know why a Dark Dragon like you is trying so hard to save our village. But I can tell just by looking at you that it's not a passing whim or an impulse. I'm a good judge of character, and I think you're a good person. Uh, dragon, I mean."

Gregory looked into my eyes as he spoke. Like I wasn't a monster. Like I was *human*.

"So from here on out, just rely on your instincts. What I'm asking you to do might take you away from your true goal here. Maybe it's selfish and cruel. Please forgive me."

He's going to ask me a favor at a time like this? And what does he mean, it'll make me stray from my goal?

"Please...don't concern yourself with me. Just save the village." His voice broke off like he had exhausted all his strength. But he still had a tiny bit of HP left. At first, I wasn't sure what he meant.

Then it came to me.

He couldn't possibly know everything, but I think he could tell that I was in the middle of a difficult decision from the look on my face and my actions.

There was only one way to defeat the Little Rock Dragon. I was ignoring it, whether consciously or not, because I wanted the villagers to accept me. Because I wanted to show off and be the hero who protected their town. I'd really let that Itty-Bitty Hero title skill go to my head.

But I couldn't keep making excuses while people died in front of me.

Slowly, I put my claws to Gregory's neck. When I cut off his head, I didn't

watch it fall. I couldn't. The other villagers began to scream. I didn't blame them. From where they stood, their one ally had suddenly turned on them.

Cannot gain experience points at MAX Lv.

Title Skill "Wrongdoer" Lv 4 has increased to Lv 5.

Title Skill "Calamity" Lv 1 has increased to Lv 3.

Title Skill "Dastardly King" Lv 1 has increased to Lv 2.

My title skills increased, and my evolution options must have opened up along with them. This was my only chance for victory. I'd tried so hard not to raise any of my evil title skills, but now...there had to be something less devastating than Jormungand that the Young Plague Dragon could evolve into.

"A-ahhh!"

"Wh-what?! I knew it! It *is* a monster! G-Gregory brought it here, so I thought we could trust it, b-but...a-a-ahhh!"

"The village is done for! Run away! Leave the injured and save yourselves! There's no hope!"

The villagers had been watching me from afar, but after witnessing Gregory's final moments, they scattered. Their last hope of saving the village was gone.

Strangely, it didn't hurt. I had so many different emotions running through my head that I'd gone numb. I had finally crossed the line from human to monster, and all I felt was empty.

Part 7

THE VILLAGERS RAN. Those who were injured and couldn't move reached out in vain to those who fled. Some of them cursed the ones who ran. Some just looked at them sadly, not saying a word.

I looked down at Gregory's corpse. I still didn't want to look at his head, though.

Don't worry, Gregory. I promise I'll protect the village.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

The Little Rock Dragon screamed, dragging its giant body around to face me.

Display evolution options?

The text popped up in my head.

The sudden return to formality unsettled me, maybe because I now knew it could talk nonsense if it really felt like it.

All right. Bring it on, you worthless Voice.

Future:

Plague Dragon Rank B—

Jormungand Rank C+

Dark Drago-human Rank —

Present:

Young Plague Dragon: Rank D+

Past:

Baby Dragon: Rank D—

Dragon Egg: Rank F

My options had decreased, but Plague Dragon had been added. I'd figured Little Arc Dragon would be gone, but I wasn't expecting Rolling Dragon to disappear, too. Not that it mattered. Still, it had seemed weird that Plague Dragon wasn't initially an option even though I was a young Plague Dragon.

I figured I just hadn't met the requirements yet.

Plague Dragon: Rank B-. A wicked dragon that brings disaster wherever it goes. Spreads plague and has destroyed many human villages. Bathes in the blood of its enemies, sleeps on a mountain of corpses. One of the three great disastrous monsters. Blessed with high flying ability and attack power.

I'd never even seen a B-rank monster before. I hesitated but not for long. I didn't have any reason to hold back.

The instant I made the decision, searing heat raced through my body. The intensity grew and grew until it felt like I was exploding. That was what transformation felt like when my flesh and bones were growing and strengthening.

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”



I roared instinctively, and the sound that came out of my mouth was so fearsome I could hardly believe it was coming from me. It felt like it shook the entire earth.

Around me echoed the hopeless cries of the villagers.

I grew so big so quickly, the Little Rock Dragon in front of me suddenly seemed very small. My chances just went up.

Evolved from the Young Plague Dragon to the Plague Dragon.

Gained Special Skill “Wicked Dragon” Lv —.

Gained Special Skill “Psychic Sense” Lv 2.

Gained Special Skill “Automatic HP Recovery” Lv 3.

Finally, the skill I’d been coveting forever—Automatic HP Recovery! Psychic Sense sounded useful, too, although at the moment it was hard to be happy about anything.

Special Skill “Fly” Lv 2 has become Lv 5.

Special Skill “Dragon Scale Powder” Lv 1 has become Lv 3.

Special Skill “Dragon Scale” Lv 2 has become Lv 5.

Due to Title Skill “Dragon King’s Son” Lv —, all Resistance Skills less than Lv 5 have increased.

All my skills increased at once. I guess I really had been a baby dragon before this.

Normal Skill “Disease Breath” Lv 1 has become Lv 3.

Normal Skill “Venom Fangs” Lv 1 has become Lv 3.

Normal Skill “Paralyzing Venom Claws” Lv 1 has become Lv 3.

Normal Skill “Human Transformation” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

And all the skills I’d made such a conscious effort to *not* level up suddenly mercilessly increased.

Normal Skill “Baby’s Breath” Lv 5 has evolved to “Scorching Breath” Lv 5.

Gained Normal Skill “Whirlwind Slash” Lv 1.

Gained Normal Skill “Neckbreaker” Lv 1.

Whirlwind Slash and Neckbreaker? Those sound pretty dangerous.

Title Skill “Wrongdoer” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

Title Skill “Calamity” Lv 3 has become Lv 5.

Title Skill “Dastardly King” Lv 2 has become Lv 4.

Wow, I really am leveling up. And it’s seriously hitting home that there’s no going back from this.

Illusia

Species: Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/75

HP: 22/142

MP: 42/131

Attack: 158

Defense: 124

Magic: 118

Agility: 98

Rank: B—

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 5

Divine Voice: Lv 4

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Fly: Lv 5

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 3

Dark Type: Lv —

Wicked Dragon: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 3

Psychic Sense: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 4

Falling Resistance: Lv 5

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 5

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 5

Magic Resistance: Lv 3

Dark Resistance: Lv 3

Light Resistance: Lv 2

Fear Resistance: Lv 2

Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 3

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 6

View Status: Lv 5

Scorching Breath: Lv 5

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 3

Disease Breath: Lv 3

Venom Fangs: Lv 3

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 3

Dragon Tail: Lv 1

Bellow: Lv 1

Meteorite: Lv 1

Nutcracker: Lv 2

Human Transformation: Lv 3

Whirlwind Slash: Lv1

Neckbreaker: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 3

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 2

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 5

Itty-Bitty Hero: Lv 4

Wrongdoer: Lv 6

Calamity: Lv 5

Chicken Runner: Lv 2

Mr. Chef: Lv 3

Dastardly King: Lv 4

Stalwart: Lv 2

Giant Killer: Lv 1

Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4

Clan Boss: Lv 1

Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 1

My overall stats had gone down since I was starting over at Lv 1, but my attack was up. I was still way faster than the Little Rock Dragon, and I now had more skills and options at my disposal. My scales even grew bigger. My resistance skills all increased, so I'd take less damage now.

I turned to glare at the Little Rock Dragon. Our bodies were roughly the same size now. It had taken a step backwards when it saw me suddenly transform, but now it stared back at me threateningly. Its will to fight was alive and well.

Part 8

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!”

My roar echoed through the town.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!”

The Little Rock Dragon let out a loud roar to match mine.

Our rematch began. The Dragon surged towards me, a cloud of dust in its wake. I flew upward to evade it, spreading my wings and soaring into the sky. Flying felt completely different from before, probably because my Fly skill level had skyrocketed. It required a lot more stamina than I expected; I wouldn't be able to fly for very long at this rate. At least I didn't need to use my breath attack as a rocket boost anymore.

I landed on a rooftop right behind the Little Rock Dragon, the structure creaking under my weight. I kicked off the shingles and jumped onto the dragon's back, targeting its neck, the thinnest part of its body and hopefully the most vulnerable to attack. If I could dig my claws into it, I'd make a sizable dent in its HP.

I dug in with my new, more lethal talons, easily slicing open the stony flesh. Then I curled my body and spun, looping around the dragon before going back the way I came. It swung its tail down right behind me, hitting the ground with such force that a cloud of dusty earth splashed up in its wake.

As long as I kept a close eye on its movements, I could easily evade its attacks.

I jumped back onto a roof, probably the same house. As long as I stayed in the air, Tremor couldn't hurt me. That meant the Little Rock Dragon now had no way to attack. I could just sit here and use Automatic HP Recovery.

Plus, I had an attack that could penetrate the monster's stony flesh. All I had to do was keep its attention off the injured villagers and whittle it down.

At this point, it was nothing but a pile of rocks to me. I pushed off the roof and flew back toward it. It let out a blast of Sand Breath, probably thinking I was

going to try the same tactic again, but I cartwheeled to the side. Its neck stretched out as it tried to aim Sand Breath at me, and I used that opportunity to slash that vulnerable neck with my claws.

Its tail came for me again, faster than before, and this time it knew where I was headed.

I cartwheeled again and deviated unsteadily from my intended path, just managing to evade the strike and landing on a house on the other side of its hulking body.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaar!”

The dragon thrashed around, clearly annoyed by its awful neck wound. Energy collected around its feet, signaling that it was preparing for another Tremor. It must’ve known it was pointless if I was perched up on a roof—it was just venting its frustration.

But Tremor would still injure the villagers stuck in the chasm or immobilized from injuries, so as soon as its leg rose, I launched myself into the air. The roof crumbled beneath my feet, a portion of the house falling away.

Folding my arms and legs, I spun into Roll, body crashing into the dragon at an angle.

I caught its leg in midair before it could slam down. The act threw off my balance and made my legs feel weak, and I probably hadn’t done much actual damage, but I did prevent it from using that attack. I kicked off the dragon’s back, spreading my wings and landing on another roof.

Turning back to the dragon, I instinctively kicked up a gust of wind—my new skill, Whirlwind Slash. Blades of wind raced towards the dragon’s neck, aiming for the wound I’d already made and kicking up a huge cloud of dust in its wake.

I didn’t stop there—I let off more Whirlwind Slashes in rapid succession. One hit, two hits, three hits. One by one, blades of wind soared towards the dragon and slashed its neck.

I took to the sky and alighted on the watchtower, now damaged from all the Tremor attacks. The dragon craned back its neck to stare me down on my perch above it. It let out another roar and charged, apparently intent on destroying

the watchtower.

After drawing the Little Rock Dragon closer, I jumped off the edge at the exact moment the dragon rammed itself into the tower. The structure trembled and began to collapse, but I was diving straight at my attacker. The dragon stretched out its neck to try to catch me with a breath attack as I flew downward.

I stretched out my wings and sped up, getting too close for it to attack me properly, and then jabbed my elbow into its neck without losing any momentum.

Now that I was closer, my path was clear. Its flesh hung tattered and torn open from my repeated claw attacks, but I could see the shape of the bones in its neck, the fragile parts. I knew instinctively how much force to use and where to use it. That had to be my new Neckbreaker skill.

I broke its neck with a loud snap. It staggered and then fell without a sound of protest.

Normal Skill “Neckbreaker” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Gained 384 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 384 Experience Points.

The massive number of EXP I gained flashed in my head.

Plague Dragon Lv 1 has become Lv 19.

Special Skill “Dragon Scale Powder” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Part 9

I'D DEFEATED the Little Rock Dragon, but I still had no idea why Doz had that egg, what that weird status condition was, why his skills were gone, or why he'd come back to the village in the first place.

But at least the village was safe. All I had to do now was leave.

I turned my gaze toward the survivors, making eye contact with a man with broken legs.

"Please don't kill me! Please spare me!" He pleaded frantically with me, trying to drag himself to safety with his arms. His pants ripped as he crawled across the ground, and I could see the blood flowing from his wounds.

I shouldn't be here. And not just right now. Ever. There was no reason to ever come back to this village.

"Th-that thing killed Gregory! It killed him!" someone screamed.

Something hit me in the back.

"Raaar!"

I felt the prickle of a magical attack, heat racing down my spine. I didn't take much damage. Turning, I saw a small girl with orange hair holding a staff almost as tall as she was. And behind her was Myria, standing there stunned.

"Tch! I had a feeling my magic wouldn't work. His scales are too tough. Myria, go get the baby from the rubble of the tower and run away!"

Myria froze for a few seconds and then grabbed the orange-haired girl's arm.

"What are you doing, Myria? Let go of me! Have you been hypnotized or something?"

"Please wait, Marielle! That dragon is Illusia, the one I told you about! He's gotten bigger, but I'm sure it's him! There must be a misunderstanding. Please stop!"

"Look at Gregory's head and tell me that was a misunderstanding! It was cut

clean off! Rock Dragons don't have sharp enough claws to do that, and Doz couldn't either with his rusty sword! Who else except that Dark Dragon could've killed him?!"

The orange-haired girl, Marielle, had low HP, but her level was surprisingly high. Her attack power was unimpressive, but that was probably because she was primarily a healer. She was also a species I'd never seen before: Elfingle-human. She must've shown up to help get rid of the dragon and take care of the wounded.

Marielle shook off Myria's grip and aimed her staff towards me again. Myria jumped between us and held her hands out towards me. "Illusi—"

"*Raaaaaaaaaaaaaar!*" I roared and swiped my claws at her. My pinky sliced right below her ear. *Fwoosh*. A lock of her hair floated through the air.

"A-ahhh! N-no!"

She collapsed weakly onto the ground.

I reached my other hand towards her, slowly aiming for her face.

"B-but why?!"

"Light Sphere!" Marielle screamed, a glowing ball searing through the air in an arc straight towards me. It hit me right in the palm of my hand.

"*Graaar!*" I pretended to be injured, staggering dramatically backwards. I narrowed my eyes at Marielle. Fear creased her face for a moment before her strength returned, and she glared back at me.

I dropped her gaze and pushed off the ground, spreading my wings and flying into the sky. Myria stared up with a hand pressed over her mouth. Marielle soberly followed my progress.

The other villagers looked up at me with hatred, and Marielle finally lowered her staff. I wasn't sure if it was because I flew outside the range of her spells or if she just didn't want to provoke me from afar.

I took one last look at the town, then lifted my head and turned away, flying as fast as my wings would carry me.

I knew exactly what Dragon Scale Powder Lv 4 would do to humans.

What I *didn't* know was whether I'd be able to clear up the misunderstanding between Myria and me, but as long as I had a dangerous passive skill, I couldn't come back to the village.

I had a feeling she would come looking for me in the forest. That was just how she was. That was why I threatened her. It was painful but necessary.

Resistance Skill “Loneliness Resistance” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

I landed once I was outside the village borders. Flying was difficult now that I had such a large body to pilot through the air; I wondered if it would become easier if I leveled up my Fly skill more. But for now, flying long distances was impossible.

I probably should have run farther, but I doubted any of the villagers would come after me.

I began the long walk down the path that led to my cave. I wanted to run, but I felt too bulky for that now. My HP was regenerating, but the fatigue wouldn't go away. Automatic HP Recovery couldn't do that, just like it couldn't erase my sadness or the hollow emptiness spreading inside me.

Could I get Automatic Fatigue Recovery or Mental Burden Resistance? Divine Voice would probably just tell me to suck it up and deal with it.

As I walked, I spotted a flower I'd never seen before—white with a red pattern, petals perfectly symmetrical, its colors pure and its shape elegant. The subtle red speckles didn't take away from that effect; they only made it more exquisite. It was such a beautiful flower it stopped me in my tracks.

Its fragrance reminded me of spring. I reached out to pluck it, but my long claws made me clumsy. The flower was just too small for my new body, and its petals fell, crushed, to the forest floor. I was left with nothing but a bare stem sitting sadly in my palm.

I should've used Human Transformation before attempting to pick it. The flower was so beautiful, and regret welled inside me.

I might as well check what it was, though.

Illusia: Value D+.

I gasped. This was my namesake, Myria's favorite flower. My heart ached at the thought of her. I didn't have a choice, but I had still betrayed her and fled the village. Did I even deserve to bear such a name?

I'd just noticed it on a whim. I didn't realize it would be *the* flower.

A beautiful red and white flower. It's said that this flower only grows where monsters live; therefore, it is quite rare and a highly coveted gift.

Getting ahold of this flower was difficult; tracking it down showed strength.

It symbolizes bravery, heroism, and courage.

I stared at the crumbled flower in my hand and felt an incredible sadness grow inside me. I couldn't help but imagine what was going through Myria's mind when she picked this flower to be my name.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaar!" I impulsively let out a roar. A group of birds perched in the trees took off at once, and in the distance, graywolves howled.

Delete it. Please delete it. I have no right to keep using the name Myria gave me.

Once a name has been chosen, it cannot be changed.

The message popped up in my head—this was the second time I'd seen it. Even though the Divine Voice gave me this warning before, this time it just felt like I was being taunted. A young woman put her hopes in me, and I crushed them. Now I had to live with it.

Part 10

MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY exhausted, I ran back to the cave. My body felt heavy, and every movement hurt. My legs knocked into each other, and it felt like I would trip and fall at any moment. But I didn't care. I just kept running. And as I ran, I worried. I knew I might have to leave this damn forest altogether.

Dragon Scale Powder had the power to spread sickness and disease. Would it be dangerous to live with the black lizard and the orangurangs? Would the black lizard's poison resistance work against a plague?

I doubted the villagers could live comfortably knowing that a Plague Dragon lived in the forest. I'd gone into their town once before. They had to think I would come back.

All this combined to make me think I'd come to the end of my time here.

As I ran, I spotted a pack of graywolves up ahead.

"Grrrr..."

"Aroo! Aroo!"

They appeared to be in the middle of a hunt. Five of them had one giant squirrel surrounded. They clawed and bit it from all sides, knocking it to the ground. The giant squirrel grabbed its head and trembled, covered in blood.

"Grrrrr...grr?"

"Groo?"

The graywolves must've heard my footsteps. They looked up from their prey.

"Arr! Arr! Arr!"

They scattered like baby spiders spilling out of a broken egg sack, running in all directions. Not even the reckless graywolves would dare attack me now. They used to chase me all over when I was a *Young* Plague Dragon. They must've been able to glance at an enemy and automatically know when they were outclassed.

The giant squirrel looked puzzled and lifted its head, looking around.

“Squeak... S-squeak!”

The instant it saw me its face froze in fear. No need, I had no intention of bothering it. I ran right past without giving it a second look.

I wasn't expecting that even *monsters* would be afraid of me. If the black lizard and the orangurangs ran away from me screaming, I thought my heart might break.

I've been running for a while. I should be getting close to the cliff by now.

“Kssh!” Suddenly, a familiar voice stopped me in my tracks. The black lizard was dragging its injured leg, walking towards me. It must have taken the long way around the chasm as it tried to follow me.

Did it recognize me with just one glance? It sniffed the air. Maybe it realized it was me from my smell?

I hesitated, my legs rooted to the spot.

The black lizard blinked at me. Then, as if it suddenly figured out what was happening, it ran straight towards me. It threw itself into my arms, but since I was so much bigger now it just felt like something got stuck on me.

“Kssh! Kssh! Kssh!” I sat down right in the middle of the forest, setting the black lizard on my tail and lifting it up to my face. I patted its head, being very careful of my claws.

“Kssh! Kssh!” The black lizard cooed happily.

I had a lot of worries weighing on my mind. The first was that I still didn't know how Doz ended up in that state. I *did* have a guess, though, and if I was right, I couldn't just leave it alone. I'd have to do something about it before I left the forest.

My second worry was Dragon Scale Powder Lv 4. That was a grave danger to everyone around me.

Worry number three was the village. I doubted the villagers could go on with their lives, knowing I was out here somewhere. I knew they might hire more fighters like that swordswoman to track me down and kill me, and that would

put the black lizard and the orangurangs in danger.

My fourth worry was that I might not even fit into my cave anymore. Well, I could use Human Transformation to get inside, but at this size I would probably destroy the black lizard, the orangurangs, and all my pots all at once. I was so big that even all our jerky probably wouldn't be enough to feed me.

At any rate, first I needed to apologize to the black lizard. It didn't seem upset, but *still*. All I could do was gesture, so communicating remorse was difficult, and I didn't want to be misunderstood and cause more problems.

But for now, I just wanted my friend to get some rest.

"Kssh!" The black lizard was welcoming me back home, I just knew it.

"Raar." I roared back, saying "thank you."

Chapter 6:

Forte Slime

Part 1

I PUT THE BLACK LIZARD on my back, and we made our way toward the cave. I was still worried about the Dragon Scale Powder. If I saw any sign of it harming my friends, I'd leave and go live by myself. Or would it already be too late?

Maybe I'd use Divine Voice Lv 4's simulation power once I saw the orangurangs, just to be sure... The thought of using the Scale Powder made me feel sick, but I needed more information.

We reached the edge of the cliff, and I was just about to spread my wings when I suddenly sensed something *terrible*. It must've been from that new skill, Psychic Sense Lv 2. I looked behind me and saw a puddle-like *thing* crawling across the ground. I remembered it; I'd seen it near my cave a while back. It was some kind of slime that my View Status skill wouldn't work on.

It had some skill that blocked other monsters from checking up on it. I mean, I hadn't even noticed it until Psychic Sense picked it up. I could have crossed its path a bunch of times before without even realizing it. This couldn't be a coincidence.

The only times I hadn't been able to view someone's status was when I couldn't see Doz's and the mahawolves' conditions, and with this slime.

And the slime was headed straight for the village.

Was this the monster controlling Doz and the mahawolves? The only evidence I had to support my theory was the shared hidden statuses and the fact that it was headed towards town.

That, and the incredibly terrible aura I felt emanating from it.

"Kssh?" The black lizard made a questioning noise, wondering why I'd suddenly stopped.

All right, let's try to check the status again. My View Status skill is at Lv 5 now, so I might be able to see more details than before. And even if that doesn't work, I still might figure something out.

Let's see what you are.

Normal Skill “View Status” Lv 5 is unable to provide that information.

Ÿ#Æ: Forte Slime

&MΔÈ(: N*

Ξ^: 27/35

zΘ: 148/148

ÏĂ: 67/67

Á£j°Ĉ: 88

Θf\$\\Э: 77

Ξp)4%: 75

@fiĈΔu: 68

ΦG<86ç: D

*****.

**Mage: Lv —

*****.

Slime B**: Lv —

St***th: Lv —

Poison Belt: Lv —

**** Sense: Lv —

Gr***an Lang****: Lv —

Au***atic MP Recovery: Lv —

Su*****: Lv —

Mag** ***rgy *****ission: Lv —

***ic Energy Reception: Lv —

Sn***: Lv —

Swords***: Lv —

Impact Suppression: Lv —

Super Regeneration: Lv —

Recovery+: Lv —

Dark Vision: Lv —

*****:

Phys*****tance: Lv —

Da*****stance: Lv —

Con*****sistance: Lv —

*****Resistance: Lv —

Water R*****nce: Lv —

Lonel*****sistance: Lv —

*****ling Resistance: Lv —

Hung*****stance: Lv —

So*****tion Resistance: Lv —

Fir*****stance: Lv —

Ear*****tance: Lv —

D*****sistance: Lv —

***** Resistance: Lv —

***** Resistance: Lv —

***** Resistance: Lv —

Poison Resistance: Lv —

Trans*****: Lv —

Skill *****]: Lv —

Bi*: Lv —

Sho**wave: Lv —

***me Slash: Lv —

Intimidation: Lv —

Spider****k: Lv —

***** Tongue: Lv —

Double Poison: Lv —

Petrify: Lv —

*****: Lv —

Hellscissors: Lv —

Vi** Sta***: Lv —

Shell Re****: Lv —

I*** Tackle: Lv —

Slow: Lv —

Rest: Lv —

Life Dra*n: Lv —

Swell: Lv —

Au** Regen: Lv —

Ma** Dr***: Lv —

R*ll: Lv —

Black Fog: Lv —

Jeweled Cage: Lv —

Death Needles: Lv —

*****: Lv —

Armor Break: Lv —

*****: Lv —

Calamity: Lv —

Da*** King: Lv —**

*******Thief: Lv —**

*******Scale: Lv —**

*******: Lv —**

*******: Lv —**

Puppet M***: Lv —**

*******: Lv —**

Corpse Ea*: Lv —**

Pain seared through my brain. It felt like I’d trespassed into some top-secret information, and this was punishment.

Its rank had changed, but I was sure it was the same thing I’d seen before. I had a hard time believing there was more than one of these things.

It had a truly outrageous number of skills, but “Mag** ***rgy *****ission” and “***ic Energy Reception” made me sure of it. This was the thing controlling the mahawolves. With Magic Energy Transmission and Magic Energy Reception, it could send instructions remotely to the mahawolves.

How in the world did a monster of a completely different species have that skill?

Not being able to check the levels of its skills was pretty unsettling. I didn’t want to confront it, but I didn’t have a choice. It was clearly headed for the village. If I hadn’t run away when I saw it that last time, maybe the whole incident with Doz wouldn’t have happened. And if I ignored it again, who knew what kind of terrible monstrosity it could become.

*Gr***an Lang****: Lv*

*Swords***: Lv*

*Sho**wave: Lv*

****me Slash: Lv*

Intimidation: Lv

Some of those were definitely Doz's skills when I'd seen him before. I recognized some normal mahawolf skills on that list, too. There was only one explanation—this slime could steal skills from other monsters.

A skill that stole other monsters' skills made sense, but I had to imagine there were limits or conditions on it. That must be why the slime used mahawolves as minions, even though they weren't very strong, and why it chose Doz to carry the egg. But why did it go to all that trouble to control the Little Rock Dragon?

Whatever the reason, the dragon was its target. That damn slime was nothing but trouble.

I lowered my head and let the black lizard clamber down. I felt bad about sending the black lizard away so soon after we'd reunited, but I had no choice.

"Kssh?"

I turned my face towards the cliff, trying to communicate that it should go home without me. It could go the long way around to get back across. This enemy was clearly strange, unlike anything I'd faced before. And I still didn't know what it could do.

Maybe it wasn't so strong after all, if it had to use magic to control other monsters. I had a feeling it was either incredibly strong or incredibly weak—there was no middle ground. Possibly no one had ever survived to tell of their encounter.

The black lizard didn't seem to care about humans like I did; I couldn't get it involved in such a dangerous fight.

"Kssh?"

It tipped its head, looking puzzled. I didn't think it understood what was going on.

"Raar." I made a little noise and gestured towards the slime. The black lizard turned and followed my gaze, finally spotting it. I probably wouldn't have noticed it either if not for my Psychic Sense skill. Even now, I felt like I'd lose it if

I took my eye off it for too long.

“Kssh!” The black lizard let out a cry and then hopped onto my back. It climbed all the way up to my head and opened its mouth wide, sticking out its tongue. I practically heard it saying it was ready for a fight.

“Raar...” I made a soft noise, asking if it was sure. It bared its teeth and snapped at the air, glaring at the slime.

Part 2

I LET THE BLACK LIZARD down for a moment so I could circle around and cut the slime off. I was hoping to get the first strike, then let the black lizard attack with venom from its hiding spot. And if that didn't work, it could provide backup with Clay Gun. Typically, I would have the orangurangs take up the vanguard, but they weren't here right now. If I couldn't take it head-on in my new form, there was absolutely no way I'd put the black lizard in harm's way.

I didn't have much MP left but...I wondered if I should I go ahead and run the Divine Voice simulation.

Nah, I didn't want to waste my remaining MP. And who knew if it would work against an enemy with hidden stats, anyway. Besides, even if I only had a slim chance of victory, I couldn't just walk away now.

If it told me the odds were good it might change my tactics, but then I'd have less MP to attack with. I needed to go into this battle in the best possible condition. This was my second battle in a row; I didn't have a lot to work with, and my MP was tragically low. But thanks to Automatic HP Recovery, I was about 80 percent healed.

I could still work with it. My resistance skills were beefed up even if my overall stats went down when I evolved.

The slime had a lot of worrying special skills, but if things went well, I could kill it in one hit. Its agility was low, and in a worst-case scenario I could always retreat and try a different approach. And if it was just impossibly strong, then I'd go rampaging through the village and force the villagers to flee.

The slime stopped. It appeared to have a Sense ability; it might've figured out I was here.

I leapt down from the tree and attacked.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaar!"

Why was it headed to the village? I really wanted to know, but it wasn't like

the slime was going to tell me.

I slashed through the air, talons intent.

Its wide, humanlike mouth opened, emitting a black fog.

Was it poison? It didn't matter. The black lizard could just cure me later. This first, experimental attack was more important.

I cut through the black fog with my talons and whacked the slime, feeling it respond to the hit. My claws stuck and punctured the soft flesh into the bodily fluids beyond.

I aimed a second punch, but my fist met the ground instead.

Huh? The fog was too thick to see where it went, but I didn't get an experience point message, so I must not have defeated it. I took a few steps backwards out of the fog, nervous about my visibility.

The fog didn't seem to be poison, and no condensation gathered on my scales, so it must not have actually been fog, either. It was pitch-black inside the cloud. Maybe that was all it was—magic meant to lower visibility?

Not having access to my opponent's skills unsettled me. It had never happened before. I almost wished the cloud would poison me, at least then I'd know what I was up against. But I didn't want to tempt fate. I retreated out of the black fog and waited for the slime to make a move.

From this distance, I could counter any trick it had up its sleeve. The fog began to clear, slowly revealing what was inside.

Two human silhouettes stood at the edge of the cloud. A moment later they were revealed as two small children, a boy and a girl, hugging each other and trembling. Their faces were similar enough that I figured they were twins.

"How... Where are we?"

"H-huh? What happened?"

I was certain they hadn't been there a few moments ago. Absolutely suspicious, but I didn't have time to worry. I needed to find the slime and get them away from it. It might be trying to catch me off guard and attack while I was saving the children. While I scanned the black cloud as thoroughly as I

could, the boy looked at me and raised his hands up. His fingertips turned blue, stretching out. His fingers fused together, their tips sharpening.

I reacted too slowly to dodge, taking the hit on my shoulder. The limb scraped against my scales and then bounced back like a yo-yo.

I kicked off the ground, retreating. What the heck was this thing? The girl watched the boy with concern as he stared at me with listless eyes.

Their bodies continued to turn blue, and they held on to each other so tightly I couldn't see where one ended and the other began. Finally, one of them opened their mouth wide and swallowed up the other. They briefly became a puddle, then took human form again. This time they had a single androgynous body, with hair down to their shoulders. They were naked, but even though their body was the size of an adult's, it was like a mannequin. No sex characteristics at all.

Their lower body sank into the puddle even as their upper body tried to crawl out. This time the skin was a semitransparent blue. So not only could this creature transform, it could also change colors, take human form, and become a pair of twins that could converse.

That reminded me...it had the Grecian Language skill, probably stolen from Doz. So it could even mimic voices? That would be useful. All I could do was roar.

It opened its new mouth and spoke. "Your skills have changed so much since you evolved. Annoying."

All right, this thing is much smarter than I thought it was. It remembers me. Or did the mahawolves send it info using the Magic Energy Transmission?

So...was it saying it had been using its skills to hide and keep an eye on me? I caught a glimpse of what might have been eyeballs inside its semitransparent body, floating through the gelatinous flesh.

"I see a black lizard in the trees, too." Well, it had a Psychic Sense ability; the black lizard hiding *was* pretty pointless. Apparently realizing it had been found out, it shot Clay Gun from its hiding place in the trees, sending a steady stream of clay bullets at the slime.

The slime's body writhed a bit but didn't make any real move to dodge. Instead, it flowed like water, coolly avoiding most of them. A few hit, though, and passed right through.

Its HP didn't change at all. Still at max, 148/148. That made sense, since the bullets slid through, but it also meant my claws had no effect, either. But I'd felt a response when I touched it. Did it already heal?

It had a bunch of recovery skills: Automatic HP Recovery, Super Regeneration, Recovery+, Auto-Regen, and Life Drain.

So here I was in my old pattern again. One hit wouldn't be enough.

"This is quite...inconvenient for me," the slime said. "I only like fights when I know I can win." Its googly eyes bulged as it glared daggers at me and the black lizard in turn.

Part 3

“YOU CAN UNDERSTAND ME, can’t you? If you just let me pass peacefully, I do not intend to do you harm.” The slime sounded annoyed, like I was making it late for something. “You can see inside me, so I’m sure you understand what I want. All I wish is to go and safely collect the skills from the Rock Dragon and the dead villagers.”

That lent more weight to my theory that the slime had been what drew the Little Rock Dragon into town. I wouldn’t even be surprised if it had sicced the mahawolves on Myria to lure me as well.

I hadn’t found Myria quickly after I’d first heard her screams. It was a miracle that she was still safe when I finally reached her. The slime must have been holding the wolves back.

Attacking a village with so many skills would be simple, but the slime seemed hesitant to let humans see it.

“It won’t benefit either of us if you attack me unprepared. Just let me go.”

It had a point. I had no advantages. But come on, *“Hey, I’m gonna head over to the village so I can mess with a bunch of dead bodies,”* really wasn’t gonna fly with me.

There was no guarantee it wouldn’t harm the townsfolk. And besides, I owed it payback for sending a Little Rock Dragon to a populous village in the first place. I’d promised Gregory I would protect the town. I wasn’t breaking that promise.

“Raaaaaaaar!” I roared loudly to indicate my rejection of the slime’s truce. It started to open its mouth, but I let out a stream of my upgraded Baby’s Breath attack, Scorching Breath.

Flames surrounded the slime’s body. It could shapeshift to avoid taking damage, but it seemed unable to effectively deal with attacks with a wide area of effect.

Since the slime had Resistance Skills and Recovery Skills, this wouldn't be enough to deliver a finishing blow, but it would make it pause. I chased after the trail of my flames, jumping at it and digging my claws deep into its body, carrying it with me as I flew. I used Paralyzing Venom Claws, my talons buried so deep that it should be immobile for a bit even with resistance. I flew towards the cliff, still holding on to the slime.

Surely it couldn't survive being thrown into the chasm from this height, could it? And even if it did, the swift current of the river would wash it far away.

I flew to the top of the cliff and quickly spun into Roll. This wouldn't work if I couldn't get the darn thing unstuck from my hands to throw it. I was used to the momentum, but anything else would be disconcerted, to say the least. As I spun, I held the slime high above my head, waiting for the right moment to hurl it down into the chasm.

The force of it threw me off balance, but I spread my wings and braced myself.

Normal Skill “Meteorite” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

The slime plummeted straight down like it was being sucked into the chasm. I glided sideways, changing directions to land on the edge of the cliff.

“Kssh!” The black lizard ran over, letting out a sigh of relief as it saw me. It continued to look warily around the cliff edge. I wanted to tell it not to worry—I took care of the slime—but for some reason I hadn't gotten the experience notification. And I doubted it was just the Divine Voice holding out on me.

Could the slime really survive a fall from that distance? Maybe I'd have to rely on the black lizard's special venom after all. Even if it *was* still alive, it couldn't get back up here. I'd throw it into the river, taking care not to let it get caught on the edge of the cliff or anything. That was far enough away from the rock wall that I shouldn't have to worry. There was no way it could slither back up here...

A noise coming from the side of the cliff had me and the black lizard both reacting at the same time, our bodies jolting with alarm. I took a step backwards, then froze. Something sprang up and landed in front of me—a Giant Tarantourouge. And unlike the one I faced before, this one was pure black.

“Kssh...” The black lizard let out a little noise of relief that it wasn’t the slime. I felt better, too, but it only lasted a second.

Ÿ#Æ: Forte Slime

&MΔÈ(: N*

ε^: 27/35

zΘ: 148/148

ŸǺ: 67/67

It wasn’t a taranturouge at all! It *was* the slime! I smashed it down to the bottom of a cliff and it got back up here literally right away! The black lizard looked at me, sensed something was off, and quickly began shooting clay bullets at the camouflaged slime.

It made a weird noise with its mouth, and I realized it was shooting spiderweb nets to parry the clay bullets.

One of them passed through the web and struck the slime’s front leg, knocking it clean off. But instead of bleeding, the leg hit the ground and turned into a blue, sticky liquid. A new front leg appeared in its place.

I remembered then that it had some skills that involved webs and silk. It probably shot a thread of spider silk towards the cliff as it fell and launched itself back up here. At this point, anything was possible.

Abruptly, the color of the spider’s body began to fade from black, to blue, to semitransparent. Its upper body slowly took human form—that androgynous form from before, stuck onto a spider’s body. It reminded me of the myth about Arachne.

“How irritating. I can’t stand it when someone interferes with my carefully laid plans.” The slime stretched out one of its arms, fingers fusing together, its arm growing wider and thicker.

Its arms now resembled pointy blades, like a praying mantis. Its lower body

was a spider, its upper body was human, and it had two praying mantis arms, and yet the whole of it was a slime. *Stop mixing up body parts, you freak!*



It swung its claws around, looking satisfied at the sound they made as they slashed through the air. Then it dug them into the ground. “If you won’t let me pass, I’m going to have to stop playing around. And I’ll start with your weakness. I’m not a very generous creature, you see.”

The slime looked at the black lizard and licked its lips.

Part 4

“RAAAR!” I let out a loud roar, urging the black lizard to leave. It nodded silently and used Roll to retreat, hiding behind in a tree some distance away.

The slime had a Sense ability, so it didn’t matter if the black lizard hid, but I guess it did make it more difficult for the slime to predict where the clay bullets would come from.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure the Clay Gun attack would do any damage at all. I used Meteorite to bash it down a cliff and it bounced back up like it was no big deal. I had no idea what else to try.

The black lizard’s Special Venom might work. If we timed it just right, that could be our only chance. The problem was, the black lizard’s defense and HP were much lower than mine, and the slime had skills that could pierce right through my scales. We couldn’t just jump right into this.

Even the poisonous fog of Double Poison required the black lizard to get in close. The slime wasn’t fast, but its movements were unpredictable. Its shapeshifting ability meant it could surprise us easily.

Honestly, I wasn’t confident I could react fast enough. It had turned itself into children to take advantage of my compassion, after all.

It didn’t seem especially concerned about the black lizard’s Special Venom attack, either. It was possible it didn’t know about it or was trusting in its Poison Resistance ability. And with its boatload of skills, surely it had something in there to counter the Special Venom?

But right now, we had to take the chance and at least try.

“Fine. If you won’t withdraw, then I have no choice. But are you certain you won’t regret this?” As it spoke, the slime lifted its two large claws. They glinted red, and suddenly I was surrounded by flames.

“First Flame Slash, now Shockwave!” The slime turned its back on me and swung its arms, letting loose a fiery Shockwave attack.

I caught a glimpse of the black lizard using Roll to escape, hiding in the brush. The Shockwave hit a tree with a tiny explosion, leaving a mark on the trunk. Then, a blast of wind from Shockwave extinguished the flames. A moment later, the tree fell.

“Pretty crafty, eh? When you combine the skills, they become even more deadly. I’m far more versatile than a human or a dragon. I can even do *this*.” It lifted both of its arms and slashed them through the air in my direction. Several fiery Shockwaves flew at me.

Judging by the way its MP kept going up and down, the slime’s recovery magic was awfully fast. With my much-higher stats I’d managed to hold my own this far, but now it was practically cheating. If it survived and kept absorbing skills from monsters, there was no limit to how strong it could become.

I spread my wings to shield my body as I ran straight at the flaming Shockwave attack. I prioritized speed, not bothering to dodge. The Shockwaves that hit my wings turned into hot little whirlwinds, but they didn’t penetrate my scales. I took a little damage, but as long as I kept my guard up, this couldn’t hurt me that much.

“Trying to use your higher stats to your advantage? I’m tougher than you, so you’re probably better off avoiding my attacks. I think you made a poor choice.”

I peeked at the slime through my wings. It opened the big spider mouth on its lower body and shot out a stream of blue spider silk. It really had an endless array of possible moves.

I took to the air and flew at a low altitude to avoid the silk, then dove at the slime. It had its sights on me now that the shield of my wings was gone, letting loose another flaming Shockwave. I slashed at it with my claws, dissolving it.

Abruptly, the slime separated the upper and lower halves of its body, making the taranturouge and human two separate beings. As I swooped down, preparing another attack, I watched a strange bulge appear on the left side of the human’s upper body. It looked like a shell.

The shell began to take on color, transforming into a perfect replica of a large turtle shell. I couldn’t stop the momentum of my arm, and my talons jammed right into the shell.

Deep lines etched into the surface, cracks appearing, but I really felt it in my claws. The pain was so intense I thought they might snap off. I yanked my arm back automatically, like I had touched a hot stove.

The slime used that opportunity to get back up on its many spider legs and retreat.

Damn it! Looked like it even had the Tortoise Shell skill. I had no idea you could use it that way.

Now that it was farther away from me, it paused and smirked. The shell shrunk, disappearing back into its body. The gaping wound I'd left vanished as well.

"Haven't you realized yet that it's no use? Give up. Run away. I'm not fast enough to catch you two, even if I gave chase. As I've said, I have no desire to fight you."

When the slime realized I had no intention to withdraw, it tipped its head at me, tongue lolling out of its human mouth and stretching all the way down to the ground. Something sizzled, and the grass at its feet erupted in flames. Oh, now this thing had Paralyzing Tongue, too? And it had to be a pretty leveled-up version.

Even the most difficult skills became extremely versatile when the slime used them, paired with its ability to shapeshift at will.

The spider half of its body opened its mouth wide, sucking in a breath and exhaling a black fog, covering the area around it in a dark mist.

At first, I thought it was blinding itself with that move, but it had a Special Skill called Dark Vision. This wasn't a normal fog but some sort of light-blocking smoke, and that was where Dark Vision came in handy.

Should I try to get out of the dark fog? No point. I could follow the slime based on sound. I folded up my arms, legs, tail, and wings and Rolled after its footsteps.

Something whip-like lashed out at my body, probably its tongue. My scales were intact, though, and the paralysis didn't have any effect.

I sped up and charged right into the slime. The instant we collided, I twisted my body to control where it went. I was right; a fragment of the slime's body flew off to the right.

"Tch...irritating." It momentarily lost its shape but reformed it and rose up once more. "You won't win. I was being generous, but now you've upset me. You're going to regret it." The slime looked at me as its head regenerated.

The black lizard lunged at it from behind.

The slime was so focused on me that it hadn't noticed my companion sneaking around and waiting for a chance to strike. It had totally overlooked the black lizard.

"Hey! Is this why you forced me over here?" The slime tried to counter the black lizard's attack with its arm, faster than I'd expected. I should have punched it to focus its attention on me—I could tell that this surprise attack was going to fail. The lizard's bite just barely missed the mark.

I was too trigger happy, but I also knew that if I waited too long, I might miss my best chance to strike. That was what I was thinking anyway...but then the black lizard took the brunt of the slime's counterattack—an attack I thought it would easily avoid.

"Kssh!" It cried out and collapsed.

What? With the black lizard's speed, it should've evaded that no problem!

"Raaaaar!" I roared and ran over to its side.

The slime sighed. "See? That's why I gave you so many warnings." It looked down at the black lizard, its face crumpling into a smile. It raised its claws to strike, aimed its blades, and...weakly dropped its arms. "Th-this poison! D-damn it! Why? I have plenty of resistance!"

I watched as a dark cloud of something moved through the slime's semitransparent arm...the black lizard's special venom. It must have bitten or scratched at the slime during the counterattack. That was why it didn't dodge—it was making sure it injected the slime with its venom.

Part 5

“**L**OOKS LIKE I underestimated our cute little lizard friend, hm?” The slime’s voice was thick with anger.

I ran to the black lizard’s side, checking on the slime’s status as I went.

Ÿ#Æ: Forte Slime

&MΔÈ(: Poison α

ε^: 27/35

zΘ: 144/148

ÿǺ: 24/67

All right, we finally gave it the status effect. It had an abnormally fast HP recovery skill, but the poison had really slowed it down—it must’ve been harming it faster than the creature could heal itself. If I got in a chain of attacks here, I could win.

I’d tell the black lizard to run away and then deliver the finishing blows.
“*Raar!*”

The black lizard leapt up as soon as it heard me roar.

“I won’t let you get away! Clay! Slow!” Purple and yellow lights flew towards the lizard.

The purple light was sluggish, but the yellow light was very quick. The black lizard must’ve still been slightly dazed from getting hit, because it staggered and lost its balance, giving the yellow light plenty of time to catch up. It began swallowing up the lizard’s legs, flashing down to the ground and transforming into sharp needles right underneath.

The black lizard sprang backwards to avoid being stabbed, but that was when the purple light struck it, entering its body.

I'd been tortured way too many times by that purple light during my fight with the potortoises—it was magic that lowered your agility. I could see the black lizard's movements getting slower and slower.

That was when the slime attacked.

I rushed between them and slashed at the slime's body with my claws, hitting it at the shoulders and slashing diagonally across its torso. My attacks made barely a ripple, though, and the slime ignored me, its tongue whipping out towards the black lizard, wrapping around its body and squeezing. I raised my talons to try to cut the tongue off, but the slime opened its mouth and blew out a dense cloud of gas. Darkness fell, and my claws sliced through empty air; the slime had evaded me.

"Raaaaar!" I relied on my instincts and the noises around me, slashing through the air. I longed to let loose a stream of Scorching Breath, but I didn't want to accidentally hit the black lizard in the dark.

I couldn't hear a sound.

Was the slime staying still and going for stealth? The black gas was interfering with my Psychic Sense. I tried not to panic and paused, straining my senses. Just as the dark cloud began to lift, I pinned down the slime's location.

"Raaaaar!" I jumped towards the spot where I thought I felt its presence the most and stabbed my talons forward. I felt them hit but then bounce off. Tortoise Shell again?

The slime was gradually coming back into view as the black fog dissipated. Its outline was more angular than before, blue body turning translucent and sparkling like a jewel.

I froze. I didn't know what skill this was, but the creature had stopped moving and seemed to be raising its defense. The black cloud finally disappeared.

The black lizard's body was *inside* of the slime's taranturouge lower body. In a panic, I checked the black lizard's status and saw that its HP and MP were both ticking downward.

Life Drain and Mana Drain!

“Raaaaaaaaaargh!” I screamed and struck the slime’s body with my claws. I scratched the surface, but I didn’t do any meaningful damage.

Calm down. Its defense is definitely higher right now. But doing that meant it was frozen, so it couldn’t transform to evade or do any fancy tricks to avoid taking damage.

My strongest attack was Nutcracker, but if I used it I’d hurt the black lizard, too.

I spread my wings and flew to the top of a nearby tree. I set my sights on the slime’s neck and then kicked off the branch. Behind me, the tree creaked and collapsed. I glided down towards the slime, focusing all my momentum and all my body weight into my claws. They dug deep into the slime and broke off with a loud snap. I flew past the slime and landed heavily. My broken talons stabbed deep into the earth, and the slime’s head, which I’d forced off, fell to its side. The rest of its body lost its form and melted into a puddle.

I ran over to it and stuck my hands into the goop, pulling the black lizard out.

Just when I thought we were out of danger, part of the slime’s body transformed into countless needles and shot towards us.

Several of them hit me, but I took flight with the black lizard still in my arms. Somehow I managed to escape to the top of a tree.

For a monster with low attack power, the slime sure was good at penetrating my scales.

Must be the Armor Break skill. It really is dangerous. It’s got way too many skills!

“Ks-kssh...” the black lizard cried weakly.

I checked its status—my friend’s HP was almost gone. I looked off into the distance and roared quietly.

The lizard let go of me reluctantly, but it must have realized it would only hinder me if it stayed. It curled up and rolled away from the slime, leaving me alone.

The slime transformed again, pulling its needles back in. Its wolf’s face

crumbled and began to grow into a human torso, like some sort of wolf-centaur. Its human form was that same androgynous one as before—it seemed to like that one.

“Hm? That isn’t right.”

The slime closed its eyes and poked a fingernail against its forehead, drawing a horizontal line. The line opened up and another eye appeared—the third eye of a mahawolf. Wow, this slime really could do anything. Honestly, it was getting ridiculous at this point.

With the third eye in place on its forehead, the slime nodded in satisfaction and reopened its other two eyes.

“Ah, that was close. You startled me. I should be more careful when I take a new special skill from an opponent. I didn’t realize it was such a dangerous ability. Not that it will work on me ever again, of course.”

The slime shrugged. Then it shook its head slowly from left to right. Was it trying to provoke me?

This was weird. Why did it sound so confident? By now it should be on death’s door from the black lizard’s venom. I had a bad feeling, so I checked its status.

Ÿ#Æ: Forte Slime

&MΔÈ(: N*

ε^: 27/35

zΘ: 148/148

ŸĂ: 67/67

Wait, it recovered from the poison already?! I glanced automatically in the direction the black lizard had escaped. There was no way I could defeat the slime now; I might have to call the lizard back to help.

“Maybe take a closer look? I really shouldn’t be the one telling you this, but knowledge is power.”

I hated doing what it told me, but there was no reason not to check. At that point, I should have known that nothing was impossible for this creature.

*Trans****: Lv —*

*Skill *****]: Lv —*

*Bi**: Lv —*

*Sho**wave: Lv —*

****me Slash: Lv —*

Intimidation: Lv —

*Spider****k: Lv —*

****** Tongue: Lv —*

Double Poison: Lv —

Petrify: Lv —

******: Lv —*

Hellscissors: Lv —

*Vi** Sta***: Lv —*

*Shell Re****: Lv —*

*I*** Tackle: Lv —*

Slow: Lv —

Rest: Lv —

*Life Dra*n: Lv —*

Swell: Lv —

*Au** Regen: Lv —*

*Ma** Dr****: Lv —*

*R*ll: Lv —*

Black Fog: Lv —

Jeweled Cage: Lv —

Death Needles: Lv —

*******: Lv —***

Armor Break: Lv —

Neutralize Poison: Lv —

The slime had a new skill at the very bottom of the list, one I was certain belonged to the black lizard. It must have grabbed it when it had the lizard in its clutches and then cured its own poison.

We were back to square one.

Part 6

THE SLIME was a strange centaur-like creature now, with the lower body of a wolf and the torso of a human. It put a dramatic hand to its forehead and let out a languid sigh. “Only three of them nearby, hm?”

In the distance, monsters howled a response. The slime had to be summoning the mahawolves in for backup with Magic Energy Transmission.

“You really are stubborn, aren’t you? Are you that afraid to leave me alone? Or do you not like the idea of me messing with the village? I know that little black lizard friend of yours is hiding nearby. Should I set my sights on it instead?”

I had my reasons. I couldn’t let something so dangerous into the village—or let it get away with setting a dragon on the villagers, either. *Myria’s there, and I promised Gregory I’d protect everyone.*

And if I let this monster go, it would just keep accumulating skills and growing more and more powerful. We lived in the same forest; we’d bump into each other again. Both the black lizard’s and the orangurangs’ lives would be in danger. I absolutely could not let this thing roam free in my forest.

When I used Meteorite to smash it to the bottom of a cliff, it just spider-silked its way back up with no problem at all. It stole the Neutralize Poison skill, rendering the black lizard’s Special Venom useless. But that didn’t mean I’d exhausted all options. I didn’t want to use it, but I still had something up my sleeve.

“Awoooo!”

“Gawwoo!”

“Grrr!”

Three blue mahawolves appeared, third eyes locked on me. The slime’s reinforcements had arrived.

The slime ordered the mahawolves to advance. They bared their fangs and

growled viciously as they came.

Their levels weren't that high. I could wipe out their HP with one swipe of my tail, which I was sure the slime realized. They were just pawns to distract me, to split my attention so it could find an opening.

I also beat the slime in overall stats, and even though it had a lot of skills, there weren't many I didn't recognize. Once I figured out how it performed all those crafty moves, I could end it. It must've realized this; it couldn't whittle my HP down any further with the same old tricks.

The slime watched as two of the mahawolves headed towards me. Well, they didn't come right at me—they split up and circled behind me, one to each side. The third lay in wait a little farther back to attack from the middle. A flawless, elegant strategy. I was really starting to hate this slime.

Well, at least it didn't have a ton of HP. The slime bragged about how tough it was, but it couldn't afford to take too much damage.

I split my attention, waiting to see what my enemies would do.

The slime beckoned towards the waiting mahawolf, and it trotted over obediently. The slime placed a hand on its forehead. For a moment I thought it was going to steal a skill from it, but it already had all the mahawolves' skills.

It had enough HP for now, so I supposed it was doing Mana Drain. Compared to its Automatic HP Recovery skill, its MP Recovery skill was quite slow. It made sense it had a tactic to drain MP from the monsters it controlled.

I checked the slime's status. Yes, definitely low on MP. Now was the time to attack. I swung my arm up, letting off a Whirlwind Slash from my claws.

I aimed for the slime's outstretched arm; I was far enough away that it evaded easily, but I did interrupt its Mana Drain.

I took flight and glided straight towards the slime. The two mahawolves flanking me gave chase.

The slime and the mahawolves took different sides; they were going to try to surround me. I stretched out my legs and landed, aiming for the slime's eyes.

"Graaaaaaar!"

The mahawolves howled from behind, trying to distract me. I continued straight ahead, whipping my tail behind me and bashing one of them in the snout. It was a solid hit, too—enough to incapacitate it.

A mahawolf leapt at me from the left, and I finished it off with a Dragon Punch. It yelped helplessly as I knocked it into the air.

All right, two down. Now for the one coming at me from my blind spot.

I whirled around and spotted the third mahawolf. I could get rid of it in one hit, but I wasn't going to make myself vulnerable in front of the slime. As I spun, I spotted another mahawolf.

A fourth one?! There were only three before! I quickly checked its status. Yep, definitely a mahawolf. So that meant...the third mahawolf was the slime. Oh crap!

I spun quickly, but the slime-turned-mahawolf was already closing in on me. I should've figured it would do something like this when it attacked from all sides. Once again, I played into its hands and gave it the advantage.

"Raaaaaar!"

I backed up and readied Paralyzing Venom Claws. The instant my claws scratched it, the mahawolf's body dissolved, losing its color and turning semitransparent again. It shifted into the sea of needles and came at me.

I took the attacks in both arms, and a few got me in the stomach. As the sharp pain raced through me, I felt fangs penetrate my back. I whipped my tail around, knocking out the third real mahawolf for good. Its face was crushed, its neck broken, and its body spasming. Its front leg and its ribs were broken, too.

The three of them weren't dead, but they were close to it. They wouldn't be getting up and attacking me again.

The slime still didn't have much MP left. Not only that, but it was currently a ball of needles. Probably wasn't too easy to move around like that. I'd rendered the mahawolves powerless. This was my best chance for victory.

Part 7

I SCOOPED THE SLIME UP and held it tightly in my arms. It reacted with needles. They pierced my scales and drove all the way into my flesh, but I didn't loosen my grip. A line appeared on its fibrous body and opened up into a mouth.

"What do you think you're doing?"

I couldn't talk, so I had no way to answer. I wouldn't have answered even if I were able to, though.

I carried the slime as fast as I could over to the cliff. I kicked off the ground and spread my wings, flying higher and higher. Suddenly, I sensed something and looked down at the ground.

I saw a small girl with familiar orange braids, holding a staff almost as tall as she was. It was the Elfingle-human, Marielle.

She stared up at me with her mouth wide open.

Had she come to take me on? Why? She had to know there was no way she could win. Well, it didn't matter—I was glad to have an audience for this. It would eliminate one more of my worries.

I saw the black lizard looking up at me, crying out. Ahh, I hoped it didn't cross paths with the orange-haired girl.

Once again, I'd have to leave the black lizard behind. I didn't have a choice. The longer I stayed in the forest, the more warriors and magicians they'd send after me. And I was still concerned about the Dragon Scale Powder thing, so I couldn't ask the black lizard to abandon its home and come with me.

"Hey! I asked you a question? What do you think you're doing, Plague Dragon?" the slime yelled. I ignored it and flew higher.

About halfway to the cliff I felt the fatigue hitting me. The slime's needles kept stabbing in and out. If I lost my stamina in midair this whole thing would be meaningless. I decided this had to be high up enough.

I paused right over the chasm and looked down.

Too late to chicken out now.

I couldn't let this monster go to where Myria was. Not when she was the one who named me. And I couldn't break the promise I made to Gregory, who called me by that name. I couldn't let this creature roam around the forest where the black lizard and the orangurangs lived. Not when they'd all been so kind to me.

"You're going to throw me down to the bottom of the cliff again? How predictable. What will happen if I do this, I wonder?" The slime stretched its feelers and needles, trying to wrap around me and stab my entire body.

Damn it! My HP is plummeting!

But...its attack power is low. I can handle this.

"If I'm tangled around you like this, you won't be able to throw me. Too bad. How foolish you are, to use an attack I already know how to defeat! I can attack you as much as I please. You're defenseless! See, see, see?! Ha ha ha! I never thought I'd kill a Plague Dragon right after a Rock Dragon! Don't worry, I'll keep all your skills and take very good care of them! Once I have your Dragon Scale Powder, I'll be able to wipe out entire villages without any help! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

This slime was pretty cocky. But I was actually fine with it wrapping itself around me, because my greatest worry was that it would escape before I could take it down.

It was digging its own grave, and I would be the one to bury it.

"Hey! What are you smiling about? Something's wrong..."

I tightened my grip on the slime, stabbed it again with Paralyzing Venom Claws, and then dove straight for the bottom of the cliff. If it dodged damage from Meteorite with its spider silk, then I'd just have to bash it directly with Nutcracker. And if I held on all the way down, there was no way it could slip away and dodge like last time.

The distance we were falling was so great, there was no way it could escape taking a ton of damage, no matter how many resistance skills it had.

“I-Idiot! Stop it! You’re going to smash me into the bottom of the chasm?! I’m not going to let go of you, you know! And if you get caught in that current, we’ll die together! So stop it! Stop it!!”

It was right. The river’s current was too fast. Even if the slime cushioned my fall, we were wrapped together so tightly that I would certainly take serious damage.

I doubted I’d have enough stamina left to fly after this, either. I probably *would* get swept away by the current. And who knew what would happen to me afterwards?

I might die. Or I might get washed away to some unfamiliar place. Or maybe I’ll be surprised and the current won’t carry me away after all. Who can say?

But I did know that if I did this, the slime would no longer be a threat to the village. And since there was a villager right here to watch me fall, people wouldn’t have to live in fear that a Plague Dragon could show up at any moment.

“F-fine! I lose! I won’t go to the village! I’ll leave the forest! S-so...!” The whiny slime opened its mouth wide and screamed.

As if I’d believe that. I knew full well that once its stats surpassed mine, I’d have no chance of beating it.

“Stop, stop, stop! Stop! I can’t die! Not here! Not now! *Stop!*”

The slime changed shape, mouths appearing all over its body. And all of them were trying to swallow me. I ignored them and glanced down at the bottom of the chasm, aiming for a huge, rocky crag.

“Nooooo! Not here!!” Spider silk shot out from the slime’s body, aiming for the top of the cliff. It hooked onto the edge and slowed us down. It was trying to lower the damage we’d take on impact.

“Stop! Stop! Stop! H-ha ha ha! I made it! I made it! I’m sav—”

It gloated as the silk attached to the edge of the cliff. I let go of the slime with one arm and sliced through the thread with my claws.

“No! You stop that! Stop! Stop! Stop! *Illusia!*”

I changed positions and thrust my arms out, pushing the slime down. My HP was already pretty low. If I screwed this up, the blowback would kill me. But I couldn't prioritize my own safety, because then the slime might escape. I had to time it perfectly.

"Stop! You have to! Stop! Why?! I'll do anything! Stop! I'm going to be the strongest!" Its mouths were all begging at the same time—I could barely make out anything it was saying.

"Stop!"

"I can't die!"

"Not here!"

"Because—!"

"I promised—!"

"The Divine Voice!"

I slammed the slime into the jagged, rocky crag. It stopped talking.



The rock shattered, splinters flying everywhere. My claws snapped off, an intense, sharp pain racing all the way down to the bone. I stretched my legs out and pushed off the rock as hard as I could to stop my body from being broken as well. I felt the scales on the bottoms of my feet being torn clean off.

But it worked. I floated through the air in an arc. But just as relief settled on me, one of the slime's tentacles reached out and grabbed hold of me, slamming me down onto the rock.

"Raaaaaargh!"

My head crashed into the crag, knocking me unconscious for a split second. The current caught my legs and swallowed me up, pulling me into the muddy water. The parts of the slime still holding on to me were torn away. And then everything went black.

Interlude:
The Half-Elf's Doubts

Marielle

“REST!” I screamed. A ball of light shot out from my staff and enveloped the blood-stained villager. The gaping wound in her stomach closed, and color returned to her face. Her breathing would be normal soon.

That was the last villager with life-threatening injuries. My vision warped, and my hands trembled. The bottle I held slipped and shattered on the ground, the last drops of green liquid that remained splashing out.

Mana potion. It instantly recovered your magic power, but the side effects were dire. Drink two bottles in a day and you’d suffer the worst death imaginable.

“Marielle, please let me use that medicine! There’s some more back at the house, isn’t there?”

I rose to my feet as my apprentice, Myria, ran over. She was the only person in the whole village besides me who could use white magic.

Mana potions were extremely useful since we didn’t have any other practitioners, but I couldn’t let a regular human, much less barely-out-of-childhood Myria, drink such a thing.

Not only would it stunt her growth, it might even shorten her life span.

“No one else has life-threatening injuries. It’ll stunt your growth if you drink it.”

“But you’re also—” She realized what she was saying and her eyes widened.

This was one of the things I loved about her, but if I allowed it too often she would forget who was the master and who was the apprentice. I would lose face as the town elder, too. I didn’t mind being teased, but I needed to be serious in my leadership role for the village. Now more than ever.

They needed a strong leader to rebuild the ravaged town, and there were plenty of better-suited candidates than me. I had one in particular in mind, but rumor had it they were planning to take their children and leave town. Under

normal circumstances I would try to stop them, but with things the way they were, I truly didn't have the right. I couldn't push the responsibility on someone else at this point.

"Don't treat me like a child," I snapped. "That medicine is expensive. If you still insist on sating your curiosity after I'm done saving villagers' lives, then you can pay me 200,000G!" To tell the truth, though the potions from town were fairly expensive, I made my own out of cheap ingredients I bought myself and rare herbs from the forest. This potion probably wasn't worth more than 1000G altogether.

"I-I promise I'll pay you back...f-from my future salary. Pomera seems like she's in so much pain..."

I covered my mouth with my hand to hide a smile. She was such a sweet girl.

"I can still use it at least one more time," I said. "I'll see to Pomera. Why don't you distribute medicine and bandages to all the houses?"

"Okay! Thank you so much!" Myria bowed her head and ran off.

All right. I promised her, so I figured I should go get my potions. Two bottles in one day would kill me, but another half a bottle shouldn't pose a problem. My life span was already ridiculously long, so what was shaving a few years off? I wouldn't regret it. I'd buried so many people precious to me, and the numbers just kept growing. Even Myria would die before me.

Something nagged at me, but it could wait. The Mana Potion had me feeling terrible, so any work I did was a race against time.

I couldn't leave my biggest task to anyone else, though. I had to go after that Dark Dragon. I had a hunch—a potentially dangerous one.

My true reasons for wanting to go after the dragon were selfish ones. I'd only seen a Plague Dragon long ago, and even then only in a drawing.

I returned home to gulp down some more Mana Potion and then cast white magic on Pomera. After making sure she was recovering properly, I caught up with Myria, who was panicking as she tried to care for several people at once. I relayed some simple instructions, told her I was planning to rest back at home for a while and asked her to take care of things in my absence. Then I slipped

out of town.

I cast stealth magic on myself and ran through the forest.

Myria was holding herself together well, despite being nearly killed by that dragon. Clearly she knew to be strong and keep it together for the townsfolk. But I was sure, deep down, she was very upset.

If I looked at the big picture, the truth was that the Plague Dragon showing up was a blessing. It defeated the Little Rock Dragon and left the town intact. If it hadn't shown up, we would've had ten times the casualties.

But that didn't change the fact that the dragon had killed one of the villagers. Which meant, unavoidably, that Myria would be held liable for bringing the dragon to the village in the first place. I hated to push this off on the dead, but the only way I could see out of this was to swear a few people to secrecy and then tell everyone else that it was Gregory who brought the dragon in.

I suspected it would prove difficult to get Myria to agree, but it was the absolute best course, all things considered. There was just something I had to make sure of first.

Considering the scope of the situation, the number of casualties was incredibly low. One villager was mauled by the mahawolves, one murdered by Doz, and three crushed by the Rock Dragon. And then there was Gregory, who'd been decapitated by the Dark Dragon.

Of course, it was still nothing to celebrate, but the death toll only reaching half a dozen was nothing short of a miracle. I checked Gregory's body afterwards to be sure. It had signs of crush damage from being pulled into the chasm caused by the Little Rock Dragon's Tremor attack. Honestly, I had my doubts that he was even still alive by the time the Dark Dragon beheaded him. I went around and questioned survivors, and not one person could tell me they'd seen the Dark Dragon attack Gregory.

Plague Dragons were known for leaving a trail of death and destruction in their wake, and yet it had left almost no casualties. I could say the same for when it attacked Myria. It was close enough to kill her with one swipe. It didn't.

It was also strange that it withdrew from a battle against someone with my

level of magic. I *did* attack with the type of magic it was weakest to, but I only hit the back of its hand.

Maybe it was all nothing more than a coincidence. I'd lived a long time, and I'd seen unrelated events line up to point to a pattern that wasn't actually there.

But it still nagged at me. I was worried that perhaps we had abused and thrown rocks at the hero who had protected our town.

"Ughh!" Suddenly, a wave of nausea came over me. I paused and pressed my hands to a tree trunk. I must've drunk too much Mana Potion after all. I leaned against the tree, deciding to rest until the pain in my head retreated.

The Dark Dragon would be deep into the forest by now. And the farther one went into that forest, the more dangerous it became. My stealth magic wouldn't be much use after a while.

Maybe I should just come back later. I talked myself into accepting my own excuses and was just about to head back when I heard a loud racket from nearby. It sounded like two giant monsters fighting.

If I got caught up in that, there was no way I'd make it out alive. I took a few steps back towards the village, then paused. There weren't that many giant monsters in the forest. I turned back around, wondering if one of them could be the Dark Dragon. Then I looked up.

The Dark Dragon flew high into the air. It was holding a shapeshifting monster, a slime.

The dragon looked at me and then quickly averted its gaze. Its expression seemed sad. At least, that was what it looked like to me.

Then it dove straight down into the chasm.

I stood frozen for a few seconds. Then I snapped back to reality and ran to the edge of the cliff, looking down into the abyss.

The Dark Dragon was gone. It must have been caught by the river's current.

I turned to see a large lizard gazing down at the bottom of the chasm. We made eye contact briefly, but it didn't seem interested in me. It just continued

to stare down at the river.

Interlude:
Home Alone with the Orangurangs

Orangurang

THE SUN HAD RISEN and set five times since Boss left. I'd gotten better at making pottery, just like he taught me. It was hard to make a fire without Boss, though. I caught a fire-breathing frog and made it do it for me. But I wasn't used to making fires, so I burned my fur a lot.

I tried making weapons and armor like I'd seen humans holding a long time ago. They were heavy, so the others didn't like them even though they were hard and strong.

I decided I'd be the only one to use them for hunting, then. But the armor made it hard to move well, and one of the others kicked me. It didn't hurt since I had armor on. He grabbed his leg and cried. Armor is great. Everyone should wear it.

When I wasn't hunting or sculpting, I went searching for Boss. The four of us searched near the cave, but we didn't find any clues.

Even the girl who was so fond of our boss wouldn't help with the search. I was sure she must know something, but she didn't tell us and just lay in the corner of the cave all day long. Sometimes she would put her head in the poison pot and then her legs would flail. I laughed at her once, and she almost bit me.

I looked up at the sky. The red sun was sinking, and I might as well go back home. I had come up empty again today. My shoulders drooped as I walked back to the front of the cave.

The other three were already there. They all looked sad.

"Ah-ooh?"

"Ah-ooh."

"Ahh."

"Ah-oh, ah-oh."

I asked the three of them how the day went, and they all shook their heads.

None of them had found a clue about Boss.

I let out a sigh and looked towards the cave. Then I noticed something. The girl had been cooped up inside the cave ever since Boss left, but now she was gone. The others sensed something was up and glanced into the cave, looking puzzled.

“Kssh! Kssh!” There she was. She came running towards us from the direction of the cliff. I hadn’t seen the girl this upset since Boss went missing. Something bad must have happened, or she found Boss.

No, if she found Boss she would be happier.

I stared at her in confusion, and she looked at the statues near the entrance of the cave. At the human one.

Was a human coming?

The lizard ran over to the tree where we hung the jerky and started pulling on the branches. At first, I didn’t understand what she was doing. Then she looked at us and hissed, *“Kssh!”*

Did she want us to help her? I took the meat off the tree and went into the cave. I put the meat in a pot and took four shovels, then went back outside. I handed out the shovels to the others, and we cut down the tree.

The girl looked satisfied and then moved to another tree. Did she want us to cut that one down, too?

I hesitated but then she bared her fangs at me. There was venom in those things. Boss always stopped her from biting us, but he wasn’t here now. She’d really do it if she wanted to.

I took the meat off the second tree and brought it inside. By the time I got back, the other three had already chopped the tree down. Two of them carried the wood inside the cave. The other took his shovel and began to tear up the branches. I stood there staring into space, and the girl whipped me in the back with her tail.

I took my shovel and started tearing up branches, too. I threw them into the cave. I raked dirt back over where we had dug and then stepped on it to smooth

it out, all under the girl's instructions.

We carried the sculptures inside. They were heavier than I thought, and I accidentally dropped one, but it didn't break. Still, I bet Boss would be mad if he found out.

We picked up the fur carpet on the floor and tossed dirt on it. She told us to do that, too. I was certain Boss would fly into a rage if he saw it.

Halfway through I began to worry if I should even be doing this. Boss didn't bite, but he roared. The girl didn't roar, but she bit.

She told us to take the muddy fur pelt and hang it over the entrance of the cave. After I crawled underneath it to go back outside, I finally understood. From out here, the mud-caked pelt just looked like an earthen wall. You couldn't tell it was the entrance to a cave at all.

Now we didn't have to worry about outsiders coming in, but we were still able to come and go freely. I was certain the girl was doing this to throw off a human. That was why she hid the jerky and the tree and the statues inside. She was very clever. I was frightened of her, but I trusted her.

I went back inside and ate some meat out of a pot. Then I heard some footsteps that sounded human. There were about four of them. First, I heard a confused voice and then another that sounded fed up.

There was a human who came here to find something. Now their friends were making fun of them. The humans' voices continued.

First one, then another began walking away from the cave. Finally the last one ran after their three friends.

I don't think they noticed us.

Curious, I ran towards the mouth of the cave so I could flip open the pelt to peek outside. But the girl stopped me, so I decided to go to sleep instead.

I put a pelt over the shiny mushroom we used for light and the cave instantly went dark. The rule was once someone did that, no one could make any noise again until morning.

In the morning, I didn't even realize the sun had risen because of the pelt. I

woke up later than usual. The girl was gone.

I quickly woke the others, and we went outside the cave. There she was, standing there. She looked at us and cried, *“Kssh.”*

And I don’t know how, but I just understood. She was going to travel far away to look for Boss. That must be it. I walked over to join her, but she shook her head.

She was our boss in Boss’s place, so if she left, we would be in trouble. I wasn’t sure what to do now. But she turned her face towards the cave and cried, *“Kssh!”*

She would bring Boss back someday, and she wanted us to protect the cave until then. That’s what it sounded like to me, anyway.

“Ahh!”

“Ah-ooh!”

“Ahh!”

The other three stepped forward to try to convince the girl to stay, but I just bowed my head to her. Once the other three saw me do it, they stopped howling and bowed their heads, too. The girl looked relieved and nodded, then left quietly. Once she was gone, I turned back towards the cave.

I would protect the cave until Boss and the girl returned. I’d make it bigger and stronger. I’d make a ton of weapons. I’d fight other orangurangs and make them our subordinates to get even stronger.

By the time Boss and the girl got back, they would be so happy. If I made weapons, no other orangurang would ever be able to best me.

Interlude:
The Swordswoman's Mistake

Meltia

WHEN YUNO AND I returned to the village with the others, we were stunned. The tall watchtower was gone, along with several other buildings. Craters and huge cracks in the earth had appeared all across town, too.

Apparently, something major had gone down in the village center.

“Hey, are we too late?” Daz, the archer, turned to us and whispered.

My hunch had clearly been wrong. The discovery of that bandit cave in the forest had prompted me to gather up my friends; I wanted to neutralize the bandits before they became a threat to the village. But this was very obviously not the work of humans.

I had made a severe miscalculation, and a surge of powerlessness accompanied that realization. Yuno and I should have been here. We could have managed the situation. We could have prevented deaths and injuries.

According to a passing villager, two dragons had appeared and used the center of town as their battleground. Everything we saw now was collateral damage.

The dragon who lost the fight had perished. The victor was gravely injured and fell into the chasm nearby.

Even more alarming was a supposedly dead man suddenly showing up and going berserk. Rumors about the cause spanned all the way from zombies to poisonous mushrooms.

I thought again about my nixed theory of necromancy. None of the town’s graves were disturbed, but if that guy really was a zombie, I couldn’t dismiss the theory.

Was that bandit group dabbling in necromancy? That was dangerous magic. But if they were already a bunch of lawless bandits, why would they care?

I took my three companions and headed to Marielle’s house. She’d be able to tell me what happened in town without floating some ridiculous theory. Despite

her unassuming presence, she hadn't stayed in this village so long just for show.

She wasn't at home, so we went back into town to find her. We quickly located her in the town's community center, which had been converted into a makeshift shelter for the people who lost their houses in the incident and a hospital to treat the wounded. Marielle walked around casting white magic on the injured villagers. We made eye contact, and she stopped.

"I'm Meltia. I've visited the village before." I didn't mention she was the one who'd hired me; she'd asked me to keep that bit of information a secret so as not to alarm the residents.

She took me back to her house, and I relayed my questions. Nothing she had to say differed greatly from the rumors around town. I could tell she was hiding something from me, but I doubted any persuasion could entice her to give up that information.

I told her about finding something I thought was a bandit hideout. Initially, I'd gotten her permission to explore the forest, but if anyone asked, we could tell them we'd entered on our own. Then she could explain the dragon incident as divine comeuppance for too many people tramping through the forest.

It would serve to put the villagers at ease and stop them from searching for a cause, and at the same time discourage others from entering the dangerous forest. Marielle could kill two birds with one stone.

Doz himself had ignored entreaties to stay out of the forest, setting off this strange chain of events in the first place. Marielle couldn't let the villagers discover she had given us adventurers permission to enter.

We were standing up to leave when she stopped me. "Ah, there's one more thing. Can I ask you a question?"

I hung back as she stood up from her seat.

"Do you remember Myria? The girl who was here with me last time we spoke." I thought back on my last visit, conjuring up the image of a small woman with bobbed hair and skin as beautiful and clear as a porcelain doll's.

"She says she wants to go on an adventure. I want you to look after her for a while. Just teach her the ways of the world outside this village, that's all. I'll pay

you. If you need to consider my offer, you can give me your answer after your current job is done. Or you can talk to her first and then decide.”

I’d heard Myria was the only other person in town besides Marielle who could use white magic. Under normal circumstances I was sure she’d want to avoid losing her, so there must be a very good reason.

Myria was rumored to have let one of the dragons into town; I wondered if she was being chased out. But then I saw the look on Marielle’s face and knew that wasn’t it.

I didn’t mind taking care of some fledgling white mage, but I needed a better grasp on the situation. I wanted to speak to her first.

“Well, we’ll think about it while we’re searching the forest.” That was a safe and perfectly acceptable answer. We said goodbye and left Marielle’s house.

And now, with her blessing, we made our way towards Noah’s Forest.

We were set upon by wolves, spiders, some weird bear made of clay, and all kinds of other strange creatures, but four was much safer than two.

Daz acted as our vanguard. After his poisoned arrows stunned the monsters, Yuno charged in with her hammer. Then I attacked from close range with my sword or Light Magic. And when the battle was over, Romeena, our white mage, would heal us.

With those numbers, we could easily defeat that Young Plague Dragon we’d seen before.

“Hey, Meltia, you *sure* there was a bandit hideout all the way out here?” Daz asked skeptically after we trooped the long way around the chasm.

“Yes, I’ve seen it. We’re almost there. I have an exceptional sense of direction. Don’t worry.”

“I checked into it after you told me the story. I talked to the biggest merchant on this continent, and he didn’t know anything about it. If enough piperis to fill a huge pot disappeared, it would be a huge deal. You sure it was even piperis?”

“You never told me you were looking into it.”

“You sure the people in the cave didn’t flee from another continent? It’s

possible they smuggled the piperis in—there’s a huge underground trade. Maybe that’s why nobody wanted to talk about it. But I don’t know, after looking around the forest, I’m finding it hard to believe.”

Daz was raised in an orphanage in a city filled with strife and did a stint working for organized crime. He certainly had far more experience in this area than I did. If he said something was off, that this area didn’t make sense for a hideout, I believed him.

He spoke lightheartedly, but he wasn’t the type of man to say things he didn’t mean. The world had taught him life was too short for idle chatter.

Still. I knew piperis when I saw it.

“It smelled exactly like piperis. Yuno saw it, too. Didn’t you?”

“Oh, Yuno couldn’t possibly comment on such expensive things. That was my first time seeing it. We were so poor growing up that I ran away from home so my mother couldn’t sell me. We once had to roast my father’s shoes and eat them. Although, they *would* have tasted better if we had piperis...” Yuno sounded oddly proud of the story, her ears twitching cheerfully. Still, it was a pretty effective mood-killer, and the rest of us were silent for a few moments.

I knew she took pride in how far she’d come from nothing, but that didn’t mean I liked hearing about it.

“Ah, oh...sorry. It’s not like Yuno’s *never* used anything expensive, or...anyway, we’re almost there! The cave should be right here...oh...”

I broke into a run and found...nothing. The mysterious statues were gone, along with the jerky-strung trees.

Was this the wrong place? *No, I’m sure this is right...* “What’s wrong, Meltia?”

“Yuno, there was a cave here before, right? Right?!”

“Hm, Yuno’s not super confident about her memory. Are you sure it wasn’t a bit farther?”

I didn’t think so, but if it really wasn’t here, then there was no other explanation.

“Are you sure you saw it? This story’s fishy all the way through. You sure you

weren't just dreamin'?" Daz seemed exasperated.

"No, I wasn't dreaming! There were trees with meat strung up in them and statues..."

"Oh yeah? Well, why don't we look somewhere else. No point in staying here."

"Yuno will go first!" Yuno shouted. "It was farther into the forest anyway. Honestly, Lady Meltia, for someone so brave you can be so forgetful sometimes!"

Wow, was that really what Yuno thought of me? I guess this wasn't the time to dwell on that.

"Hang on! It was around here! I swear it was here!"

"Hurry up and come along," Yuno said gently. "Let's keep going."

Yuno started walking, and Daz followed her. Romeena glanced between us, conflicted, then quietly said "I'm sorry" and ran off after Yuno.

I wasn't sure why she apologized, but there was no point staying here. Feeling a sudden sense of abandonment, I hurried after the rest of the group.



Bonus Story 1:

The Girl's Story

Part 1

Myria

TODAY MARIELLE AND I took a trip to the city of Hyritet. She had an errand to run, and I'd figured she'd turn down my offer of company, so I was pleasantly surprised when she allowed it.

She hadn't let me come to town with her since that time I'd gotten lost. It looked like she'd *finally* gotten over it. She wasn't really the type to hold grudges, anyway. The only small part of her was her stature.

"Listen. I know you already learned this lesson the hard way, but don't go off on your own," Marielle warned me.

"Yes, of course! I know!"

"Why does it always sound like you *don't* actually know when you say it like that?" Marielle narrowed her eyes and studied my face. She was trying to glare at me, but the effect was slightly undermined by the fact that she had to look up at me. And that she was *incredibly adorable*. I reached out automatically to pat her on the head but caught myself just in time and pulled away. *Wow, that was a close one! I need more self-control.*

"Ah ha ha...that's not true!" The last incident had taken more of a toll on her than I realized. She must've really hated the guards treating her like a child.

I'd heard that elves were very proud and arrogant, but Marielle wasn't like that at all. Of course, I'd never met a pure-blooded elf. Maybe they were stuck up, or maybe that was just a stereotype, along with the rumors that they looked down on humans and avoided even conversing with them. I really wanted to meet one. I wondered if they were all small like Marielle.

"Thank you so much for bringing me along with you, Marielle. I know you're

still bothered by what happened, so I thought for sure you'd make me stay home this time, too."

"I am *not* still bothered by what happened! I told you several times I left you behind on my last visit because I needed you to stay and tend to the Mirei flowers! They're difficult to take care of!"

"Oh, I'm sorry! That's right, you did say that." I had a feeling it was just an excuse, but I wasn't about to rub it in and make her angry on purpose. Maybe if everything went smoothly, she would bring me back again next time.

We stopped in a town on our way to the city, where we hired a small carriage to take us the rest of the way.

We generally didn't hire carriages, but this one belonged to a personal friend of Marielle's. Considering the price, there was no way I would ever be able to afford such a trip myself. And I didn't have anyone else to accompany me either, so I absolutely couldn't afford to get on Marielle's bad side. I needed to be extra polite and cautious. Whenever she went on her own, Marielle never got me exactly what I asked for. She would get something similar but miss the spirit of my request. Sometimes I thought she might be doing it on purpose.

Times like those were when I felt the age gap between us most acutely.

"Actually, there is something I'd like you to do for me, Myria. That's part of the reason why I asked you to come along."

She wanted my help? What task could I possibly do that Marielle couldn't? Whatever it was, I'd accept it without hesitation. I couldn't turn down a favor for Marielle. It would be the perfect opportunity to prove myself indispensable.

Even if I screwed it up, I'd prove my loyalty. She was the type of person who appreciated effort no matter the results.

"I'll do anything you want me to do!"

"Well, there's no need to get so excited about it. Do you remember that wine I bought last time I was here? I'm quite fond of it. Supposedly it's a special brew only sold in this city. I'd like you to go buy some for me."

Huh? She just wanted to send me on an errand? I was grateful it was such a

simple task, but it put me on guard. *That* was why she wanted me to come along?

“Um...why do you need *me* to do it, though?” I wasn’t refusing, but I was genuinely curious. We didn’t need to split up to go shopping, especially after how annoyed she got with me last time when I got lost.

“H-hmm...” She frowned. She appeared to really want to keep her reasons a secret, and I was beginning to grow suspicious. Perhaps I shouldn’t have agreed so readily.

I knew she wasn’t the kind of person who would send me off into danger just because she wanted some wine, but I couldn’t think of any other good reason she wouldn’t just tell me. I considered whether to press her on it.

“M-Marielle?”

“...I just had a bit of a misunderstanding with that shopkeeper, you see. He doesn’t have the best opinion of me.”

Okay, so she’d made a bad impression. That made sense. But would she really feel so bad about it that she wouldn’t even want to step foot inside the shop? Marielle had lived a long life, and she was an incredibly practical person. She knew all kinds of things I didn’t, and her open-mindedness always impressed me.

She could be a bit scattered at times, but usually only around me. She always held it together when it really counted. This shopkeeper had to be *awful* if they’d upset her so much. I was biased as her apprentice, but still.

“Don’t worry about it. Just go buy the wine and get out quickly. That’s all you have to do.”

If it was as simple as that, why did her eyes keep darting away from me? I hesitated, absolutely certain there was more to this story. Marielle glanced at me, quiet and sad. She must really want that wine.

There was something about Marielle’s face when she was sad, though. She looked so young, like a poor, unfortunate little girl who had lost all hope. The contrast between how old she looked and how old she actually was could be intense. And yet every time I was overwhelmed with a desire to protect her...to

do something for her.

“Leave it to me! I’ll go get you that wine!”

“I’m glad I convinced you, but you really don’t need to shout.”

Part 2

Myria

THE WINE was a brand called Baphomet. She said it had a label with a sheep that looked like a child had drawn it.

“There, there it is...” Marielle jerked her head in the direction of the shop as we rounded the corner.

“So that’s where I have to go? All right. You stay right here and wait for me, Marielle. I’ll prove to you what a reliable apprentice I am.”

“That’s a good girl, Myria. Don’t dawdle. Just buy the wine and get back out here. If they say anything to you, just smile.”

“Thank you so much for the advice, Mistress. I promise to make you proud.” I was feeling fairly enthusiastic. But just then, we were interrupted by a loud thump.

“Eek!” Marielle and I both jumped at the same time.

“Meow.”

A black cat padded past us, turning to look back and sticking out its tongue like it was teasing us. Then it continued on its way.

I let out the breath I’d been holding. Marielle seemed equally relieved. Thinking about it, there was no real reason for us to get freaked out like that. I collected myself and headed over to the shop.

It was a simple place without many frills, and at the moment I appeared to be the only customer. Darn. If the shop were busy, the shopkeeper would be less likely to try and make unnecessary conversation with me, but I guess luck

wasn't on my side. I waited a bit, but no one else came in.

I didn't see the shopkeeper, either, but I began to search for the wine. I'd wait until I found it before calling for assistance.

I walked the perimeter of the small room, searching for the label with the sheep, but I couldn't find it. Frowning, I made another trip around the store. This time I spotted a bottle on the back shelf with an odd label. I put my bag down and picked up the wine. It was *some* sort of horned animal. Was it a sheep? No...the horns were growing from its chin. I'd never seen a sheep like that. I'd never seen *anything* like that.

"Welcome. You're my first customer today, young lady." A voice startled me. I turned to find an elderly man with beautiful white hair and a neat appearance standing there. His voice was kind and friendly.

This was the man Marielle had gotten into an argument with? He seemed so nice. But I guessed you never really knew what might set someone off. If Marielle said that was what happened, then it must be true. I needed to be cautious.

"Hello. Do you carry a wine here called Baphomet?"

His eyes widened slightly. "Another customer requesting that wine? It's always been my dream to sell locally made wines, but no other shops would carry it, so I had to open my own. This was some thirty years ago now, though. The Baphomet never sold well, I'm afraid. I asked for input and stocked up on the more popular vintages, and managed to eke out a living that way. Occasionally someone would come and buy the Baphomet, but without fail they'd complain that the flavor was too strong and they couldn't drink it. I can't explain it!"

Wow, that sounded rough.

"Um, anyway...where do you keep the Baphomet? I couldn't find it anywhere."

"Well, so many customers complained about it that I put it in the back so no one else would be unlucky enough to buy it by accident."

Wow, it was *that* unpopular? But Marielle said she'd bought it before,

so...“Did a small girl ever come to buy a bottle of it?”

“A small girl...ah, now that you mention it, yes. About three months back, I think.”

That was definitely Marielle. That matched when she and I had last come to the city together. Doubtless he’d remember something as unusual as a young girl buying alcohol, especially a kind that wasn’t very popular.

“She said her mother liked unusual wines. She hasn’t been back since, so I guess her mother didn’t care for it after all.”

The shopkeeper dropped his gaze and shook his head slightly. He looked a bit hurt. He must really love those local wines, going so far as to open up a shop. It must have been devastating when they weren’t as warmly received as he’d hoped.

Still, the girl he described couldn’t have been Marielle after all. First of all, I didn’t even know her mother. She didn’t really like talking about her, and she didn’t visit her often, if ever. There was no way she’d tell a stranger about her.

I wanted to know what happened between Marielle and the shopkeeper, but if I kept prying, he’d just get suspicious. I might have already gone too far.

The shopkeeper asked, “Where did you hear about Baphomet, anyway?”

“Um, a friend of mine asked me to get a bottle for her.”

The shopkeeper looked as if he found that hard to believe, but he didn’t ask anything further, just smiled.

“Well, whatever the reason, I’m glad to know someone wants to buy it. I just wish one customer would tell me they enjoy it before I close up shop.”

“Oh? Are you going out of business?”

“Someone built a large shop nearby that sells spirits. The owner is young but very well known. Their motto is ‘buy cheap, sell cheap.’ An old foggy like me could never hope to compete. The past few years I’ve only kept the shop open out of love. But it’s time.”

“O-oh...” I answered vaguely, not sure what else to say.

“Yes, I’m planning to go back home to the country. Although...I left abruptly and have rarely been back, so I’m not even sure anyone will remember me. Maybe I should have done this a long time ago.”

He was closing up shop and going home. I wondered how many times he’d put it off over the years. Part of it must be stubbornness—it couldn’t be easy to leave your hometown and then come back because you’d failed. A rival shop opening nearby was as good of an excuse as any.

It was sad, but what other choice did he have? If he’d finally made up his mind, I had no right to try to get him to stay. I doubted he was making much of a profit. But maybe I could grant his wish. I knew someone who loved that wine. Marielle was right outside, anxiously awaiting my return.

She said they didn’t get along, but it had to be a misunderstanding. I just couldn’t believe this nice old man would start a terrible argument with Marielle. If they just talked things out, I was sure things could be resolved.

“Ah, pardon me. There I go again, just talking and talking. I’ll go get the Baphomet from the back for you.”

“Sorry, can you wait just a moment? I’ll be right back!”

“Hm?” He looked confused, but I smiled reassuringly and ran out of the shop.

I’d bring Marielle back. I knew she wouldn’t be thrilled about it, but I’d drag her here if I had to. I dashed down the street and turned the corner. Marielle was leaning against a building waiting for me.

“There you are. Did you find it? You sure you didn’t stay and talk too long?”

“Please come with me!”

“Hm?”

I grabbed her by the wrist and tugged her away from the wall.

“Myria! What in the world are you doing? Let go of me!” She resisted, leaving me no choice but to grab her with both hands and pull.

“Just please come with me! You have to help that old man!”



“Wait! Just calm down a minute! I don’t even know what you’re talking about!”

“If you won’t come quietly, I’ll pick you up and carry you!”

“You’ll regret it for the rest of your life! Now let me go!” As Marielle and I struggled, I heard footsteps.

“Excuse me, but you forgot your bag...”

It was the shopkeeper. I’d left my bag on purpose thinking I’d be right back, but he hadn’t known that. I’d run away so suddenly.

He seemed surprised to see Marielle but not uncomfortable. The situation must not have been as serious as she made it sound.

I checked to see Marielle’s reaction. She was hanging her head in frustration and biting her lip. She looked resigned.

“Hm? You’re that little girl from a few months ago. Do you two know each other?”

“Oh, Marielle might look like a little girl, but she’s actually an adult.”

“What? When I asked her why she was buying the wine, she said it was for her mother’s birthday.”

So the girl he mentioned *was* Marielle.

“You bought it to drink yourself, didn’t you, Marielle? What’s this about your mother? I thought you told me elves don’t care about birthdays.”

Marielle’s face grew redder with every question I asked her.

“Marielle?”

“It wasn’t me! You must have the wrong person!” She shook off my grip and sprinted away.

I stood there watching her run with my mouth hanging open. What in the world? I turned to the shopkeeper, eager for the whole story.

He told me that when she came in, he asked her if she was running an errand, and she snapped, “No!” indignantly, as if she were offended. Then he wondered

if she had snuck some money away from her parents to buy alcohol, since the drinking age here was fifteen. He was very hesitant to sell her something so strong.

Marielle then told him she was part Elf, but he didn't believe her. He knew elves existed but had never seen one for himself, and he'd never heard of an elf having a child with another species. And Marielle just looked so very much like a small child, he dismissed her argument outright. After that, Marielle gave up on convincing him she was an adult and instead made up a story about buying the wine for her mother's birthday. She even put on a baby voice and said, "I really wanna buy it for Mommy," trembling on the verge of tears.

I couldn't imagine Marielle putting aside her pride like that, but why would the shopkeeper lie? Marielle must've *really* wanted that wine.

Now I understood why she didn't want to go back into the shop. This was the misunderstanding she'd been so vague about—she *hated* having to pretend she was a child. She wasn't a self-important person, but she wasn't exactly humble, either. The thought of having to put on a baby voice again and pretend to cry was probably torture for her, never mind having to explain it all to me. And yet she risked all that just to drink the Baphomet again.

I suddenly felt very guilty. I practically ripped a bandage off her wound and rubbed salt in it. There was no turning back now. What was that old saying? "If you're going to eat a poisonous lizard, you have to swallow it whole, all the way down to the tip of the tail."

Part 3

Myria

"THERE YOU ARE, Marielle! I've been looking everywhere for you!" I found her in a vacant spot near a line of outdoor vendors. She was panting with exertion from her run.

"Just so you know, I'm not the little girl the shopkeeper was talking about.

And I've never even met my mother. It definitely couldn't be me."

"Okay..." She wasn't budging.

"Anyway, Myria. Did you buy the Baphomet?"

"I forgot! Let's go buy it together!"

She scowled. "I'm never stepping foot inside that shop again! How many times do I have to tell you that? Why are you so insistent on taking me there? Is torturing me really that entertaining?" Her eyes glittered with unshed tears. Wow, she must *really* not want to do this, and I understood why.

But I wasn't going to budge, either.

That old man came all the way here from the country to spread his love for local wines. It was so depressing for it to end this way. I wanted Marielle to tell him that she loved the Baphomet and thought it was delicious. That was all she had to do. We'd already resolved the misunderstanding about her age, after all.

"Honestly, just forget about it!" she snapped. "I'm heading back to the inn and going to bed early. I'm exhausted."

Uh-oh, that wasn't good. Now she was really mad.

"That shop won't even be here the next time we come to the city, Marielle."

"What?"

"A bigger shop opened nearby, and they took all of his customers. He said he's closing and moving back to the country. He wanted people to appreciate the Baphomet wine, but not even one customer has ever told him it tasted good."

She went silent for a while, averting her eyes. "Well, if he's going to close up shop, I suppose there's nothing I can do about it. If you won't buy it for me, I'll have to do it myself."

She turned abruptly and started back towards the shop. I felt a smile spread over my face.

"I'll come with you!"

"What a terrible apprentice I have. Can't even do a simple errand! I'll just

come to the city by myself again next time.”

“What?” But I didn’t want that at all!

Marielle laughed. “I’m only joking. Don’t take me seriously. Now hurry up.”

I smiled again and quickly followed her.

“U-um, Marielle? I have a favor to ask before we get to the shop.”

“Hm?”

“Could you please pretend to be a child in front of the shopkeeper again, like you did last time? Just a little bit? I’d do anything to hear you talk like that!”

Marielle had quite the poker face. Her smiles were frequent, but she still always looked mature. I couldn’t imagine her seeming innocent or childlike.

Just imagining her saying, “I wanna buy it for Mommy!” got me excited.

“Hm? Marielle? Marielle?”

There was no answer.

She suddenly sped up. Uh-oh.

“I-I’m sorry, Marielle! Just forget about it! You probably didn’t want me to bring it up again, did you?!”

“I’m *definitely* coming back alone next time!”

“I-I was only joking! You don’t have to take me seriously! Marielle, slow down!” I ran after Marielle as fast as my legs would carry me.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH for buying Volume 2 of *Reincarnated as a Dragon Hatchling*. It pains me to admit it, but I didn't realize I had to write an afterword for every book until just now. For some reason I thought I just had to do it for the first one, but apparently that's not the case!

I have a hard time figuring out what I should write here. It makes me feel a bit shy to say things like, "You should interpret this part this way!" or "I want you to feel this way when you read it!" or something like that, so I never know what to write. And it's not like I can talk about how my friend wanted to see a particular picture so I cut it out of our junior high yearbook, or how I tripped one rainy morning on the way to high school and showed up covered in blood.

I have a feeling I'll be thinking the same kinds of things in my afterword for the third volume, so please just keep in mind that I'm trying my best to fill up space and keep your expectations low.

I picked up several books to get an idea of how other authors write their afterwords, but they're all pretty unique. Sometimes they'll slap a big drawing in there for no reason to take up about ten lines of space. I thought that was a good idea, but I didn't have the guts to try it myself. But if I really can't think of anything to write next time, I might draw a big triangle or something and put the afterword in there. So if I go ahead and do it, you'll know I finally took the plunge and went for it. Stay tuned!

...All right, I suppose I'll let you in on some secrets from the author. It has to do with the biggest status screen that appeared in the second volume. I can't let every volume get longer and longer each time, so I've been trying to organize the status screens a bit better...but if I don't pay enough attention to them I don't realize how big they're getting. I find myself saying, "Is it just me, or are you getting bigger?"

I think it's just difficult to write out all the skills horizontally instead of vertically, even if it means cutting down on space. It's kind of like playing Tetris. But now I feel like I can't go back to having everything in one narrow column. I'll

probably have to keep making a big block raining down like bullets for every status screen.

Well, if I keep adding skills, nobody's statuses are going to get shorter. Except for Doz's, of course. Honestly, if I keep adding at the rate I'm going, it'll fill up an entire page. I thought about restraining myself, but I don't want to have to change the content of the book just because of formatting restrictions, so I'm just going to keep adding more and more skills. I'll make my goal a status screen that spans two pages next time. Bring it on, Status Screen! Common sense be damned!

Also, I'm sure you all have noticed this by now, but I added little character silhouettes at the beginning of chapters and POV shifts. Since our narrators change a few times in this volume, I wanted to make it easy for you to see who was speaking and make the reading experience as smooth as possible.

I think the silhouettes are really cool, so if you didn't notice them before, please go back and take a look at them. Yeah, they're *really* cool.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor for always listening to my selfish requests. And I can't thank my illustrator NAJI Yanagida enough for the absolutely beautiful illustrations.

Nervously watching the avocado tree that's on the verge of death from my window,

—NECOCO

I WANNA SLEEP FOREVER.

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all your support.


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