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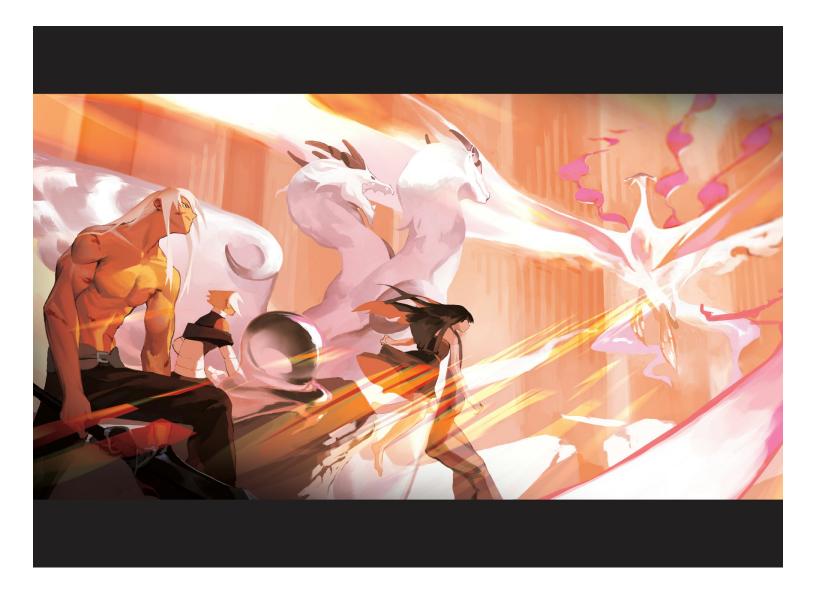
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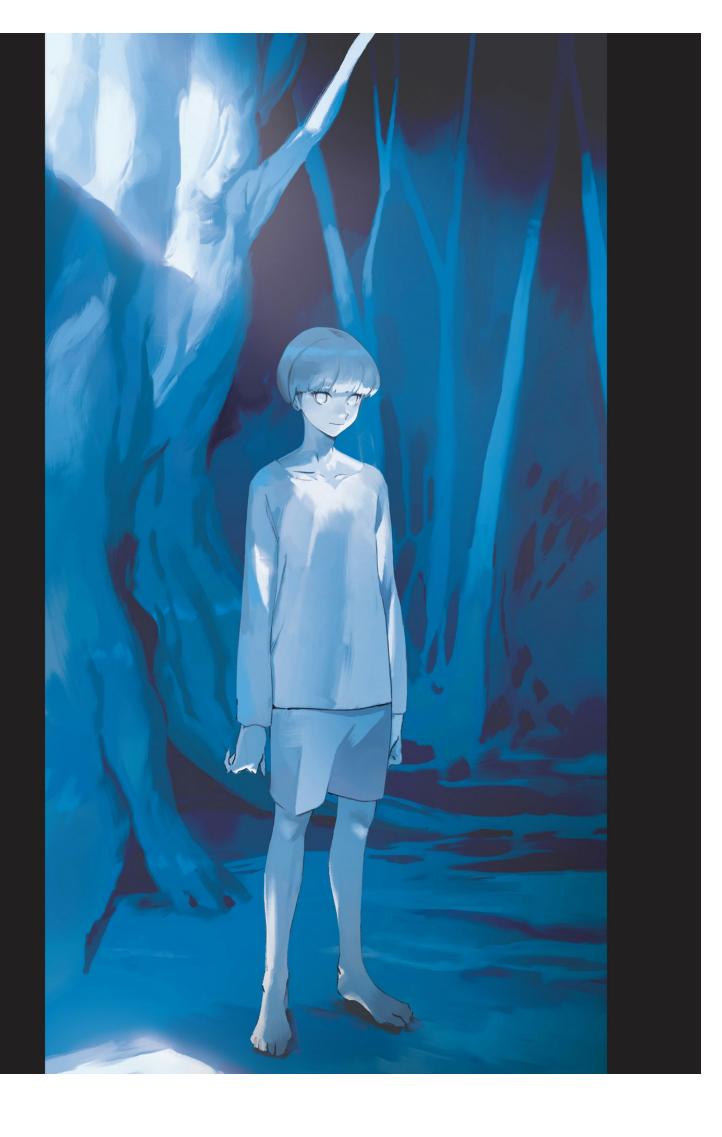
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REINCARNATED AS A DRAGGING HATCHILING

NOVEL



WRITTEN BY

Necoco

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NAJI Yanagida



Seven Seas Entertainment

AWAY FROM THE BATTLEFRONT



LILYXILA

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



ALLO

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

SAMAEL

One of the Demon King's Three Cavaliers, the "Sword of Death." Discovered Illusia and Myria's connection.



MYRIA

IN

A kindhearted girl who named our hero. Invited to Alban Castle as a guest but taken hostage once her connection to Illusia was discovered.



MEPHISTO

One of the Demon King's Three Cavaliers, the "Sword of the Mythical Butterfly."

ENGAGED IN COMBAT

VOLK

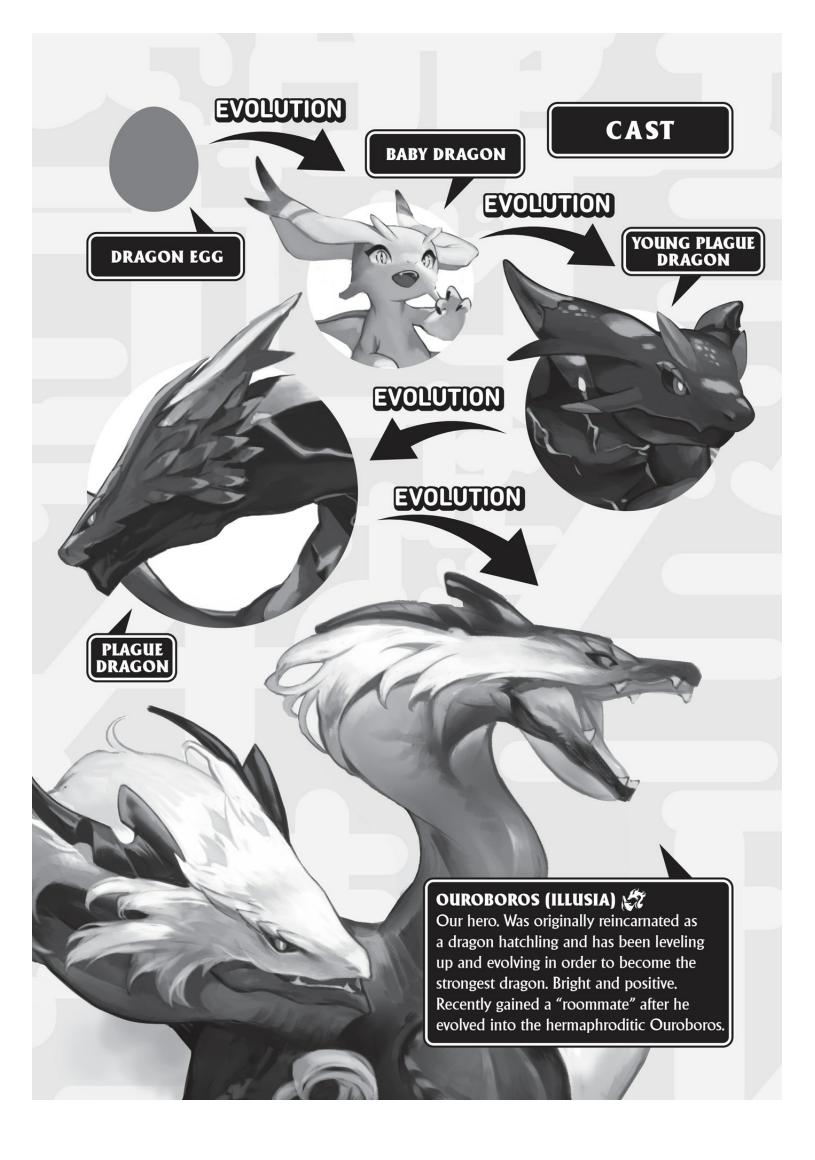
An adventurer who carries the title of "Dragonslayer." Wound up working with Illusia by some strange chance.

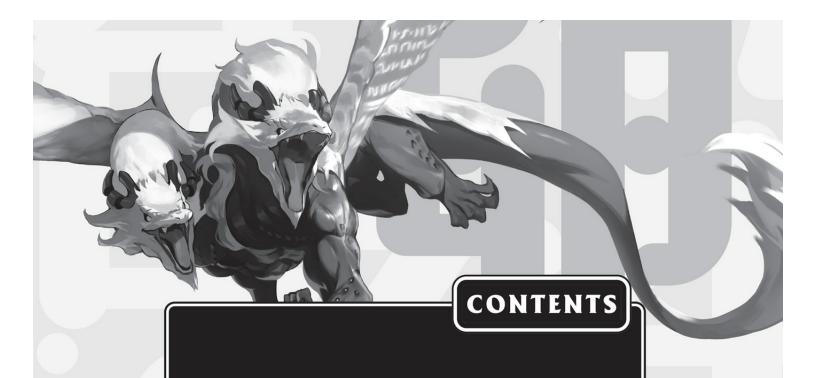


BLACK LIZARD 🚓

A trusted companion of our hero. Master of poison attacks. Traveling with Myria to reunite with Illusia.







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THE STORY SO FAR

After
meeting Saint Lilyxila
on the Island at the Edge of
the World and joining her cause, Illusia
set out with her toward the royal capital of
Ardesia, where the Demon King was said to have
appeared. With a new friend—the adventurer Volk the
Dragonslayer—in tow, Illusia infiltrated the royal capital.
There, he reunited with the kindhearted girl who gave him his
name: Myria. She was in the capital to attend a party at the castle
hosted by none other than the princess of Ardesia, whom the Demon
King had chosen to impersonate.

Although certain that they'd be walking into some kind of trap, Illusia was determined to save Myria and Volk from the clutches of the Demon King, and so he headed for the castle where the Demon King was waiting.

However, amid the chaos of battle, one of the Three Cavaliers, Samael, the Sword of Death, realized that the Ouroboros he was facing was Illusia—the very same Illusia the Demon King was obsessed with. Not only that, upon realizing that Myria was Illusia's weakness, he took her hostage and fled.

Intent on rescuing Myria, Illusia entrusted Volk with taking down the second of the Three Cavaliers: Mephisto, the Sword of the Mythical Butterfly. With the help of Allo and the gang, Myria was safely recovered. However, Illusia found himself being led to a place where his enemies had the home field advantage. There, the last of the Three Cavaliers—Rogueheil, the Sword of Infinity—revealed himself. On top of the rank A Rogueheil, Illusia was also forced to deal with a rank A– Giga Slime. Illusia was in a pretty sticky situation, but he managed to pull through in the end.

Unfortunately, Illusia's troubles didn't stop there. With Samael chasing after Myria, Allo, and the others, the outcome of Volk's battle with Mephisto unknown, and no sign of the supposedly powerful saint's movements, it's now up to Illusia to vanquish the Demon King once and for all.

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Chapter 1: Mephisto, the Sword of the Mythical

Part 1: Slime

N A ROOM deep within Alban Castle's underbelly, a viscous soldier—a knight slime—knelt before my throne in deference and gave its report. I listened, kicking my short legs against the edge of the throne.

Urgh. I still can't get used to the princess's tiny body.

"...and Volk the Dragonslayer is on a rampage against our knight slimes in the banquet hall," the knight slime reported. "It seems that Sir Samael, the Sword of Death, of the Three Cavaliers has succeeded in separating the dragon that suddenly appeared from the rest of the group."

According to the last report, a dragon had attacked the banquet hall where the adventurers were gathered. By now, Rogueheil, the Sword of Infinity—who'd left his place as my guard after receiving the report—should have joined up with Samael in order to deal with the dragon.

This had developed into a rather peculiar situation. However, with Rogueheil on the move, I could assume that the dragon was more than handled.

"Volk the Dragonslayer and Mephisto, the Sword of the Mythical Butterfly, are facing each other in battle. The dragonslayer may be strong, but no matter how many humans there may be, without a hero or a saint with him, he has no chance against the strength of one of the Three Cavaliers. He'll be defeated in no time, without a doubt!" the knight slime said, swollen with pride. I wondered how he could be so confident when the knight slimes themselves couldn't hold a candle to Volk.

"Hmm, but still...a dragon..." I muttered to myself, drawing my legs up to the

throne and wrapping my arms around my knees.

An inkling had sprouted in my brain when I first heard news of the dragon. However, I immediately dismissed it. No. There's no way he'd show up here. I hate to admit it, but I will: I'm too paranoid about that dragon showing up again. I'm always so eager to pin everything on him.

But this dragon wasn't him; it had been sent by the saint. The saint possessed a skill called Spirit Servant that allowed her to bind the souls of the monsters she defeated to her and control them. With such a powerful cheat skill at her disposal, she would have had no trouble taming this dragon.

I knew that the saint would be making her move soon. The adventurers were invited to the castle so my followers and I could farm them for levels and add their skills to our collection, but that wasn't all they were here for. I'd wanted to create a spectacle to lure the saint to me; I was sure to run into her sooner or later, and this way, I could meet her on my home turf and destroy her.

A banquet hosted by the princess where outsiders were invited inside the castle must've seemed like the perfect opportunity in the saint's eyes. If the saint from the Holy Land of Lialum spearheaded an attack on this castle—and the princess, the ruler of the Kingdom of Ardesia—it could spark a war between the two countries. The adventurers provided a conveniently neutral third party to enter with. Even if she thought it was too convenient to not be a trap, she couldn't let such a good opportunity pass her by.

"...And the saint?"

"U-unfortunately, we haven't been able to find her yet..." the knight slime stuttered.

Damn. She still hasn't made her move? I clicked my tongue, annoyed. The knight slime trembled, no doubt in fear of incurring my wrath.

The Three Cavaliers had taken action; now it was my turn. The worst-case scenario would be all of us being defeated one by one while we're separated. However, since there was no sign of the saint—or of the Beast King Spirit

Servant she controlled—I had to be careful.

I'd tried to predict the likelihood of future outcomes using my Laplace Authority Interference, but the percentages were fluctuating wildly. The Laplace Authority Interference wasn't suited for large-scale predictions. When it came to things I couldn't envision, its accuracy dropped dramatically.

If it was just that it wasn't very accurate, it might've still been helpful, but for some reason, the percentage changed drastically every time I used it. It was just a waste of MP.

The saint was likely also using Laplace to predict the future. We were in a strange standoff: We were both using Laplace to try and gain the upper hand over the other, rendering its predictions—already inaccurate at best—almost completely useless.

"If God could only tell me of her whereabouts, I could go and kill her right now... Ahh, no, I know. This is all a test to see whether I'm qualified to succeed the Great Sages and inherit the power to wield Laplace freely, isn't it? Yes, I get it now. It's the same as it was back then, isn't it, God? I'll kill the saint. Then the Beast King. And then the dragon that killed the hero. Will that suffice, God?"

The knight slime looked on in horror as I muttered to myself.

"Yes...? I am simply communing with God."

"I-I see, my liege..." The knight slime looked unconvinced.

"If it comes to a battle of wits, the saint may still have the upper hand."

The saint had come all the way to Alban, the royal capital of Ardesia, to speak to us and make her presence known. There was no way she wasn't involved with the adventurers now running amok in the banquet hall and the dragon suddenly appearing and ravaging the castle.

But even so, the saint was nowhere to be found. I'd sent a slime to follow her while she was in the city, but as expected, the slime never came back to report. It was reasonable to assume that she killed it.

Under normal circumstances, I'd make a bolder move once my opponent began to act. Even before the saint announced her visit to Alban, I knew she'd be making her move soon. Things had all gone as expected since her announcement. I planned out her time of attack for her so it coincided with the feast. Once she arrived, I'd block her escape, then use a two-pronged attack with Rogueheil to ensure we eliminated her without any issues.

If I killed the saint, I'd be revealing the fact that I was a monster, and I'd lose my cover as a princess, but stealing the saint's Sacred Skills was far more important to me than maintaining my princess ruse. If I could attain those skills, there'd be no one in the world who could stand against me.

"After all, God said that amassing a collection of Sacred Skills is an essential step in becoming the ruler of the world, yes? And I am the vessel for that might."

That was why I wanted to take on the saint, even if it meant forcing my hand. But unfortunately, I still didn't know where she was or what she was doing. I'd assumed she must be setting a trap somewhere in order to subdue me, but I couldn't find the trap either. I had no idea where the saint was planning to attack me, nor what she had planned. This meant that in the end, I'd had no choice but to hide myself deep underground as a precaution against the saint's unseen movements. On top of that, due to my lacking military forces, I'd had to send the Three Cavaliers to deal with the rioting adventurers and the dragon. For the time being, I was completely cut off from them.

I had the feeling this was all exactly what the saint wanted, but I had no other recourse available to me. By keeping herself completely hidden, she was restricting my movements.

I was getting impatient. My circumstances were not great, to say the least. But there was no way for me to act now. If I were to take on both the saint and the Beast King at the same time, my chances of victory were slim. However, even though the game was being played around me, I couldn't see any of the cards in the saint's hand.

"God, I..."

At that moment, the door burst open and several knight slimes charged in with panicked expressions.

"Demon King, sir, we're in dire straits! Sir Rogueheil, he...he's been defeated!"

Blast it! The worst-case scenario was playing itself out before me. I held my head in my hands.

"...I see. So the saint has finally shown her face, has she? Was she the perpetrator?"

"N-no, sir. I was only watching from a distance, so I don't know the details, but it looked like it was the dragon, the one who infiltrated the castle."

"The dragon...?"

Rogueheil was a lower rank A, and a particularly clever one. Yet he was defeated by the saint's Spirit Servant, who didn't even have any Sacred Skills?

"And what of the saint ...?"

"W-we have not heard any word about her yet, my liege... I have tried to confirm her whereabouts with the other soldiers, but no one has seen her or the Beast King yet."

So not only were they able to preserve their fighting power, but they defeated Roqueheil too...

"God," I murmured, "it seems I must withdraw for the time being."

The cellar of Alban Castle had a large waterway that led outside, which I could use to make my escape in case of an emergency. I rose from my seat, and the knight slimes in the room rushed to my side.

"What...do you intend to do, Demon King?"

"For now, I will retreat. The saint has played us for fools. Rogueheil should have been more careful."

This defeat stung. I had no idea how many of my knight slimes—or the

remaining Cavaliers—I'd slowly and carefully recruited for my cause would survive. But so long as I survived, it was still possible to rebuild. This was a massive blow, and even if we rallied together and fought hard now, our chances at victory were slim. The saint was not an enemy I could take lightly. She'd even succeeded in killing the Beast King and harnessing its spirit, rewarding her with immense power.

I'll kill the saint, and I'll kill the Beast King too. And then...one day, I'll find that despicable Illusia again, the one who ruined me, and kill him as well. Perhaps not now, but one day soon.

My thoughts floated back to the dragon currently attacking the castle. I'd assumed it was the saint's Spirit Servant, but something felt off. I'd been told that the saint could only possess two spirits at a time. Had she disposed of the Holy Dragon Seraphim to recruit a new dragon? The thought tugged at my mind.

"You are...retreating, Demon King?" one of the knight slimes asked hesitantly. I, of course, had no intentions of taking on several rank A enemies at once. I rose from my throne.

As I did so, one of the other knight slimes spoke up. "Sir Samael mentioned the names 'Illusia' and 'Myria.' Do they mean anything to you, my king...?"

At first, I couldn't grasp what the knight was saying. But then, after a few moments, it clicked.

Ahh... So the dragon that infiltrated the castle really was Illusia, then? My suspicions were correct from the very start. Laughter bubbled up from deep within my body.

"M...my liege? Is everything all right?"

Was this another one of the saint's clever traps? Did she know that I wouldn't run away if she used Illusia as bait?

I would've liked to assume I was overthinking things. What happened

between Illusia and me in the forest all that time ago was nothing of consequence in the grand scheme of things, but if the saint had been investigating me, it wouldn't be impossible for her to connect the dots all the way to that forest village. It wouldn't surprise me to learn she'd done that.

Even so, I still had to go and see for myself. My god had to know that I wasn't the only one who was worthy of meeting Him, earning His favor. That I was the one who would aid Him—not Illusia.

During that battle in the forest, it became clear that my development was well behind Illusia's; and because of that battle's outcome, God abandoned me.

But my fate was not to end there. I survived. I'd been certain that my death was assured, but I lived. I knew now that the experience was a test, a trial given to me by God. And it was not over yet.

"Change of plans," I announced. "I'm going to kill Illusia. We can escape afterward."

It'd taken quite some time, but I'd already met the conditions for acquiring the Human Realm Path and the Preta Realm Path. It was time to prove that I could live up to my god's expectations.

Part 2

LOST IN THOUGHT, I gazed around at the slime carnage scattered around the massive hall deep underground, at the bones and partially dissolved corpses that had once been trapped inside the Giga Slime.

Rogueheil, the Sword of Infinity and the strongest of the Three Cavaliers, had been defeated. So had his secret weapon, the Giga Slime. The question was, what was my next move?

This underground hall was uncomfortably vast, and the door at the end appeared to lead to a lower level. It seemed like they'd dug *quite* deep underneath the castle. Why? Did it serve some sort of purpose?

The Demon King ended up not revealing himself, but...if he was hiding anywhere, it had to be at the end of that passageway. That would explain why the Giga Slime—the largest, most powerful class of slime I'd ever seen—had been locked up in this underground hall: to guard the Demon King. This hall was a bit over-the-top if the plan was just for Rogueheil to lure his enemies down here and kill them, after all. If his objective was to cut off his enemy's retreat, it would make more sense to bring me to a room that was a dead end. I had no explanation for the door at the end of the hall.

When he was talking to Samael, Rogueheil had let slip that his main duty was to protect the Demon King. And based on our battle, it seemed like the Giga Slime's power could be utilized to its full potential when it was teamed up with Rogueheil. If Rogueheil's typical station was in this hall with the Giga Slime, and their role was to act as the final bulwark protecting the Demon King, then...call it a guess, but I had a feeling the Demon King was somewhere deep beneath us.

If he escaped right now, the royal capital would be safe, at least. But I had no doubt that he'd find somewhere else to hole up and start the same cycle all over again. He'd slaughter humans, gather his followers, and try to take over

the world.

We'd successfully made it into Alban Castle and killed two of his strongest minions, who were both rank A—. This might be our last chance at getting the Demon King alone and taking him down.

Saint Lilyxila hasn't shown her face yet, but we're allies. I dunno how long she plans to just watch, but I'm sure she'll do something if she sees him trying to leave. The main bulk of our enemy's forces have been defeated. Opportunities as perfect as this don't come by very often. It's only natural we'd both want to defeat him, here and now.

However, there was still the issue of Samael and Mephisto. If I put those two on the back burner, they might hurt Allo or the others. I knew the world was hanging in the balance, but leaving my friends to fend for themselves was just too risky.

It was frustrating that I couldn't confirm anything for certain, but I apparently still had Lilyxila on my side, and she'd never been defeated. Along with her were Seraphim the Holy Dragon, and—although she struggled to control him—Beelzebub, the Beast King. And if I had a quick rest, I could still fight too. We had a total of four rank A allies on our side.

Although Lilyxila hadn't acted yet, it was almost like she was keeping the Demon King in check and on his toes by staying hidden. That was probably why he hadn't come out into the open yet: He had no choice but to stay on high alert in case Lilyxila showed up. And as a result, she was able to draw the Three Cavaliers away from the Demon King and give me the opportunity to take them all down one by one.

Even so...I was out here on the front lines, and she was still holed up somewhere safe. I would've liked to see her out here by this point. Now that I'd defeated Rogueheil and the Giga Slime, the Demon King was probably in a tight spot. Unless he was powerful enough to defeat four rank A opponents single-handedly, retreating was the only logical choice for him. And if he *did* have that

kind of power, he would've already come out of hiding and vaporized me where I stood.

There was also still a chance that the Demon King had already fled. It made much more sense to make supporting Allo and my team my highest priority rather than searching for someone who might not even still be around.

All right, I guess we'd better head back up. When I turned toward Partner, I noticed she was tilting her head in an odd way, and it didn't seem like she'd noticed my thought.

Partner? I gave a questioning growl. Partner jolted, then shook her head and turned her attention to me.

("There's...something dangerous coming. What do we do?")

I immediately used my Psychic Sense. Partner was right: There was something coming up the stairs leading deeper underground. It seemed to be shaped like a human, but it was clearly something...different. Something evil. Looking at it was like staring into the inky blackness of a bottomless pit, in a way no other monster had made me feel before.

No, it can't be... Why would the Demon King show himself now? What, does he have some sort of plan to turn things around? Or is he just desperate?

From the stairs emerged...a blonde girl, dressed in lavishly regal attire. This had to be Princess Crys, the last of the Ardesian royal family. Her already petite frame was slightly hunched over, making her appear timid. She looked at me with a mixture of fear and uncertainty, and I was struck by how different she seemed from the egotistical, selfish, and shortsighted princess I'd heard so many rumors about. But I'd also heard that she was originally quite sickly and withdrawn, and that looked accurate to me. The princess's actual physical appearance was irrelevant now, anyway.

The center of Princess Crys's timid face began to twist and swirl, her features smoothing into each other. A chill ran down my spine.

The fake princess opened her mouth in a silent laugh. Then her silhouette distorted, and the surface of her body transformed into a rainbow-hued, gelatinous slime. The mass of rainbow slime reformed again, into the shape of the same androgynous child I'd seen in the forest all that time ago.

"Aha, Illusia! It really is you!" the slime cried. "Oh, how I've longed for the day I'd see you again! Watch closely, God! I'm going to prove to you, right here and now, that I am the only one worthy of your favor!"

Maybe the Divine Voice was talking to him? The slime was bowing his head with rapturous attention.

...Damn it. I knew he'd survived our last fight, but I thought I'd gotten some experience points afterward, so I'd always believed I'd killed him.

Standing in front of the slime now, though, brought back the memories of that fight in vivid detail. I remembered jumping into the river at the bottom of the cliff with him wrapped in my arms and immediately losing consciousness. When I woke up, my level had increased and the slime was gone. I'd assumed the slime died, but I was wrong. It must have been the mahawolves it'd summoned—I'd left them near death when I jumped, and they must have died at some point while I was blacked out. That's where the experience points came from, and I'd foolishly not realized until now.

"Now, then, I'm sure the saint will show up before too long if I don't finish this quickly. Do not worry, God. I will not falter again! Illusia, I've been waiting for this moment for a very, very long time!"



The slime's outline collapsed to the floor—he was going to transform. I immediately sent four Whirlwind Slashes toward him; they exploded on the ground just in front of him, one after the other, as the slime leapt back. Dust kicked up from the floor danced around in the air, and the slime disappeared from my sight. I tried to use Psychic Sense to detect his presence, but although I could sense his evil aura, I couldn't tell where it was coming from. He seemed to have some sort of cloaking skill.

("Partner! It's in the air! That guy is bad news!!") Partner called, her face pointed upward.

I followed her gaze and saw the deformed slime suspended in midair. His translucent, rainbow-colored body was still the same, but four massive wings sprouted from his back. In addition to the childlike face the slime seemed to prefer, he now had three other dragon heads that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

Oh, crap! He knows Fly?! Talk about a jack-of-all-trades. What's with all the heads though? It looks super unbalanced.

"I wish I could've taken my time and killed you nice and slow, but this'll have to do," the slime said.

Flaming orbs of light appeared in front of each of the dragon heads' mouths. The heads all opened their jaws, then closed them over the fireballs and swallowed. Red light shone out from inside the slime's translucent body.

I knew this skill, but I couldn't believe it. It didn't make any sense.

"Gravity."

The red light turned black, and the three orbs shot out from inside the slime, heading straight for me. The moment the light touched me, my body instantly got heavier, and I fell to the ground. The floor sagged and cracked where the light touched it as though it was crushing the ground with its weight.

Gravity was a skill that increased the gravitational force of everything in its

range, preventing everyone but the user from moving. But this Gravity was on a completely different level, in both scale and power, from every other Gravity skill I'd seen before. If I'd been a rank C, it might've been enough to crush me to death right then and there.

"Illusia, I will be the one to save God. Not you, not the saint, and not the hero or the Beast King either. God is mine. He chose me, and only me. I know that. You and the rest are merely stepping stones on my path to His side! You misunderstand your place in all this, and you keep meddling in our affairs! You're in my way!"

At the sound of the slime's voice, the three dragons stretched their necks toward me and opened their mouths.

"Now, hand over your Sacred Skills and disappear! Drago Flare!" Three red beams of light shot out of the dragons' mouths and beamed straight at me.

Part 3: Volk

I STRODE ACROSS the gaudy carpet decorating the banquet hall and pointed my sword at the strange swordswoman in front of me. She was a smaller girl with indigo hair, but on her chest was a decrepit old face with two strange eyes. This was Mephisto, the Sword of the Mythical Butterfly.

"Sorry, but I'm not going to waste any more of my time on a human opponent," Mephisto's first head, the girl with the blank expression, said indifferently.

"You really are a fool, 'Volk the Dragonslayer,'" cackled the second head protruding from Mephisto's chest. "It doesn't matter how strong or fast you are. You only have a few skills and many obvious weaknesses. You simply don't have what it takes to compete with me or the others. What, did you think you had a chance because you're considered a master swordsman among the humans?"

The second head was covered by overgrown, raspy hair, but the eyes that peeked out from behind it seemed to ooze madness from their irises. Was this old, grotesque face the main head, instead of the head on her shoulders?

I received a telepathic message from the magiatite monster. *Your opponent* is dangerous, Dragonslayer! I can repel Mephisto's magic, but I cannot keep up with the speed of one of the Three Cavaliers!

"No need. Focus on clearing out the small fry. I'll take care of this one."

That was the whole reason the magiatite had stayed behind in the first place. The magic metal monster was impressively good at dealing with the slime soldiers. Mephisto was a formidable foe. If I was crowded by slime soldiers, I wouldn't be able to reach her with my sword, and this fight would become much less enjoyable.

The ugly slime crone cackled again. "Aha! I've known you were no match for

us ever since we bumped into each other earlier. You have low MP, don't you? Do you truly think you can compete with us? Really?"

It was certainly true that this two-faced monster was perhaps the worst possible match for me. It was also extremely powerful; a large step above anything I'd slayed in the past. But if I couldn't overcome it, my dragonslayer title would be nothing but a sham. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to face one of the minions of the Demon King working to destroy the world.

No matter how much I traveled in the future, I might never encounter the legendary swordsman Howgley. I'd already recognized that fact. And if that was the case, then this could be the moment that I'd sharpened my sword for all this time. I'd devoted my whole life to the study of the blade; if I retreated now, there'd be no meaning to any of it.

"How dare you try to pick a fight with us with such trivial stats? If you think you can beat us, go ahead and try! We'll melt the skin off your bones!" Mephisto cried, then dashed toward me.

She was right that I had no talent for magic. The only magic skill I could use was Dimension, a spatial skill that allowed me to carry a handful of travel supplies and swords that I could pull from thin air. And to me, that was enough. I couldn't imagine fighting with anything other than a sword. However, my lack of magic could be fatal when I had to face a magic-oriented enemy casting spells.

When I was younger, I'd had no way to resist magic, even if it was used by someone of a lower rank. Long ago, as a fledgling adventurer, I was constantly told that it was too dangerous to work alone due to my weakness to magic. However, perhaps because of my naturally aggressive temperament, I was never able to get along well with my clever, cautious adventurer peers. Or perhaps it was because of my excellent constitution, which allowed me to heal quickly from any wound. In the village where I grew up, I was once seriously wounded while fending off an attack from a bear monster. But my arm—torn entirely out of its socket—healed completely in less than a night. The villagers

found this so unnatural that they kicked me out of the village. All of this meant that I had a hard time staying in one place for long.

"...Illusion."

Mephisto's figure blurred, then split into three.

Illusion magic. This was one of the things I was weakest against. Because it was cast on the user and not me, there was no way for me to counteract it. I just had to use my combat experience to see through the illusions and find the real Mephisto—there was no other solution.

"Ah ha ha ha! I'm sure you could see me clearly before, but how about now? Yes, this is it! This is why you could never win against me!" I heard Mephisto's second face echoing from three different directions. A yellowish, murky light emanated from the tip of her sword.

"Confuse!"

Three beams of light flashed at me from each of the three figures. This magic affected its target's mind, causing confusion. If I took the full force of one hit, it would render me temporarily insane. Even with my physical prowess, it was impossible to avoid them all and also deal with the three figures headed my way. Two of them were fake, so I could take a gamble, but I could only gamble so many times before I lost.

"Don't get carried away, you scum!" I drew my blade, Leral, and slashed at the three beams. Two of them disappeared immediately, and the last one shattered, scattering light across the hall. My Blade of Exorcism skill emitted a slash that could cleave through even magical attacks.

"Ack!" Mephisto leaped to the side to evade me. Her first face scowled, while the second face on her chest cursed. "Tch! Be more careful next time! Why must I be stuck with such a useless dunce of an accomplice? Soldiers, to me!"

Unfortunately for Mephisto, the slime soldiers were too busy dodging the fireballs the magic metal monster was shooting at them to pay any attention to

us.

As soon as she landed on the ground, I closed the distance between us and swung my greatsword. "Do not underestimate me. In matters of the sword, I do not lose."

Another flash of light, this one from beneath me. She was good—good enough to be considered a master of magic.

"But not quite good enough to beat me," I murmured.

"Huh?!"

Mephisto's sword fell, along with her right hand. The hand changed to mucus in midair and dissolved, leaving only the sword to clatter to the floor.

"Hyaaaah!" I struck Mephisto across the face in her chest with a side slash. The blow sent her petite body flying through the air with ease.

"Kyaah!"

"Hraaaagh!"

Her body slammed into the wall, spraying mucus everywhere.

"Dragonslayeeeer! Damn you, you're just a human! Nothing but a mere human!" The second face shrieked, her deeply gouged eyes opened wide. Her face began to heal rapidly.

"Enough! I am at my wits' end. It's time to finish this!" The second head cast her eyes upward, toward the first. "Well? Don't just stand there! Use Detach!"

"...Yes, Sister."

Mephisto's faces shook, then her head fell off and began to turn into green slime. The rest of her body lost its shape and started turning green as well. Where Mephisto had stood moments before, there were now two slimes with humanlike heads atop their slimy shoulders.

Part 4: Volk

THE TWO MEPHISTOS slid across the ground at high speed and began to circle around me. They would've been a piece of cake to take care of if they'd just stayed together in one place, but I wasn't so lucky. If I focused on one of them, the other one moved into my blind spot.

"Illusion."

Suddenly, there were three of the young slime girls. Two of them were simple illusions, but now they were even harder to discern.

All three girls' cheeks bulged. "Ooze Bomb!"

Three bullets of acid shot toward me. If they hit me, they'd explode and coat me in acid. It was a tough attack to avoid: My only option was to leap away and create some distance.

The slime girl is the only one who uses Illusion. Perhaps I should take care of the old woman slime first, then?

The slime hag turned to me, opened her mouth wide, and stuck out her tongue. "Death! Death, Death! Ah ha ha! Die, die! Yes, once more! Death!"

A black light flashed beside me. Instant Death magic was powerful but didn't hit its target very often. Even if it did, I doubted it would actually trigger instant death. Considering Mephisto's prowess in magic, though, I needed to dodge it. I jumped back to avoid the black Death lights, then bent over at the waist and dashed forward to dodge the Ooze Bomb.

The Ooze Bomb burst behind me, spraying acid everywhere. This acid spray was the reason it was so important to avoid: If I were anywhere near it, I'd be coated in sizzling ooze.

I ran straight for the old lady slime and raised Leral to the sky.

"Fsssssshhh!"

Sinister black smoke began to billow from the slime's body, likely from a magical breath skill. I was hoping to cut down Mephisto's other half here, but she was difficult to see in the thick smoke, and my sword instead clanged jarringly against the floor.

"Confuse!" the slime girl shouted, and murky yellow light shot out from her side.

I'd hoped my earlier Blade of Exorcism slashes would discourage her from using more magic, but it seemed like that was just wishful thinking. I kicked off from the ground and leaped high to evade the light. Then, from the air above it, I threw my sword down at the center of the cloud of black smoke.

"Take...this!" A Shockwave blast erupted from the tip of my blade, which blew the smoke away as Leral pierced the floor with a *thunk*. In the dissipating smoke, I caught a glimpse of the slime hag racing away at top speed.

"Such a ridiculous amount of attack power from just a puny human...!" The slime hag gave a wicked cackle. "But you're facing your greatest weaknesses this time around!"

Wordlessly, I landed behind her retreating form and swung my sword. In a move that would've been impossible for a human being, she instantly twisted just her upper body around to face me.

"Death! Death!"

I dodged to the side to evade the Death attacks. A black light flashed right where I'd just been standing.

"Confuse." On my other side, yellow light started to glow around the slime girl.

"Tch!" With another slash of Blade of Exorcism, the gathered magic was rendered useless. The slime girl scowled. "Your MP levels really are quite low. My skill getting nullified was a bit of a surprise, but you can't do that many more times, can you? So you'd rather dodge out of the way, even if it means

losing the opportunity to attack. In that case, I'll just keep shooting magic at you until you run out of MP! Ah ha ha, it's too easy! Good thing I have to deal with this imbecile of a human instead of that legendary dragon!"

Damn. She realized. Her magical attacks were getting more and more frequent. Should I just give up on trying to avoid the Death skills...? But truly, what was I afraid of? The solution was simple: I had to take them both down before my MP ran out. I figured I should take this half out first then, just like I originally planned!

"Already at your limit? Well, sorry, but it's our turn now." As she spoke, the slime hag flung her outstretched arm like a whip and sent pieces of her body flying at me. They whipped toward me at a speed much faster than the Ooze Bombs from before.

I swung my greatsword up to block them with a metallic clang. Luckily for me, the scattered acid spray wasn't very strong. I heard a whoosh of wind behind me and twisted around to meet it. The skill slashed me across the stomach, gouging out flesh and sending a spray of blood into the air.

"So? How do you like our Water Blade, Dragonslayer? Ah ha ha!" The Water Blades were so fast that it was difficult to avoid them when they were shot from my blind spot at this distance.

The two slimes circled around me, firing several Water Blades at once. I held my greatsword like a shield and dodged from side to side to evade them.

One of the Water Blades phased through my greatsword before vanishing into mist.

"Hng...!" An illusion?! I thought I'd kept track of the real Mephistos' positions, but they'd managed to fool me somehow.

Blades rained down upon me without pause. For every small mistake I made, I paid the price in flesh; before I could come up with a solution, the Water Blades were slicing through my shoulders, arms, and legs.

"Death!"

"Confuse!"

The two status-affecting skills seemed to meld together as they were unleashed. I swung at the two lights with my Blade of Exorcism to neutralize them. They were clearly being used to drain my MP, but there was no other way to deal with them.

At that moment, I spotted a ripple in the air in front of me.

"Crap...!" It was an Illusion and Water Blade skill combo. The Mephistos had changed up their skills while I was focused on dodging the Death and Confuse combo to throw me off. I hurriedly raised my greatsword to defend but couldn't make it in time. The Water Blade slashed deeply across my chest.

"Gah!"

My grip on Leral loosened. But one must never lose their weapon on the battlefield, so I regained my grip before taking a look at my arm. Some of the skin and flesh had been stripped away, revealing the white bone underneath.

"These wounds are no laughing matter...!" I concentrated all of my power in my arms and focused my mind. My flesh began to regenerate, covering the white bones with thick muscle and tendon. But I couldn't rely on my Regenerate skill too much; I was low on MP, thanks to the slime soldiers and Mephisto. From now on, I could only use Blade of Exorcism, Regenerate, or Shockwave at the most critical moments.

My mind was hazy, and my body felt like lead, likely from the blood loss. But if I used all my MP up healing, I wouldn't have any left to attack. The only way to take the two slimes down now would be to hit them both with Leral's unique skill, Moon Pierce.

For a moment, my vision went white. The sound of the slime girl saying "Confuse!" brought me back to myself immediately. I was only incapacitated for a few seconds, but that could be fatal in the middle of battle. This was the worst

possible timing.

I couldn't let myself get hit by the confusion magic, and it was too late to evade without being vulnerable to the Water Blade that would follow. That meant Blade of Exorcism was my only choice.

As I raised my greatsword, I heard a telltale gust of wind behind me.

<Master Volk! Forgive me!>

An acid bullet hit my shoulder and burst.

"Y-yes! I did it! I hit the dragonslayer with one of my Ooze Bombs! It was me, I did it!"

One of the slime soldiers...!

My raised arm fell to my side. One of the slimes had slipped past the magic metal monster and shot an acid bomb at me.

"Confuse!" I was washed in yellow light, and my mind began to slip into madness. I felt like I was going to throw up. Fear and anger, joy and excitement; I could feel it all welling up inside me at random. It was hell. I'd never been subjected to such powerful confusion magic. Even if it lasted less than a minute, the massive gap in my defenses caused by the impaired cognition was more than enough to make the difference between victory and defeat.

I suppressed my emotions with sheer force of will. *I...I cannot let this be my end*.

"Hah! You did your best, but it's all over now! You held your own, though, considering you had us as your opponents. But at the end of the day, you're a human, and humans can only be so strong. This is simply what happens when we battle for real."

I kneeled down and thrust my greatsword into the floor. First, I need to control my breathing. I can't let my mind wander. Need to stay focused. No matter what happens, I have to watch my step until I'm healed. What if I get torn to shreds before I can heal? No, no. I cannot let myself be driven mad by

fear. My first priority should be to return to normal and get a good look at the situation.

Emotions could wait. Right now, I couldn't do anything. I had very little resistance to magic, and because of that, I'd worked hard to be able to take magic blows. One day soon, I'd be able to overcome this magic.

"You, crush his limbs to keep him from moving. Once he's nice and helpless, I'll break him to bits with some gravity magic! Yes, that should do it!"

"No need to go that far." The slime girl moved quickly toward me and latched on to my body. She pressed slowly and intentionally on my limbs, stretching my joints. A sickening crack reverberated through my head.

"Gh...ghh...gahh!" My spirit, nearly back to normal, was once again overwhelmed with pain and fear.

Is this truly all that I am? No. I am more than this. I am Volk the Dragonslayer, and I will not fall here.

Get up. Shake off this slime and slay it. I promised that two-headed dragon that I'd follow him all the way to the Demon King, didn't I?

"Gravidon."

A pitch-black sphere of light grew from the tip of the slime hag's outstretched hand.

"Open your eyes wide and get a good look, Dragonslayer! Ah ha ha! This will be the last sight you ever see! If you even have enough sense left to comprehend it, that is!"

The slime girl twisted my wrist. I heard the crack of bones breaking. But I focused harder on my Regenerate skill and gripped Leral with all of the strength I had left, pain shooting up my arm.

This sword will not leave my grip until my spirit is truly broken. That is when I lose. I haven't lost yet. I can still turn this around. My broken bones and low MP be damned.

"Huff..."

The slime girl's face twisted when she saw me refusing to let go of my greatsword. Then her usual expressionless gaze returned, and she pulled herself off me.

"Goodbye, Dragonslayer. You were pretty strong for a human." The slime girl slid to the floor and moved away from me like she was trying to create some distance.

"Ah ha ha! I've packed this one with all the magic it can hold! You'd better be grateful!"

The ball of black light shot toward me.

I could barely move my legs and stumbled hard as I tried to stand. The pain was so great that I'd gone numb to it all. Was my knee completely shattered? Well, that was fine. It was all right.

I raised my greatsword.

"Nuuooooooooooooo!" I mustered my remaining MP and sent out a Blade of Exorcism at the orb of black light.

"Ah ha ha! You fool! There's no way you could destroy a concentrated orb of my most powerful magic with one swing of your sword!"

The black orb had been stopped in its tracks by my blade, but my hastily repaired wrist was too weak; I couldn't swing hard enough to slice through it.

My body screamed with agony. I felt the overwhelming pressure of the Gravidon spell through my sword.

"Hyaaaah!"

Despite the pain, despite the pressure, I swung my greatsword with all of the strength I had left. The Gravidon sphere was cleaved in two and then disintegrated. I felt a large chunk of my remaining MP drain from my body all at once.

"No, it can't be... Did he really..."



"H-he cut Gravidon in half...? A human cut Gravidon in half with a sword? That's...that's impossible..."

Both of the Mephistos stared at me in astonishment.

I looked down at where my right arm should be. From the shoulder down, there was nothing. I'd failed to fully neutralize Gravidon, and it had blown my arm clean out of its socket.

Looking behind me, I saw a twisted lump of flesh on the ground, still clutching Leral. I felt some relief that I had not let go to the very end.

"...Forgive me, Leral." I watched as a crack appeared on the blade's surface.

"Enough of this! Let's kill him and be done with it! He's already at death's door!"

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"Y-yes, Sister..."
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The Mephistos gathered themselves and prepared to fight once more.

A telepathic message came to me from the metal monster: *The soldiers have been dealt with!* I will buy you some time with Mephisto. Retreat,

Dragonslayer!

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"Metal monster..."
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(Yes?)

"Take the fallen adventurers and get out of here. And tell the Ouroboros...that I'm sorry, but it looks like I won't be able to follow him to the Demon King. Now go." I raised my remaining left hand in the air as I finished speaking.

"Dimension."

Dimension was a skill that allowed me to trap a handful of items in an alternate dimension and retrieve them whenever I liked. I drew out a large sword and wielded it with my left hand.

The sword's hilt had a strange blue-and-red pattern. Its sinister-looking blade gleamed with a dull red-black hue. One could tell from a single glance that it

was not a respectable sword, but it was one that had once captivated me, one that I had obtained at the cost of many things dear to me.

This was only the third time I'd ever drawn this sword. It was dangerous, for both me and everyone else around me. And using it did not guarantee victory. But it was the only chance I had left at defeating this monster.

"Wh-what is that...?" The slime hag's face twisted as she glared at the wicked greatsword.

"Allow me to introduce you."

The blade was said to have been made from the hide and fangs of the last Beast King from five hundred years ago, and its name was feared by all. It was also said to have been the sword that had driven the hero mad and killed the saint.

"This is the Fang of the Frumious Maniac, Bandersnatch."

Part 5: Volk

UNDER THE INFLUENCE of the Fang of the Frumious Maniac, Bandersnatch, my vision went entirely red. My mind was overwhelmed by frenzied excitement and an urge to ravage, to kill. This beast blade turned its wielder into a wild berserker.

Perhaps this is what the world looked like to the Beast King, Bandersnatch. One of my main reasons for prioritizing mental training was to be able to handle this blade's influence on my mind. But even so, I could not suppress the wild rush of adrenaline and destructive impulses I felt when I picked it up. From that moment onward, I let my fury take over and allowed instinct to dictate my swings.

"What?! The dragonslayer, he...he seems different someho—"

"Hyaaaaaaah!"

I slammed the beast blade against the floor with all my might.

The floor cracked, sending shards of debris flying. I leapt into the air and kicked off from the wall, twisting my body to aim straight for the slime hag.

"Ah ha ha! Looks like that sword just made him even more of a fool! Water Blade! Water Blade!"

"Water Blade!"

The two slimes fired a series of Water Blades at me.

"Since the blades are airborne, he either has to block them or dodge! Go after him!"

"...Yes, Sister."

The Water Blades hit me head-on. My skin felt the slice of countless razorsharp edges and erupted in cuts, but I felt no pain. It was blocked out by feverish exhilaration. I would feel no pain, no agony, no fatigue, until my very last breath.

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"What...?"
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"H-huuuuh?!"

I tilted the beast blade to shift my center of gravity and plummeted to the floor, landing right next to the slime hag.

"Gah! The more foolish he becomes, the faster he swings that sword around! That blade is no mere compensation for his weakened attack power! If we get hit, then..."

I struck the floor with my beast blade once more, sending out a wave of destruction.

"Gyaaaaaah!"

The shockwave generated by the blow sent the slime hag flying. I aimed my blade at her defenseless form in midair.

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"Hrr...hraaaaah!"

"W-wait! No, don't! Stop!"

"No! I won't let you! Confuse!"
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Hazy yellow light enveloped me from the slime girl's skill. I put all of my strength into my face, enraged by the discomfort of my mind being stirred up again.

"...Just in time."

"H-how foolish. Heh heh, didn't you know what would happen if you got close to us, Dragonslayer? Well, I guess not! Ah ha ha! You truly were a stubborn one, but it's all over now. Prepare to die!"

The slime hag, still floating in midair, extended her long, slimy tentacles

toward me.

"Uraaaaaaaah!" I swung my beast blade at the slime hag.

"Ah...!" The slime hag was smashed to the ground from the force of the blow, then bounced wildly into the air with almost the same momentum before slamming her back against the wall. Her form collapsed into viscous, runny slime, which convulsed weakly.

"Ah, agh...! You stupid sister, you've...you've failed me!"

"N-no! My Confuse didn't work! It must be due to the sword's influence on his mental state! He's already delirious!"

"Wh-what?! How can that be?!"

"He's moving on almost pure instinct alone! Perhaps he has no thoughts left to disturb!"

"Then...Confuse won't work?! Why?! After we've come so far...! This man, he truly is a beast!"

I slammed the ground with my blade once more and began to close the distance to the slime hag.

"Prepare to be slain, Mephisto!"

"N-no! Damn you!" The slime hag peeled herself from the wall and began to slide across the floor in an effort to escape me, shooting Water Blades behind her as she went. I deflected the ones I could with my blade and took the others without dodging in order to reach the slime hag in the shortest distance possible.

"Find a way to stop him! I'll keep up the damage and kill him! He must be near death by now; there's no way he can survive after taking so much damage! It's impossible!" The slime hag kept running from me, turning in a wide circle. I followed.

After chasing her for a few moments, steadily closing the distance between us, I noticed something hurtling toward me from the side. It was the slime girl.

I'd noticed the strange path the slime hag was taking and realized she'd led me into an ambush.

The slime girl latched on to me and spread out, then began to tighten around every joint in my body.

"...Now, Sister!" the slime girl called. "While you still can!" I could barely move an inch.

"Yes, well done! It will hurt to lose my other half here, but I refuse to let this be my end!" The slime hag stopped trying to escape and looked back at me. A black light pooled in her hand.

I struggled against the slime girl's fierce hold and raised my beast blade, then focused the last of my remaining MP on the sword.

"Gravidon!"

"Shockwave!" I brought the beast blade down with a mighty slash.

The Shockwave released from the Fang of the Frumious Maniac,
Bandersnatch hurtled toward the black orb in the form of an enraged dragon.
The dragon's claws scraped along the floor as it lunged forward and took the
Gravidon orb in its jaws. The dragon's fangs snapped down, and the Gravidon
orb swelled before bursting with an echoing boom. Then the Shockwave dragon
turned its gaze to the slime hag.

"You, you beast...! Gyaaah!!"

A cloud of dust and smoke billowed over the area. The walls crumbled to reveal large holes, and the ceiling collapsed, raining debris. When it cleared, all that remained of the slime hag were a few scattered globs of slimy green liquid.

"S-Sister...! *Noooo!*" The slime girl reformed her upper body, continuing to hold on to me, and transformed the end of her arm into a sword.

"You panicked, and it rushed you to your end!" I whipped my body around in a wide arc to throw the slime off-balance, then stuck my sword in the gap created between us and sliced off everything above her chest. As the slime girl flew back, I delivered my final blow. The slime's shriek echoed through the banquet hall, and green liquid sprayed through the air. The mucus that remained on my skin splashed to the floor.

"Haah...haah...haah..."

The redness in my vision cleared. It seemed I'd fully exhausted both my physical strength and energy. I had reached my limit. My ability to follow the Ouroboros had been snatched from me the moment my fingers touched Bandersnatch. Wielding that blade meant I would be berserk until I was unable to go on.

"I could not fulfill my promise to you, Ouroboros," I said, "but I played my role as well as I could, so I hope you can forgive me, even if I do not deserve it."

I crouched down with my back against the wall, still clutching my beast blade. My body felt like lead from the physical and mental strain. My mind spun in circles, making me nauseated. I couldn't even stand up straight.

I felt a splash of cool liquid on my hand and looked down. It was a final clump of Mephisto's mucus, barely hanging on.

"Mephisto, the Sword of the Mythical Butterfly. You were...a worthy opponent," I murmured as I closed my eyes.

Chapter 2: Samael, the Sword of Death

Part 1: Samael

RAN THROUGH THE HALLS of Alban Castle, chasing the masked spider monster and the strange girl with red eyes. Myria, the injured girl, was being carried on the spider monster's back. Both the spider and Red Eyes were likely rank C or higher monsters.

They must be Illusia's lackeys.

I was no stranger to combat, and I was a firm believer in thinking through things one battle at a time. I'd asked the Demon King enough questions about the "statuses" that governed this world to make him sick of me.

Because of my extensive experience and prior knowledge, the longer I battled against someone, the more I was able to learn about my opponent's capabilities. When I first encountered the masked spider and Red Eyes, I was unsure how powerful they were. That being said...their agility stats clearly left something to be desired. Even if agility wasn't their specialty, I doubted their other stats would top mine. It occurred to me that they might be setting an intentionally slow pace to bluff, but it didn't seem like they had the luxury for that.

I thought maybe one of them would stay behind to buy the rest some time, but they both ran off in the same direction. I doubt they're confident enough of their skills to face off against me.

...I need to catch that Myria girl.

We were called the Three Cavaliers, but the only one entrusted with the task of guarding the Demon King was Rogueheil. He was rank A– and, although I hated to admit it, much stronger than I was.

This made my role in the conflict to get rid of Illusia's party members, along with the rest of the adventurers still inside the castle. But the Demon King wouldn't bestow any favor on me for simply clearing out the rabble. However,

the Demon King seemed obsessed with both Myria and Illusia—if I could bring either of them to him, he might come to appreciate the clever thinking that distinguished me from the other slimes. On top of that, Myria would also serve as a useful bargaining chip in case Rogueheil failed to take down Illusia.

Even with the Demon King's Blessing, I was still unable to evolve past my rank B+ Poison Ruler form. I'd never been able to break the barrier between class B and class A. When the Demon King confirmed that my evolutionary tree stopped at class B, he'd told me in a bored tone, "Unless it's a particularly solid type of slime, many slimes stop evolving early." I still remembered that moment clearly to this day.

The Demon King was one who found it easy to discard whatever and whomever he deemed unnecessary. Although I was now part of his inner circle as one of the Three Cavaliers, I still needed to prove my worth to him so he didn't cast me aside.

Even compared to the slime soldiers, I'd had a lot of contact with humans, so I understood. It wasn't that the Demon King felt no attachment toward anything —that much was clear from his devotion to the Divine Voice. It was just that his mind had been terribly warped, and he couldn't consider things from an outside perspective and realize how twisted he'd become. I was secretly afraid that one day soon, the Demon King would decide to abandon the slimes entirely because of their slim chances of evolving.

The two girls and the spider disappeared around the corner of the hallway. I had no wide-range perception skills, but I hurried to close the distance between us so I wouldn't lose them.

As I put all my strength in my legs and jumped forward to the end of the hallway, Red Eyes leaped out from behind the corner. I'd thought she was still running away. In her hand she held an orb of black magic.

"Wha-"

The black orb—it had to be the Dark Sphere skill—came hurtling at me from

close range. It seemed like Red Eyes had been hiding just around the corner with her magic readied.

I blocked the sphere with my arms to avoid taking a direct hit to my torso. Although I didn't have a weak spot, losing chunks of my mass would increase the amount of damage received from each attack, making it harder for me to regain my full strength.

My arms erupted in pain. The next moment, my body was hit by a massive blow.

"Gagh! Y-you...!" The blow sent me flying back and into the wall. My left arm, which had taken the brunt of the Dark Sphere, broke at the elbow from the collision; pieces of it turned into green liquid and slopped to the ground. Red Eyes glanced at me for a moment, then turned on her heels and hurried away.

...Ahh. Now she's done it.

It seemed I'd misjudged Red Eyes. I didn't think she'd have the guts to pull off such a risky play at the last moment. However, that attack made it clear that Red Eyes's stats were not as good as mine. Her best attack wasn't fatal to me. Based on her speed and the magic she chose for her surprise attack, at best, she was either a high-level rank B—, or a low-level rank B+. Her stats were a step below my own, but there was no point in calling her bluff now, after she'd already made it this far.

Considering the masked spider hadn't stuck around for a follow-up attack, I assumed it would be even weaker, but I wasn't about to make the same mistake twice: From then on, my guard would be up.

And I was going to take them down.

Part 2: Samael

CHASED AFTER RED EYES, the masked spider, and Myria. The surprise Dark Sphere attack bought them some time, but thanks to my higher agility stat, closing the gap between us would be no issue. Soon their backs came into view.

I used Regenerate to heal myself as I ran, although the damage wasn't serious enough to worry about recovering immediately.

Even so, it was difficult to determine what species Red Eyes was while she was disguised as a human. I doubted she was truly human at all: She'd been brought along as part of Illusia's fighting force, and she had an air about her that was very different from that of a human being. She definitely had the magical capabilities of a monster.

I sped up to leap over the three of them, then turned around to face them.

"My, what a shame. Did you really think you'd be able to outrun me with those weak little legs?"

The masked spider immediately turned and darted toward another passage, Myria on its back. Red Eyes moved toward me, presumably to buy the other two more time.

"Splitting up to try and stall me, are you? That feels like a poor choice, Red Eyes. The masked spider won't stand a chance against me on its own when we run into each other again."

It was a poor choice, but they were quickly running out of options. Even so, I tried to sow some seeds of doubt about the decision to try and shake her up.

However, Red Eyes's face showed no hint of confusion or unease. She didn't doubt herself for a second. I was impressed by her determination to not be perturbed by the situation. Of course, it was typical to mask one's agitation, but this was no mere act. I was shocked at how unfazed she still seemed.

"Clay!" Red Eyes shouted, then held out a pale hand toward me. The magical light in her palm turned to earthen clay, which formed itself into a figure that was about two meters tall and resembled a giant version of her.

This was more than basic earth magic. The clay created by the Clay skill could be controlled and maneuvered with other skills. The clay figure moved toward me as if it were a living creature and then attacked.

But while the clay figure kept me busy, the girl kept her distance. I noticed her close her eyes and regulate her breathing. She was gathering magic, no doubt to unleash a massive attack with the help of the clay figure. Or maybe the clay figure was a decoy, and her main goal was to hit me hard with a second magic attack?

"Either way, you're being awfully optimistic!"

I flexed my arm and used Tentacle Lash. The slime that made up my arm stretched into a long, vine-like tentacle. It smashed through the clay figure with ease, then slammed into Red Eyes, who was standing behind it. Although the attack's power was weakened from crashing through the clay figure, it should've still inflicted a significant amount of damage on Red Eyes.

The blow hit directly on her shoulder, gouging out a large chunk of flesh...but not a single drop of blood seeped from the wound. I knew it! She's a monster. But...what's the deal with her body?

She was humanoid in form, but she secreted no blood or body fluids when she was injured. That was rather unusual—after all, even us slimes secreted green liquid. Perhaps she was just a monster with a thick outer carapace? But it was all the same to me; whatever she was, it was over for her!

The force of the attack sent Red Eyes staggering back. I moved to stand in front of her before she could regain her stance. Red Eyes raised her hand hurriedly to cast more magic, but she was too slow.

"Ah..." A short noise of despair came from Red Eyes's mouth.

"Naive girl. Did you really think you could escape *me* with such meager stats?!" Her attacks meant nothing to me, and I was on an entirely different level in terms of speed. I tried to decide how best to deal with her. "Well, you certainly held your own for a while. Sleepis!"

I pointed my finger at Red Eyes. Blue light spread from my fingertip and enveloped her. Sleepis was a skill that afflicted targets with powerful sleep magic.

I wasn't going to kill her here. The Demon King was close to evolving into a Legendary species, and he needed all of the experience points he could get. Red Eyes would make for a tasty treat: She was a moderately powerful monster that would award him a good number of experience points. I wanted to capture her alive if I could.

Red Eyes froze for a moment. When nothing happened, she immediately raised her arm toward me. For some reason, my Sleepis skill had no effect on her. Was she resistant to sleep spells because she was some sort of mage class? No, but it didn't even seem to make her drowsy. Was she some kind of golem or something...?

"Gale!"

A whirlwind gathered at the tip of Red Eyes's hand. I crouched down and braced for impact. Using all of the magic she'd gathered, she unleashed the Gale at me the moment she saw her opportunity.

"Tch!" That one hurt. I was still all right, but she dealt a lot more damage than I was expecting. Red Eyes might have had low stats, but she was quite adept at using her skills.

At first I thought she could be either a high-level rank B— or a low-level rank B+, but now...based on my experiences and knowledge, I was convinced it was the latter.

Which means that without the Demon King's Blessing, we'd be exactly the same rank.

The Demon King's Blessing skill had the ability to increase the evolutionary potential of the Demon King's subjects. But even with that advantage, I was still only a rank B+. Rogueheil looked down on me like I was worthless because of it, and the Demon King also often lamented that the Cavaliers weren't powerful enough. It was my biggest insecurity.

"...Damn. Now I'm getting angry."

I raised my head and glared at Red Eyes.

"Wh-what? How are you still standing?"

Red Eyes' face showed a hint of confusion.

Has she finally realized just how much of a discrepancy there is between our stats?

"Not only did you try to run, but you also thought you could cut me down? Well, it was a great idea, but you dreamed a little too big. What made you think you'd be able to defeat a high-health, high-recovery slime who's a higher level than you? You should've gotten a little stronger before you faced me."

When I tried to step forward, the clay pieces scattered on the floor by the Gale attack reformed into clay arms that wrapped themselves around my legs. I lifted my legs, but they weren't coming off easily. The clay pieces wrapped around my joints and ankles in layers, making it even harder to pull free.

"I see. An interesting skill and strategy. But unfortunately, I'm a slime, so..." If I unsolidified myself a little, I could slip right through the clay arms. This plan wouldn't buy Red Eyes any time.

"Dark Sphere!" Red Eyes unleashed more magic, presumably to take advantage of the slight opening she'd made. However, this wasn't much of an opening. I could still evade any magic attack she sent toward me.

I stood at the ready, my eyes trained on the Dark Sphere.

The jet-black orb spiraled dizzyingly through the air...but not at me. Instead, the Dark Sphere shot straight up into the air and crashed into the ceiling. Cracks

appeared along the ceiling's surface, and debris fell to the ground around us.

"Urk!" She got me. Had this been her goal from the very start? She used the clay arms to draw my attention to the ground, then took advantage of Dark Sphere's irregular movement patterns to disguise her plan to rain down debris from the ceiling until it was too late!

I had to hand it to her. An area-of-effect attack using objects from the field of battle, which would ignore my defensive stats, was certainly the best tactic to compensate for the difference in ability.

A large chunk of rubble fell straight toward me. I made my arms huge and used them to knock the debris to the side. One of the advantages of a slime's amorphous body was the ability to absorb and negate impact, and it was most effective against this type of attack.

"What a shame. That would've probably done a lot more damage if I wasn't a slime. It's a good thing you're a lower level than me. Now, have you exhausted all your options?"

I turned my attention back to Red Eyes—just in time to see her jump into the air and fly upward in a move that seemed to defy gravity,

"Huh...?"

From the edge of the hole, I spotted the masked spider that carried Myria on its back peeking out; its mask rattled like it was laughing at me. Then Red Eyes joined up with them, and the three turned and fled.

I understood then why she was completely unfazed by my attempts to shake her. Their party had split into two with the intent to meet back up right away. Red Eyes was already planning to use the masked spider's thread to climb up and escape somewhere after they parted, so it was easy for her to dismiss my provocations.

"That girl played me for a fool..."

I stretched out an arm and grabbed on to the ceiling one floor above, then

pulled myself up and through to the next level. I strained for any sound of their escape, trying to estimate their position. Drawing a map of the castle in my mind, I tried to narrow down their potential routes.

"It's useless. There's no point in playing out this farce. Not only am I much faster, but I know this castle like the back of my hand. If they think they can get away, they really are too naive."

Part 3: Samael

PURSUED RED EYES and the masked spider carrying Myria on its back as they fled. With the castle's layout mapped out in my head, I could narrow down their potential escape routes. Perhaps because they were aware of the risk of me chasing them into a corner, they occasionally made strange turns to try and throw me off. However, since they didn't know the castle's layout, they could only do this randomly, and their plan sort of backfired.

Even so...it seemed like they were moving with a particular destination in mind. For a moment, I had a suspicion that they might be leading *me* into some sort of trap...but that was impossible. This was their first time in Alban Castle. Maybe they were using a skill to communicate with their allies, but they were all otherwise occupied: Illusia with Rogueheil, and Volk and the Magiatite Heart with Mephisto. The only other possibility was the saint's party, but I doubted they would come out of hiding to dispose of me.

Red Eyes and the others were trying to get me out of the way. I couldn't think of any other explanation.

Before long, I caught up with my three targets once again. The path they chose was a single door that led to a private room at the end of the hallway with no other exits. It was a dead end.

"What a shame. There's no way for you to escape now. If your plan was to draw me in and kill me, I can admit that you executed the first part flawlessly. However..."

If I gave them any time to think, they'd likely try to escape through a window or another ceiling or floor. Ideally, I wanted to finish them off here without giving them the opportunity. With my physical capabilities, it would be a piece of cake. As I closed the distance between us, Red Eyes stepped protectively in front of the masked spider.

"Clay!"

A lump of clay shot toward me. Red Eyes's Clay attack was only the first move. It was clear that next she'd be using her Special Skills to manipulate the clay again.

"Give up. I already know your attack pattern." I bent down to avoid the clay and sped up, reaching them almost immediately. They'd made it this far, but they simply couldn't compete with my speed.

I put my hand on Red Eyes's face. "This is the end of the line for you, Red Eyes. Poison Touch!"

A powerful jolt surged through my palm and into her skull, and she went limp. I was afraid that I'd killed her, but what's done was done. The important part was to make sure she was immobilized. This girl was even more dangerous than I thought.

However, Red Eyes woke up almost instantly. It didn't even look like she took any damage.

"Wh...what?!"

That couldn't be right. There was supposed to be a massive gap between our levels and stats. Suddenly, her complete negation of my Sleepis skill floated through my mind. It made me think that perhaps...she had full immunity to debuffs.

"Which would make you...an undead type! And you lack blood because you're a Levana, and your body is sculpted from soil!"

I'd come across an undead of the Levana lineage once before, but the one I saw looked more like a simple lump of soil. However, if a Levana became a Liche class, they could obtain a body that was even more beautiful than that of a real human.

The price for my momentary lapse in focus was a heavy blow. I thought I'd already secured my victory, but then Red Eyes swiped at me with a massive,

grotesque arm formed from her earthen body, claws outstretched. The claws gouged through my abdomen from the left side.

"H-how dare you...!"

This much damage was nothing to me. However, an undead with full debuff immunity posed an unexpected problem. Most of the skills I normally used to fight would be useless. All I could use was Tentacle Lash.

"I'll send you to an early grave!" I roared, then stretched out my arm and whipped it downward.

Red Eyes evaded the Tentacle Lash with an unbelievably fluid dodge backward. The Tentacle Lash only grazed Red Eyes's skin before slamming into the floor, creating a large crack.

Red Eyes's last evasion tactic, I soon realized, was thanks to a string of web attached to her by the masked spider behind her. With it, the masked spider pulled Red Eyes to its side.

"I'm getting tired of your measly little parlor tricks..." I quickly raised my arm. If I aimed it right, I could still hit Red Eyes with a Tentacle Lash at this distance.

"Fog of the Dead!" Red Eyes shouted.

The narrow hallway was enveloped in gray mist. Another silly trick? I swung my tentacle arm down in frustration. I thought I caught a glimpse of her in the mist, but she was a good distance away, and I couldn't hit her. Landing a hit at this distance with such limited visibility felt next to impossible.

I closed my eyes and concentrated on my other senses. Even with the thick fog, I could still pick up sounds of movement. I wouldn't let them get away.

I heard the sound of footsteps and immediately brought down a Tentacle Lash in the direction it came from. It was a perfect hit, and I felt something roughly the shape and mass of one girl shatter to pieces. For a moment, I was sure I'd finally won, but I quickly realized that what I'd hit wasn't Red Eyes; it was just a clay figure she'd made walk across the ground to catch my attention. She kept

trying to buy themselves time with these sly tactics, and I was sick of it.

"Enough! Surrender now, or die!"

I continued to send Tentacle Lashes through the hall, both horizontally and vertically. They tore through the walls and floor, but I got no response from my adversaries. In the midst of my rage, I heard a noise.

My eyes darted toward the sound and, sure enough, there was the shadow of the spider and the red-eyed undead girl jumping through a fissure I'd made in the floor. They were using the thick fog as cover to escape back down to the lower level. There were no other signs of movement. This time, I was certain that those figures were my real targets.

There'd be much less fog on the floor below, and Red Eyes's MP was running out fast. If she wanted to make more fog, then so be it. All I had to do was drain her MP and get her more and more desperate.

I jumped into the hole in the floor after the trio. There was some fog on the lower level, but not much; the visibility was more or less the same as normal.

As I fell, I looked for Red Eyes, the masked spider, and Myria, but I didn't see them anywhere.

What? Were they just more clay fakes?! But that doesn't make any sense...

Suddenly, I felt something tug at my leg. It was one of the masked spider's webs. It pulled hard and flipped me upside down in midair.

"Gah...!"

Although the web itself wasn't very strong, it was very effective while I was in the air and could offer little resistance. I bent my body to break the web, but couldn't right myself, and I plummeted to the ground face-first.

I looked up as I fell and spotted Red Eyes, the masked spider, and Myria attached to the ceiling, likely by the masked spider's webs.

They were up there waiting for me?

"...Clay, Clay, Clay." Red Eyes used multiple skills to form a massive ball of clay at the tips of her fingers.

What's she going to do with such a huge ball of dirt? As I wondered, Red Eyes released her hand. The massive ball of clay swung toward me in an arc. When the light hit it just right, I could see some of the masked spider's web attached to one side of the lump of clay. They'd created a makeshift pendulum weapon.

Following the pull of gravity, the ball of clay hurtled toward me as I fell. Just like their previous attack, they were taking advantage of the castle's architecture to do as much damage as possible.

"D-damn you, you...!" I used Tentacle Lash to break the web attached to the ball of clay, but that did nothing to stop it. The ball, accelerated by gravity, careened straight for me.

Falling freely through the air, I had no way to dodge out of the way. If I could reach the wall, I could use it to escape, but the only way to do that in these circumstances would be to collide with the ball first.

I lowered the viscosity of my slime, then tried to position myself to lessen the force of the impact. My body began to morph and reshape itself.

If I couldn't avoid the ball of clay, the only thing I could do was try to mitigate the damage as much as I could. The lower my body's viscosity, the more resistant my body would be to physical attacks.

The ball of clay crashed into me, hitting my whole body.

As my consciousness began to fade, I used Tentacle Lash to stick my arm to the wall, then pulled myself to it. There, I increased my body's viscosity and returned to a humanlike shape. The ball of clay slammed to the ground, sending an earthquake through the area.

"Damn it...! How long do you intend to drag this out?!" I used Regenerate to heal. I took significant damage this time, but it wasn't a fatal blow. No matter. I've identified my opponent's basic strategies and species. I'll just recover and

regroup real quick, then start thinking from their point of view and thwart their survival strategy. I won't allow this game of tag to continue any longer.

"No doubt they'll use the web to escape back through the hole in the ceiling..."

I looked up in time to see Red Eyes swing a massive clay arm toward me.

"Agh...!" The arm smashed into my head, then it peeled me off the wall and flung me into the air. While I'd been focusing on regenerating, she'd come down to attack me.

The attack caught me by surprise. It was true that I definitely didn't want to be hit right now, but attacking me was still a mistake on her part. That was why it surprised me; it was simply not a good strategy.

Red Eyes's borderline suicidal surprise attack barely did any damage to me. Instead of trying to deal damage while I was down, she should've taken the opportunity to flee. Of course, fleeing would only prolong the inevitable, but it would've at least meant she'd survive the current encounter.

I morphed my stomach into a massive mouth, inhaled, and then released a Diseased Breath. The dull, cursed mist breath enshrouded Red Eyes, who frowned.

Curse skills didn't affect undead—I knew that already. But Diseased Breath could also make biological substances rot and deteriorate. In this case, it would cut Red Eyes's lifeline.

Something snapped behind Red Eyes, and her eyes went wide—my Diseased Breath had destroyed the masked spider's web attached to her.

Red Eyes's plan must've been to knock me down with a surprise attack, then use the web to return safely to the ceiling. She definitely wasn't expecting to face me in close combat.

Red Eyes extended her pale arm. "Gale!"

Even if her magic was instantaneous, it would've been simple for her to just

move away from me and regroup. That is, if I wasn't in her way.

Red Eyes's hand was starting to crumble. It was easy to tell what kind of situation she now found herself in, and how she was going to deal with it.

And Red Eyes, who had her hands full with her current predicament, didn't have time to predict my actions and take any countermeasures. I extended my tentacles and attached them to her massive, disfigured arm.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Ngh...!"

I pulled Red Eyes toward me as I fell. She raised her massive arm to try and intercept me, but in a direct face-off, there was no way I could lose.

I pinned Red Eyes's massive arm down, then grabbed her elbow with my opposite hand as I grew a third arm out of my left shoulder. I formed my new arm into a blade before stabbing it downward into the center of her pinned arm. The snap of bones cracking echoed through the room. I tore her arm apart with my two free hands and tossed it to the ground.

As I raised my other arm to finish her off, I noticed a round, earthen shield hurtling toward us from above.

"Is that...a Clay Shield?"

There were several different types of Clay skills: Clay Gun and Clay Sphere both shot spherical lumps of clay from a distance. The regular Clay skill could replicate them, but it cost more MP, and the Clay versions were much weaker and less accurate. The Clay Shield skill was specifically used to create sturdy clay shields. It was a difficult skill to use offensively, but its sturdiness made it effective to use as a falling projectile.

It was hard to believe the masked spider had that skill... Maybe it was Myria's?

"You underestimate me." I raised my third arm upward and smashed into the clay disk, destroying it.

I'd come across Myria in the reception hall earlier too, but she was clearly at least three ranks below me. She was a second-rate adventurer at best, and she wasn't worth wasting my time on.

A web shot out from the blind spot just above the now-destroyed shield. The masked spider had ridden the shield down. I didn't think Myria and the masked spider were really working together, though; Myria probably panicked and used Clay Shield, and then the masked spider jumped onto it to drop down and try to rescue Red Eyes.

It was a surprise attack created by chance, and that made it unpredictable. The web began to wrap around my neck.

"Tch!" I turned and brought my raised arm down to break the web. The masked spider jumped at me and sank its teeth into my lowered shoulder.

"Gale!" Red Eyes unleashed an attack toward me while my attention was on the masked spider. The masked spider kicked off me, then used another web to zip to the wall and out of the way. The Gale attack hit its mark and sent me through the floor to the lower level.

On the lower level, the large ball of earth Red Eyes threw at me earlier had made a massive hole in the floor, and I fell even farther. I did my best to mitigate the fall's damage by lowering my body's viscosity and becoming amorphous. The impact of the fall coursed through my entire body. The damage I took was no joke, even for me. I immediately used Regenerate to start healing myself.

I looked around. I'd fallen two levels down from the second floor, so that meant I was now in the castle's cellar. During the previous encounter, I'd taken a lot of damage in quick succession. Things weren't looking great for me. They'd really messed me up good. Luck seemed to be in their favor as well. Anger boiled up within me, threatening to overflow. How much more trouble were these weaklings going to cause me?

I should've just led them to the room where all the slime soldiers were

waiting—it would've been faster. I'd opted not to do so before because I thought it would be quicker to take them out myself, but that was obviously a mistake. I'd assumed Red Eyes and the others would be easy to clear out, so I was quick to let my guard down. "I'll wipe them out next time." "It'll be fine." This moment was an accumulation of all of those poor choices, and that thought irritated me to no end.

First, I formed a mouth to shout at the ceiling and slid across the floor. "It's no use! No matter how hard you try, we're on completely different levels. Do you really think you can just run away from me forever?!"

I'd lost a lot more MP than I thought I would. This sucked. The Demon King was going to be so disappointed.

"Enough of this... Damn it, you annoying little..."

While I considered whether to go straight back up, Red Eyes landed lightly in front of me. It seemed like she'd used Gale to completely negate the impact of the fall.

"Finally decide to throw in the towel?" I asked. "Or...heh heh, did you think you'd be able to defeat me now?"

"...I knew escape was impossible. That's why I've been leading you here from the very beginning."

"Huh? You led me here?" I did notice that they took some strange routes through the castle when I was chasing them, but there was no way they could've known the castle's layout beforehand. Was it the saint? Did she tell them the layout? It didn't feel likely, but...regardless, being led down to the cellar wasn't going to change anything.

"If you're planning to bluff your way to victory, think again," I growled.

"...Fog of the Dead."

The area was covered in thick, dense fog. However, I could still see Red Eyes's silhouette. The fog seemed to have a presence-blocking effect, but it wasn't

perfect. I'd finish this up nice and...

"Huh?"

Countless shadows rose in the thick fog. Was Red Eyes making dolls out of the clay that dropped down here earlier? But it didn't matter; it was just a pointless little trick now. I'd take them all out in an instant. I morphed into a humanoid frame and grew four arms. Then I created a mouth on my stomach and long tentacles that hung down from my abdomen.

"Come get me, I dare you! I'll shatter your conceited belief that you'd ever be able to defeat me!"

One of the silhouettes leaped at me, and I crushed it between my arms. The thing that attacked me simply fell to the ground. But it was not clay—it was a human skull, with decaying flesh still stuck to the surface.

"What ...?"

Silhouettes rose up around my stunned frame. Even the corpse I'd just knocked to the ground began to rise once more.

"No. Is this...the Undead Maker skill?" Undead Maker was a skill possessed by some advanced undead species which allowed them to reanimate any corpses caught in their miasma. The corpses themselves were closer to weapons than individual underlings. All the corpses in this area would simply serve as swords devoted to aiding their master. And even if they were torn to shreds, they would not die. A broken sword could still swing. If I wanted to stop the swords, I needed to take down their master.

An undead clubbed me on the back from behind. After taking the blow, I grabbed the club and swung it in a wide arc at the undead surrounding me, knocking them down.

My MP was getting dangerously low. I could no longer preserve my physical strength either. I was getting driven into a corner...but regardless, I would be the one to emerge victorious.

My opponents were reaching their limit too. They had to be, with the amount of magic they were using. Maybe Red Eyes was replenishing her MP by siphoning some of the spider's with an undead skill like Mana Drain; even so, they had to be running on empty.

I'd considered Red Eyes's wind skill, Gale, a threat after that surprise attack, but in truth, it wasn't that powerful. That was the best proof I had that Red Eyes didn't have much MP to spare and was trying to conserve it as much as possible. The Fog of the Dead and Undead Maker skills wouldn't last long, and the reanimated corpses from Undead Maker would hardly be my undoing.



Red Eyes would definitely come up with another irritating trick, and if I could endure it long enough, she'd run out of MP and I'd come out on top.

The corpses Red Eyes was using were the remains of humans we'd kidnapped. They were usually disposed of by feeding them to the Giga Slime, but in order to manage the Giga Slime's habit of binge eating, it was necessary to collect the corpses in advance and store them. That was why we had a storage area in the cellar.

Perhaps Red Eyes, as a high-ranking undead, had the power to sniff out areas where the dead lay. Like she'd said before, she was working to lead me here from the very beginning, so that made sense. Even without knowing the castle's layout, she could locate the pile of corpses underground.

"Dark Sphere!"

"Shiiiiii!"

Suddenly, I heard two voices call out from either side of me. Two black, glowing spheres emerged from the deep gloom of the fog and floated toward me.

"...Here they come."

Red Eyes and the masked spider had both used Dark Sphere. So the spider can use Dark Sphere too, huh? When I tried to avoid them, a clay arm made from the fallen ball of clay wrapped around my ankle.

"U-urgh...!" Red Eyes had saved this skill for the right moment, to ensure that their Dark Spheres would hit their mark. No, in fact, the entire wild-goose chase they'd sent me on was leading up to this very moment. More and more corpses piled onto me before I could break free of the clay arm's grasp.

"Have I...lost? No, it can't be, not like this! This cannot be my end!" After a moment of panic, I lowered my body's viscosity and began to slip between the bones and corpses restraining me.

The lower my viscosity, the more resistant I was to physical attacks—but that

also meant I was more vulnerable to magical energy attacks. In my more liquid state, Dark Sphere would be dangerously effective.

I should've prioritized breaking free of the corpses restraining me as soon as possible, but I hesitated—and that late judgment call led me to my ruin.

The approaching orbs of black light sandwiched me between them and exploded.

Chapter 3: The Battle of Destiny

Part 1

THE THREE DRAGON HEADS attached to the slime's body opened their jaws and sent out an inferno that tore up the floor, walls, and ceiling as it surged toward me. The areas burned by the flames were then engulfed in a blazing column of fire.

Wh-what the heck? Three Drago Flares at once? That's way too extreme.

I thought back to the Drago Flares used by Azalea and Eldia. They'd both been extraordinarily powerful attacks that seemed to exceed their users' stats. Even as an Ouroboros who prided myself on my physical strength, a single Drago Flare could potentially be fatal.

If I stayed on the ground, I'd risk being instantly burned to a crisp. My best option was to get into the air and give myself more room to evade so I could dodge the three massive heat rays coming my way.

I tried to spread my wings, but they suddenly felt like they'd been encased in lead; I could barely move them. A black light floated around me. The Gravity skill the slime had used just before Drago Flare was holding my body in place.

I gulped. With Gravity still affecting me, I could hardly move, let alone fly.

Using Gravity on top of the three simultaneous Drago Attacks to restrain me was a dirty play. The slime was using an attack method that seemed to negate all the combat experience I'd accumulated up to now. What in the world is this slime's deal? We just started fighting, and he already managed to drive me into a corner? Wh-what do I do? What's the play here? I can't get in the air to evade, but it'll be impossible to dodge the attack while I'm on the ground.

"Graaaah!" ("This is getting dicey, Partner!")

Even Partner, who was usually the confident one of the two of us, was at a loss. I couldn't blame her—this slime was in a whole different league than any

enemy we'd faced before.

You've gotta be kidding me. How was I supposed to beat this thing? I think I got why the saint had been hiding away all this time now. She had to stay inconspicuous so she could prepare to take on this slime, right? Surely now she'd swoop in at any second to help? I could count on that, right?

I quickly glanced around, but all I could see was that this was not the moment Lilyxila would swoop in and rescue me.

W-well, if I can't avoid it, I have to find a way to protect myself somehow! I brought both of my wings around to block me from the front, then thrust my tail forward to act as a makeshift shield.

The three blasts of overwhelming heat shot down from above and engulfed my body in flames. In an instant, my field of vision was dyed a bright, swirling red.

"Die, Illusia! Diiiieee!!"

The slime's shriek was accompanied by white-hot, searing pain. The immense firepower of the triple Drago Flare instantly burned through my wings and tail. The force of the impact was so great that it even overpowered the gravitational force pinning me to the ground, and my body was flung back, out of Gravity's range.

My entire body was on fire. It felt like every inch was being burned by the flames. I could no longer feel my wings or tail, but sacrificing them meant I was able to avoid a fatal wound. I quickly curled my body in midair and used Roll to run in the opposite direction.

The three flaming death-bringers chased after me with a roar. This thing seriously didn't know how to play fair! I'd been told this underground hall was made of special impact-resistant metal, but these attacks were going to bring the entire place down in no time. But even if that happened, a slime could still slip through all the debris and either finish me off or escape.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha! Look, God! You see?! I really am the strongest! That puny worm was nothing compared to me! How does it feel, Illusia?! I've been waiting for my chance to do this ever since that day in the forest! All this time, I've waited!"

The trajectory of the three intertwined flames wasn't perfect. Its skill level probably wasn't that high, so the accuracy wasn't great. But even so, the three Drago Flares at once were simply too big a threat. They made up for their lack of precision with sheer scale and power and quickly drove me to the wall.

"Die for me, Illusiaaa!"

I was trapped, pinned against a vertical wall on one side and flames on the other. No matter how hard I tried, I wouldn't be able to avoid the slime's attack...

No. I couldn't let things end for me here. There was no way of knowing if there were any other beings in the world who could defeat the Demon King if I lost. Lilyxila probably couldn't do it on her own, Beelzebub was impossible to control, and Eldia would likely side with the Demon King slime. If I died, that slime would probably consume the entire world.

If I lost, Allo, Nightmare, and Treant would most likely try to go up against the Demon King as well. And to be honest, even if those three worked together and gave the fight everything they had, they'd still be no match for the Demon King.

Suddenly, it hit me. If I thought this hit was inevitable, my opponent probably did too. In other words, there was an opportunity here.

Sometimes, things didn't work out the way I assumed they would. For example, when the slime believed he had me cornered, he might get lax about keeping track of me with Drago Flare.

I bounced against the wall in feigned panic, and the speed of the Drago Flare attacks slowed down a little, as if assured of their victory.

No, not quite; it seemed like they were spreading out to widen their range

and ensure I'd be hit, no matter how far I rolled. It was a clever strategy, but it was careless to believe they'd hit me even if their speed dropped so long as they widened their range.

And thankfully, their plan backfired. I made it through unscathed.

"Aha! Did you see that, God? I could've killed Illusia so easily just now!"

After crashing into the wall, I'd used Roll to zoom along the wall at full speed and escape the fire spread by Drago Flare. If the slime hadn't slowed down, I would've been burned to a crisp when I hit the wall. However, forcing myself to Roll along the vertical wall at top speed wasn't something I could do for long.

I lost my balance, just as the roar of Drago Flare's flames stopped. I kicked off from the wall and landed on the floor. The scales on my tail were burned off, along with the tip. I used Regenerate to heal both, then I cast my gaze upward. The humanoid slime figure in the center of the three dragon heads looked down at me with emotionless eyes.

"I may have missed this time...but I'll kill him soon, God. Please watch closely."

The three dragon heads roared and thrashed in rage. I stared back at the slime suspended in midair. I'm a little late because of the sudden onslaught, but I should check out this thing's status screen. First, let's start with the species.

Chaos Ooze: Rank A Monster.

An imitator of all of creation, able to copy any power.

This monster could have done anything, become anyone.

And yet, all it could do was destroy.

What this monster truly wanted to be, no one knows.

A Chaos Ooze, huh...? I remembered hearing about a faceless lord in one

country's folklore named Chaos. Seemed like a fitting name for a fake princess

or the faceless Demon King.

The harbinger of chaos and ruler of the slimes.

The end result of a mutant slime that absorbs anything and everything.

Able to reproduce parts of up to four monsters at once, which also allows

for simultaneous use of up to four skills at once.

The Chaos Ooze's power increases with the number of monsters it

consumes.

The parts of four monsters at once...? The three dragon heads shooting Drago

Flare and the human body that used Gravity made four total, so that checked

out. It was like I was dealing with four rank A monsters at once.

Now I knew that he was a Chaos Ooze, but the important thing was finding

out just how many monsters he had already consumed. He'd gone to the

extreme of impersonating a princess to supplement his meals, so I wasn't

optimistic.

"If you wish to look at my status screen, then go ahead and look. I can't stop

you anyway." As the slime spoke, a massive amount of data flooded into my

head.

Species: Chaos Ooze

Status: Normal

Lv: 100/125

HP: 1681/1681

MP: 1417/1780

Attack: 1125

Defense: 574

Magic: 1229

Agility: 842

Rank: A

Sacred Skills:

Demi-God Realm Path: Lv—

Special Skills:

Seven Types: Lv—

Slime Body: Lv—

Stealth: Lv 3

Poison Belt: Lv 8

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8

Divine Voice: Lv MAX

Tortoise Shell: Lv 3

Psychic Sense: Lv 2

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 8

Control: Lv 4

Magical Brainwashing: Lv 3

Conceal: Lv 3

Nekomata: Lv —

Third Eye: Lv —

Magic Energy Transmission: Lv 4

Magic Energy Reception: Lv 4

Scent: Lv 3

Swordsman: Lv 3

Impact Suppression: Lv 6

Super Regeneration: Lv 7

Recovery+: Lv 7

Nightvision: Lv —

Dragon Scale: Lv 5

Demon King's Blessing: Lv —

Nightmare Creation: Lv —

Bug King's Chitin: Lv 4

Mage: Lv 3

Tentacles: Lv 4

Fly: Lv 4

Slime Plant: Lv 3

Master's Demonic Gaze: Lv 2

Evil Eye: Lv 2

Fearsome Gaze: Lv 1

Enchanting Gaze: Lv 2

Maddening Gaze: Lv 2

Petrifying Gaze: Lv 2

Instant Death Gaze: Lv 3

Four-Headed: Lv —

Magiatite: Lv —

Flame Emperor's Wings: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 7

Magic Resistance: Lv 7

Debuff Immunity: Lv—

Seven-Type Resistance: Lv7

Normal skills:

Change Color: Lv —

Skill Steal: Lv 9

Bite: Lv 2

Shockwave: Lv 3

Flame Slash: Lv 1

Intimidation: Lv 1

Spidersilk: Lv 2

Puppet: Lv 3

Thread Slice: Lv 3

Iron Pendulum: Lv 2

Paralyzing Tongue: Lv 2

Double Poison: Lv 2

Paralyzing Bite: Lv 2

Acid Drool: Lv 2

Heat Beam: Lv 3

Petrify: Lv 1

Evade: Lv 2

Hellscissors: Lv2

View Status: Lv 7

Shell Retreat: Lv 3

Iron Tackle: Lv 1

Life Drain: Lv 4

Lightning Bolt: Lv 2

Dimension: Lv 3

Swell: Lv 2

Regenerate: Lv 7

Mana Drain: Lv 2

Roll: Lv 2

Black Fog: Lv 2

Jeweled Cage: Lv 3

Lucent Luna: Lv 3

Godspeed Flash: Lv 2

Great Leap: Lv 3

Death Needles: Lv 2

Water Gun: Lv 1

Armor Break: Lv 2

Tentacle Lash: Lv 4

Bellow: Lv 2

Mirage: Lv 2

Charm: Lv 1

Scorching Breath: Lv 2

Diseased Breath: Lv 1

Sand Breath: Lv 1

Decaying Breath: Lv 2

Metal Breath: Lv 3

Decoy: Lv 1

Resist: Lv 3

Drago Flare: Lv 2

Mega Cleave: Lv 2

Concentration: Lv 2

Sandstorm: Lv 2

1,000 Needles: Lv 1

Venom Fangs: Lv 2

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 2

Whirlwind Slash: Lv 3

Charge: Lv 3

Headbutt: Lv 2

Meteor Dive: Lv 2

Ooze Machine Gun: Lv 3

Ooze Bomb: Lv 2

Tremor: Lv 3

Stone Breath: Lv 2

Temper: Lv 3

Hi-Slow: Lv 3

Hi-Rest: Lv 2

Summon: Lv 3

Illusion: Lv 3

Holy: Lv 1

Hi-Power: Lv 1

Mana Barrier: Lv 2

Grim Burner: Lv 3

Hi-Care: Lv 2

Hi-Quick: Lv 2

Firewall: Lv 1

Flash: Lc 3

Berserk: Lv 3

Stone Spear: Lv 2

Death: Lv 3

Neutralize Poison: Lv 2

Curse: Lv 2

Clay Wall: Lv 3

Dark Sphere: Lv 2

Clay: Lv 2

Fire Sphere: Lv 2

Aqua Sphere: Lv 3

Wind Sphere: Lv 2

Telepathy: Lv 2

Gravity: Lv 3

Gravidon: Lv4

Lightning Rain: Lv 2

Mirror Counter: Lv 1

Poison Cloud: Lv 1

Physical Barrier: Lv 3

Magic Metal Creation: Lv 2

Liquid: Lv 2

Corona: Lv 2

Iron Maiden: Lv 3

Anti-Power: Lv 3

Gale: Lv 3

Hidden: Lv 1

Demon Hand: Lv 1

Dual Dark Sphere: Lv 2

Holy Firebird: Lv 2

Great Blowfly Ring: Lv 2

Detachment Beast: Lv 6

Empty Dream Invitation: Lv 3

Life Mana: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Mutation: Lv —

Demon King: Lv 9

Thief: Lv —

Insane: Lv —

Dependent: Lv —

Puppet Master: Lv —

One Hundred Faces: Lv —

Corpse Eater: Lv —

Liar: Lv MAX

Itty-Bitty Hero: Lv MAX

Protective Spirit: Lv MAX

Nightmare Chimera: Lv —

Laplace Authority Interference: Lv 2

Princess: Lv —

Recreator of All Things: Lv —

Cursed Millennium Tortoise: Lv —

Great Owl of Wisdom: Lv —

Eight-Legged Death God: Lv —

Giant Bug Cluster: Lv —

Ugly Dragon: Lv —

Fallen Phoenix: Lv —

What the heck?! How many freakin' skills did this thing need?! His stats were mostly higher than mine too...aside from defense, HP, and MP!

When fighting against an enemy of the same rank as me, the disadvantages of being a tanky Ouroboros really came into play. I'd learned a lot from my past fights: If I challenged an opponent with more attack power and agility to a melee battle without any strategy, I would be beaten to a pulp. And if I kept my distance from an opponent with a lot of magic, they'd shoot me with long-range magic and force me to defend.

Stats were everything in this world. That was why I, with my View Status skill, had been able to survive so long. And that also meant I could see how reckless it would be to fight against a monster that had more attack, magic, and agility than me.

"No, this won't do," the slime grumbled. "This form drains too much magic power to waste on an enemy who's only running away."

The three dragon heads began to consume each other, and their forms collapsed, leaving only their wings. The slime transformed, taking on a human upper body and a spider lower body. His spider body was somewhat large, so it seemed like he was mostly in spider mode.

"Yes, this form is best for hunting. It's less draining, and I can hunt my prey quickly and efficiently. There's no sense in going out of my way to keep my distance from a weakling like you, but I'm not stupid enough to get close."

Part 2

A SPIDER LOWER BODY, dragon wings, and the same androgynous-looking human torso I'd encountered in the forest so long ago.

The spider slime sprinted toward me.

The only difference between the slime back then and the slime now was that he was now actually slime-colored, which made him even more disturbing. The spider's eight eyes darted around vigorously, each with a different-colored gleam.

A sudden slit appeared in the floor in front of me. I had a hunch it was bad news, so I immediately backed up. The slash in the floor widened, and something grabbed at my wings where they crossed over that extended line. I could tell he did something, but I didn't know what.

The floor down here was made of sturdy metal, designed for combat; Rogueheil said as much during our fight. However, it had been sliced open like tofu. I didn't know what this attack was, but I knew it was bad news.

Looking up, I saw the slime closing in on me, arms raised. He was going to do it again. I had no idea what kind of attack it was, it was insanely powerful, and it was too fast to even tell it was coming. Without hesitation, I turned my back to the slime and booked it in the opposite direction. Not my proudest moment, but I knew I couldn't face that attack until I knew exactly what I was up against.

Although I had a rough idea about what the mysterious attack could do, not knowing its scope or trajectory made it dangerous. If I went up against it blind, I'd be sliced to shreds in an instant. This thing was no joke. It could fly out at me whether I was on the floor or the wall, and it could even slice through midair. I flew low to the ground but, sensing danger, made an abrupt landing by extending my back legs, twisted my body around ninety degrees, and leaped to the side.

The space on the floor where I'd just landed was sliced as if by a massive, razor-thin blade. As I dashed away, I thought back to the slime's status screen and tried to narrow down which skill he was using by asking my Divine Voice for more information.

I quickly concluded that he was probably using the skill called Thread Slice. This was a skill that created an incredibly thin but sturdy thread that sliced through the air like a giant knife—but even so, his attack power felt way too high.

I turned around and squinted, trying to locate the thread. Then I spotted a line of familiar silver light, and I gulped.

My guess was that the slime might've made part of his own body metal with one of his other skills, then transformed it into a thread to use with Thread Slice, thus raising his attack power. By supplementing the convenient, nearly invisible skill with more power, he had made it into a low-cost, one-hit-kill attack. Compounding the effects of more than one skill together was a technique only this slime could use.

Enhanced by the metallization, the power of Thread Slice was certainly impressive, but there was something else that bothered me: I was pretty sure that this metal was the same kind Grandpa Magiatite was made of.

When I looked at the slime's status earlier, I did notice a skill called Magiatite on his skill list... Grandpa Magiatite's words floated through my mind.

That slime killed an old friend of mine who also aided him because he said they had skills he needed.

Not that I doubted it before, but...it seemed like this slime really did kill the old man's friend.

"So? How do you like my unique skill combo, Illusia?!"

They're not your skills. Both your Normal Skill Thread Slice, and your Special Skill Magiatite, were stolen from other monsters! And you've got the gall to

pretend they belong to you!

"Horizontal Slice!" The slime cracked his human arm like a whip and a large, diagonal slit appeared in the wall beside me. I quickly swung my paws to the side and flew off in the opposite direction.

The Thread Slice nicked my claw with a shrill, echoing screech of metal and sent me flying back the other way. I spread my wings in and used the sideways force to swoop up and float in midair. A large gash appeared on the wall just centimeters beneath me.

"Hng...!" Just when I thought I was safe, a Thread Slice shot through the claws I'd held up to defend myself. They shattered, coating my paw in blue blood. If I'd been any closer, I would've been sliced in half. Maybe not entirely, thanks to my Ouroboros scales and defense, but it would've hurt. A lot.

"Ah ha ha ha! You can't run from me forever, Illusia! Why don't you just call it quits now and let me gobble you right up?! I'm sure I can put your rare skills to better use than you ever will!"

The Demon King was just a slime, but even so, he was a step above me in terms of stats. He was using a mid-range, fast-attack skill that left me very little opening to retaliate.

However, if I just kept dodging his attacks, sooner or later I wouldn't be fast enough, and then I'd be dead. Even if the odds were stacked against me, I had to take a gamble.

I flapped my wings and swung my front legs through the air. The wind gathered beneath my wings flowed through my front legs, then burst out of the ends of my claws as a Whirlwind Slash.

The slime effortlessly moved to the side to avoid the slash. "Huh? You're going to need a faster skill than that if you want to beat me. One with more range and power too. Like this!" He slashed with his arm again, toward where I floated in midair. "Ah ha! Get ready, the next one'll be vertical! How far can you run, Illusia?"

Vertical attacks had a narrower range than horizontal cleaves; they were simple enough to evade. However, I noticed the slime adjust his stance. He was probably readying himself to attack either left or right, depending on which way I went. If I made a bad move here, it could create a fatal opening in my defenses.

("Partner! Stop right there!")

I stopped, and we dropped to the ground. Partner stretched her neck out and tilted her head. Before I could ask what her plan was, a flash of silver struck her across the face in a painful slash. Blue blood sprayed from the wound and splattered on the floor. However, the Thread Slice stopped there, giving Partner the chance to bite down on the metallic thread. The slime's face clouded over.

("I've never met this slime before, but I can tell you one thing: I ain't a fan!")

Partner yanked her head back. The slime's body shook violently, then floated slightly closer to us.

"Urgh...!"

The slime waved his arms, and I heard a snap. It seemed like he had severed the thread from his body.

Now. It wasn't a huge opening, but it was better than nothing. Even if it was risky, I needed to take this chance to go on the offensive. I'd learned the hard way that when this spider slime went on an MP rampage, there was nothing I could do to stop him. My best bet was to do some damage while he was in spider mode, even if it meant being a little reckless.

I spread my wings, kicked off from the ground with my hind legs, and leaped into the air. Flying low, I closed the distance between the staggered slime and myself.

I concentrated my magic in my swinging claws, calling forth the black flames of Dragon Punch. The slime's viscous form would negate some impact from the blow, his ability to morph freely made it difficult for the attack to connect, and

close-range attack would mean risking a counterattack. I'd rather avoid challenging the slime in close combat, but Whirlwind Slash wasn't strong or fast enough to do anything.

"You did see my status screen, didn't you? I'm stronger and faster than you are, and you think knocking me a bit off-balance is enough for you to come charging in for the kill? Well, I suppose you have to take every chance you get when you're this far out of your league."

The dragon wings attached to the slime's spider half then transformed into two massive, demon-like arms and extended forward to meet my charge. Long claws grew from the demonic arms like rows of swords. The slime reached his arms out at me and swiped with his claws as I dove toward him.

He was fast. And since he was a slime, he could stretch and extend himself at will to get the reach he needed.

I was still too far away.

"How about a taste of my Paralyzing Venom Claws?! If you think you can avoid this, then I'd like to see you try!"

A claw slashed across my chest, piercing my scales to gouge deep into my flesh. The slime's face, lit up with a triumphant grin seconds before, went still, and his eyes narrowed.

Getting a claw to the chest didn't stop the momentum of my swinging fist. Dragon Punch was a slow, heavy blow that required a big swing. This windup made it a pretty easy skill to avoid in normal situations—but not this time.

This time, the attack connected. The slime had attacked me preemptively to stop my attack, but while he was gloating about his victory, I had the perfect chance to get in a good punch.

"What?! Were you planning to let that hit you from the very beginning?!"

Being a tanky Ouroboros with a lot of HP meant even if I got hit twice, I could hit back once and still win in the end. I might've been lacking in attack and

agility, but when it came to HP, I came out on top. I could definitely take a beating.

"Grrroooooooooh!"

I gathered more magic in my paws. The black flames expanded, wrapping around my arm. I aimed for the slime's face. He was still a slime, so attacking his formed head wouldn't make a difference, but I was still going to knock that head clean off his shoulders.

I fired a vicious Dragon Punch at the slime's face. The next moment, my fist erupted in pain, and I heard the crack of a bone breaking. Obviously, this wasn't what I was expecting punching a lump of slime to feel like. It felt like my attack was blocked by some kind of wall.

"Phew, that was close... You sure are a tricky one, aren't you?"

What I'd hit was a massive turtle shell covering the slime from his face to his waist, beyond which was the slime's spider half. The shell had intricate swirling patterns running through it that gleamed emerald in the light.

Just before my punch connected, the slime had formed a rock-solid turtle shell on the surface of his body.

"Amazing, isn't it? It's the shell of the millennium tortoise, Aspidochelone. The real shell is much bigger, of course, but my version is just as sturdy. It was quite a challenge to hunt the beast down, to be honest. But that's why I like it so much."

The slime's right demon arm clenched its fist and punched me in the abdomen so hard that the impact reverberated all the way through to my back. It broke through my scales and gouged out a chunk of flesh. It felt like my organs had been crushed.

I was sent flying backward. My vision flickered, teetering on the edge of unconsciousness from the pain of the blow.

I need to Regenerate myself quick, or else...! My stomach was so messed up

that I could barely move.

"Graaa!" ("Hang in there, Partner! It's still coming for us! Hey!")

The slime's left demon arm then stretched out and smashed into the side of my head. I was powerless to avoid it. The blow rocked through my brain like an explosion, and for a moment, my mind went completely blank.

"See? This is what happens when you get close to an opponent like me. You can be as fast or slow or careful as you want, but it's all the same in the end."

I saw the slime stretch his arm out—another Thread Slice was coming. But I couldn't move my body. My mind was still too hazy. I tried to force myself to move, but my body didn't listen.

("Tch! That's it! I'm taking the reins for a while!") Partner turned her head to look me straight in the eyes. Her eyes blazed crimson for a moment as she used Master's Demonic Gaze, which let her temporarily control an opponent tuned to the same wavelength. Under its power, my body moved of its own accord. I leaped into the air and spread my wings, soaring high to avoid the slime's Thread Slice attacks.

"Graaaa!" Partner howled.

The healing light of Hi-Rest enveloped my body. Soon after, Partner lifted the effects of Master's Demonic Gaze and returned control of our body to me. I quickly used Regenerate to restore all the spots that took damage. *S-sorry, Partner... That was a close call. We almost kicked the bucket.*

("If you come back here later, you owe me some tasty treats!")

O-oh, of course! Leave it to me! The capital of Ardesia's gotta have everything from tasty treats to local delicacies. I'm not sure when I'll be allowed to walk freely through the country as a dragon like Lilyxila said, but I can still come into the city in my human form. I'll try to get some money from Lilyxila and buy all the food your heart desires. But to do that, first I'm going to have to take down this slime jerk.

If I got hit by a barrage of attacks, my HP would be down to zero in an instant. Not that I'd expected this to be a walk in the park or anything, but seriously, I couldn't let my guard down for a single second. This thing was way too dangerous.

"I wanted to end you quickly with my Thread Slices, but you managed to stick around somehow. I never thought I'd have to use my millennium tortoise shell against you either."

The slime's body trembled, then began to bubble and expand as if he were boiling. He also seemed to be morphing again: The slime's spider lower half began to lengthen, and his two front legs swelled and transformed into pincers. His smaller, humanlike upper half swelled until the torso and head alone were nearly two meters in height.

"I wanted to finish our little matchup quickly with my thread to save time and magic, to be done with you before the saint decided to show up, but it seems I may have been a little too hasty. The gap between our stats was even wider when we first met, and I hadn't amassed all of the skills I have now, but you are still the dragon who managed to nearly defeat me at one point in time. So now, I will fight you with my favorite combination of parts for combat."

The slime's lower half changed from a giant spider to that of a giant scorpion. His humanoid upper half carried the millennium tortoise's shell in one hand as a type of shield and a massive blade in the other. Two additional arms extended from his shoulders as well, each wielding blades of their own.

The slime's torso wriggled, morphing into the face of an owl. The owl's eyes darted this way and that, and its beak opened and closed in a chewing motion. Its entire face twisted upside down and then back again.

Is that the Great Owl of Wisdom I saw in the slime's Title Skills? If so, it must've been a pretty famous monster.

"Hooooooooooo!" The owl screeched as if it had gone mad. Its face rotated up and down again. Suddenly, the slime's body was enveloped in

flashing red-and-blue lights. What the heck? Is he using some kind of statusenhancement magic? How many different status effects did he just use?!

Species: Chaos Ooze

Status: Power (Major), Quick (Major), Physical Resistance Boost, Magic

Resistance Boost

Lv: 100/125

HP: 1590/1681

MP: 1169/1780

Wait, four of 'em? All at once?! I'd been barely skimming by thanks to my stats this entire battle, and now he was even stronger than he was before? You gotta be kidding me.

Even so, the slime's MP was steadily decreasing. Not because he was using it wastefully, though—if anything, it seemed like he was trying to be careful about conserving it—but because making good use of his strengths as a Chaos Ooze meant consuming a lot of MP. His triple Drago Flare opener, especially. Considering he had already used up more than a third of his MP, his chances of winning our fight were slim to none.

But he had another skill that was making me nervous.

Normal Skill: Life Mana. Burns through life force as fuel for magic. Converts HP into MP.

I'd never seen any MP-focused monsters who used that skill, so maybe it was too inefficient and deadly to use, but...I still had a bad feeling about it.

WON'T ALLOW THIS little farce to continue any longer! I'll finish you in an instant!" yelled the slime as he moved to attack, now transformed into a strange, mutant knight. He had the lower half of a scorpion with huge wings, four arms equipped with either a sword or a shield, and an owl face on his chest—the Great Owl of Wisdom—whose eyes rolled in its sockets.

The owl was the one to look out for. The slime had just used four statusenhancing skills at once. Using the full extent of the owl's skills probably wasn't very efficient in terms of MP, but if it could use offensive magic as well, it was a fearsome monster all on its own. I'd have to keep an eye on it at all times.

The next thing to watch out for was the shell shield on one of the slime's four arms; according to the slime, it was modeled after the shell of the Cursed Millennium Tortoise. It managed to completely block my Dragon Punch. Breaking through it with a normal attack would be impossible.

Both the owl and the tortoise are listed in his Title Skills. Maybe since they were so powerful, they were recorded as Title Skills once the slime defeated them and absorbed their power? If so, then I guess all of his most powerful forms are recorded as Title Skills...which means I should be extra careful about those.

According to this theory, the slime's main forms were the six forms listed in his Title Skills: the Cursed Millennium Tortoise, the Great Owl of Wisdom, the Ugly Dragon, the Eight-Legged Death God, the Giant Bug Cluster, and the Fallen Phoenix. The Ugly Dragon form had to be the one that used Drago Flare, and the Eight-Legged Death God had to be the spider that could shoot out a relentless stream of Thread Slices. I hadn't even seen the Giant Bug Cluster or the Fallen Phoenix yet.

I'd love to defeat this thing before he has a chance to use them, but as of right

now...I don't feel like I can land a winning blow.

I evaded the incoming slime by rearing up on my hind legs and making a massive leap backward. The slime's sword plunged into the ground where I was just standing, but he pulled it out easily.

J-jeez. That thing's extra strong now... I'd never be able to keep up with him while he had that Quick (Major) status modifier going. With an opponent this strong, I'd have liked to take advantage of the moment when he had to reapply his status condition to strike, but...this slime could activate four skills at once. There was no moment for me to take advantage of seeing as the magic specialist Great Owl of Wisdom could reapply it and three other skills at the same time.

If this had been a video game, the slime's super OP four-skill cheat would immediately classify it as a garbage game. There was just no way to even the odds against something that powerful. And since he was a slime, he could recover instantly even if I knocked him off-balance. There was no room for me to do anything.

I spread my wings and put some more distance between us. As I flew, I shot a series of Whirlwind Slashes at the slime one after the other from above. The slime raised his shell shield and blocked them all with ease. Multiple peals of wind struck the shield and dissipated, seemingly absorbed by the shield's hexagonal pattern. My Whirlwind Slashes tore through the floor around him, but the slime didn't move.

"How long do you intend to drag this out, Illusia?" As soon as my torrent of Whirlwind Slashes stopped, the slime swung his sword sideways from its spot on the ground. A massive wave sprouted from the blade and shot toward me. I recognized the skill immediately: It was the swordsman skill, Shockwave.

I dropped my altitude and ducked my head to dodge the attack. The Shockwave caught the very edge of a few of my scales, shattering them instantly. I heard the ceiling behind me crack.

Th-that's a nasty move... Who knew an enemy who can handle fast attacks, offensive magic, and auxiliary magic skills would be so tough to beat? Is he invincible as long as he has MP?

"Hmm. With my improved statuses, I wonder if you'll be able to handle this?" The slime raised his three swords high.

W-wait. You're kidding...right?

The slime swung his three swords randomly. Around ten Shockwaves shot at me where I was hovering in midair. I frantically pulled my wings in, ducked my head, and dove downward to try and avoid them, but the storm of Shockwaves thundering in my direction was impossible to avoid completely.

I couldn't afford to take a direct hit. Instead, I somersaulted to reposition myself and faced the Shockwaves head-on, curling my body and bringing my wings in front of me to block. My wings erupted in a flash of pain—no, not just my wings. The Shockwaves managed to partially penetrate my wing shield and slash across my chest.

Hngh?!

Tch! That hit was worse than I thought it'd be. But I...I could compensate for the damage to my wings with Regenerate or something, right? Then I'd still be able to fight...!

I let the blow send me flying backward, without trying to resist its impact, so I could minimize my damage while also keeping my distance from the slime.

As I tumbled through the air, spraying blue blood, I managed to use Regenerate to rapidly heal my wounded wings and chest. I spread my wings again to create some air resistance and came to a halt in midair, centimeters from the ground.

I let out a sigh of relief. Somehow, I'd managed to avoid being slammed into the ground or a wall. But what was my next step? Run? With my stats this low, it was taking everything I had just to survive moment to moment. I'd never last until the slime's MP ran out.

Should I try to take this fight outside? That'd definitely throw the royal capital into chaos, but if we were outside, there'd be a much higher chance Lilyxila would be able to join the fight. Lilyxila had been concerned from the start that her involvement in attacking a castle in another country might create a misunderstanding between the kingdom of Ardesia and the Holy Land of Lialum, or that it could create an opening for her political enemies to exploit back in Lialum. Judging from her radio silence up until this point, it seemed like she had no intention of interfering until I dragged the slime out into the open.

If I took the slime outside, though, he could also try to run away for fear of going up against the saint. From our previous encounters, I knew that the slime was brutal, vicious, and would stop at nothing to achieve his goals. But beneath that brutal exterior, the slime was nothing but a coward. I doubted he would even follow me outside if I tried to leave.

Going outside might be a good way to stop the fight, but it wasn't a good way to beat the slime. I stretched my legs to drop down to the floor, then raised my eyes to check the slime's position, and... *Wha?*

"Did you really think I'd let you keep your distance from me?" The slime sneered, already mere meters away. What the heck? Was this guy really that fast?! I mean, he did have the Quick (Major) status, but this felt a little extreme to me! Could I even consider this a competition at this point?

I was screwed. Close combat was won or lost in an instant. I couldn't slowly whittle down the slime's MP like I'd planned. The gap between my stats and the slime's would really show itself here.

Well, I knew it'd end up like this at some point. I didn't have the long-range skill set I'd need to fight against an opponent equal to or stronger than me from a distance. And since the slime blocked all of my long-range attacks with his shell shield, the only way I could inflict damage was if I got up close and personal. As a melee specialist, if I couldn't get past this exchange, then I was

dead from the moment I set my eyes on the slime.

The slime raised his three swords again. As my gaze followed them upward, the owl in his chest hooted.

"Hoooooooot!" A ball of crimson, flickering flame formed in front of the owl's face and immediately shot toward me.

Is that Fire Sphere?! I moved my left wing forward to block it. A column of blazing fire rose from the surface of my wing. While my vision was blocked by the flames, the slime swung his sword down from the left.

I raised my left paw up, meeting the swing. The sword caught on one of my claws and shattered it, then dug deep into my foreleg. Two more deadly blades followed. I lifted my upper body and started to raise my right foreleg to block them...but halfway up, I stopped. The twin blades, free of any obstacles, plunged deeply into my neck.

I think I'm...gonna pass out... Instantly, I was enveloped in the healing glow of Partner's Hi-Rest.

("Oi! Why the hell didn't you block that?!")

I'd never make it through this many attacks unharmed. There'll always be another one waiting for me. It's not about dodging 'em all—it's about choosing which ones I take.

"Phooooo..." Black light gathered at the tip of the owl's beak as its eyes rolled in its head. It was Hi-Slow. If I let it hit me, it was game over, here and now.

Yep, I was right. Just like I thought. I'm glad I kept my right paw free.

I struck out at the owl with my paw, moments before the skill was unleashed. The only advantage I had over the slime was my toughness. And if that was all I had, then continuing to tear flesh and break bones was the only thing I could do.

"Oh no you don't," the slime said, sticking his tongue out.

My right paw slammed against the slime's shell shield. Damn it! No matter

how much I sacrificed, I couldn't even lay a single blow on this thing! This was not good. Not at all. That stupid owl's Hi-Slow was coming for me!

"Graaaaaaaaa!" I put my full force into my right leg and shoved the shield with all my might.

"G-gah!" The slime lurched to the side from the shove, and the recoil sent me flying back. The black light of the owl's Hi-Slow flew past me and dissipated.

"You don't know when to give up, do you?! Just die already!"

Three Shockwaves shot out from the slime's three blades. The first two sailed above my head, preventing me from getting back in the air to escape. The final blow was aimed right at me, where I'd been grounded by the other two. I ducked down and raised my front legs to avoid it. The blow left a massive crack in the floor.

"Hoooooot! Hoooooot! Hoooooot!"

Three Flame Spheres spiraled out from the owl at random, then shot at me from three different directions. I dug my claws into the gouge in the flooring caused by the Shockwave and yanked, forming a makeshift metal shield as the floor peeled away from the ground below. The ball of flame hit the floor shield and burst, creating a pillar of flame.

N-nice. Well played, me... This metal floor is pretty good for protection.

"Y-you...!" The slime dashed toward me on his scorpion legs and scuttled around the floor shield. "Gravity!"

Black light spread out in a circle with the slime at its center. As it washed over me, my body sagged with the tremendous weight of the gravitational pull. So... heavy... I can't move... But compared to how it was at the start of our fight, it's way weaker. The range is smaller too. It's still strong enough to stop me, though, so that doesn't change much...!

"Grrrr..." I sent the slime a message via Telepathy. What's the matter? That's not the Gravity I saw earlier. You're trying to reserve your MP, aren't you?

You're trying to play it cool, but you're starting to worry that you won't be able to beat me even if you use up all your MP, right?

The slime's humanoid brows furrowed, and he glared at me. "This is the end for you. God is in agreement. You're nothing but a bore, and it's time for you to die!"

Dang it. No luck. I'd hoped to get under his skin and dig for info, but the slime's response gave away nothing. My goal was to find out how much MP the slime would have left after fighting with me and whether he could use Life Mana to make enough MP to Regenerate and restore his HP in a loop, but that response was way too vague to tell.

The slime's swords lunged at my nearly motionless form. Two of the three shot down from the left; Partner lunged forward and caught both swords in her mouth. Jagged pieces of sliced fangs fell from her mouth, along with blue, dripping blood.

Yes! She stopped two of his arms! This is huge!

"Chiii!"

"Grrrr..." Partner growled, deep and low in the throat. Then her eyes glowed red as she used Master's Demonic Gaze.

But...the slime is resistant to magic, isn't he? Even if he's less resistant to status changes, Master's Demonic Gaze won't work against an opponent with so much magic power. It'd be nice if it could create an opening, though, even just a small one...

"Ah? A-ahh, aaaaaahhh!" the slime shrieked, his remaining sword dropping to the ground as he clutched at his head.

W-wait, did it actually work?

The slime glared at me through the gap between his fingers.

"Bghooooooot!" the owl hooted in rage. Fire, water, earth, and wind spheres appeared in front of the owl's beak in succession, then flew at me one after the

other.

H-hey! Is that a good idea, making the owl shoot off all its magic at us at once?!

Crap. If this guy was gonna blast me with that many skills, I had to avoid them, or else. Each one of those spheres was chock-full of magic. This was not the time to rush in, but this was my best shot at getting out of this—draining the slime's MP would force him to drain his own HP. There was no need for me to go on the offensive.

I kicked off from the ground with my hind legs and jumped backward. The two slime swords in Partner's mouth stretched as we leaped back, then snapped. Their color faded, and they fell to the ground as nothing but goo.

("Geh! B-bleghh!") Partner spat the remaining goo from her mouth.

The slime raised his final sword. "Your petty tricks bore me!"

I flapped my wings, concentrated the generated wind power in my right paw, and unleashed it at the slime as a Whirlwind Slash. The goal wasn't to deal some damage, it was to deflect the slime's attack, which would've hit me otherwise.

"You're not the only one with that skill, you know!" The slime flapped his wings and pointed his now-empty hand at me. He unleashed his own Whirlwind Slash, canceling mine out.

Tch! He copied my skill to block it!

Behind the Whirlwind Slash, I saw that the slime had already swung his sword and unleashed another Shockwave. *Oh man. Here it comes!*

The Shockwave expanded horizontally as it flew toward me. At this distance, such a massive attack was impossible to avoid. *Damn it! He's attacking way too fast for me to do anything!*

I gave up on evading it completely and curled into a ball to try and protect myself. But as I knew, blocking wouldn't be enough to survive the slime's

onslaught.

Suddenly, an idea flashed through my mind. Maybe I could use the rotational force of my Roll to deflect some of the Shockwave's power and run away as soon as I landed to give myself some space?

I used Roll to spin vertically at high speed, keeping my body wrapped in a tight ball. The Shockwave hit me, sending a burst of pain through my back that felt like it was being torn apart. I almost stopped rolling, but that would only mean being attacked by the slime. I kept rolling, simultaneously trying to minimize the damage with Regenerate. As soon as I landed on the ground, I rolled away from the slime as fast as I could.

"Are you trying to run from me again, Illusia?!"

The slime scuttled after me on his scorpion legs, still benefiting from the Hi-Quick. As I considered whether I'd be able to outrun him with Roll, my eyes landed on the section of flooring I'd peeled up to use as a shield. It was still bent up at a slope, almost like a springboard. Could I jump on that to create some distance? No, wait... Maybe I could use it as an attack somehow? The millennium tortoise shell he was using as a shield was a major problem. It would be difficult to get past that shield with a direct, frontal attack. However, I did manage to force my way past it with a Dragon Punch.

Is that...my chance?

I'd have to rely on pure luck afterward to survive, but this felt like the only opportunity for me to do some damage. Things would only get worse otherwise; every time we got in an altercation, I came away from it needing to waste MP on Regenerate. My MP, already low after the fight with Rogueheil, was about to hit rock bottom. I had to take a chance; and if I couldn't manage to force my way out of this situation, it was all over for me.

The slime was still underestimating me. He only saw me as a warm-up for his fight with Saint Lilyxila. Well, that's fine. I'll make my move now and decide the victor, before the slime has the chance to pull any more tricks from up his

sleeve!

The slime chased after me. With his Hi-Quick active, he was almost as fast as I was with Roll. The slime swung his two previously empty arms—now equipped with new slime swords made from his body—at me again. *Jeez. Talk about convenient*.

"Hoooooot!" The Great Owl of Wisdom's cry echoed across the battlefield.

Ugh! Not this thing again! I darted from side to side as bullets of fire, water, wind, and earth exploded right behind me. The more I was forced to maneuver, the closer the slime got.

"Watch yourself, Illusia! I'm catching up!" The slime raised his three swords.

Was the triple Shockwave next? It was faster than the magic bullet skills and had a much wider trajectory, so I'd be in trouble if it hit me. However, I was able to get to the piece of peeled-up metal floor and use it as a shield.

I turned ninety degrees to the right and accelerated with all my might. The first of the slime's Shockwaves slammed into the ground, right where I'd been moments before.

"Hmm...not bad. But how long do you think such a harebrained strategy is going to keep you safe?"

The slime moved to swing both of his remaining swords down at the same time. I spun a full one-eighty and lunged directly at him.

"What?!"

The slime wasn't expecting me to suddenly come toward him. His body stiffened for a moment, then he started to back away. It was the perfect opportunity to pounce.

Yes! This is it! I'm gonna Roll tackle that jerk!

"I told you! It's useless to resist!" The slime thrust out his shell shield, which grew a size larger and stood tall against the ground like a solid wall.

I leapt at the huge shell, and my body was slammed by the recoil. The shield held steady. I accelerated, rotating my body as fast as I could and sending up a spray of metal floor scraps behind me.

"God...if I abandon this castle, I will come out of hiding and take my rightful place as the Demon King and prepare for an all-out confrontation with the saint. But in order to do so, there is something I require."

Ghh...urgh! This shield is freakin' huge! But I can't give up now! I've just gotta push through it!

"I need a name. If I win this fight, perhaps you can grant me a name as a reward. I want my name to be chosen by you, God. That is why I chose to remain nameless, even though Samael recommended one for me. And I chose not to adopt that child's name either. I'd like a name that has a cool ring to it... but I will accept any name, if you are the one granting it to me."

A slime arm, complete with a multitude of joints, slithered out from behind the shell shield. It seemed the slime was trying to attack me while I was stuck against the shield. *Th-this slimy bastard!*

"Rooooooooaar!" I used Bellow and increased my rotation speed. Come on, please! I don't need to destroy the shield; I just need to knock this thing offbalance a little bit!

"Ggh!" With a final shove, the shield gave way a little as the slime staggered.

Y-yes! I did it!

"You're a persistent one, Illusia! But a little shove won't change anythi—
aagh!" The slime's jab was cut short as he tripped. What he hadn't realized was
that the floor behind him was the part I'd peeled up before, and he was on a
massive slope that was enough to bring his legs out from under him.

With a final hard shove, the slime's guard broke, and we shot backward into the top of the springlike flooring. Then we bounced off and were sent flying into the air.

Now there's no floor around to help stabilize the shield! And not just that—the slime, suddenly thrown into an aerial battle, was too bewildered to react.

I rolled over and extended my tail to push the shield down from above.

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"Hrgh... Y-you dare...!"
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Black flames surrounded my paw, and I struck the now-defenseless slime with a Dragon Punch. My deadly claws wrenched through the human face, then gouged deep into the owl in his chest.

"Bghooot!" the owl screeched as its face was ripped open.

You really messed me up too, y'know! If I never met the original owl monster, it'd be too soon. I'd been subjected to enough of its magic to last a lifetime.

My Dragon Punch blew through the slime's face, sending half of his mass flying. The flying red glob lost its integrity and its color, then splattered to the ground like rain.

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Yes! My gamble paid off!

("N-nice work, Partner!")
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Don't congratulate me yet! If I don't wrap things up now, we won't survive another round of attacks!

The slime made a feeble attempt to grab at my face, but I whipped my tail at him again and sent him flying into the air. Then I reversed my spin to release an uppercut and immediately struck him with my tail again.

Yes! Keep going, keep hitting him! I won't give him a chance to recover! If I don't finish him off here, then there's no way I'll get out of this alive!

I battered the slime's body, creating deep dents across his surface. One of his arms ripped off and fell to the ground.

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"Illusiaaaaaaa!"
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A demonic face appeared in the malformed ooze and leered at me in fury. I swung my paw straight down and struck him across the forehead with the skill

I'd taken straight from the hero: Celestial Fall.

The slime's face twisted; then he plummeted to the ground at top speed. I made a final pursuit, dropping down after him with my front legs extended.

My claws tore through the slime with the full force of gravity, and then I followed up with Earth Fall. The floor ripped wide open, scattering the slime's ooze across the room at random.

That was it. I put everything I had into that last barrage of attacks.

I had nothing left to spare.

Illusia

Species: Ouroboros

Status: Normal

Lv: 109/125

HP: 331/2816

MP: 98/2718

My MP was already at less than 4 percent of its max. Although I'd finished it with time to spare, the fight with Rogueheil really drained my stats. It would only take a few more healing skills for my MP to be gone.

This isn't the kind of enemy where waiting for my MP to recover automatically enough to use Hi-Rest is gonna work. Please...let this be the end.

In the distance, one of the globs of splattered slime rose and contorted into a human torso.

"G-God..."

He's still alive?!

He must've been healing like crazy, even in the middle of that onslaught! But

that had to have been a massive drain on his MP. E-even after all that, this thing was still kicking...?

Species: Chaos Ooze

Status: Power (Slight), Quick (Slight), Physical Resistance Boost (Slight), Magic Resistance Boost (Slight)

Lv: 100/125

HP: 433/1681

MP: 447/1780

H-huh?! Y-you gotta be kidding me?! He's still got that much MP?!

"Forgive me! Forgive me, God... Are you disappointed in me?" The slime clawed and scratched at his face. "This is the second time this guy has driven me into a corner... I swore the next time we met, I'd destroy him with ease...!"

Unbelievable! How did this thing come out on top?! If that attack wasn't enough to kill him, then I was dead from the moment I saw him!

I...couldn't think of a way out of this. What was I gonna do? Could I even escape at this point? If I could just find Lilyxila and get some backup... No, the slime was faster than I was. It was no use.

"L-Laplace! What are the odds of my victory?! Answer me!"

Wait. Laplace? Like the Laplace Authority Interference skill? I'd thought Laplace was the same as my Divine Voice, but from the way the slime spoke to it, it seemed like another being entirely. The skill was supposedly the same as the one that'd given me probabilities of future events when I fought the Little Rock Dragon. I'd been trying not to use it because it creeped me out, but the slime clearly didn't seem to mind.

"Ninety-five percent, huh...? Heh, heh heh, I see...I... I won't lose to him...

There's no way I can lose... It's okay. It's all okay. Wait and see, God. I'll crush Illusia to death..."

I was frozen in a state of despair, but hearing those words brought me back to life. W-wait, that means I've still got a chance. Five percent, huh? That's all I need!

Even if it was just a show of bravado, I was gonna fight to the very end. It'd be way too boring if I just lay down and died! No way out? That was normal in a world full of hungry monsters! In fact, I was lucky I'd had my powerful recovery skills to protect me all this time. Get it together, me. The last time I'd confronted this slime, all I had to keep me alive was my weak little Rest skill.

The slime's form wriggled, and something that looked like a lump of flesh swelled up, seemingly crushing the humanlike torso beneath it. The slime transformed himself into what appeared to be a hulking mass of flesh. Four large wings sprouted out of him, and the lump of flesh took flight. Then four fleshy owl faces appeared on the surface of his body.

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"Hoooooot!"

"Pghooooot!"

"Hoohooooot!"

"Hooooooot!"
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The four faces spun around the lump of flesh. I thought I was used to the slime's grotesque transformations, but I was wrong.

What the heck?! Four Great Owls of Wisdom?! They must be trying to finish me off in one last Hail Mary.

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<"Let's settle this, Illusiaaaa!">
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I almost balked, but then I shook my head and stepped forward. All right. I'm ready, slime. I'm gonna take you down without using any skills!

Part 4

THE MASS OF FLESH with four owl faces spread his four eerie wings and soared through the underground hall. It was a quadruple Great Owl of Wisdom that specialized in ranged attacks, without regard for his appearance or MP usage.

It was definitely going to be difficult to survive against a monster like that for long. However, the slime was down to about a quarter of his max MP. Using four of the MP-draining owl forms at once had to be a risky move.

But...the slime still had forms and skills that he hadn't even used yet. If it wasn't a risky move, if he still had a trump card hidden up his sleeve...with my stats as low as they were now, it wouldn't take much to finish me off...

No. I couldn't think like that. Right now, I needed to focus on doing everything I could to survive. That's all I could do. Just had to keep fighting with the belief that I'd win and stick it out as well as I could.

It'll be fine... According to Laplace, I've still got a 5 percent chance of coming out on top...!

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"Pghogogogoooot!"

"Pghooghooooot!"

"Pahoooooot!"
```

"Pghoooot!"

The four owl faces spun around and around as he soared higher. After a few seconds, black light began to rain down from the air overhead.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The twenty or so barrages of black light were all powerful Dark Spheres. Any one of them could be the end for me, even as a tanky Ouroboros.

I-Is he an idiot?! Using that many skills at once is like throwing MP into the

gutter!

I kicked off from the ground, flying low to try and outrun the nightmarish bombardment from above. Fortunately, because the slime's Dark Sphere skill level was so low, the orbs were only raining down in straight lines. I'd be really screwed if they had spiral trajectories or a homing effect.

A Dark Sphere exploded right behind me, shattering the floor beneath it.

¿Look, look here, God! My body can do anything, become anything! I'm the one most worthy of God's favor! What could you achieve with a measly dragon like Illusia?> The slime's maniacal laughter echoed through my head.

Suddenly, a chill ran up my spine. *Something's coming.* I quickly curled up into a Roll and shot down toward the ground. A thick beam of heat shot through the air just above my head: Drago Flare. One shot could be the difference between victory and defeat.

I looked back toward the source of the beam and saw that one of the owl heads had stretched out from the mass of flesh and transformed into the head and neck of a dragon.

"Grooooooar!" the impromptu dragon roared. Then the dragon's neck shrunk back into the lump of flesh, and its face returned to that of an owl.

Damn it! Quit using those broken skills! I knew if I just waited for the slime to exhaust all his MP, I'd slip up and get caught sooner or later. There was no guarantee that I'd make it through the next magic downpour. On the other hand, if I flew after the slime, the four owl heads would target me with their magic and I'd be blown up before I got close enough to hit him. Sure, I was glad this attack routine was a big MP drain, but his power and range were far too dangerous to risk it.

As expected, the slime flew after me, but then he shot toward the ceiling again. It was no use. If I used Fly to go after him, I'd be hit with a storm of magic.

No, wait... Flying isn't the only way to reach the ceiling! I dashed to the wall, still using Roll, then zoomed vertically up it. Y-yes! This is it! I've got it! If I mess up here, the magic storm will kill me...but if I'm gonna die anyway, I'm gonna die trying!

«What? What're you...» The slime, so incensed beforehand, returned to his normal state for a moment. However, when he realized I was scaling the wall and coming for him at a tremendous pace, the slime's murderous intent returned. The next moment, several orbs of black light rained down on me. I swerved from side to side, just in time to dodge the explosions, and reached a height that was about equal to the slime's altitude in the air.

All right, how about this?! Let's see you try and run away this time! Two dragon heads extended from the floating mass of flesh. Each one opened its mouth and shot out a massive ray of heat, tracing a circle of molten metal in the wall around my body, engulfing me in a wall of Drago Flare flames.

The slime grew a third dragon head, which extended toward me and released a third beam of Drago Flare at my trapped form.

I'm completely surrounded, but there's still one more way to go: out!

I stopped rolling, kicked off from the wall, then spread my wings and flew straight for the slime. Then, wheeling to the side to avoid the third Drago Flare, I shot toward the slime's upper left. Here it is! This is the perfect time to attack!

You fool. I've been luring you here from the start!>

Just as I was about to strike, the final remaining owl face looked straight at me.

"Phgogogogooooooo!"

Almost at once, four Dark Spheres shot out from the owl's beak and closed in on me. My right wing, which I'd moved in front of me to defend, was blown from its socket. The next shots hit me in the chest, front right leg, and Partner's neck.

My consciousness began to fade. Did I get the Bleeding status condition? I didn't even have the MP to use Regenerate, and having one of my wings torn off in midair was definitely a worst-case scenario.

<Aha ha ha! That's a garbage amount of HP you have left!>

Oh yeah? Well, same to you!

I swung my gouged right paw and tore through the slime. Then I broke his stance in midair and slashed him savagely with my left paw. I dug the claws of my hind legs into the lump of flesh to keep myself from falling.

⟨Gaaah! Wh-what?! You even lost a wing! Your HP is barely hanging on and
yet you don't even hesitate!>

Don't be stupid! You and me, we've got what you call a difference in resolve! I thought the Demon King was supposed to be someone impressive. You're just a mama's boy who does whatever the Divine Voice tells you to!

<What would you know about it?!>

Tentacles extended from the lump of flesh, piercing through my body. But even so, I didn't stop attacking. I kept swinging my front paws in wide arcs, tearing apart the mass of slime flesh piece by piece.

<Aaaaaaaah!>

The slime's body burst open in midair, and I dropped toward the floor. I could...barely move. But if I didn't, I was going to hit the ground straight on my side.

I lifted my tail and slammed it into the floor before me, using the recoil to slow myself down and reduce my fall damage. The slime, having lost his form, slammed to the floor after me with a loud boom. From the center of the slimy lump of flesh, a human head and torso formed, swaying like a ghost. His eyes stared out at me lifelessly.

Heh, heh heh...I did it. You definitely wasted all your MP with those owl attacks. And on top of that, you took an absolute beating just now. You've gotta

be running on empty, right?

Species: Chaos Ooze

Status: Normal

Lv: 100/125

HP: 521/1681

MP: 67/1780

...Well, you still have more than I thought you would, but whatever. You have HP, but you'll run out of MP soon. Then all you'll be able to do is writhe around in that slime body. I win. You should beg for mercy to the Divine Voice for losing a match you were 95 percent likely to win.

The slime looked at me with hatred in his eyes. "...God hasn't answered me in a long time. Not since that day in the forest, Illusia. The day our fight ended in a draw."

W-wait, not since then...? D-does that mean you've just been talking to yourself this whole time?!

"I didn't want to have to use this here, but...I am out of options. Allow me to show you my most prized skill: Life Mana! It utilizes my strength—being able to absorb all kinds of monsters—and uses it as my ultimate skill!"

On the slime's lower torso, three owl faces wriggled to life. Just then, the slime's entire body was enveloped in blue light, and then it burst into flames. Inside the flames, a human form clutched at its head with its arms and screamed. The owl faces lost their shape in the heat of the fire, and their forms disintegrated.

"A-ah, aaah, aaaaaaaah!"

Th-that's Life Mana?! The skill that lets you exchange HP for MP?!

The slime hadn't used it until now, so I had to guess he was using it now because the exchange rate from HP to MP was expensive, and I didn't have anything left to attack him with. He was sacrificing the rest of the HP he had to spare in order to squeeze out the last of his MP. Well, that was fine. If the slime reduced his HP, I'd just finish him off with a single blow...!

The blue flames of Life Mana dispersed. With a heave, I lifted my heavy body and staggered to my feet. *Now, the question is, how much MP did he get back...?*

Species: Chaos Ooze

Status: Normal

Lv: 100/125

HP: 1075/1681

MP: 547/1780

...Huh?

N-no, wait, that can't be right. No, no no no! It can't be!

This...this is just...it's absolutely impossible!

By all accounts, the Chaos Ooze's stats and characteristics, coupled with the slime's inherent ability to extract skills from other monsters, was a truly broken combination. But being able to regenerate both HP and MP with no cost? That was on a whole different level entirely.

"Laplace...what is my chance of victory? I see. So it hasn't changed..."

Why?! Why did he regain most of his HP too?! What the hell is going on? With a skill like that, this battle will never end. Something...something fishy is going on. There must be some sort of catch.

"Now then, Illusia... Let's begin our final round, shall we? This monster was...

very difficult to kill. It was the one with Life Mana, after all."

Then the slime's body began to swell rapidly.

Part 5

A RAINBOW OF COLORS began to spread over the slime's growing form. The hues turned warmer and warmer, until he finally completed his transformation and stood before me as a bright-red bird. He spread his two wings that were large enough to take up a majority of his body width and stamped on the floor with massive clawed feet. The slime bird looked down at me from behind his imposing beak.

This had to be the form of the monster that had Life Mana...the Fallen Phoenix.

But the slime managed to kill the Fallen Phoenix, even with his Life Mana skill, right? That meant the skill had to have a weakness. If I could find it and use it to my advantage, then maybe...!

"...God called me pathetic, you know. But I seem to be a truly unique specimen in this world. Because it chose to acquire Life Mana during its evolution, the Phoenix's HP was incredibly low compared to other rank A monsters, and that became its downfall. It was still a persistent enemy...but I've realized that, out of all monsters, I am the only one without any weaknesses. And that is because I am God's ideal vassal, and I exist outside the boundaries of this world."

Two bright-red wings spread wide from the slime's back. The space behind him seemed to shimmer with intense heat.

My consciousness began to fade. S-sorry, Lilyxila... I can't win against this. Was I just an expendable resource to you? A stone to use and throw away?

The damage from the consecutive Dark Spheres was too much for me. One of my wings had been blown off, so I couldn't fly properly; in fact, I couldn't even lift my leg. Partner's neck had also been hit hard, and there was a deluge of blood pouring out of it.

The slime slowly approached, his steps echoing across the floor, and he pointed his fingers at me as he closed in. Our eyes met. I knew that if I made a move to try and escape, he would attack without hesitation.

("H-hey!") Partner protested. ("Are you seriously just giving up?! There's gotta be something we can do!")

Yeah, you're right. There has to be something. If the Life Mana skill really didn't have any weaknesses thanks to the slime's OP abilities, he should've used it from the very start of the fight.

The slime could've come down on me hard at the beginning and finished me off, trapping me with a barrage of Drago Flare and preventing me from ever getting close. Even if he completely destroyed the underground cellar, he would've been able to escape with that slime body. But he didn't do that.

So it's definitely not an all-powerful skill. He probably recovered his MP with Life Mana, then used a different skill to restore his HP.

I felt like there might be other risks to using Life Mana, but considering it wasn't displayed in the skill details, I doubted there was any crazy disadvantage to using it.

It didn't escape my notice that when the slime activated Life Mana, three Great Owls of Wisdom appeared. However, I didn't have the time to guess at the connection there and exploit it as a potential weakness. At the end of the day, I had to accept the facts: The slime had recovered, and I was still on the brink of death. It was too late. The multitude of cards in the slime's hand had overwhelmed me. I couldn't even move properly anymore.

"You had luck on your side, but you still lost. Even so, I never expected you to give me such a run for my money." The slime lowered his fingers, and a two-meter-long comet of flame shot out from the flames on his wings. The flames took the form of a bird, which spread its wings and opened its beak wide as it flew at me.

"This is Holy Firebird...a mass of flames with a homing effect."

I blocked the attack with my remaining wing. The flames burst against my skin and enshrouded my entire body in blazing heat. I could tell that my HP was rapidly decreasing.

"Ghhh..." I sank to the ground and kneeled. From the very beginning, there was no way I'd be able to win this battle. The only thing I could've done was run away as fast as I could. The slime's Laplace only predicted the slime's chance of winning—for all I knew, that five percent could've simply been the chance that I'd be able to get away.

"Gaa, graaaaah!" Partner cried out and shook her head. Blue blood splattered the ground with each shake from the gaping wound in her neck. A second Holy Firebird flew at me and exploded, and then a third.

The slime raised his arms and opened his mouth. "I've managed to come this far because I've been focused on becoming strong all this time. I've heard that you, on the other hand, have been going around and acting frivolously, doing whatever you pleased. I don't know much about you, but that is clearly what distinguishes you from me. If you were at your max level, our stat difference would've made it impossible for me to even land an attack, and this conflict might've never ended. If you'd just made it to your next evolution, you would've been rank A+, if not Legendary. Then...things may have ended differently. But it's no use speculating now."

Then the slime began to slowly lower his arm, as if biding his time.

"It may surprise you to know, Illusia, that I never truly hated you. Not that it matters now, of course."

Another massive, flaming bird flew at me. It was slow and hulking, probably because it was intended to be all about power instead of speed. It could be as slow as it liked; there was no way I could hit it now.

...I'm sorry, Allo, Nightmare, Treant. I won't be coming back. I should apologize to Lilyxila and Myria too... No, I guess it's too late for that now.

What was this slime going to do now that I failed to stop him here? I doubted

Lilyxila would be able to stop him herself. I should've gone back as soon as I found out we wouldn't be working together.

Judging from the current outcome, if either Lilyxila or I were not around to help, it would've been completely impossible for us to capture the Chaos Ooze at this point.

But just before the Holy Firebird hit me, a shadow flew out in front of me. I opened my eyes wide.

"Uraaaaaagh! Blade of Exorcism!"

A sinister, red-black blade slashed through the Holy Firebird, cleaving it in two. The flames lost their forward momentum and dissipated without bursting.

V-Volk?!

Volk released his right hand from the eerie greatsword, opened and closed it as if to check his grip strength, and then gave a ghastly grin.

"Hmph. That'll do, I suppose."

Wh-where'd that sword come from...? And he seems even faster than he was when I fought him...

"Don't get too close. This sword carries a curse. It even tried to slash at me while I was trying to heal Volk. It seems our dragonslayer truly is closer to monster than man." Right before my eyes, standing next to a pile of rubble, was Lilyxila's retainer, Alphis. Her small, piercing irises peeked out from underneath her short blonde hair.

"Master Dragon!" I couldn't see Nightmare anywhere, but even Allo had arrived here. She leaped over the rubble and dove to my side, glaring at the slime.

"Rooooooaar!" H-hey, watch out! That guy's really dangerous! If we don't get out of here soon, it'll kill us all!

"Goodness, that surprised me. But you're not the saint, are you? It seems I've only got a few more small fry to worry about, so..." the slime said, laughing.

The slime's laughter was cut short by the sound of Alphis's voice. "You should have never come out into the open. No matter how many humans you've swallowed, no matter how illustrious a name you've given yourself, you are still nothing but a slime. Saint Lilyxila is likely still making predictions with her remaining magic. Choosing to appear at her provocation was a huge mistake. You should have bided your time until the saint gave you a clear opening, just as she is doing with you now."

The slime's face contorted in anger.

<Allo, what the heck's going on?> I asked Allo with Telepathy.

Allo gave me a complicated look. "Nightmare is taking the girl, Myria, upstairs right now. But that slime...we only barely escaped from him."

So Myria's safe? And that slime...you mean Samael? Y-you guys managed to fight him off? With how powerful he was, I could only hope you were able to get away.

"And after that, we met up with her." Allo pointed at Alphis, a hint of dislike clouding her expression. When we'd first met, Alphis had clearly looked down on me and the rest of my crew as just a gaggle of monsters. Now that we were working together, she seemed to appreciate having our strength on her side, but I still felt like she was reluctant to accept us as true friends and allies.

...I wanted to thank them for coming here to support me, but to be honest, I wasn't sure how long Volk, Allo, and Alphis would be able to survive against that slime... More than anything, I was simply worried for them. Alphis was provoking the slime for coming out into the open, but as for me, I would've rather she called up Saint Lilyxila and let her handle things.

"It seems the small fry is trying to make me out to be a fool. Can't you see that you stick out like a sore thumb?" The slime moved.

Alphis raised her sword. "I've saved a bit of my magic, so I can at least buy you some time. Quick!"

A magical light enveloped Allo and Volk. Volk raised his greatsword and kicked off from the floor, then leaped to the wall and ran along it toward the slime. Allo, momentarily taken aback by Volk's vigor, glanced back at me before moving to go after him.

However...although Volk was a different matter, I knew the slime was way too much for Allo to handle.

"Grahh...!" I called out to her, but Allo just looked back at me and smiled.

"Don't worry, I've got an ace up my sleeve." Allo patted my side, then enlarged her hand and ran over to the slime.

An...ace up her sleeve? Sure, being low on agility would be lethal, but this isn't the type of monster she'd be able to defeat because of a little speed buff.

"Naturally, we'd be in trouble without you back in the fight. Mana Release!" Alphis raised her sword again and thrust it at my forehead. Her body began to glow. The light traveled through her body to her sword, then flowed from the sword's tip to me. My entire body felt lighter, and the haze over my five senses cleared.

Was that...an MP-transfer skill? I didn't receive much, probably because the conversion rate wasn't very efficient and Alphis was running low on MP herself, but...there was a very big difference between having a little bit and having none at all.

With this, I could use Regenerate to heal my broken parts and Hi-Rest to regain some HP. I healed my wings and repaired the gouges across my body.

A-all right! I can still fight! I wasn't sure if Alphis would be any help back when we first met, but she did have some pretty handy skills. I guess it was no wonder, considering she was Lilyxila's retainer.

("Say thank you,") Partner ordered.

"I have no need for thanks from monsters," Alphis responded calmly, without making eye contact. "Show me it was worth it."

Welp, her attitude's the same as ever. Couldn't Lilyxila have found a strong swordswoman who was a bit...nicer? I hoped she didn't give me sass while we were fighting for our lives out here.

I tried to take a step forward, but I felt my body wobble, and I staggered. *Ugh!*My body's not in good shape yet? When I need to get back into the action?!

"...What are you so surprised about? Don't you know? Recovering MP with items or skills puts a strain on your body."

Now that she mentioned it, I did remember Allo struggling a bit after using Mana Drain to borrow my MP in the mine. I thought it was just mental fatigue at the time, but...it actually put you at a disadvantage?

Then...was the slime at a disadvantage too? Did that mean Life Mana wasn't a skill he could use repeatedly? If so, then I'd understand his wanting to conserve MP. But Allo had filled her empty MP several times with no issue, so it didn't seem like a heavy burden on her.

"However, transferring MP through skills is far more convenient than relying on medicine to recover," Alphis added. "Now move."

I wasn't sure if it'd be much of a fatal weakness in this fight either, as it was something I could tolerate as long as I was aware of it. It seemed like wishful thinking to believe using Life Mana multiple times would wear the slime down... right?

"Let's finish this before our energy runs out. The dragonslayer and the undead are already at their limits. Quick!"

The light of Alphis's magic fell upon my back.

You...don't know how stupid tough this slime is, so you're talking down to it like you're better. But I'm telling you, the only time I can defeat it is now, while the Quick is active. Right now, I had the upper hand against that cheating slime in melee combat, but our only shot was if I could finish him off with a barrage of blows that prevented him from using his Life Mana skill again.

Alphis jumped onto Partner's neck. "Get moving. You're wasting my magic." "Graaaaaah?!" Partner snapped her fangs and glared at Alphis.

"Hmph. This is not the time," Alphis said, but Partner didn't seem to be listening.

("Hey. Can I bite this lady real quick, just to cheer me up a little?") Partner asked, staring at Alphis with wide eyes.

I sighed. *(Hop on my neck instead, Alphis; I don't mind. That one won't be swayed by logic!)*

"R-right..." Alphis leaped over to my neck. Wow. The big bad swordswoman was really scared just now, wasn't she? I saw her face tense up.

I ran over to where Volk and Allo were deep in combat with the slime.

"...I won't be needing any fancy skills to get rid of Illusia's little entourage," the slime sneered. "I'll just destroy you with this."

Numerous tentacles stretched out from the slime's body to attack Allo and Volk. Allo couldn't even get close to the slime. Just when the tentacles were about to catch her, she used Gale to blow herself away and narrowly avoided them.

The slime could sling his tentacles around as long as he liked, but Allo had to use MP to dodge. This slime really was a head above her in terms of stats. Meanwhile, Volk evaded the tentacle strike effortlessly, like he'd known its trajectory from the very beginning, then leaped upward and swung his greatsword at the tentacle.

"Hyaaaaaaah!" With a furious shout, Volk sliced the tentacle cleanly in two. The slime frowned, and Volk gave a fearless grin. The next moment, however, another tentacle shot out and slammed Volk to the wall. The wall cracked with the force, and Volk's body was crushed deeper into the crevice.

I-Is he dead...?

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, Volk jumped out of the hole and

dodged the pursuing tentacles. His form was stained with blood, but that same feral grin was still plastered on his face.

No matter how I looked at it, there was no way he could've gotten out of that so quickly. He must've only targeted the parts of his body necessary for movement and immediately healed them with Regenerate.

I-Is Volk really not human after all?

Volk jumped onto one of the tentacles chasing him and ran along it to the slime's main body. "I suppose I wouldn't mind exchanging my dragonslayer title for that of Demon King slayer!"

"You are nothing but an annoyance! Gravity!" the slime shouted.

Black light spread rapidly along the ground, restricting Allo's and Volk's movements. They both sank to the ground and writhed on the spot, their shoulders shaking.

"Mmgh, grrh... This power...!"

"How unfortunate. No one can save you while you're stuck in the light of my Gravity. Now you'll both die!" The slime's stomach wriggled, then transformed into a spinning owl face. Two spheres of black light appeared in front of it—the Great Owl of Wisdom was using two consecutive Dark Spheres!

Maximum power Gravity really was dangerous. Even I, with my size and power, would have my movements greatly restricted if I went into the area of effect. Volk and Allo had no way to escape, so it was up to me to do something. I kicked off from the ground and spread my wings, then flew into the ring of black light from above.

When I entered the Gravity field, I felt it immediately begin to pull my body down to the ground. I used my momentum to aim for the slime's humanoid form as I plummeted down, my front legs stretching toward it.

"What?!" The slime immediately threw its two Dark Spheres at Allo and Volk, then raised both arms to meet me. His massive shell shield formed at the tips of

his fingers and blocked my claws. However, it seemed like he couldn't bear the weight of my huge body along with the Gravity, and his entire form trembled with exertion. The ring of black light from Gravity weakened, and Allo and Volk started to move again.

"Gale!"

"Mega Cleave!"

The tornado of wind released by Allo struck the phoenix's back leg, and Volk's sword skill slashed at the tentacles. The slime lost his balance, and his shell shield began to tip even further.

"Shockwave!" Alphis released a sword strike in the gap we'd created. The Shockwave sliced through the opening in the slime's defenses and sliced through the base of his humanoid arm.

"Tch!"

I shoved the tilted shell shield with my claws, toppling it further, and tossed it to the side. The slime was defenseless.

I raised my paw and tore through the slime's humanoid upper body vertically where it extended from the phoenix neck. The shell shield fell to the floor and burst, turning back into slime.

"This...this isn't fair! We were having a one-on-one fight!" The two halves of the slime's mouth flapped open and closed as he spoke. His human form, split in two, dissolved and sank down into the body of the phoenix.

Instantly, the phoenix's body was covered in a layer of silver, and dozens of mouths of various sizes formed along his entire body. Even the tips of his tentacles had mouths. *H-huh...? What's going on?*

The slime's entire body was transformed into a strange, silvery mass of gaping maws. I felt a tremendous amount of magic power flow into the center of the metallic phoenix. I dunno what this thing's about to do, but whatever it is, it doesn't seem good.

"First, I'll start with the small fry."

"I'll be sure to mow them down."

Voices echoed from each of the slime's open mouths. I swung my paw wide and clawed at the silvery surface of his body, only for my claws to shatter against him and snap off, along with my toes.

Ouch. He wasn't as hard as the shell shield, but he was still really tough. Did he seriously manage to make his entire body as hard as steel? Damn it, I thought he'd used his trump card already! Or was this just another card in his hand?

Think, think! What skill is this? It feels like metal, so maybe... No way. It can't be!

"I'll be nice and declare my plan ahead of time."

"I'll be releasing my breath skill, Metal Breath, in all directions at maximum power."

"You, with your high HP, will likely be the only one to survive."

That's Grandpa Magiatite's skill! It was a breath skill that sprayed magiatite, vaporized by super high heat, into the surrounding area all at once. If the massive metal slime shot it out from each of his mouths, the lethal spray would take up half of the underground hall. There was no way for me to stop the magiatite slime with any of my current attacks. If such a powerful attack hit them, Allo, Volk, and Alphis definitely wouldn't survive.

"Roooooar!" (Get behind me! I'll block it!) I told the other three via Telepathy.

("Hey! Watch out, Partner! It's aiming straight for you!") Partner warned me.

I knew that much. The slime said he wanted to wipe out my friends with this attack, but I was certain he wanted to finish me off by making me take a direct hit while I protected everyone else. If I took the hit, the slime would get what he wanted.

But if I didn't, all three of them would die!

The slime's mouths all twisted into smiles. "You're a brave one, aren't you! Go on, start running, or this'll be the end for you!"

The slime sucked in breaths through all of his mouths, and his body swelled. I stood in front of the slime and raised my upper body to form a barrier. The only spot Metal Breath couldn't reach would be right behind me.

"I had no idea this thing was such a monster... Will Saint Lilyxila really be able to manage it?" Alphis muttered as she leaped behind me.

Allo, Volk, you too! Hurry!

"Are you...sure you can handle this?" Allo asked, glancing back at me. Then she turned back to the slime and raised her oversized clay arms over her head.

"Oh, yes! Now!" Volk, who'd been running around at the slime's feet, leapt to Allo's side and slashed at one of her bloated arms.

H-hey! What're you doing to her?! Don't tell me that weird cursed sword is messing with your head...!

"Gale!" Allo raised her remaining arm toward the large open mouth at the center of the slime. The whirlwind from Gale kicked up around her and picked up her severed arm before it sailed over to the slime. The Gale hit the slime, but he didn't move. Allo's severed arm was sucked directly into the slime's mouth.

Hey! Seriously, what're you two doing?! Come back here, quick!

"Sorry, but your time is up. This is the most ideal outcome for me anyway. Get ready! Metal Breath!"

At that moment, something strange happened. The metal around the mouths began to melt, blocking their airways. The silver covering the surface of the slime's body turned a bright red, and his whole body distorted and began to expand.

"Huh? Wh-wha...? N-no, it can't be! Why, why, wh—" The slime's mouths were sealed shut as the molten magiatite trickled in. The Metal Breath attack,

intended to be sprayed outward, had no place to go and burst inside the slime.

Wh-what? What just happened?

"H-h-hot! It...hurts! It hurts! How did...how did you...?!" The slime's phoenix body staggered as he began to melt. He spread his warped wings and flew into the air.

For a moment, I was stunned; but this was my chance. I jumped straight up to catch up to him, and then the remainder of the battle was between the slime, who only lived to become stronger, and me, who spent my days gallivanting around.

"I'm...I'm not finished yet. I still have Life Mana, and as long as I do, I will never lose..."

Three owl faces appeared on the slime's body. "All right, let's start all over again."

"And again and again."

"Until you're through, and I'm the only one left standing...!"

I sent a message with Telepathy. *Enough with the bluffing. Sure, it's a useful skill, but you can only use it so many times, can't you?*

The slime froze in surprise.

Compared to how powerful he was at the beginning, the slime was clearly much slower and weaker after using Life Mana. He had probably used the faulty magiatite skill to compensate for that fact.

At first, I'd been too preoccupied to think about it, but as I saw the slime preparing to use Life Mana again and compared it to how he was during the battle earlier, I understood.

«That three-faced owl form...you use it to cover yourself with a barrage of
magic skills to compensate for the damage from Life Mana, don't you?»

The slime's Life Mana skill... At first glance, it looked like the slime had

recovered 500 MP, and more than double its remaining HP, just by using it once. But as expected, that'd be too broken of a skill to even be possible. The slime had various skills that consumed MP to recover HP, and Life Mana converted HP to MP. If there was a single positive net gain from this cycle, the slime could repeat it over and over quickly to gain a lot of both HP and MP.

But using skills to recover MP over and over would cause fatigue, like it did for Allo. Even as a slime with three owl forms that specialized in repeated magic attacks, if he alternated Life Mana and recovery skills at high speed, he would be hard-pressed to keep up the pace.

In fact, he was slowing down. If he were only up against me, he would've been able to fend me off with his skills. But after the surprise magiatite attack, on top of the arrival of Allo and the others, I doubted the slime would have enough strength left to fight properly after he forced himself to recover with Life Mana again.

"You...say that like you know a single thing about what you're talking about."

"I still have plenty of skills I haven't even used yet."

Blue flames began to rise from the slime. The three owl faces spun around the slime's torso and melted in the flames.

"I...was intending to never use this skill again."

"But it seems I have no choice."

"I am going to turn this cellar..."

"Into the fiery pits of Hell."

The slime began to move within the flames. He raised his fiery phoenix wings high, and the flames engulfing his body turned black.

"I didn't expect to be pushed so close to the brink, but in the end, you are the ones who are going to die."

"You may as well try to run for your lives..."

"But you'll likely be vaporized in an instant!"

Wh-what're you planning to do?!

"Prepare to burn to death! Great Blowfly Ring!"

A massive circle of magic appeared, floating, in the middle of the hall. Moments later, it transformed into an enormous ring of black flames. The temperature of the entire hall jumped in an instant.

"Ha ha ha! Meet the skill that calls forth the flames of Hell to burn through anything and everything aside from the skill user, who is equipped with armor of black fire! I was outside when I faced this skill from the phoenix, so I was able to escape. But here, I doubt you will be able to do the same."

I hurriedly scanned the battlefield to check the others' positions. Of course, Allo and Alphis were staring, but even Volk was looking at the massive ring of black flame in dismay. I dashed around the hall, stretched my neck out toward Allo and Volk, and scooped them both into my mouth.

("Partner! Jump to the right and get that stupid swordswoman and Grandpa Magiatite!")

Partner instantly did as she was told, scooping up Alphis and Grandpa Magiatite, in sword form, with a flick of her head.

A-all right, we got 'em all!

"Unfortunately..."

"You made the wrong choice."

"You should have left your friends behind..."

"And looked for a way to escape."

"But now, there is nowhere to run!"

The ring of black flame contracted for a moment, then expanded at a tremendous speed.

It's already hot enough just being in the room! Is the slime planning to coat

the whole hall in flames?! It's gonna burn down the entire cellar!

I curled up and covered myself with my wings. Hellfire engulfed my body and surged past me.

Resistance Skill "Fire Resistance" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

I felt my cells being burned away and my body beginning to carbonize.

Partner! Use Hi-Rest! As many as you can, please!

("We're almost out of MP!")

Please! Use the rest of the MP we got from Alphis and everything we got back over time, all of it!

I was enveloped in the light of Partner's Hi-Rest. I felt my body, moments from being burned to a crisp, revive from the healing magic. But my new scales and skin quickly began to burn and blacken.

Resistance Skill "Fire Resistance" Lv 4 has become Lv 5.

So...hot. It hurts. I couldn't breathe because of the inferno raging around me, and my body was burning up. Just let me die already... The weak thought rose in my mind unbidden, and I desperately tried to fight off the urge to surrender.

If I gave up now, everyone would die. Everyone. And I wasn't finished with this slime yet.

I was starting to think that even my five senses had burned away to ash... when the pain racing through my body suddenly eased.

"What? How..."

I stood up and shook my head, then opened my bleary eyes. Fire still raged

throughout the hall, but the lethal black flames were nowhere to be seen.

"How are you...still alive?"

I lowered my head and spat out Allo and Volk. Despite being somewhat protected inside my mouth, they'd both been exposed to some degree of flames, and they were badly burned—but they were alive. Next to me, Partner spat out Grandpa Magiatite and Alphis, who both seemed crispy but alive as well.

"I-It can't be... Lies..." The slime recoiled in disbelief.

Unfortunately for you, slime, as an Ouroboros, my defining trait is endurance. If I'd chosen to evolve into any other rank A dragon, I wouldn't be standing here right now. That much firepower, with such a wide range...that was truly an incredible skill. But that was your Hail Mary, wasn't it? And now, it's all over.

Part 6

"RoooooooAR!" I let out a wild roar and slashed at the slime with my front paw. In his phoenix body, the slime raised the shell of the Cursed Millenium Tortoise to block my attack. As before, it was tough as steel; my claws couldn't break through.

"No! I won't lose! I won't! I can't lose to you anymore!" The split human torso on top of the phoenix's neck collapsed, and five tentacles appeared from inside it. The tentacles flexed in midair and swung down to attack.

"Don't get carried away, Illusiaaaaa!"

Partner gathered the five sprouted tentacles together and chomped down, crushing them between her jaws.

("Get it! Kill it!")

Way ahead of ya, Partner!

Partner jerked her head back to make the slime stagger. I stepped down hard on his now-vacant abdomen, then shoved hard with my shoulder to send him flying. The slime's body shot backward, tearing him off from the mass of tentacles in Partner's mouth all at once.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaa!" Countless screams echoed from the slime's many mouths.

Partner slurped up the tentacles like noodles as they began to liquefy. Then she looked up, swallowed, and spit. ("Ugh. Disgusting.")

The battle was already decided. We'd won. Great Blowfly Ring was a great skill that had nearly destroyed the hall, but it was also a quick way to say goodbye to all the MP the slime recovered with Life Mana.

I had no doubt that it'd done a lot of damage to the slime's body itself too. His movements were much more sluggish than before. At first, he had only planned to use Life Mana once, and now no trace of his former agility remained.

The slime staggered, then slammed his back against the wall. The entire hall shook with the force of the impact. Already close to collapse from the fire, the beams and pillars supporting the underground hall began to crumble. One of the pillars fell to the ground with a crash, and debris began to fall from the ceiling.

U-uh-oh...We gotta get outta here, and fast. I could also go after the slime and take him down, though... But the problem was, my body was almost at its limits. I was still damaged from that ring of fire, and I didn't have any MP to heal myself with.

"N-ngh..." Allo staggered toward me, lugging both Volk and Alphis along on her back and enlarged shoulder. In her hand, she clutched Grandpa Magiatite, now reduced to just his core. It seemed like she'd gathered them together to protect them from the remaining flames. Unfortunately, it didn't look like she'd been able to fully heal herself: Her skin was dry like sand, and cracks were beginning to appear here and there along her body. Her left leg in particular had cracks running up and down it, and I could tell it hurt.

"Groooh!" Allo, get out of here. Any more of this and you'll crumble to dust.

Allo blinked and looked up as I called out to her, her face etched with pain. "But...but what about you, Master Dragon?!"

I'm going to go settle things with this slime once and for all. Partner, please.

Partner let out a sigh. ("You know, I bet we'd be a lot more stable if I gave us at least one Hi-Rest...") Despite her words, she turned to Allo and used Fake Life.

Allo's body was enveloped in black light. Her body, close to becoming a statue of crumbling sand, turned back into fresh clay.

"N-no, Master Dragon! You can't! If you waste your magic on me, you won't have enough to take down that monster! I-I'll help! I'll fight too!"

"Graaaaaah!" I roared with all my might. There's no time! Just go! Hurry! If

you don't, Volk and Grandpa Magiatite will die! You know that, right?! Are you trying to dawdle here and give that slime a chance to recover?!

Allo flinched, then gave a small, sad smile. "I know. That's just the way you are, Master Dragon. But...you don't have to be so mean."

Allo sidestepped a piece of falling debris. Then, with Volk and the others on her back, she ran off in the opposite direction of the slime.

("...Did you think she wouldn't back down unless you said all that to her?")
Partner asked. I remained silent and turned toward the slime. ("Hmph... Well, it'd be awful embarrassing to lose to that pile of muck after all of that.")

Even if we won, it'd be meaningless if it meant my friends had to die. I couldn't just leave them to perish because using my MP to heal them might leave me at more of a disadvantage. If I just held on for a little longer, everything would be okay, and we'd have a happy ending.

My foreleg swayed as I stepped forward, but I steeled the last of my strength, and it stilled. Then, one agonizing step at a time, I approached the slime.

"Laplace, what...what are my chances of victory? Huh? N-no, you...you're lying, right? Wh-why is it so low...?"

The slime stood frozen on the ground, stunned. I walked up to him and punched him in the torso again. I understand the desire to rely on predictions, but God won't save you now.

I closed the distance between me and the slime again. He had collapsed, and his body was now beginning to droop and melt. The phoenix body disintegrated, leaving behind a humanoid upper body that sagged into a puddle on the ground. The bright pigment coating him faded, and his entire body returned to his original clear iridescence.

"No, lies... I don't believe it. I don't! Wh-what? My survival rate? No. No, I didn't hear that! Wh-what is this?! What's happening?!" The slime retreated, trying to get away from me. "Stop! Stop it! Let me go! No, I don't want to die! I

don't want to die!"

I moved forward. A piece of falling debris hit me on the head, and blood streamed from my left eyelid. But I kept my eyes open and kept moving forward.

"N-no! If I die here, I can't fulfill my promise! I promised God that I'd...that I'd get you out of here! So...!" The slime was staring at me as the debris hit my body, but when he saw me continue forward with no regard for him, his expression went desperate again.

Title Skill "Calamity" Lv 9 has become Lv MAX.

H-huh? Why now? Because everything's starting to collapse?

Title Skills "Wrongdoer" Lv MAX, "Dastardly King" Lv MAX, and "Calamity" Lv MAX have become "Demon King" Lv 1.

Fulfilled requirements to obtain Sacred Skill "Demi-God Realm Path."

...Ahh, I see. So this is what this was all about, was it? Hey, what's the big deal? You're watching me right now, aren't you? Are you watching the slime and the saint too?

Was that question directed at me?

The message suddenly appeared in my head.

Congratulations. Your original position has been reinstated. Although, in truth. I would have been just as happy. If the other one beat you. But even so, the victor. Was you.

I heard a smattering of polite applause in my head that made me feel like the Divine Voice was mocking me.

I dislike using my authority much. It annoys Laplace. But in such an interesting case. I cannot allow Demi-God Realm Path to disappear. Consider it a freebie.

... You keep talking about things that I don't understand. I've got no interest in freebies or bonuses or anything from you.

Perhaps that is why. You are the better choice. The other one was cowardly. Cruel. Devious. Timid. And a liar. He seemed ill-equipped to be the hero of our tale, don't you think?

Are you really in a position to say that about him? You're the one who's been pitting the slime against me all this time, aren't you?

"G-God...? Are you there? I-I haven't lost yet! I can win this! I could take Illusia on a hundred more times, and I'd win every single one! Y-yes, yes, I can beat him right now!"

Three owl faces appeared one after the other on the slime's body. The faces spun, and blue flames erupted all around them. A thin figure flickered in the flames as though it was on the verge of disappearing.

"With this...my HP and MP will return to normal. Ah ha ha, ha ha ha! It's a shame you're so battered! Now, then, let's get into some overtime..."

This is...too painful to watch. We already know you don't have the strength to recover with Life Mana anymore.

Gained Sacred Skill "Demi-God Realm Path" Lv —.

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

Title Skill "Laplace Authority Interference" Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

My Divine Voice continued announcing my skill acquisitions without pause.

"Ah, aaaah, aaaaaahh... How...how can this be? Why...?" The blue flame of

Life Mana burning around the slime's body vanished with a flash. The slime's melting, humanoid form slowly fell to the ground.

The slime looked up at the crumbling ceiling and started laughing like a madman, then turned his blank, expressionless eyes to me.

Species: Chaos Ooze (Deteriorated Form)

Status: Normal

Lv: 95/95 (MAX)

HP: 488/1531

MP: 532/1630

The slime's stats were much lower now, but aside from the Divine Voice-related skills, his skills were unchanged. It seemed like he had successfully regained some HP and MP with Life Mana, but the exertion of using it so many times in a row along with recovery skills had rendered him completely immobile.

"I'll...curse you! I'll escape the cycle of reincarnation and rise again one day. And when I do, I will remember your face, and I'll kill you. I'll tear you limb from limb and drown you in a swamp of poison, I'll make insects feast on your flesh, and I'll torture you to death. Whether it's ten years from now or a hundred, I swear, I'll..." The slime spat the words with fury and resentment. The word "reincarnation" felt like it didn't belong in his mouth.

Wait, did this slime have memories of a previous life in another world, like me? Or was that something encouraged by the Divine Voice?

<Did you->

As soon as I reached out via Telepathy, there was a large crack, and the ceiling collapsed above us with a roar. This underground hall was going to completely crumble, and soon. I didn't know how much time I could afford to waste on unnecessary questions—and I had no interest in making friends with this slime either.

"Grrooooooh!" I roared, then dragged my heavy body over to the slime. As I lifted my front leg, I felt a cold sensation on my back. The next moment, my legs buckled and I fell to the ground, one step short of the slime. An unpleasant sensation coursed through my body.

D-damn. Is my body giving up on me? But I'm so...close...!

As I dragged myself forward, splintering pain erupted on my back like I'd been slashed with a sword. No. This isn't just fatigue or me reaching my limits!

I gathered the last of my desperate strength and rolled my body to the side. Above me, a sword-wielding man with green-silver hair flew into the air.

It was Samael of the Three Cavaliers.

Crap. I knew he was alive...but I never expected him to show up at the very last second and try to get in my way. Did he use his slime body to get through the crack in the ceiling from the upper floor?

I swung my paw upward and used the momentum from my side roll to slam into Samael. He tried to parry the blow with his sword, but the impact was so powerful that it flew out of his hand.

My paw crushed Samael to the ground, where he rolled along the floor. As he got up, the slime regained his human form. I quickly rolled back over to my original position. My entire body started going numb, and I realized the initial discomfort I felt was the sensation of the Poison Ruler's venom running through my body.

"Tch...! You seemed weak, but you still managed to show such ridiculous power!" Samael clicked his tongue and slung the humanoid slime body sinking

into the pool of Chaos Ooze across his back. The slime's face, which had been limp and lifeless before like his soul had been sucked out, turned upward in a devilish grin.

"W-well done, Samael! Ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha! He is still with me! God is... He's still watching over me! This confirms it!"

Wh-what in the world is happening?

I'd assumed I could only start inheriting Sacred Skills once the battle was over. But if someone came in after I'd already gotten the skills and changed the outcome of our battle, what would happen? If things continued like this, the slime could slip through my fingers. I definitely wouldn't lose to Samael, but...I could barely move. If the slime tried to run, I wouldn't be able to catch up.

"Kill him!" the slime cried. "Samael, kill him! Kill him with your poison! If you do, I might still get my powers back! Do it, quick! Kill him! Kill Illusia!"

Samael's expression tightened a bit in surprise, then he shook his head and kicked the floor to get away from me. "...Let's retreat, Demon King. We've lost this round. Next time—"

"There may not be a next time! Don't you see how weak he is?! Kill him! Now, while we can! Just hurry up and kill him! There's no point in running away! Kill Illusia!"

"Groooooooh!" I kicked the floor with my back legs and swung my front legs down at the slime. Rather than simply moving my body, it felt like I was swinging with the power of centrifugal force.

Samael, with the slime on his back, leapt behind me to dodge my blow. As I stared at Samael, my chest heaving, the slime began its ranting anew.

"You saw that lousy attack! You can do it, here and now! You can kill him!"

"...Don't be absurd. It was difficult enough for me to avoid that lousy move. The longer we wait, the more he'll recover and the faster he'll move."

"But even so, this is our last chance! Why won't you get that through your

thick skull?! Kill him! Kill him now!"

Ignoring the slime's cries, Samael touched his hand to a crack in the wall, turned his body back into green ooze, and began to slither through.

"Too bad, Illusia. The Demon King has an emergency escape route underground, but without a slime's viscosity, you'll never be able to catch up." Samael grabbed the slime, whose body was already a melting heap, and pulled him into the wall after himself.

"Graaaaaaaaa!" I crawled up to the wall where the slimes had disappeared and swung my claws into the cracks. The floor shook, the wall collapsed, and a large chunk of debris fell onto me. Even so, I didn't gain any experience.

After all that, the slime still got away... I didn't think the slime would be able to do anything after he forfeited his Demi-God Realm Path skill...

It's all right. The only reason you were able to inherit the Sacred Skill. Was because Laplace determined the other's death was a certainty.

I suddenly remembered the slime mentioning his survival rate. Was his death a 100 percent certainty at that point?

You have never sought fit. To place your trust in my words. However, I have already told the others of this truth.

...Yeah, and I don't trust you now either. This is the last time you and me are ever going to have an extended conversation. You're done with the slime, right? I'm not interested in becoming your new pawn.

After I've given Lilyxila a piece of my mind and explained the situation to her, I'll take Allo and the others, eat some delicious food with Partner, and go back to living my comfortable life as a dragon. I don't know if you're an evil god, or some sage, or what, but I don't give a damn what you think.

I had hoped to win you over. With this. There are many things I still wished to teach you. But perhaps I can leave you with a single piece of advice?

I didn't know what to say to that. No matter what I thought, this entity was

the one behind the slime. I really had no business listening to a single word it said. But...could I really risk missing the Divine Voice's advice?

When I hesitated, the Divine Voice's next words appeared in my head.

Give up on saving your friends. You must get out of here as soon as you can. Otherwise, you will be trapped.

...Huh?

And your worst trial yet is waiting for you on the surface.

Chapter 4: The Worst Trial Yet

Part 1

RAN BACK THROUGH the cellar that led to the underground hall and headed for the upper floor. I used the MP I'd gained back to use Regenerate and heal my burns from the Great Blowfly Ring, my chest and wing injuries from the Dark Spheres, and Partner's neck. If I wanted to prioritize regaining HP, I could've used Hi-Rest, but doing so would've given me a much harder time trying to escape.

I looked back at the hall as I continued down the corridor. The slime wasn't dead yet. I didn't know how many experience points he'd be worth.

Was he really going to die? He had already lost all the power he had, his status as the princess of Ardesia, and his Sacred Skill. He probably wouldn't be showing his face anytime soon regardless, but... No. I needed to focus on the problem at hand: getting out of here.

Using my wings to shield myself from the falling debris, I ascended the stairs to the upper level, simultaneously using Psychic Sense to detect any signs of life.

I was worried about what the Divine Voice had said, about the "worst trial yet" waiting for me on the surface. Countless voices echoed from the castle above, running around in all different directions.

"Search for any fallen humans. There probably isn't a single one of the castle's human inhabitants left."

"Watch out for any remaining slime soldiers. There may be some hidden away somewhere!"

The voices shouting orders seemed to indicate that help was on the way. Not just one or two people either—more than ten seemed to be coming. Maybe they were adventurers from the capital? Or...

As I stopped to look around, I heard a loud noise from above. It sounded like someone had used an attack spell.

"Sir Barea! Seize that child! It's an undead! If you don't believe me, use Rest on it!" The voice belonged to Alphis. Wait, were Alphis and Allo fighting each other? And who was Sir Barea? One of Alphis's friends?

"Got her...but damn, she's a tough one. Is she a Liche class or somethin'?" The voice sounded rough and masculine.

"She must be at the end of her magic by this point. But don't let her rest!"

There was no time to wait and scope out the situation. I took off, thundering up the stairs and bursting out into one of the crumbling halls on the castle's ground floor.

Allo stood on the other side of the room, surrounded by Alphis and a man who had to be Sir Barea. She'd received a nasty slash across her torso, her left arm was enlarged, and she was poised for battle. However, she was also almost out of MP, which meant she was in no condition to fight.

Although Sir Barea was cloaked, I could see that his sword was an exact replica of Alphis's. I didn't want to believe she'd betray us, but the sword was proof enough.

Lilyxila had said that she'd only brought Alphis along with her because she had to keep a low profile, but this man was clearly another member of the Order of the Holy Knights—the same order Alphis was part of. They'd arranged to send their forces to Ardesia without telling me.

My sudden appearance drew the three trios' attention, putting a pause to the fighting. I stared at Alphis, waiting. If she had an excuse, I wanted to hear it.

Alphis narrowed her eyes and glared back at me.

"The Kingdom of Ardesia has fallen to a high-rank dragon and a Liche-class undead!"

Those words were decisive, and I felt a shock rattle through my skill.

So...that's how it is, then? Did the saint decide this? I asked Alphis with Telepathy.

Alphis silently raised her sword and pointed the tip at me. "Let's go, Barea. The dragon is exhausted. We can at least buy everyone some time."

"Aye, Sir Alphis."

I was beaten. From the very beginning, Lilyxila had planned to pit the slime and I against each other and then hunt down the one that remained. It didn't matter to her who won or lost, as long as we were evenly matched and the one who came out on top was weakened. Perhaps her goal was to recover our Sacred Skills for herself.

"Rooooooooar!" I concentrated my magic in the pit of my stomach and let out a Bellow. Alphis and Barea froze, intimidated.

You...you goddamn fool. The world was at stake, and you came to me. To ask me for my help. Are my Sacred Skills really that important to you?

I aimed at Alphis's back and fired a Whirlwind Slash with the last of my MP. The blade of wind ripped a massive crack along the floor right behind her.

I'm not sure the two of you get it. If I wanted to, even in my current state, I could tear two measly human soldiers limb from limb. And if that's what you want, then so be it.

Neither Alphis nor Barea gave me any response.

"Sir Alphis...I fear this monster may be out of our league."

"... Agreed. Then what is our play here?"

After a moment's hesitation, Alphis turned her sword to Allo. "Don't move, Evil Dragon. The moment you do, Barea and I will use our skills to send this undead back to the underworld where it belongs." Her eyes were wide open, glaring at me brazenly, but her lips trembled.

I know you're desperate, Alphis, but that's not my problem to solve. I'm sick of your treatment and your backstabbing ways.

"Master Dragon! Don't worry about me! Just get out of here!" Allo shouted at me, keeping the two knights in check with her massive arm.

I knew that Lilyxila and the Holy Dragon Seraphim were around here somewhere, and they were both rank A. In my current state, I wasn't equipped to deal with them if we crossed paths now. If they appeared, it'd be all over for me. But I also had no intention of running away without Allo and the others. They'd come all this way because of me, because I made the mistake of taking Lilyxila at her word. There was no way I could abandon them now. Allo, Nightmare, and Grandpa Magiatite would be hunted down and killed by the humans if I did.

"Rooooooooar!" I howled, then pounded the floor with my paws. The floor easily cracked and shattered underneath me.

"H-hey! I said don't move! Don't you care what happens to this one?!" Alphis shouted, bearing down on Allo.

Try it, then. But don't think you'll actually be able to kill her. I'd used Fake Life on Allo already. If they got their hands on her, even if they killed her once, it wouldn't be the end for her.

Alphis and Barea swayed for a moment and then dropped both their swords to the ground with a *clunk*.

"Ngh..."

Next to me, Partner had her gaze fastened on Alphis and Barea, eyes wide. While they'd been distracted by my telepathic message, she'd used Master's Demonic Gaze.

("I did it! I stopped 'em!")

The moment I stepped forward, my Psychic Sense went off, alerting me that someone was at the window. Then the window exploded inward, bringing some of the surrounding walls with it, and a mass of black light soared in through the hole toward me. I could tell immediately that it was the Gravidon skill...and that

it was stronger and faster than any other magic skill I'd seen up until now.

Were they just holding Allo hostage as a distraction?! As I was about to back up to avoid it, I heard a voice from outside the window.

"Holy Sphere!"

I saw a staff peek out from behind the crumbling wall. An orb of magical light shot out from the end of the staff and headed straight for Allo.

I darted forward as fast as I could. The Gravidon hit me on the side of my abdomen, cracking through scales and skin and gouging out a hunk of flesh. I reached out with my front paw and shoved Allo back, out of the way.

The Holy Sphere missed Allo and instead exploded on the tip of my outstretched paw, blasting my skin away and exposing bone. Allo's body, bathed in the radiating light of the aftershock, whitened and began to crack. She fell to the ground and rolled away until she hit a wall and stopped, unmoving.

"Master...Dragon... R-run," she murmured.

My body felt frozen, like it could barely move. I tried to curl my paw, the one that took the direct hit. *It's...it's okay. It hurts, but I can move.* The rest of my body, though, felt like lead. I couldn't get myself to stand. I was already at my limit after the battle with the slime, and this was too much for me to bear.

"It was a mistake to act before we'd seized our main target, Alphis. You knew what the plan was, didn't you? The dragonslayer sensed something was amiss earlier and went on a rampage that caused a lot of trouble for us all. Did something unexpected happen?"

From behind the wall, out stepped Saint Lilyxila.

"...Forgive me, Saint Lilyxila." Alphis bowed her head.

No doubt the plan was to take me by surprise and kill me before I suspected anything, but that plan was clearly out of the question now.

Lilyxila's expression didn't even change as I glared at her. "But, well, I suppose

it does not matter now. It is finally over. All of it."

Barea pointed his sword at Allo where she was lying on the ground.

It was over. The Divine Voice was right. I'd been so focused on settling the score with the slime that I didn't even consider the idea that Lilyxila might betray me.

Lilyxila had a Sacred Skill too. I'd been a fool to not think she might have similar goals in mind as the slime.

...Sorry, Partner, for getting us wrapped up in all this.

("I agreed to come here and help too, didn't I? Don't be stupid. It's not your fault.")



But...

("And besides. We may be down, but we're not out yet.")

...Y-yeah, you're right. I've got no intention of going down without a fight. I still need to make sure Allo gets out of here safely.

With that, I put all my strength into my legs and made myself stand once more.

Part 2: Slime

SAMAEL RAN THROUGH the underground passageway with me on his back as we made our escape.

There was a large waterway down here that led to a subterranean water vein. If we could reach it, as slimes, we'd be able to escape to a nearby river, ocean, or wherever else we liked. No dragon or saint would be able to follow us. I had no idea where to go, or even how to get out of here. This escape route was a last resort—a way to slip out, vanish from public view, and give myself a chance to start over and get back on the right track.

"But...there's no point in any of that now. It's all over," I muttered. Samael's face turned grim at my words. "I can't see anything anymore. Levels, species, names, statuses... It's all gone. I can't get any stronger, now that I've lost my Sacred Skill. I can feel my level decreasing, like it's being pushed down by something from above. And since I've lost my role as Demon King, I'll never be able to create any rank A followers again..."

"It's...it's not over yet, Demon King. I'm still—"

"You?!" I shrieked, letting all of my fury out at once like the crack of a whip.

"And what can a rank B failure like you do?! Maybe if you were as strong as
Rogueheil, things would be different! How did it feel, getting tossed around by

that little undead whelp?! If Rogueheil were there, he could've killed her in an instant!"

Samael's expression remained unchanged. I considered yelling at him some more, but my anger receded, and I just felt deflated. Rogueheil was gone. It was all over. I was nothing. Not the Demon King, not the hero...nothing.

"Samael...it's over," I said. "Laplace has already predicted it. I'm going to die. Sacred Skill inheritance only begins once the owner of a Sacred Skill is predicted to die with 100 percent certainty."

"Y-you know, I'm sure even that Laplace of yours can make mistakes sometimes—"

"It can't. Laplace is not a fallible, living being. It is the concept that governs all the phenomena and laws that make this world possible."

According to God, it was a complex, intertwined mass of paradoxes and contradictions; and although it was neither omnipotent or omniscient, it was as close to those as one could possibly get. The only way to outwit Laplace would be to utilize the world's paradoxes that it hadn't been able to solve—the phenomena that God called "bugs." That was the only way to overthrow the world's balance and release God from captivity. God told me that I was the closest thing He had to one of those bugs, but now I was certain that was nothing but a lie.

It was a long time ago, back when I'd just been born, deep inside a certain forest from my past. I could only vaguely remember it now, but it was an important memory. After getting kicked out of my pack for being a different color than the rest of the slimes, I'd happened across an egg in the forest. Out of starvation, I bit into it, and that was when I accidentally snatched the Sacred Skill developing inside the egg and made it my own.

Normally, Sacred Skills could only be passed from one owner to the next through legitimate inheritance via combat. The fact that I received a Sacred Skill by complete chance in this fashion was, indeed, one of God's bugs.

God hypothesized that there was a certain period of ambiguity in which Sacred Skills were able to manifest but were not yet inherited by the growing organism. That didn't make much sense to me, but thanks to that, a bug had appeared in the egg's inhabitant as well. When I took the skill, I caught a glimpse of fragmented memories from the bug, but it was a strange scene that didn't seem to resemble anywhere in this world.

God seemed to know something about that world, and was very interested in hearing about it, but He never told me anything. Thinking back about it now, I felt like God was more interested in Illusia—the result of the bug—than me, its source, from the very beginning.

Actually, I think I've known that for a long time, but I chose to pretend that I didn't notice.

"...If you believe in Laplace so much, then why try so hard to defeat Illusia in the first place? You fought against him because you thought you could change the future that the prophecy had foretold, right? And instead of giving up, you __"

"No, Samael. I never doubted Laplace. From the moment it told me, I knew my death was fated. I already knew what was going to happen."

"But that's—"

"However, although my death is unavoidable, Illusia's survival is not. He could have been killed by falling debris or whatever else. The hall was collapsing, and Illusia was weak. After all, the only thing Laplace told me for certain was that I was going to die."

"Oh...?"

"But still, I was so frustrated. After all that work, all that time spent honing my skills, I was going to die. And Illusia, who wandered about without a care in the world, would take everything from me! If it was all just going to be taken by him, then I never wanted any of it in the first place! If Illusia was going to take my levels, stats, Sacred Skills, Laplace, the world, and my god away from me,

then I would rather just disappear! I'll curse him... I'll curse Illusia and everything he does, for the rest of his life!" I burst out with the words that had been bottled up inside of me.

Samael looked puzzled, and opened his mouth slightly as if to speak, but seemed to think better of it and remained silent. I scanned his face with some degree of indifference.

<A suitable final request.>

A telepathic message came down to us from above. I looked up to see a massive white dragon standing in the entrance to the waterway. *Ahh, yes. As expected, the saint's collared dragon.*

"Wh-what? When the hell did that big brute get down here...?" Samael's sword dropped from his hand, the clatter of it hitting the stone floor echoing emphatically along the passageway.

«All that time spent waiting, biding our time, and you don't think the saint did
anything to prepare? She is waiting above in case you decided to go
aboveground, and I was tasked with waiting underground to foil any attempts
at escape. Even if I were to be buried alive here, I could simply be replaced. But
truly, it is a horrible reason to send one hailed as the Holy Dragon of Salvation to
my death.

If Illusia had left earlier, the saint would have likely planned to come down herself and finish me off in a pincer attack. Damn it. I was just too hotheaded when it came to that guy. By the time I chose to fight him, I was already doomed. I should've just left early and waited until Illusia was alone to kill him. I fell for the bait, hook, line, and sinker.

"Look. It's over. I know tha—huh?" I felt a strange sensation across my entire body.

It was an instinctive, uncontrollable urge, as if something dark was swirling deep inside me. I recognized the feeling. *Evolution*.

After I'd lost my Sacred Skill, I felt its power leave my body. I'd thought that my body could no longer support the Chaos Ooze species without it and that I'd gotten weak as a result. However...perhaps my level cap had lowered because of that and allowed me to meet the conditions necessary for evolution.

But that...that couldn't be. I'd lost my Sacred Skill. There was no way I could evolve into a Legendary rank. That'd be way too convenient right now. Laplace even predicted that the Holy Dragon would be here, and yet...here we were.

Could this be another bug?

Sacred Skills themselves were beings that existed between this world and Laplace. They were the only thing Laplace couldn't control.

Originally, God had said that a being's using Sacred Skills to ascend to a Legendary rank—which was impossible through any normal means—was, in itself, a kind of bug. The Sacred Skill acted as the trigger for evolution. In fact, the whole reason Illusia and I were unique individuals in the eyes of God was because I'd received my Sacred Skill in a way that outwitted Laplace.

Even so, it's hard to understand. But that doesn't matter. If I can evolve, I may be able to overturn Laplace's prediction. And then, most importantly, I could kill Illusia.

"This is a miracle. I have been given a miracle...!" That was the only thing I could say. My passion and zeal had overcome Laplace, the absolute law of this world. How else could it have happened?

Stop. I did not ever expect this to happen. Your purpose here has already been fulfilled. One without Sacred Skills. Or the Laplace Authority Interference skill. Will never be able to break through the wall between rank A and Legendary.

The divine voice of God floated through my head. It was comforting. I never thought I'd hear it again; but without a doubt, God's Divine Voice had returned to me. God was watching over me once more.

"Don't worry, God, I'll kill them all...!" My body was being remade. It was redhot, painful, and hollow. My head began to spin, and my ability to form thoughts slipped away.

"Chaos Ooze" has Evolved into "Ruin."

Rank L evol tion not author%ized.

Gained Special Skill "Ruin."

Gained Normal Skill "Ruin."

G@!nedSp%cialSk!ll"#&."

Am I getting...taller? No, have I been able to see this high from the beginning?

I didn't know. My mind was so jumbled. I felt sick. I felt like I could see a world that I didn't know. And then it disappeared into the distance. I didn't know. Maybe I'd collected too many. Too many skills, too many memories.

I knew it was strange. You had survived too long past the pronouncement and skill inheritance. I see. So this was a fixed outcome?

The messages from God continued.

Lost Special Skill "Seven Types."

Lost Special Skill "Slime Body."

Lost Special Skill "Stealth."

Something left my mind just now. I can't remember what it was.

Lost Special Skill "Poison Belt."

Lost Special Skill "Tortoise Shell."
Lost Special Skill "Psychic Sense."

I wonder if it was something important?

Lost Special Skill "Grecian Language."

I can't think of anything. Something is floating away inside my head.

".....!"

Something...was making noise in front of me. Experience points. I stretched out my arm, and it crumpled, then popped.

Experience points. Need...experience points. More experience points.

"Illusia..."

Yes. To kill Illusia, I need more Experience points. I see a white...dragon ahead. Ah, yes, it looks like it has lots of Experience Points. I recited the only word that remained in my memory, which had gone pure white.

"Ruin."

The entire area was covered with a blinding, empty white light that looked just like the one inside my head.

Part 3

LILYXILA LEAPT from the windowsill into the hall and pointed her staff directly at me as she landed.

"Holy Spear!"

A spear of light shot from the tip of her staff and careened toward me at high speed.

Can I avoid it? No, that'd be too tough. Then I've got no choice but to defend. I'll slice through it with my claws and send a Whirlwind Slash at her at the same time!

I spread my wings and swung my front leg toward the spear. Two chipped claws fell from my paw and clattered across the floor. It wasn't enough to cancel out the spear of light, but instead, it veered off course, spun around, and embedded itself in my back.

Enduring the intense pain, I flapped my wings, then gathered the wind in my front claws and shot a Whirlwind Slash at Lilyxila. Then I twisted my body around and fired another Whirlwind Slash in the opposite direction.

When the wind slash got close to Lilyxila, a wall of light appeared in front of her. My Whirlwind Slash was sucked into the wall of light and disappeared with a slight ripple on the wall's surface. Then the Whirlwind Slash burst from the light wall again, this time headed straight for me. Partner turned her head just in time to avoid the brunt of the slash. It seemed to have grazed her; a few of her scales were sliced off, and blue blood dripped onto the floor.

That must have been Lilyxila's Mirror Counter skill. I'd thought I already had a pretty good grasp of her skills, but it seemed like she still had a few useful ones left that I didn't know about.

Lilyxila's eyes narrowed slightly as she looked at me, and she touched her

mouth with her free hand as if contemplating something.

"...I took many precautions to prepare for any uncertainty," she muttered, "but even so, the unexpected continues to rear its ugly head."

What, did something go wrong with her plans? If so, I thought perhaps I could take advantage of it, but I couldn't see anything I could exploit.

Dang, maybe I should've been chummier with the Divine Voice to get it in a good mood and pull some information out of it?

At that moment, an angry voice spoke up from the other end of the room. "Gah! It...it got me...!"

Barea, who'd had his sword trained on Allo, glared at me, holding his blood-soaked arm. His sword had flown from his hand and rested on the ground a short distance away. The second Whirlwind Slash I'd sent out had been aimed for Barea, and apparently he hadn't been able to avoid it.

"A hostage is useless in these circumstances! We should've disposed of her at once!" Barea pointed at Allo, no doubt readying to use some sort of magic attack. Allo got up and jumped backward to make some distance between the two of them.

"Barea, that's enough!" Alphis shouted. "Leave the undead alone! Liche or not, she's nothing compared to that dragon!"

Barea stopped moving and looked me up and down, eyes narrowed. "But...Sir Alphis! The undead doesn't look like it's going to run away!"

Even if there was no chance that I'd win, I wanted to keep the three of them focused on me to give Allo time to escape. That was my goal, and I'd succeeded. Allo was free to leave.

Allo, get out of here! Grab Nightmare and Grandpa Magiatite on your way if you can!

Allo stopped, confusion etched on her face.

Hurry up! I can't get away if you're still here!

With that, Allo flinched, her shoulders and back trembling. She looked down to hide her face and turned her body away.

...I'm sorry, Allo.

She would've never run away first if I didn't lay down the law like that, but I still felt bad. I wanted to apologize the next time I saw her, but I was almost certain that I'd never get that chance.

Lilyxila jumped closer to me. Was she...trying to close the gap?

My only long-range skills were for small fry and dealing damage, so the closer Lilyxila was, the better. If I was extra lucky and managed to land a good blow, I could maybe even get her to retreat.

When I raised my leg to strike, Lilyxila's staff was already in the air.

"Gravity." Black light spread in a circle with the saint at the center. I felt myself grow heavy—I couldn't lift my paw any higher than my neck.

"Your body is already at the end of its rope. But surely you know that better than anyone, don't you?"

Yeah...seems like it. But at least now, Allo should be able to escape...

I turned my eyes toward the edge of my field of vision. Alphis and Barea were both kneeling under the effects of Gravity, but lying on the floor a ways behind them was Allo. My eyes opened wide.

Th-there's no point in killing Allo! Your goal is to get my Sacred Skill, right?!
We risked our lives to get rid of the Demon King for you! You could at least show us a bit of mercy!

Lilyxila didn't respond to me, but she scowled in annoyance and turned slightly to look behind herself.

"I wanted to get this over with before it became too much trouble..." Lilyxila muttered, just as a group of armed humans entered the hall. At first, there were only three, but another seven came in soon after.

There was no sense of uniformity in their garments, weapons, or appearances. Some were clad in armor, while others were bare on their upper halves and carried massive clubs on their back.

"So the rumors were true! The Demon King was pretending to be the princess of Ardesia!"

"W-wait, let's stop here... If that massive dragon comes this way, we won't stand a chance!"

"Don't be stupid. It's dying, see? Besides, the saint is keeping it at bay. With this, we can join the ranks of heroes!"

These...weren't the adventurers the Demon King had invited to the castle to harvest for experience points. More than likely, they were adventurers based in Alban who'd rushed over when they noticed something strange going on in the castle.

Their stats weren't great. They were all in the E+ to C- range. But even so, now that they were here, it'd be even more difficult for Allo to escape. On top of that, even more adventurers—and Lilyxila's men, who were still busy fighting the rest of the slimes at the moment—would arrive before too long.

"Please stay back," Lilyxila said. "This dragon is dangerous, and we do not require your assistance." She raised her staff. Black magic gathered at its tip, and I immediately recognized it as the gravity magic Gravidon. If that skill hit me directly with my current stats, it'd be all over.

All right, bring it on. Perhaps because Lilyxila's focus was shifted to Gravidon, the Gravity she'd used before was weakening. I jumped into the air and blocked it with my wings, which somehow diverted its orbit.

And now, I'm gonna try and devour that saint in one bite!

At that moment, Lilyxila suddenly flinched. She staggered, covering her mouth with her hand. The expanding light of Gravidon shrank and disappeared, and the circle of Gravity weakened as well.

Wh-what's going on?

"Seraphim...?" Lilyxila murmured, her face tense. She seemed genuinely shocked.

Well, I dunno what the deal is, but this is a perfect opportunity to strike!

"Rooooooar!" I leaped straight at Lilyxila and swung my claws at her. She hurriedly backed away, waving her staff in front of her, and two spears of light flew toward me. I slammed my front legs to the ground and landed quickly. The two spears pierced the floor right in front of me.

"Saint Lilyxila?! What're you doing?!"

"I'll explain later. For now, let's just finish this dragon first."

Seeing that I was released from my Gravity restraints, the onlooking adventurers had backed up considerably.

"W-well, it doesn't look like it can move still!"

"Yeah! We can't stop now! I-I'm going to go down in history!"

I saw the adventurer release an arrow, but I chose to ignore it and avoid risking giving Lilyxila an opening. The arrow pierced through my stomach, which had already been descaled by the saint's magic. *C-crap. That's gonna do some damage.*

"Look! My arrow hit it! I hit it!"

Okay. Don't get too ahead of yourself, me. It's not that much damage. I just gotta grin and bear it.

At that moment, the hall was rocked by a massive tremor. No doubt the underground portion of the castle had just collapsed, and the reverberation had been transmitted to the level above.

A crack appeared in the floor right in front of me, and the floor started to crumble. I leaped up and flew backward to avoid it. Lilyxila, unfazed by the collapsing floor, bounded forward in pursuit.

She shoved the tip of her staff into my chest—a reckless move. However, once I was caught in the collapse, I knew I'd be skewered by her spear of light. Was this...the end?

As I prepared myself for Lilyxila's attack, the crack in the floor widened, and something sprang up from its center.

What appeared between Lilyxila and I was a fluid, color-changing mass of light. The iridescent mass of light resembled the outline of a dragon.

"Wh-what? Where did this... What happened?" Lilyxila's face twitched, but she waved her staff toward the light.

The spear of light thrust straight into the creature's chest, but disappeared as if it was absorbed by its iridescent glow.

The creature's eyeless head turned toward Lilyxila. She leapt back and waved her staff, creating a wall of light between them. It was another Mirror Counter—the same skill she used to repel my Whirlwind Slash.

"Oooor, ooourgh..." A strange sound escaped from the creature's mouth. An iridescent ball of light, the same color as the creature, appeared in front of Lilyxila. The next moment, her Mirror Counter shattered.

"What...?" As soon as I heard Lilyxila's confused mutter, my vision was completely flooded with light and I felt an impact hit my entire body. The force slammed my back against the wall, then I dropped to the ground and crouched. When I opened my eyes, a spherical area of complete destruction greeted me. The walls and floor of the castle were in ruins, centered around an iridescent ball of light floating in the air.

The area where Lilyxila was standing was much less destroyed, thanks to her Mirror Counter. But even if she had a magical barrier, she'd still been attacked at close range. There was no way she'd gotten out of it unharmed. But whether she'd been obliterated by the blow, or fell through the collapsing floor, she was nowhere to be seen.

"S-Saint Lilyxila...? Saint Lilyxila? Where'd you...?"

The other adventurers, along with Alphis and Barea, were on the ground groaning on the other side of the crater in the floor, seemingly blown away just like me. Allo was kneeling near them, but her body didn't look like it'd taken much damage, probably because her enlarged arm had acted as a shield.

Wh-what the heck was that crazy skill...? It seemed like I'd been lucky enough to get away with minimal damage because it was a good ways away, but based on the level of devastation on the floor, it would've done some immense damage if I'd been stuck in the center.

The creature itself used its head to break through the ceiling with ease, then flew up to the upper floor and disappeared from view.



"Oooor, oooooouurgh!" It gave another strange cry, and iridescent light began to shine down from the hole in the ceiling. It had to be the same skill it unleashed on Lilyxila earlier. The floor above us shattered, revealing the creature once again. Fortunately, this time, there was no debris left to rain down.

The creature's pearly iridescence and ambiguous shape reminded me of the Chaos Ooze's initial form, before it started changing colors. But where that one had a slime body, this one was completely made of gathered light.

It had come from underneath us, so maybe it was a monster like the Giga Slime that the slime locked up underground because it was too difficult to handle?

Species: Ruin

Status: Collapsing God

Lv: 54/150

HP: 1279/2422

MP: 1185/2716

Attack: 1871

Defense: 1016

Magic: 1995

Agility: 1287

Rank: L (Legendary)

Special Skills:

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 9

Divine Voice: Lv 1

Ruin: Lv —

Collapsing God: Lv —

Absorption: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Debuff Immunity: Lv—

Normal Skills:

Regenerate: Lv 9

Ruin: Lv —

Title Skills:

Former Demon King: Lv —

Ruin Magic: Lv —

Final Evolution: Lv —

L-Legendary?! And all its stats are over 1,000! Its attack and magic are closer to 2,000, even! What was a monster this powerful doing, sleeping in a room underneath the castle all this time?!

Wait, it's got "Former Demon King" as a Title Skill... Does that mean this thing is the slime?!

Wh-what's going on? I know the higher your rank, the faster the initial leveling process will be, but isn't 54 levels a bit much? Did he kill Seraphim or something?

Ruin: Rank L (Legendary) Monster.

An embodiment of destructive impulse. An amorphous, indefinite monster made of gathered evil magic. So long as its form remains in the world, it will never be healed of its urge to destroy. Uh, Divine Voice? What happened to the slime's death being certain? Not only is he alive and well, but he got a serious upgrade!

Special Skill "Ruin."

User's body is a vast mass of magical power, and touching it means death. Halves MP consumed by use of the magic skill of the same name.

Wh-whoa... It's like his body is completely covered in magic skills. Guess that means close combat is a no-go. If my opponent was equal to or stronger than me, my damage output was limited to almost entirely melee attacks.

Special Skill "Absorption."

Continuously absorbs MP from surroundings without user input.

On top of his massive stats, he was also equipped with a special MP recovery skill. He also had the Normal Skill Regenerate, so tiring him out wouldn't work. If Ruin really used to be the slime, he should've been worn out from using Life Mana to regain his stats. However, there was no sign of fatigue in Ruin's shining form, and the Absorption and Regenerate combo wouldn't require him to spam the skills dozens of times like he had to with Life Mana. I couldn't expect the same level of exhaustion from healing as I did last time.

Normal Skill "Ruin."

Emits an iridescent ball of light that explodes, causing destruction in a wide area. Power varies greatly depending on distance from the center of the blast.

So that blast earlier...was Ruin, the skill with the same name as his species? He was caught up in that explosion too, but it didn't seem to injure him. Maybe Ruin was immune to skills with his namesake? There was no way I could fight a monster that strong. Wh-what could I even do? Oh, crap, what was *this* skill?

Special Skill "Collapsing God."

Those who gain undeserved power will inevitably perish. Maximum HP and MP decrease rapidly. This skill will never disappear. Ever.

Wh-whoa. Was that the catch for evolving into Ruin? No, that couldn't be right. Undeserved power... Maybe the slime wasn't able to evolve on his own, or maybe he shouldn't have. I was pretty sure you needed to have one or two Sacred Skills to become a Legendary.

...Ahh, that must be it. The slime was obsessed with beating me, and the only way to do that would be to force himself to evolve and give himself the Collapsing God status. That must've meant that even if the slime managed to escape, he was still sure to die in the end. I doubted there was even any trace of the original slime left now...

It was...painful to think about. The slime was a cruel, selfish, and terrible monster, but even so, I felt bad for him. I wished I could've just killed him while I had the chance.

...However, if Ruin really was just a mindless monster, I might just be able to get out of here in one piece.

Part 4

RUIN LOWERED his eyeless head toward me. I crouched down in alarm and took a defensive stance, but he immediately yanked his head in the opposite direction and smashed into a wall on the upper floor with his entire body.

I knew it. He's...not out to get me anymore, is he? With Ruin's sudden disinterest and Lilyxila nowhere to be found, now was the perfect time to escape and get back on my feet.

I reached out to Ruin with Telepathy. Not only did the skill let me get my thoughts across, it also let me probe into my target's inner thoughts. Although I didn't have as much of a mastery over it as, say, Lilyxila or the Red Ogre Ant Queen, it should at least be able to tell me whether or not there was a mind left inside that beast.

<Destroy...destroy...>

Normal Skill "Telepathy" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Using Telepathy on Ruin made me sick to my stomach; I quickly severed the link. As Ruin's description said, he was just a mass of destructive impulse. There was barely a sense of self left.

This was a crazy stroke of luck. If the saint's knights fighting the rest of the slime soldiers were to join forces with the adventurers looking on, they might've even been able to hunt me down while I was still weak. But now, it was impossible. The saint's knights were freaking out because their commander had disappeared, and all the adventurers in the crowd were cowering in fear at the sudden turn of events. There was no way they'd join forces and work together now. And if Ruin came back down here, the entire thing would fall

apart. There was no way the onlookers would go along with such a borderline-suicidal strategy.

There's a chance. It wouldn't be too tough to take Allo, retrieve Nightmare, Volk, and Grandpa Magiatite, then grab Treant from wherever it was sulking in Alban Mine and make our escape. And since it was so dangerous around here for everyone, I'd like to at least take Myria out to the edge of the capital too.

I couldn't help but laugh. Allo's safety and my survival, seemingly shattered by Lilyxila's betrayal, were now back within my grasp—and it was all thanks to Ruin.

All I had to do was not provoke him. If left to his own devices, his Collapsed God status would eventually drain his HP and MP, and he would collapse and die. I looked at Ruin's status again and saw that his max HP and MP were decreasing by about one point per second... *No, actually, a little more than that.* It was about one-and-a-half points per second. Even with his impressively high HP, Ruin would still run out of HP and die in about thirty minutes.

I would've liked to go underground to check for Lilyxila's body—and finish her off if needed. However, if Lilyxila was able to use magic, she could kill me with a single shot. Besides, right now, the most important thing was to get Allo and the others out of here safely.

I looked down at the hole leading to the cellar. It's a shame things had to end like this, Lilyxila. I really believed we could join forces and work together, but I guess you thought differently. It must've been real satisfying, watching me fight for my life against that slime, just like you wanted. But you chose the wrong moment to betray me. How does it feel, betraying me after you thought I defeated the Demon King, only for it to come back even stronger?

To hell with you. You make me sick. I don't wanna say this to someone who might be dead, but look at them. I looked over at the remaining humans.

"N-ngh... How could this happen? After all Saint Lilyxila did to prepare..."

Barea held up his sword, but his shoulders were shaking. He didn't think

they'd be able to beat me without their saint there to back them up. Alphis was still on her knees, but seemed ready to get up at a moment's notice. As expected, Lilyxila's retainer seemed much tougher than the surrounding adventurers.

I sent a telepathic message to both of them. I'd love to devour you two right here and now, but I'd rather not waste my time or magic. Get your sorry mugs outta here before I change my mind.

"F-forgive me, Saint Lilyxila..."

Barea's grip on his sword relaxed, and the blade tumbled to the floor.

If Ruin would be rampaging for another half hour, it would probably drastically reduce Lilyxila's forces. Maybe even finish the saint off, if we were lucky. And it wasn't just the castle at risk. With that much time, Ruin could even go into the royal capital, Alban. But that wasn't my problem anymore.

It was true that I came here at Lilyxila's request to keep the royal capital and its citizens safe, but Lilyxila betrayed me. Not only did she completely double-cross me and try to kill me, she also tried to kill Allo, who was only trying to escape. I was done with her. And I'd lost my respect for these clueless adventurers who were planning to kill me while I was weak just to make a name for themselves.

All that stuff Lilyxila had promised about granting me safe passage in Ardesia and the capital always seemed too good to be true. I'd known deep down that there was no way it'd ever actually work, but when I heard the world was in danger, I risked my life to come all the way out here and defeat the Demon King.

And if it weren't for Lilyxila's betrayal, I would've risked my life once again to stop Ruin now.

I sent out a telepathic message. ... Allo, Partner, I'm sorry I brought us to this awful place. Let's grab Nightmare and the others and get out of here as fast as we can.

I glared at the adventurers again to make sure they weren't about to pick a fight. Many of them were still on the floor, unable to move. Most shrieked and struggled to get themselves up when they saw me look in their direction. One of the adventurers, soaked in blood, was desperately bowing his head to me. One guy simply ignored my glare and wailed like he'd gone mad. It was the archer who managed to shoot me in the stomach. It seemed like the wounds he'd sustained in Ruin's attack were more pressing than the dragon standing right in front of him.

"No, Tina, you can't! Hey! Wake up... Tina, wake up! Please! Tina!"

Upon closer inspection, I realized the archer had a limp female adventurer in his arms. It seemed like they must've known each other. The man seemed completely unconcerned about his own injuries or the fact that I was looking at them.

She was a living human being. They all were. I suddenly felt like my fury toward Lilyxila had blinded me from recognizing that fact. I shook my head. What the hell am I thinking? I can't just stand here and do nothing while Ruin kills half the city. I've gotta do something.

Now that the slime had become Ruin, if I could just get past this fight, he would never be able to evolve again and come back to kill me or start a war as the Demon King. My agreement with Lilyxila was also long gone. Even if I risked my life here, I doubted she'd ever change her mind and want to create an actual alliance with me—and neither would I.

But my life wasn't the only one at stake. If I challenged Ruin, both me and Partner could die, and the adventurers might hunt down Allo and the others while I was away.

Ruin would only be able to rampage around the capital for half an hour max. And if Ruin stuck around the castle for a while beforehand, there shouldn't be a whole lot of damage... So, yeah. From here on out, it wasn't my problem. There was no reason for me to stick my neck out for these guys. It should be fine.

Partner stared intently at my face. I thought she was going to say something, but she just kept looking at me.

"Oooor, oooooouurgh!" At that moment, I heard Ruin's roar echo through the air from far away.

Iridescent light shone from the direction of the capital.

N-no way. Ruin was still upstairs. How'd he use his Ruin skill from so far away?

One by one, iridescent domes of light exploded throughout the royal capital. I stared at the light with my fangs clenched. I can't see much from here, but it seems like things're about to get pretty crazy in the city.

I got a thought from Partner. ("Hey. We're helping, right?")

But...I don't really want to get caught up in this slime's suicide spectacle.

("You look like you're in more pain than when we were fighting that thing.

Quit making up excuses to run away. It's not like you. Now let's settle this, shall we?")

B-but...

("It ain't like you to see that and say, 'Screw it, not our problem.' Let's show that backstabbing girl who's probably rolling in her grave right now what we're made of. That witch is gonna be soooo mad if she finds out we beat her in the end. Ain't that the best kind of payback?")

...What "we're" made of, huh? Well, I guess I can't back down now that you've said all that. Thanks, Partner.

Partner gave me a long, exasperated look. ("Your softheartedness is starting to get on my nerves. When'd you turn into such a goody two-shoes?")

However...if I was going to protect Alban from a Legendary like Ruin, my current HP and MP levels weren't going to cut it. My body was already on the brink after my back-to-back battles with Rogueheil the Shoggoth Ooze and the Demon King Chaos Ooze. With the scuffle with Lilyxila added on top, it was a wonder I was still alive. It was difficult for me to even move, and I couldn't use

my skills properly.

I stared at Alphis and Barea, who were down on their knees. They noticed my gaze, and their faces went green, probably afraid that I was going to kill them. Instead, I checked their statuses. It seemed like Alphis could use both Mana Release and Rest. Barea had Rest as well.

...I'm going after that monster, but I need you two to heal me. Don't skimp out either! I can see how much MP you have.

"As...as if we'd trust the word of a monster! You have no reason to try and stop that beast!" Barea raised his hand toward me.

I knew Barea had the magic skill Ice Sphere, so I had to assume that was what he was planning to use on me. Would he rather provoke me into a rage and die than be used by a monster or something?

Aren't you guys the ones who gave me their word and then betrayed me first?

"H-hng..." Barea glared at me, gritting his teeth.

Don't be so conceited. I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it so my friends who are still in the castle don't get hurt, and for the sake of the citizens of the royal capital whose lives are hanging in the balance thanks to your selfish schemes. Who else would play as dirty a trick as you did on me? If all I wanted was to escape, I wouldn't have bothered trying to get you people, with your nasty personalities and poor grasp of the current situation, to use a bit of your MP on me.

"H-how dare you...! A monster like you, hurling such vitriol at Saint Lilyxila! We won't help you, no matter what you say! You, you wretched evil dragon! If you're gonna kill me, then kill me already!" Barea spoke bravely, but I could see the fear in his eyes, and his shoulders were shaking.

Alphis, standing next to him, seemed to be contemplating what to do next. She turned her eyes toward the large hole leading deep into the earth and pondered for a moment. Then she shook her head, looked at Barea, and spoke.

"...Barea, if that creature is allowed to continue its rampage, all of Alban will be destroyed. And that...is the one thing we cannot let happen. We must take this gamble and place our trust in...in *him.*"

"Wh-what?! Have you no pride as a member of the Order of the Holy Knights?! You're talking about trusting the monster you betrayed! Saint Lilyxila said that no matter what happened, we must not place our trust and support in Illusia!"

"Are you saying you intend to just stand by and watch as this land is destroyed, Barea?!"

"I'm saying that we have no reason to believe a word from this monster's mouth! Are you really so naive that you believe this monster would take down the other one out of the goodness of its own heart?!" Barea turned his hostile glare toward me. "Yeah, you're right, two-headed Evil Dragon! We betrayed you first, just like you said! So why would we believe you? You've got no reason whatsoever to risk your life trying to take down that monster! I assure you, if I were you, I would do no such thing!"

"Rooooooooar!" I let out a Bellow. This is no time for petty arguments! Don't you get it?! You heard the destruction echoing from the city!

As I said it, the sound of another wave of explosions echoed from the capital. I turned to look and saw an iridescent light expanding outward in the aftermath of another Ruin.

Look! Just like that, another dozen people or so are dead! How can you say there's no reason for me to help?! Have you been so wrapped up in your dirty, backstabbing ways that your emotions have gone numb?! Think what you like about me, but mine definitely haven't!

Alphis and Barea were looking out toward the capital where they heard the explosion, but when they got my telepathic message they turned back to me, stunned. Then the two knights looked at each other and nodded their heads.

"V-very well," Alphis said, a little contrite. "I will use Mana Release to transfer

the remainder of my MP to you. I'm afraid there isn't much left, though..."

Barea said nothing, but seemed to be in agreement, and stood with a lowered head.

"You're...going to take that thing down?" One of the wounded adventurers called out to me. It was the archer who shot me. He'd been sobbing uncontrollably and clutching the body of the dead woman close, but it seemed he'd picked up on my Telepathy. He stood and staggered toward me as if his bloody body were being pulled along by a rope.

"L-Let me help... I have Rest too, so I can help. I know I'm in no position to ask this of you, b-but please, I beg you. Please avenge Tina! Don't let anyone else die today!"

I nodded silently.

Barea's Rest alone wouldn't be enough to max out my hefty Ouroboros HP. The more people I had healing me, the better. I still probably wouldn't reach max HP, but it was the best I could get.

After a short pause, the other adventurers watching the scene unfold began raising their hands.

"I-I can use Rest too..."

"I can... I can give you Quick, if you want."

"Th-then I can use Power!"

Adventurers began to approach me one after another.

Jeez... I'm glad I didn't just abandon them and run away. I really thought I was going to for a minute there.

Alphis and the adventurers healed me with a variety of recovery and support magic. The wounds on my body began to close over and mend themselves.

Maybe it was an effect from the support magic, but my body felt lighter somehow.

Illusia

Species: Ouroboros

Status: Power (Slight), Quick, Mana Barrier

Lv: 109/125

HP: 1172/2816

MP: 315/2718

All right, that's much better. But still...I was definitely lacking, compared to Ruin. These support skills would only give me temporary relief; the effects would wear off soon anyway. But I still had to find a way to take Ruin out.

I turned my attention to Allo, who was standing a little farther away. She'd watched the entire exchange with her eyes fixated on me.

...I'm sorry, Allo. Please take care of Nightmare and the others. I'm counting on you.

Allo nodded, a forlorn look on her face. "I...thought you might choose to do this, Master Dragon. Because I know you... I know you're a kind, gentle dragon. You didn't abandon my father's village either. I'll go meet up with Treant and wait for you there, so...just promise you'll come back, okay? I'll be waiting for you."

I gazed up at Ruin, who was looking out at the city from the upper level of the collapsing castle. He didn't even turn to look at me.

Sorry, Allo...but I may not be able to keep that promise to you this time.

I watched Allo run out of the hall and disappear out of the corner of my eye, then kicked off from the ground and leaped into the sky.

Part 5

SOARED THROUGH THE AIR and landed on the upper level of the castle. It was in a state of partial collapse from Ruin's magic attacks. From my position, I could hear Ruin's wild shrieks as he unleashed Ruin after Ruin on the capital.

"Ooooor, oooooooorrrrgh!"

This close to it, I could feel Ruin's oppressive power. He was the embodiment of destructive impulses, an iridescent mass of light in the shape of a dragon.

I really couldn't think of any way to attack him. From this height, I could clearly see the destruction his magic had wrought in the city. In the distance, buildings caught in the iridescent lights collapsed one by one. Ruin's empty eye sockets seemed to stare vacantly out at the scene.

"Rooooooaaar!" I let out a Bellow.

Ruin didn't look back at me, but the next moment, his tail lashed out in my direction. It was too far away to reach, but it at least proved that I had Ruin's attention.

Here it comes!

I smacked the floor with my tail and jumped back with my hind legs. An iridescent ball of light appeared right where I'd been standing and exploded in a blinding flash. The shockwave from the blast washed over me. I spread my wings wide, catching the impact underneath them, and used it to fly backward. Then, flapping my wings to stay in midair, I looked at the floor where I'd been standing.

A massive, perfect sphere of destruction greeted me, centered around that spot. It was like the entire area had been scooped out with a giant spoon. I expected Ruin to launch another attack at me, but he remained as motionless as ever, staring out at the capital beneath us.

Damn. Did all the slime's memories seriously get wiped?! It doesn't seem like that thing cares about me one bit.

("Why don't you try shooting something at him?") Partner suggested.

But I don't want to waste all my MP on random skill attacks. With Ruin's impressive recovery abilities, there was no point in trying to whittle down his strength with long-range skills. I was just hoping to minimize destruction while I waited for Ruin's Special Skill, Collapsing God, to do its job and kill him. Even if I attacked Ruin now, it was unlikely that I'd become the primary target for his Ruin skills. He was probably just acting out in a way that would inflict the most damage possible to sate his destructive urges. Otherwise, he wouldn't be ignoring me to attack the city while I was right underfoot.

Hey, slime! It's me! Look over here!

Ruin's head twitched, and the monster stopped moving. The magic Ruin attacks, firing off at regular intervals before, went silent. I used Telepathy to search through his mind.

<Destroy, destroy...? Destroy...des...troy...>

Just like before, the only thing I saw swirling around in his brain was a miasma of destructive impulses. However, I could see something strange hidden inside the miasma.

Come on. There's gotta be a little bit of that slime's soul left in there. Ruin shook his head as if confused, like he was searching for something. Just one more push.

But if I pushed too hard, all that murderous intent would be turned on me. And if it did, then I was... No, I couldn't chicken out now! Not after getting this far!

You heard me! It's me, Illusia! And I'm gonna settle the score between us once and for all, slime! You're as exhausted as I am, aren't you? I'll send you right back to the Divine Voice!

Ruin's confused movements came to a halt. The iridescent giant slowly looked back at me, stomping and destroying the floor.

"Illu...sia...?"

I swallowed.

My eyes met Ruin's eyeless sockets. They looked almost like they were glowing red. Maybe it was a trick of Ruin's light, which changed fluidly between the seven colors of the rainbow, but even so, I felt a chill of fear run down my spine. Ruin, who had been nothing but cold, destructive impulse moments before, was once again filled with malice. There was no escaping a fight now.

Title Skill "Hero" Lv 8 has become Lv 9.

Gained Special Skill "Valiant Soul."

The Divine Voice message floating through my head was confirmation that Ruin had targeted me for his next attack. It was a little lame to admit it, but I'd have been lying if I'd said I didn't have any regrets. I still had no clear vision in mind for how to face this monster and come out of it alive.

"Oo, ooor, oooough...Illusiaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" Ruin roared.

The light surrounding Ruin's body intensified and then scattered into the air. The floor he was standing on collapsed. When the light subsided, Ruin was floating in the air with four iridescent wings spread wide. He had also clearly grown in size, and he didn't seem to be using his wings to remain in the air—in fact, they were barely moving.

I turned to face the opposite direction, leaned forward, and started to glide away.

To be blunt, I just wasn't strong enough to fight Ruin directly. His stats were way higher than mine; not to mention the fact that just touching that mass of magical power could be fatal. That skill that matched his name, Ruin, was a

wide-range skill that obliterated anything in its radius. If I challenged Ruin headon, he would kill me with that skill before I even had the chance to dodge.

The only thing I could do to protect the city of Alban was to attract Ruin's attention and draw him as far away as I could. With the mysterious Collapsing God skill, he would only last so long before his max HP would drop to zero. It was a shameful way to end things between us, but it was the only thing I could do. Of course, with my low stats, I wasn't sure if I'd even be fast enough to get away from Ruin.

But the main perk of this plan was that I didn't *have* to be able to escape. If I could lead Ruin to a secluded place, even if he killed me there, he would run out of HP on his way back. In the worst case, I just had to hold out until Ruin's HP dropped by half, and then the capital would be safe. That definitely wasn't the ideal scenario, but in order to deal with Ruin, I had to prepare for the worst.

"Illusiaaaaaa!" Ruin roared.

As I soared away from Ruin, I glanced behind me. The monster's massive mouth was opened wide and he was drawing closer. He swung his front legs down at the spot where I'd been standing moments ago.

Oh yeah, he was fast. *Real* fast. Good thing I had got that agility-boosting magic. But what was going to happen when it ran out...?

Species: Ruin

Status: Collapsing God

Lv: 54/150

HP: 1486/2089

MP: 1044/2393

...His level hadn't changed. Guess that meant he hadn't caught any humans or

monsters worth a lot of experience points in his Ruin bombs yet.

You ready, slime? Let's get this little game of extreme tag started.

I soared away from Alban, trying to at least get Ruin a good distance from the city. Or at least, that was the plan. But Partner, keeping watch behind me, suddenly gave a low growl.

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("Here it comes! Ruin stopped; he's gathering light to attack!")

Where's he looking? I need to know where the attack's gonna land!

("Right in front of us!")
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I dropped my head and plunged diagonally downward. Above me, an iridescent light floated on the edge of my vision. I held my breath and shot straight ahead to try and make some distance.

An explosion sounded behind me, and then my vision was blinded by a field of bright light. But I was okay; I'd avoided a direct hit. With the aftermath of the Ruin at my back, I flew onward.

Man. I'd managed to survive it, but...just one of those blasts and I was already feeling wiped. At least I had Partner as an extra set of eyes. That was a lifesaver. And now I knew that when the monster used Ruin, he had to stop moving to concentrate. That was valuable information.

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"Oooooorrrgh!"
("Another one, right in front!")
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Again, I dropped altitude to pick up speed and shot forward in front of the blast. I should've been able to avoid it the same way I did last time, but... *Crap!* It caught me off guard.

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Iridescent spheres of light appeared to my right and left, flanking me.
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("N-no! They got us!")
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D-did he realize Partner was watching his eye movements and do a feint?! Ruin's intelligence was returning. I should've been prepared for that eventuality as soon as he said my name, but my options were so limited that I was completely dependent on this one plan working.

What should I do? Stop and fly in the other direction? No, if I did that, Ruin would catch me. The only thing I could do was keep going! I rolled to the side and spread my wings out vertically in the air.

I was engulfed in iridescent light. My wings were pressed in on themselves from either side. Then my body was launched forward, spinning at high speed, in so much pain that it felt like I was being torn to shreds. I righted myself and flew straight to avoid losing any speed.

Yes! W-we made it through!

("W-watch out!")

The shockwaves from each of the two explosions created an intense jet stream in the space between them. I turned my body to a vertical position and caught the stream of air beneath my wings. However, I wasn't completely unharmed. The air currents had torn at my joints and forced me into some painful positions. My legs, back, and especially my wing bones were aching. The biggest priority was my wings. I used Regenerate to repair my wing bones and kept on flying. My only choice was to keep going as Ruin continued to blast me to bits.

But fortunately, we were now outside of Alban. I'd passed the first hurdle. My next goal was to keep running away until Ruin's HP dropped to below half... which would be 1,000 points. If it got that low, I could guarantee that he wouldn't make it back to the royal capital before his time would be up.

("He's about to do something! He's been charging up for a while now!")

Wait. He's doing something different? But his only options right now should be to use Ruin or chase after me.

("Partner, stop! There's something bad up ahead!")

St-stop...? But if I do that, I'll be in range for a direct attack. No, but Partner's

dragon senses had saved my butt more times than I could count. I had to listen to her intuition!

I stopped, immediately plummeting downward. I couldn't go forward, but I still wanted to keep some space between Ruin and me. Dropping down would at least create some vertical distance.

Far ahead, spaced widely apart, six iridescent orbs of light appeared. I couldn't believe my eyes. *H-how'd he make so many of 'em at once? Ruin's an expensive skill that takes up a lot of MP; it's not something you can pop off willy-nilly.* The evenly spaced orbs of light bounced off each other and their lights connected, creating one massive wall of light.

If I'd been right in front of the wall when it appeared, I would've been obliterated by Ruin. But instead, the explosion's shockwave slammed into me, and I lost my balance in midair. My vision was covered by iridescent light, rendering me blind.

Caught...you...> My entire body was enveloped in oppressive force, and every nerve erupted in intense pain. Something massive was restraining me. Wait, was this...Ruin's front leg?!

I'd been thrown backward, and when I was off-balance, Ruin had caught me in his arms.

The light faded, and I could finally see what was happening. Ruin's slightly oversized paws had their claws dug deep into my body.

I struggled, but it was no use. I couldn't get Ruin's claws out.

Not that it came as a big surprise, with the gap between our stats. B-but was this...really the end for me? Just like that, it was over?

If I got hit by one of Ruin's attacks, I was going to die. And now that he'd caught me, there was no way to escape. My body was flung into the air and then swung back down in a single smooth arc.

("Hi-Rest!") Partner used a recovery skill. My body was enveloped in warm

light that healed my wounds.

It was no use at this point, though... No, I still had to try to lead Ruin away for a little while longer. I didn't know what was going to happen, but the moment I gave up would be the moment it was all over. If Ruin made it back to the capital, a lot of people would die. Allo, Myria, Volk, Nightmare, Grandpa Magiatite... They'd all fall victim to Ruin.

Was it really over? Well, Partner didn't think so, at least; otherwise she wouldn't have used Hi-Rest. I'd known I'd be fighting a losing battle against Ruin, but what was wrong with that? I couldn't just give up when the lives of me, my friends, and so many others were at stake! That'd be way too lame! I'm not giving up until Partner does. I'll put my brain into overdrive and fight until I don't have a single thought left!

I used Human Transformation. I didn't make myself completely human, but I used the skill to compress my body and reduce its volume. As my body shrank, a gap began to appear where Ruin was holding on to me, and I used the gap to slip out of his grasp before launching myself into the air.

Y-yes! I did it! I did it! I spread my crumpled wings and tried to get them to fly somehow. But after a moment, Ruin reached out for me again. I folded my wings and bent my body so I was just out of reach.

I should have avoided it. Ruin's arm stretched toward me.

What I failed to recognize, though, was that as a mass of magical power, Ruin could easily change his size and shape; his body had already swelled in size before he started chasing me. *And now his arms are enlarged to help catch me?!*

I stretched out my tail to shift my center of gravity and spun on a dime. Ruin's arm grazed past me. *Y-yes! I dodged it!*

("Get outta there! It's gonna blow!") Partner's message flashed through my head.

Ruin's arm began to shine more brightly. No way. Was he going to set off another Ruin with his arm?! I screwed up. Ruin's goal was to get his arm as close to me as possible and then use it as a Ruin bomb. And I'd flown right into it.

Ruin's arm began to glow even brighter, filling my vision with prismatic rainbows. This Ruin was stronger than the others.

It was the one intended to kill me.

"Die...Illusia..."

The next moment, my body was rocked by a powerful blast. I was enveloped in a blazing inferno of light and heat. My left front leg, turned black from the heat, broke off from the knee down and fell to the ground.

Is it...over? Am I dead? I wondered. But then I faintly felt the sensation of my tail touching the ground. I'm still alive...? But I was right next to the center when the explosion went off. I should be dead right now...

Illusia

Species: Ouroboros

Status: Quick (Slight), Mana Barrier (Slight)

Lv: 109/125

HP: 281/2816

MP: 284/2718

Huh? I didn't expect to have that much HP left.

Special Skill "Valiant Soul."

If hit by lethal damage with 60% or more HP remaining, user will always

endure the damage with 10% HP remaining.

Dang. What a lifesaver.

I'd apparently survived thanks to the effects of my new Valiant Soul skill, which I'd just earned for getting my Hero skill to level 9. Without that skill, I would've died from Ruin's attack. That being said, it was still going to be impossible for me to put any distance between Ruin and me by simply running away. Valiant Soul couldn't be used in frequent succession either.

C'mon, think! What could I use? Did I have anything that'd help? Even just a little bit? Like a skill to divert his attention away from me, or...

Partner! Use Fake Life! We can't be picky right now!

("H-huh?! On what...?")

My front paw! No time to think, just do it! I ordered, then curled my body into a Roll.

("Fake Life!")

A black light appeared in front of Partner, then flew over to my burned-off paw and went inside it. My paw wriggled, then reformed itself into a misshapen, eyeless, charred dragon.

Species: Ouroboros Piece

Status: Cursed, Burned

Lv: 1/65

HP: 25/155

MP: 28/144

Success.

Ruin stopped for a moment, presumably shocked to see my charred limb tottering around as a dragon. He seemed unable to comprehend the sudden appearance of another monster.

"Giiiiiii!" The Ouroboros Piece unfurled its spindly wings and flew behind Ruin. Although Ruin's response was delayed, he opened his massive mouth and chomped down on the Ouroboros Piece. Black scales and blue blood danced through the air.

I felt bad for using Fake Life to make a decoy like that, but it did successfully distract Ruin for a moment. I wouldn't stand a chance against him unless I used everything I had at my disposal.

"Ooooor, oooooough!" Ruin let out a groan. The arm he'd used as a bomb was regenerating. He sure healed quickly. I guess that was one advantage of being an amorphous mass of magic.

Ruin turned his hatred-filled sockets toward my retreating form. As I ran, I used Regenerate to regrow my lost paw. As soon as it was healed, I used Roll and sped across the ground as fast as I could.

I needed to keep my distance. There was no time to worry about burning through stamina. But Ruin's base agility was still a lot higher than mine. He followed behind me, flying at low altitude and nipping at my heels even when I did my best to outpace him with Roll.

His Ruin skill could almost ignore distance entirely and send out massive bombs to explode anywhere. However, if Ruin caught up to me, I'd have no way to repel him, and he could finish me off from up close. The only thing I could do was stay as far away as I possibly could and keep an eye out for magic attacks.

("Hey! There's another one coming ahead of you! I dunno how far away!")

Crap, another Ruin! Should I book it? Nah, that'd be reckless. Unlike flying, rolling didn't give me the option of escaping vertically, and my movement was limited. I veered off course and zoomed forward at a diagonal. In the distance, I saw the iridescent light of Ruin.

I'd managed to avoid it this time, but my luck wouldn't last forever. If Ruin continuously used that skill, I'd be trapped in no time. The extra speed was handy, but I wouldn't be able to out-Roll a Ruin.

("H-here comes another! This one...I'm not sure, it might be a feint...")

It's a little harder to pick up signs when we're at eye level, huh?

The dull monotony of Ruin's fighting was starting to fade away. So be it, then. This was about as far as I could make it with just rolling.

I hit the ground with my tail to launch myself upward, then unfurled my wings and took off into the sky. A sphere of iridescent light appeared right below me.

J-just in time!

I spun in the air with the last of my centrifugal force from Roll, then shot two Whirlwind Slashes behind me. Then I spun back around and continued onward. Forward, forward, as far as I could go.

How's it looking, Partner? Did that slow him down at all?!

("Not even a little bit! Quit wasting your magic!")

O-okay, no need to be so bossy. I looked ahead at the vast blue expanse of the ocean stretching out before me. Was this the right way to go? If I went out across the water, I wouldn't be able to use Roll anymore. If I was going to change course, it was now or never.

...No, it was silly to think I'd be able to outrun Ruin with Roll. If I kept using the same techniques, he was just going to deal with me in the exact same way.

Ruin had already seen my Roll maneuvers. If I tried the same move again, I'd get caught between the double Ruin skills and that'd be the end.

Then I guess I'll just fly out over the ocean? If I veered too much to the side, it'd only slow me down.

I flew straight and headed out over the ocean. At that moment, I felt a strange sensation all over my body, almost as if I'd suddenly gotten heavier. The

Quick that adventurer had cast on me must've worn off.

Th-this might be a little rough... How're Ruin's stats doing, anyway?

Species: Ruin

Status: Collapsing God

Lv: 54/150

HP: 1128/1269

MP: 622/1564

...He was down to almost half his original max HP, and once it got down to below a thousand, he wouldn't have enough to make it back to Alban. I'd almost achieved my second goal: making sure no more humans were harmed by Ruin's rampage. All I had to do now was to avoid him for another fifteen minutes, and then he wouldn't have any HP to keep himself alive anymore.

But...still, with my current stats, there was no way I'd survive that long. Now that I didn't have Quick, Ruin would catch up to me in no time!

The glowing dragon was getting closer and closer. I racked my brain for possible options, but no matter how much I tried, I couldn't piece a plan together.

Okay, available skills are...Diseased Breath...Celestial Fall...Human
Transformation...Neckbreaker...Death, and...Holy. That's...that's not enough. I'm
screwed!

I couldn't think of a single thing that might work against Ruin! His stats were way too broken! Both his attack and magic stats were over 1,800! This might be the end for me. I'm sorry, Allo. I can't keep the promise I made to you...

("Hey... I've got a plan.")

For a moment, I didn't know who it was, but of course, it was Partner. She'd

taken her eyes off Ruin and was staring at me instead.

O-oh, really...? You came up with a plan? That's rare.

("You're gonna cut my head off and drop it. I can't guarantee you fifteen minutes, but...I'll stop Ruin for a little while, at least.")

...Huh? Th-that's not like you. Even if I did that, it's not like you'd be able to move properly once you weren't attached to my body...

Suddenly, I remembered the Twinheads I'd defeated with the Black Lizard a long time ago. I'd knocked its right head off with my paw during the fight, after it attacked me with poison. And instead of just falling to the ground, the head got up and attacked me, thanks to its skill: Sacrifice. Sacrifice was also one of the skills I'd gotten when I evolved into Ouroboros.

D-don't be stupid! I'd...I'd never do that!

("If you don't, then we'll both die! You promised Allo you'd come back, didn't you?! You're the one controlling our body, so you can't die!")

I ignored Partner's words and faced forward again, flying hard.

("H-hey! Listen to me! You ain't got time to decide! Hey!")

Just shut up and keep your eyes on Ruin! He's gonna use magic any second!

Yeah, no way in hell that was happening. If surviving meant having to sacrifice Partner, then I'd rather just let Ruin kill me and be done with it. It was out of the question.

Just you watch, Partner... I'll keep flying away from Ruin until his HP drops all the way to zero!

("It's getting closer and closer! What're you gonna do?! It's about to shoot another round of magic!") Partner said, somewhat accusingly.

Damn it! What should I do? What was the best play here? Should I just attack it as soon as I got the first sign of an opening and try to go out with a bang? Compared to the likelihood of being able to outrun Ruin for another ten

minutes, I might have a better chance of beating Ruin somehow now that his HP had been halved.

N-no, wait, let's not get desperate here. Trying to take this guy on would be like a fly trying to fistfight a forest fire. It'd be way too risky. Even so, Ruin was slowly and steadily closing the distance between us.

("Hey, here comes his next attack!")

I had no idea where the attack was going to land. If I slowed down for a feint, Ruin would catch up to me. But if I veered to the side, and there was a Ruin skill waiting for me up ahead, I'd get caught in the blast, and this time it really would kill me. If only my Telepathy skill were as high as the Red Ogre Ant Queen's, maybe I'd be able to tell where it was aiming!

No, I've got this! If I just fly in a direction Ruin isn't expecting, I should be able to outrun it for now! It's all or nothing! I'll do whatever it takes to survive!

I bowed my head forward and dove straight down at the ocean beneath me. With a massive splash, I plunged headfirst into the water and my body was swallowed by the sea. As I shot forward through the sea with the propulsion of Fly at my back, I saw the surface of the water shining above me with Ruin's bright light. I veered to the side in the water, then broke back through the water's surface and soared back into the sky.

I looked behind me. Ruin, seemingly having lost sight of me for a few moments, had wandered a fair distance away.

I've got this. I can still get away. I was just barely skating by, I could be killed at any second, but somehow, I was still alive.

Ruin stared at me when I popped out of the water, but he didn't give chase. I was on guard in case he used his Ruin skill again, but I couldn't see any signs the skill was activating. It was almost as if the rage and murderous intent had suddenly drained from Ruin's body.

I was nervous, but I couldn't let this opportunity pass me by. I turned my head

forward and focused on flying away.

Was that vicious, murderous intent I'd been feeling until now completely swallowed by Ruin's urge to destroy? But even so, there was no way it could get back to Alban with its current amount of HP...

No, wait! I forgot! That Ruin skill had a crazy long range. As long as Ruin could see the capital, he'd be able to wipe out entire buildings and a bunch of random citizens. Even if he didn't have enough HP to get back, the royal capital of Ardesia still wasn't safe.

("Huh? He's...he's doing something!")

I got Partner's confused message and immediately turned around. My hunch was right. Ruin had turned his back to me and started heading straight for the city.

H-hey! What's the big deal?! I'm Illusia, remember? Illusia! Did you forget about me?! I turned around entirely, hovered in place, and sent a message to Ruin with Telepathy. But Ruin didn't stop.

I was at a loss. What do I do? At that moment, an iridescent orb of light appeared right in front of me. Immediately, I knew: Ruin set me up.

"Graaah!" Partner screeched. I was enveloped in the healing light of Hi-Rest. At the same time, I turned my body around again and started flying away once more.

I needed to get as far away from the Ruin skill as I could. Even a meter could be the difference between life and death.

A massive heat wave rose up behind me, shimmering with iridescent light. An instant later, I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was floating on the surface of the sea. Ruin was close by, approaching me with a smile on his face. He looked much more sinister than I'd thought he could ever look from his initial emotionless appearance.

The slime had evolved into this form purely out of hatred toward me; staring

at those empty eyes, I was confronted with that fact.

Ruin, who was getting frustrated about having to chase me down, was thinking about why I'd even provoked him and drawn his anger. And now, by pretending to go back to the capital I was trying to defend, Ruin tried to make me panic so I'd stop and he could hit me. It seemed like the slime has come back to his senses.

"Illusia...die with me."

Even though Ruin had supposedly lost his language skills, the words still leaked from his mouth. I spread my wings, holes burned through them from the light, and scrambled into the air in the exact opposite direction.

As I flew, I started to repair my wings with Regenerate, but I couldn't fly properly and began to dip closer to the waves.

Damn it! Come on, come on, I've come this far!

I heard Partner's voice in my mind. ("Hey, Partner... Do it. Use Sacrifice. It's all over otherwise.")

Shut up! Just shut your mouth! I told you, I'm not doing it!

("This...probably isn't the best moment to say this, but I am a little happy you rejected my idea outright. That's just the kind of guy you are, huh?") Her voice sounded strangely calm.

W-wait. Partner, what're you...? Partner nuzzled my face with the tip of her snout. This is not the time to wax poetic!

When I turned to her and my eyes met hers, my entire body stiffened like it had turned to stone. Her eyes were glowing bright red. She was using the Ouroboros skill Master's Demonic Gaze. It was a skill that could stop a target's movement and also allowed the user to control their target's movement for a short period of time.

P-Partner?! What're you doing?!

("Y'know, it's true, what you said. This kind of thing...it's not like me. But since

I wound up as your Partner, I feel like your weirdo ways have inspired me to change mine a little. I can admit it now; I wasn't a huge fan of you in the beginning. It was always like, 'Ahh, another day, another disaster we've got ourselves in.'")

Partner lifted her—*my*—paw. She spread my toes wide and extended my claws.

Then she rested the tips of my claws along her neck, which had been burned and shredded to pieces by Ruin's attacks. I tried to resist, but my leg wouldn't listen to me.

("But...it really is a shame that this is the last time I'll get to be with you. If I ever get reincarnated, I'd wanna be by your side again in my next life. If that time ever comes, don't forget your promise that once this is all over, you'll treat me to all kinds of fancy human food.")

Partner, p-please! Don't do this! Ruin's HP is probably almost out! If we fight him like we're ready to die now, then maybe...!

("So long, Partner. Don't let my death be in vain. Don't let me die for nothing.")

My paw swung down on Partner's neck, snapping it clean off. It tumbled from my shoulders and down to the sea below.

The binding effect from Master's Demonic Gaze ended. I turned in midair to look at Partner's falling head, spurting blue blood into the sea. Her eyes were closed peacefully.

However, before her head touched the surface of the water, both of her eyes flew open and she stopped in midair. She opened her mouth and screeched at Ruin. Then, with only her head and neck to worry about, Partner rushed toward Ruin at a speed much faster than my normal Ouroboros Fly skill would let me go. I'd seen this before, in the battle with the Twinheads: My Sacrifice skill had been activated.

I could still feel the sensation of tearing Partner's head off in my paw. I was so stunned by the devastation of losing Partner that I could do nothing but stare at the scene unfolding in front of me.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" Partner suddenly rushed at Ruin, who backed up. No doubt he was intimidated by Partner's sudden aggression.

Ruin immediately swung out an arm and tried to grab Partner, but even his lightning-fast arms couldn't keep up with her. Partner slipped between his arms and sank her razor-sharp fangs into Ruin's shoulder.

"Oooor, oooooough!" Ruin howled, his neck coiling in pain.

However, because Partner bit down directly into Ruin's pure-magic form, her skin was immediately torn up through her scales, and blue blood began to flow from all parts of her face. Her eyes were dripping blood—they looked like tears.

No... Partner, I...

Partner's eyes locked onto me and glared accusingly, almost like she was scolding me. Her words came to my mind unbidden.

("So long, Partner. Don't let my death be in vain. Don't let me die for nothing.")

I turned back around. Turned my back on Ruin, and Partner's head in the waves. I'm sorry, Partner. I'm really, really sorry.

"Oooooooooouuugh!"

The roar Ruin let out felt crazed, like he'd suddenly gone insane. Iridescent light coalesced around him, blinding me. When the light cleared, the figure of Partner, clutching onto Ruin's shoulder moments before, was gone.

Once again, a wicked smile played across Ruin's face. "Illusia, Illusia...Illusiaaaaaaaaa!"

I kept flying, widening the gap between Ruin and me.

Partner...thank you. For everything. I'll never forget you, I swear it. No matter

how many times I'm reborn. So hold on, body! Partner's last wish was that I didn't let her die in vain, and I won't let her down! I may be a wreck right now, but Ruin took some damage from her Sacrifice too. I'm sure he's not in great shape.

"Illusiaaaaaaaa!" Ruin leapt at me from behind, his mouth opened wide.
Although his body was just a mass of magic that could transform at will, it was still a terrifying sight.

I whipped my tail around with Roll in midair to shift my center of gravity to the side and dart out of the way of Ruin's mouth. His magical jaws closed over the spot where I'd just been suspended in the air.

"Illusiaaaaaa!" Ruin raised his arms, clasped them together, and then swung them down at me.

I fired a Whirlwind Slash, the recoil sending me off in the other direction. Then I flipped around and flapped my wings hard to gain some distance between us.

Ruin's arms slammed into the water's surface with enough force to send up a massive column of water. After coming this far, I still don't have enough left in me to wait this ticking time bomb out?!

I glared at Ruin from over my shoulder. He stared back, but behind him, I saw a black light that seemed to be taking the shape of a dragon head.

I-Is that...Fake Life? Did Partner use Fake Life on herself?! The dragon of black light opened her mouth and bit down on Ruin's shoulder as he tried to grab me.

"Oooor, ooooooough?!" Ruin screeched, writhing in an attempt to get Partner off.

("Sorry, but you're not getting my Partner's head. I'm takin' you with me to the other side.")

Partner's hazy black outline bit deeper into Ruin's shoulder. Ruin's iridescent form cracked, then broke into hundreds of pieces starting at the shoulder and

began to shrink.

"Oooorh, oooooooooooouugh?!"

Species: Ruin

Status: Collapsing God

Lv: 54/150

HP: 8/854

MP: 384/1149



Finally. Ruin's HP was almost gone. As he neared his final moments, the arm he had stretched out toward me swelled in size.

"Illu...si...aaaaaaaa!" Ruin swung his arm at me in the air, just barely grazing my tail. Then Ruin's iridescent light began to fade, and the shattered pieces of his body fell away as if sucked into the sea.

Part 6: Lilyxila

"SAINT LILYXILA! Saint Lilyxila, stay with me!"

Lilyxila came to at the sound of her retainer, Alphis's, voice. She was sitting propped against a wall in an empty room of the castle with a hole in its ceiling.

As she took in her surroundings, she realized she was sitting in a pool of her own blood. Groping her way along the floor, her fingers landed on her Staff of the Holy Land next to her. She grabbed it and clutched it tightly. Then, she suddenly recalled the last scene she saw before she was knocked unconscious.

A massive monster called Ruin had suddenly burst through the floor. She'd immediately used Mirror Counter to try and make a barrier, but Ruin had broken through it with ease...and that was enough to grasp how she'd ended up in her current situation.

Lilyxila had also quickly checked the iridescent creature's status screen, so she knew he was a monster named Ruin and that he was clearly the Demon King in an evolution that he had obtained without going through the proper channels.

"Saint Lilyxila! You're awake! Thank goodness...I've already used Rest so many times, but...your left leg and arm, they're..."

At Alphis's words, Lilyxila's eyes darted down at her body. Her left leg was bent in an unnatural direction, and her left arm was missing from the shoulder down, like it'd been blown off.

"Your leg was crushed by debris when you fell through that hole in the ceiling, and your arm was likely reduced to ash from that iridescent monster's magic."

"Then...I suppose we must go back to the Holy Land and see the Regeneration Master. This is why I wanted to bring him with me..." Lilyxila mumbled, a blank expression on her face, like she was talking about someone else entirely. The eight knights from the Order of Holy Knights she'd sent to Alban in disguise

were all there, surrounding her.

"It seems I was out for a while. What happened between that monster—Ruin—and the Human Realm Path?"

"Er, you see, well...that dragon, he offered to act as a decoy to draw that monster away from the capital. So..."

Lilyxila remained silent, but her eyes widened. After a few moments, she muttered, "That's impossible," then tightened her grip on her staff and glared at Alphis.

"B-but it's true! That dragon, he really did—"

"No. That is simply not possible, Alphis. There is no way the dragon would be able to lead that monster away with those injuries. Isn't that right? Besides, why would he do that, when you and Barea were here to risk your lives on this mission?"

Alphis took a deep breath, then closed her mouth again.

"You and Barea helped to restore the dragon's health, didn't you?"

"Y-yes, well...the dragon was trying to protect the capital, and—"

Lilyxila jabbed her staff at Alphis's jaw. "Why didn't you use all that unnecessary time spent healing the Ouroboros on crushing his skull and picking his limbs and wings apart one by one instead? And if you couldn't do that, you could've at least killed him. Alphis, Barea...do you have any idea what you've done, letting the dragon live?" Lilyxila's voice was cold as ice. "This is the third time now that you have failed me. I used to trust that you would be quickwitted and free of impulsive urges, Alphis, but it seems like I was wrong. How unfortunate."

"The...the third time?"

"Yes. The first was your hostile attitude during our initial contact with the Ouroboros. I told you to show a moderate degree of caution in order to not arouse distrust, but that seemed to have an opposite effect."

"...Indeed, my saint."

"The second was that you advised the undead to leave the Ouroboros behind and run away. Because of that, the undead detected me, and I had no time to see if the Demon King had successfully escaped. I also had to engage in battle with the Ouroboros because of it. Did you think I was oblivious?"

"...You are correct, and I have no excuse."

"This entire situation was caused by your blunders. This plan originally had a level of uncertainty that I could compensate for—that I *did* compensate for, with multiple fail-safes in place. But your actions on both occasions have ruined the plan for all of us."

Coming into this battle, Lilyxila's biggest fear had been an insurmountable foe like Ruin. It was precisely because of this fear that she'd spread her forces out as much as possible to be certain that she would always have some available. That was why she'd kept the Ouroboros as a pawn to use against the Demon King, and why she kept the Beast King as a Spirit Servant instead of taking its powers for herself.

In any other case, Lilyxila would have simply killed the Ouroboros on the Island at the Edge of the World and taken away his Sacred Skill. The Ouroboros was a crucial key for luring in the Demon King, who was otherwise wont to flee when cornered, but he was not irreplaceable. However, Lilyxila had wanted to keep him as a pawn as a sort of insurance against exceptional foes like Ruin.

But unfortunately, her fear of this unknown Sacred Skill had backfired on them this time. None of the plans she had in place proved to be of any use when they truly counted. And although she'd only realized it in hindsight, she felt like if she'd just rallied her forces together and come down on Alban with her full might all at once, there was a good chance she would've won the entire conflict single-handedly.

"But, Saint Lilyxila, you are the only one who can smile so convincingly at someone you've already decided to betray from the very beginning," Alphis

mumbled, her head lowered. The words were barely above a whisper, but even so, they were unmistakable.

Lilyxila forced herself to stand, hands pressed against the wall. "I must dispose of the Ouroboros while he's still here. I hope he's already dead, but if he survives, we will be in deep trouble..."

"S-Saint Lilyxila! You cannot go after the Ouroboros in your current state!" Barea hurriedly drew Lilyxila's arm around his shoulders to support her.

"If only Seraphim hadn't been killed...! I hope my final trump card will be able to go the distance..."

Lilyxila raised her staff into the air, held in her one remaining hand. "Spirit Servant! Rise, Beelzebub, foul god of death, one rightfully crowned as Beast King!"

A huge circle of black magic spread across the floor. Alphis paled at the sight. "P-please, Saint Lilyxila... That dragon, he is trying to save the capital and its citizens. If you send Beelzebub after him, then..."

"Even if it meant Alban was reduced to ashes, that would have been preferable to letting the Ouroboros escape! This is the only chance we have to dispose of him safely! How can you not see that?! Legendary monsters must never be allowed to be created. Much less a...a monster god!"

Chapter 5: Arrival of the Fly King

Part 1

LLU...SIA..."

Ruin's enlarged arm, the only piece of him that remained, fell into the sea and disappeared as if melting into the waves.

Gained 42,660 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 42,660 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Ly 109 has become Ly 122.

I received a massive amount of experience, much more than I'd received from any other monsters I'd defeated before. This was the level of experience fitting for Legendary creatures.

I didn't think I'd ever be able to gain that many levels that quickly after all this time. But rather than joy, the only thing I felt was a sense of emptiness.

I looked around at the surface of the sea. All that remained of Partner were a few shattered scales and blue blood floating on the water. She must've been completely blown to pieces from the direct hit with Ruin.

Gained Normal Skill "Wide Rest" Lv 1.

Gained Normal Skill "Regen" Lv 1.

Regen? Is that a magic skill...?

Title Skill "Giant Killer" Lv 9 has become Lv 10.

Gained Normal Skill "Dark-Dispelling Flash" Lv 1.

I waited for all of the Divine Voice messages to subside, then I tried to use Regenerate on Partner's neck stub. The amputation healed over, and the wound stopped bleeding. But I felt like I was losing the only proof I had that Partner had been here with me, so I immediately stopped.

There was no hope of saving her. Partner's mind and soul had resided in her head, and that was gone. There was no way I could bring her back.

My body felt so weightless that it was hard to keep my balance. I soared down to the sea's surface and scanned over the fragments of Partner floating in the water.

It didn't feel real. I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that my Partner, who'd been right by my side ever since I evolved to defeat the hero in the desert, was never coming back. I'd picked a fight with the slime, and now Partner was gone.

Strangely enough, I didn't feel any hatred toward the slime. When I found out that he was the mastermind behind the attempt to pit the Little Rock Dragon against the human village, I knew that slime was the one monster I could never let live. But now, in hindsight, I could only think of him as a pathetic creature, used up and driven to madness by the Divine Voice.

I lingered there, just above the sea, for a little while, gazing down at the shattered scales on the surface. But I soon realized that I needed to meet up with Allo and the others.

To be honest, I didn't know how I was going to be able to face them. Are they really going to forgive me for sacrificing Partner to survive? I doubt Nightmare will. She really, really loved Partner.

But even so, it was time to head back. I told Allo I'd meet up with her and the rest at Alban Mine. There was also a chance that she, Nightmare, and Grandpa

Magiatite might not have even made it there.

I was worried about Volk too—he'd probably gotten into a confrontation with the saint.

Before I left, I lowered my head toward the patch of sea where Partner had sunk beneath the waves.

...Thank you so much for having my back all this time. I won't let your death be in vain. If I have to die, I'll go down fighting as stubbornly as you. So watch over me, Partner.

I flew to Alban Mine, lugging my heavy body along as well as I could. Although I kept using Regenerate on my wings whenever I'd built up enough MP to use it, I couldn't keep up with my injuries at all. My Automatic MP Recovery was much slower than usual too, probably because of how much I'd overexerted myself.

I'd been forced to deal with Rogueheil, the Chaos Ooze, Lilyxila, and Ruin, one after the other. It was truly a miracle that I was still alive after the day I'd had.

Although I doubted it would work, I tried to use Hi-Rest, but to no avail. Not from a lack of MP but rather because it felt like the components needed to make the skill work were absent from my mind. As I remembered it, the Twinheads's Sacrifice skill hadn't removed any skills from the intact head's status screen. It felt like no longer being able to swing a sword because my hand had been cut off. Ouroboros dragons could only use magic skills with their second head. If I evolved into a normal, single-headed species, I might be able to use my magic skills again...

As I flew, I checked out my new skills.

Normal Skill "Regen."

Regenerates missing body parts and restores HP. Consumes MP at a much higher rate than "Rest."

So...it was like a magical version of Regenerate? That wasn't super helpful for me, was it? Well, if I could use it on others, it might be a big deal...

A rare skill among both humans and monsters, who are often captured, enslaved, and killed because of it. In ancient times, there was a rank D monster that could learn "Regen," but its young were unable to reproduce quickly, so the line died out without a single survivor.

A typical Divine Voice paragraph... No, this wasn't the time for jokes. But really, humans again? Seemed like there'd always been awful people in the world, and there always would be.

Normal Skill "Dark-Dispelling Flash."

Channels holy light into user's sword to cut down one's enemies. In the wake of this flash, all forms of deception will be rendered meaningless. The sword deals massive damage that ignores damage reduction from Resistance Skills, Special Skills, Normal Skills, and Status Conditions.

...So this is the skill I get at max Hero level, huh? Too bad I didn't fight with a sword. Guess this skill was only for humans. I doubt I'd ever have much of a chance to use it while I was in human form...but it might be a pretty meta attack against an enemy protected by a Special Skill. I'd never seen a monster like that, though. The whole reason the potortoises were hard to damage was because of their high defense stats, not because they used a skill. It seemed unlikely that I'd be in a situation where it'd be preferable to fight in my human form and halve my attack power.

Man. I had high hopes, but it looks like these skills are both duds. I wanted something I could use as a main attack against equal-ranked enemies or higher,

but...

I'd started using Telepathy unconsciously. I was about to call out to Partner when I stopped myself, realizing that I was speaking to open air.

Suddenly, I thought of Lilyxila. Maybe...just maybe, she could bring Partner's soul back as a Spirit Servant?

No, that's...just not going to happen. It's not possible. Seraphim's soul was sealed in a stone statue in the Holy Land so that one day the saint could magically summon it back to life. But the only way she was able to resurrect the long-dead dragon was by performing an incredibly specific ritual. I didn't know the limits of that type of magic, and I had no idea how I'd even get her to agree to use it. On top of that, Partner was just a head instead of an entire monster. It didn't seem likely that she'd be able to become a Spirit Servant.

But the possibility wasn't zero.

I wasn't sure why Lilyxila had attacked me, but my hunch was that she was afraid I'd betray her now that I had the Demon King's Sacred Skill. I knew from reading up on sacred literature what happened when Legendary monsters like Ruin were created. If that was the reason for her actions, I'd understand.

As a human in a seat of great power, she might not have been able to keep me alive out of fear that I might turn on her and become some vicious, bloodthirsty monster. If that were the case, then she might be willing to end her rivalry with me once she found out I protected the royal capital by luring Ruin away.

I knew it was naive thinking, but if she was worried about me betraying her, then this would prove that there was no reason for her to be hostile toward me anymore. Partner and I had saved the capital, and I took pride in that.

I'd never forgive Lilyxila for inadvertently causing Partner's death. If she'd actually worked with me from the beginning, we would've never let that slime escape and evolve into Ruin. But at the same time, I didn't want to kill her either.

I'd concluded that it wouldn't be possible for Lilyxila to revive Partner with her skills. But...if Lilyxila *tried* to revive her, even just a little, that would be enough. Not to forgive her, but to give up on the idea of revenge, at least.

"Ha haaa! There! There you are! You must be Illusia!" I heard a shrill, highpitched giggle from far behind me. "Kyah ha ha ha! You're already halfway
dead! If you're this close to kicking the bucket, there's no point in me sticking
around!"

H-huh? Was that a human voice?

Psychic Sense didn't seem like it was working right, probably because I was so worn out. I couldn't detect any presence at all.

I turned around and saw a man dressed in a black robe floating in the air with six insect-like wings behind him. Clearly, he was no ordinary man; he had four arms, grayish skin, tapered elf-like ears, pointed teeth, and unusually long fingers with sharp claws on the end of each one. Three human-sized flies buzzed around him.

The saint's words rose to my mind unbidden: "I also possess the soul of the Beast King, Beelzebub, a vicious monster that I vanquished with help from the Holy Knights. However, that soul is quite difficult to handle, so in truth I, prefer not to use it unless absolutely necessary."

No way. Was this...?!

"I don't blame you, you know. I can't resist the saint's charms either! Gah ha ha ha ha ha!" The man's eyes widened. In each of them, I could see several bright-red pupils moving around.

Suddenly, I understood. Lilyxila not using the Beast King because he was too difficult to handle was too perfect of an excuse—she didn't want to use the Beast King before because she was saving it to use against me. She kept him hidden so she could have him as her ultimate trump card. That had to be her M.O.

...I see. So that's how it is, huh? She has no intentions of making peace with me. I get it now. Lilyxila was still determined to get rid of me.

"Considering how raggedly you're flying, I doubt you'd be able to run even if I changed shape a little. This body is nice and nimble, but it lacks strength, and it makes me a little sick to my stomach. So it's not ideal for a fight...!"

The man's body began to glow slightly. The next moment, it expanded rapidly, swelling in mass. His original inhuman qualities became more and more monstrous. As I guessed, his appearance became that of a gigantic, hideous fly. Aside from his six legs, which now all resembled human arms, huge horns extending from his head, and his abnormally swollen underbelly, he still resembled a fly the most. But what I didn't expect was how large he'd be. He was probably twenty meters long; more than twice as long as me.

Species: Beelzebub

Status: Spirit

Lv: 86/130 (Lock)

HP: 1076/2152

MP: 2064/2071

Attack: 1485

Defense: 1090

Magic: 1384

Agility: 701 (1402)

Rank: A+

Sacred Skills:

Beast Realm Path: Lv —

Special Skills:

Divine Voice: Lv 8

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Poison Belt: Lv 9

Poison Miasma: Lv 7

Dark Type: Lv —

Solid Body: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 6

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 6

Gluttony: Lv —

Mimicry: Lv —

Fly: Lv 6

Food Regeneration: Lv 3

Followers' Eyes: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Poison Immunity: Lv —

Curse Immunity: Lv —

Dark Absorption: Lv —

Physical Resistance: Lv 6

Magic Resistance: Lv 8

Instant Death Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

View Status: Lv 6

Inhale: Lv 6

Scorching Breath: Lv 5

Diseased Breath: Lv 6

Yawn: Lv 6

Fly King's Gale: Lv 6

Multiply Followers: Lv 8

Telepathy: Lv 4

Acid Drool: Lv 3

Venom Fangs: Lv 7

Double Poison: Lv 7

Venom Claws: Lv 6

Human Transformation: Lv 4

Bite: Lv 5

Regenerate: Lv 5

Darkness Rain: Lv 4

Death: Lv 4

Wide Berserk: Lv 6

Title Skills:

Beast King: Lv 6

Poison Master: Lv 9

Liar: Lv 1

Fly King: Lv —

Calamity: Lv MAX

Symbol of Defilement: Lv —

Laplace Authority Interference: Lv 2

Spirit Servant: Lv —

R-rank A+?! In terms of stats, this guy was way ahead of the slime, and even Eldia. How in the world did Lilyxila manage to defeat him? With such a hidden gem at her disposal, there was no reason for her to run so desperately from Eldia back then. Was that all an act to hide the true power of her secret weapon from me?

...No, Lilyxila had a significant advantage over Eldia from the very start, when she used her gravity magic to hold him down. With his wings crushed, Eldia lost his mobility, and then he pushed himself to the limit by using his skills at random.

Because Lilyxila had decided to run away, I, not wanting to put the final nail in Eldia's coffin, complied. But if she'd wanted to, Lilyxila could've killed him. Probably the only reason she didn't was because she didn't want to give me enough experience to get up to my next evolution.

Eldia was a Diabolos, a rank A dragon. He was undoubtedly the dragon with the most experience in the world, aside from those with Sacred Skills. Lilyxila didn't want me to become so powerful that she couldn't control me, and she didn't want me to take Eldia's side either.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized how coldhearted Lilyxila was. Perhaps she even had other ulterior motives that I hadn't figured out yet.

You'd better avoid me like your life depends on it, or you're dead!>

Beelzebub's massive frame approached me. It seemed like his Special Skill, Solid Body, was halving his base agility stat. He said his human form was faster than this beast form, which was probably when he was freed from the skill's effects.

However, while an agility of 701 was a little low for a rank A monster, it was still an insane amount of agility. If I was moving at full speed, I'd be able to get

away from him with ease, but with my body too exhausted to move that fast, it wouldn't be easy to regain any distance between us.

In order to avoid Beelzebub's head-on attack, I changed my trajectory in less than a second by using Roll in midflight.

Beelzebub's reaction was delayed for a moment as I suddenly dropped like a stone, and I tried to sneak underneath his huge body. Then Beelzebub's massive arm reached out and snatched my tail. I felt a sharp flash of white-hot pain through my tail, and my skin was torn open with ease, revealing blue blood underneath.

Holy cow. This guy is dangerous. It's a good thing we're in the air right now.

In the air, where I could move in three dimensions, I had many more options for escape. If I'd hesitated and taken a less drastic move to evade, that attack would've hit me for real. However, even if I managed to get away, I'd still be outmatched. Beelzebub's defense and HP were insanely high. If he'd been an aggressive attacker with low defense, I would've had a chance to beat him, but he was too hard and tough. If I tried to escape and got too far away, Beelzebub would use Human Transformation to double his speed and chase me. There was no way I could shake him off.

Beelzebub turned around and grabbed at me vertically, horizontally, and diagonally with each of his six arms. I twisted my body, darting around with intentional irregularity, and evaded Beelzebub by mere fingertips between us. The one arm I couldn't avoid reached toward me. I hit it with a Whirlwind Slash to make it veer off course, then kicked at it to increase the force of propulsion and sent him flying backward.

...I might have succeeded this time, but avoiding him at the very last second wasn't going to work for long. What could I do? I was living for Partner now too. I couldn't die here and make Allo and the others wait for me forever.

Should I run, make Beelzebub use Human Transformation, and attack while his defenses were down to make him retreat? The MP reduction from being in

human form would be offset by his Mimicry skill, but his HP would still be reduced by half. All of the disadvantages aside from MP reduction would still occur.

«A clever move! But don't forget to watch your back too!» Beelzebub's two fly
friends were approaching from behind me. They were faster than I expected. I
checked one of their statuses.

Species: Butcher Fly

Status: Follower

Lv: 30/60 (Lock)

HP: 312/312

MP: 107/107

A rank C+... They weren't a threat, but I might as well wipe 'em out while I had the chance! I unleashed two Whirlwind Slashes, one right after the other. Both bodies were severed through the middle and fell to the ground.

Wait...I didn't get any experience from that?

Considering the butcher flies' weird status condition, it seemed obvious that they'd both been spawned as part of one of Beelzebub's Special Skills. And what's more, they seemed to spawn at a fixed level of 30.

(There's my opening!) Beelzebub's voice rang through my mind. A large horizontal line appeared on his bloated underbelly, which formed into a mouth. Inside it, rows upon rows of razor-sharp fangs waited hungrily.

Wh...what the hell is that?!

<Inhale!>

A magic circle appeared in front of Beelzebub's massive mouth. I felt something ominous and evil in that magic circle, turned my head the opposite

way, and frantically flapped my wings in an effort to escape.

I turned my head back to look at Beelzebub as I retreated. In the center of the magic circle, a vortex was beginning to form...and at the same time, I felt a strong force pull my body back. The corpses of the two butcher flies were sucked into Beelzebub's waiting mouth. Droplets of seawater were pulled from the ocean's surface around me, hitting my body.

What was up with this guy's random fighting style?!

I'd just barely managed to avoid getting sucked into his mouth, but as long as he had this magic active, aerial battle would be a nightmare.

*«Urp! Thanks for the meal... Ahh, damn. I sucked up an awful lot of water...»*Beelzebub's mouth closed, and the magic circle faded.

Now! I can ride his magical air current out to the side and away from him. I might even catch him off guard. Then I'll fly away and make him transform into a human again!

I turned around and, using the wind current created by Beelzebub's Inhale, flew straight past him. As I did, I could see his massive maw opening again.

(Taste my death beam!!) A purple tornado shot out of Beelzebub's mouth. The sea parted before him. As if contaminated by his exhaled breath, a purplish stain began to spread across the ocean's surface. *(Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! This skill is extra handy for farming experience points, you know! You've got some good instincts—or maybe just a lot of luck?)*

Wh-what is this skill? It's on a whole different level from the last one.

As I breezed past Beelzebub, I slammed into his back with my tail, but his massive body didn't even flinch. He had extremely high defense, but that didn't mean that my attack wouldn't affect him at all. However, with the Solid Body Special Skill, it seemed like his massive body was unusually strong against physical attacks. There was no way I'd get him to turn back with a weak attack.

Attacking while I was trying to run and he was in his defensive state wouldn't

do much damage, but attacking him head-on would just put me at risk of severe injury. How could I even defeat this guy...? My only saving grace was that Beelzebub's agility was halved when he was in beast form. If he wanted to be faster, he had to transform into a human, which would cut his HP, attack, and defense in half.

I used the recoil from the tail smack to speed up, then flew diagonally up into the air. Down low, I couldn't dodge his attacks effectively. That death beam— Fly King's Gale, enhanced with the sucking force of Inhale—was no joke. But if I stayed higher in the air, I could at least still dodge the attack by dropping down vertically.

That attack was long-range and fearsome. In addition to the massive damage it inflicted, it would also poison any opponent caught in its range with a venom so potent that it would render its victim completely immobile.

I headed back the way I came, toward land. When I was fighting Ruin, it was difficult to use Roll effectively because it could see my trajectory and try to bomb me with its stupidly long-range Ruin skill. However, in order to get away from Beelzebub with my haggard body, my only choice was to Roll. If I kept fighting this unwinnable battle over the ocean, sooner or later I'd injure my wings, and that'd be the moment my death was assured.

(Now, now, enough with this foolish charade. There's no way you can escape from me in such a battered state!) Beelzebub chased after me, tearing through the air with his six human arms.

I dropped in the air to avoid his vicious claws and used the extra burst of speed to increase my distance. If he was in his beast state, I was faster. I wasn't giving up.

(Tch! So be it, then! If you want to play dirty, we'll play dirty!) Beelzebub's huge body glowed, and then his silhouette began to shrink. He reverted to his humanized state, complete with gray skin, four arms, and insect wings.

"I don't like this body! Not one bit!"

Yes! Right on time...!

I decided to hit him while his defenses were lowered. I caught sight of him out of the corner of my eye, slowed down a little, and fired a single Whirlwind Slash in his direction.

"Nuh-uh-uh! I wouldn't underestimate my agility if I were you! Ha ha ha haa!" Beelzebub evaded my Whirlwind Slash with ease.

It...didn't seem like I could hit him. Beelzebub's transformation into a human was faster than any monster's I'd ever seen. I guess I had no choice. If I tried to hit him from a distance, he'd just dodge out of the way. I'd have to risk getting close and taking one of his attacks on purpose—then I could counter with my own attack. Although his attack would be significantly weaker while he was in human form, it would still do a significant amount of damage. With my HP as low as it was, this was a maneuver I'd normally avoid, but there was no other way.

Come on, me, hit him. Think about how he's going to attack, and move to make sure I can counter it.

"Hyahoooo! Take this!" Beelzebub sped up and took aim at my back.

He was faster than I thought he'd be. But I wouldn't let that mess up my timing. If I countered too soon, he'd dodge out of the way. No, I needed to draw him in. The moment his attack hit my back, I'd deliver my strongest blow and bring him to the brink of death.

The moment I felt a sharp pain sting my back, I twisted my body around and slashed out with my front claws. My plan was to send him straight down into the water below. I was so sure I'd gotten the timing right, that my claws would meet his skin and cleave him in two.

But instead, Beelzebub's claws tore through my failing body, and I tilted forward and collapsed in midair.

"Ahh, that was a close one. I knew you were trying to hit me, but that was still

a little too close for comfort." I heard Beelzebub's mocking voice from behind me. He was just too fast. So that was what having an agility of 1,402 was like, huh...?

A second claw attack ripped through my body without mercy, spraying blue blood into the air. Sensing danger, I folded my wings and plummeted straight down. The third claw attack just barely grazed the top of my head.

I let gravity do its work and let myself accelerate as I dropped down, twisting in the air randomly to evade the fourth and fifth claw attacks. As the ocean rushed up to meet me, I snapped my wings open and swooped up at nearly a perfect right angle, soaring just above the surface of the waves, and headed straight for land.

As I flew, I used Regenerate to repair my torn skin. It seemed like Beelzebub's poison had taken effect. It hadn't done much yet, but watching my already-low HP slowly start to trickle down over time really sucked. Yet again, I was running out of options.

My best strategy was to retreat, then attack Beelzebub while he was in his human form. But that just wasn't possible. As I was about to attack, I'd realized that I couldn't do it. He'd evaded my best shot with ease, and with the amount of MP I had left, I'd never be able to hit humanoid Beelzebub with an attack that would matter.

So instead, it was time to move on to plan B: getting to land and using Roll to run away. To be honest, my chances of survival were close to zero. After seeing Beelzebub's haphazard fighting style, I'd come up with a plan that might let me get away for the time being. However...this strategy would put me in danger.

It was unlikely that I'd actually be able to escape by using Roll. But if I kept going like this, I'd be dead anyway. The only thing I could do was change the situation and try to find a way to escape.

Partner sacrificed herself to keep me safe. I'm not going to let this be the end for me. I'm gonna do everything I can to survive.

"You think you can run from me, dragon?" Beelzebub was chasing after me, also flying just above the surface of the sea. He'd catch up to me soon, but so be it. My goal was to get as close to land as possible to give myself the best chance at escape I could.

"Rooooooar!" I flicked the surface of the ocean with my tail, spraying water at him. He evaded in a wide circle, then followed that orbit until he was right in front of me.

"I'm not in the mood for this type of skullduggery. Don't you have the guts to face me head-on and die with a bit of honor left?"

I plunged headfirst into the water to attack from below. That seemed to catch him off guard, and he pulled himself back to avoid me. As soon as he did, I flew back out of the water and continued heading straight for land.

"You just don't know when to give in, do you? Pathetic! You're nothing but a filthy coward!"

Beelzebub immediately started to chase after me once more. When he got close, he disappeared into the ocean. Assuming he was coming from below, I was about to raise my altitude when I felt a sharp pain across my stomach and my body was thrown upward.

Damn. I couldn't avoid it. But at least... I can do a bit of extra damage...!

Beelzebub then flew up past me, carving out a chunk of my stomach with his claws. But then he came back down from above and clawed through my left wing, tearing it to shreds. Blue blood spurted into the air. I could feel myself getting poisoned again, and my left wing was a little paralyzed.

"Guh...!" The blow sent me crashing into the sea. As I righted myself in the water and swam toward land, I considered my options. My wings were my lifeline, and this was going to take my flying ability close to zero.

"Die without glory!" Beelzebub massive form glowed above me, and he began to grow in size. Once again, he reverted to his giant fly form with its engorged underbelly.

«With wings like that, you'll never fly again. I'll kill you in an instant!»

Beelzebub's six massive arms swung down at me from overhead in rapid succession. I swam frantically through the water with my wings. However, Beelzebub's relentless attack had obscured me from view. I stayed underneath his blind spot and somehow managed to create a bit of distance.

When I got the chance, I broke out of the water, desperately flapping my paralyzed left wing, and took to the air again. But I just couldn't build any speed. This was it—I could no longer run. Now Beelzebub could catch up to me even without turning into a human.

I won't screw it up this time! Inhale!>

That obscenely large mouth appeared in Beelzebub's lower abdomen, complete with a magic circle in front of it.

Here it comes! First, it breathes in, then it breathes out!

Saltwater rose up from the surface of the ocean around me and flew into Beelzebub's gaping maw. I kept my wings spread wide as best I could, flapping hard, trying to increase my air resistance as much as possible to avoid getting sucked in.

But in my current state, I just wasn't strong enough to beat his Inhale. Little by little, my body slowly began to inch back toward Beelzebub's mouth.

<Ha ha ha ha ha ha haa! Get ready to be eaten alive!>

Come on, come on, just endure it! Just gotta hold on for a little longer! If I can just get through this, I'll have a shot at getting out. A very, very small shot, but still...!

Suddenly, the suction drawing me backward stopped. Beelzebub's Inhale was over.

Yes, I did it! I held out! I soared upward with all my might, expecting a Fly King's Gale to sweep over me at any moment. I had to get out of there, and

fast.

Your fear is holding you back!> Beelzebub said with a mocking laugh.

I knew exactly what he meant. The best way to avoid his Fly King's Gale was to fly around him and head in a different direction, like I did by chance the first time he used the skill. But cutting the distance between us by half and getting into close range would be the most dangerous stunt I could pull right now.

Beelzebub probably thought I was a fool of a dragon who'd try so hard to escape that I'd risk such a dangerous maneuver, but that was fine. I was prepared to take a shot or two from him. But even so, for now, I opted to fly higher. Beelzebub hadn't attacked yet, so I used that chance to catch my breath and use Regenerate to get some HP back.

Suddenly, I felt a surge in magical power behind me. Crap! Here it comes!

I didn't know if it was the right move to make, but I didn't have any other choice. I used Human Transformation. My body shrank to a fraction of its size. I kept my wings as long as I could and stretched them wide in the air.

Human Transformation reduced my max HP, attack, and defense by half. My HP was already well below half, so this didn't affect me much. However, reducing my defense by half made actually surviving one of Beelzebub's blows a massive gamble.

What, did you think you'd be able to dodge my blow just because you're a little smaller now? I'm going to obliterate you!>

The mouth on Beelzebub's lower stomach opened wide toward me as I coasted slightly upward. I turned back to face him completely, stretching my wings wide. Then a powerful gale of wind hit my entire body.

I couldn't tell up from down. My world spun around me three times in an instant. Pain exploded throughout my body, and my consciousness slipped away. My outstretched right arm was caught in a powerful gust of wind and was blown clean off.

It seemed like my world went dark for a long time, but it might have only been an instant. In any case, when I came to, my whole body felt so weak that I couldn't even open my eyes. I could faintly tell that I was lying face-down on cold, hard ground.

Well, guess my plan worked. No, I wouldn't even call it a plan. More like a shot in the dark.

I'd used Human Transformation to lower my mass but kept my wings so that I could use Beelzebub's Fly King's Gale to blow myself out of range.

Then, with my max HP reduced by half, I was easily above the "more than 60 percent HP left" necessary to activate Valiant Soul and endure the lethal blow with 10 percent of my HP left. However, my entire body had been poisoned. Right now, even though I managed to create some distance and get to dry land, if Beelzebub came after me...I wouldn't be able to get away.

I'd won the battle...or at least, managed to get away somehow. But in the end, thanks to this endless stream of battles and the stat differences, I was still...going to die here, all alone in the dirt. If only my stats were full, and I still had Partner on my side...in that case, I might've been able to hold my own, even against Beelzebub...

"...? ...!"

H...huh? Was something...poking me? I felt a pleasant, cooling sensation all over my body. It felt like the paralyzing poison was slowly seeping away. What was going on? I tried healing my ears and eyes with Regenerate.

"Kssh?" I heard a familiar hiss and opened my eyes.

A massive black lizard, slightly larger than me in my current human state, was staring at me from mere centimeters away.

"B-Black Lizard...? Is that you?"

"Ksssht!" The black lizard squealed happily, stretched its necked out toward me, and licked my face. Gradually, my pain started to fade. Was it using

Neutralize Poison...? I'd thought the slime took that skill.

But still, this was definitely my black lizard. It was a lot bigger than it used to be, but it had to be the same black lizard I parted ways with back in the forest.

It felt like the black lizard was drawing out not only the poison but the pain as well. Maybe it learned some better healing skills when it evolved?

I'd barely escaped with my life. Maybe the black lizard saw me while I was running from Beelzebub, and I piqued its curiosity? However it'd happened, it was nothing short of a miracle. I'd almost given up, but thanks to the black lizard, I'd managed to regain a bit of HP and cure my poison.

Thank you, Black Lizard...but it isn't safe here. I'm being chased by a really bad guy right now. You need to get out of— I tried to stand as I sent the telepathic message and immediately collapsed. I looked at my body in a daze and realized I'd lost both of my wings and my right arm. The limbs that were still attached were limp, and a pool of blood was forming around me.

D-damn it... Can't my body hold on just a little bit longer...?

As I dropped back to the ground, I glanced back at the black lizard. *L-Look. You gotta get outta here. Just go.*

The black lizard looked out at the distant sea I'd blown in from, then returned its gaze to me, as if considering something. I cautiously reached out my mind to peer into its consciousness.

<Somehow...make...smaller?>

Smaller...?

Hmm. If I didn't worry about shape or movement, I guess I could probably transform into something smaller... I could conserve MP that way too. But why would the black lizard want me to...

"Kssh, kssshht!" The black lizard hissed loudly, then rushed toward me.

Part 2

As the Black lizard rushed at me, I tried to make my already humanized form even smaller. I curled up into a ball and held my head, compressing my body as much as I could. Rather than a human, my current appearance was probably more like a round mass of pale, blue-white scales. Since I didn't have to be concerned with the specific shape of my body, my MP consumption seemed a bit better, but I was really running on empty.

H-hey, what's the point of this, anyway? Wait, don't tell me you're gonna—

My body was enveloped in warm mucus. After a few moments, the initial shock receded, and I came to my senses. The black lizard had put me in its mouth.

Wait...this was its mouth, right? I didn't fall into its stomach or anything? Or maybe it'd learned a skill to store things in its stomach like Ballrabbit.

H-hey, this isn't gonna work! That guy chasing me has Psychic Sense...

"Kshhhiii!"

Suddenly, the space around me began to spin, tossing me in all different directions. *I-Is the black lizard rolling?! Don't tell me it's trying to escape with me in its mouth! That won't work...will it?*

Using Roll to escape may have been my original plan, but considering how fast Beelzebub was in his human form, it was way too risky. Right now, he was probably chasing after me as fast as he could.

To make matters worse, the black lizard was trying to escape with a giant Ouroboros dumpling stuffed inside its mouth. Its balance and center of gravity were painfully off as a result. I doubted the black lizard would be able to shake Beelzebub off.

S-seriously, it's no use! Just spit me out and leave while you... I started to send

a message via Telepathy but stopped midway through. The black lizard wasn't the type of monster to leave me behind and run away. I knew that much from the time we'd spent together in the forest.

Sorry, Black Lizard...Actually, do you know where the mine is? Could you head that way?

"Kssht!" The black lizard chirped in response.

Well, I supposed it wasn't a guarantee that Beelzebub would be able to find me. He wasn't as clever as Lilyxila. He even screwed up by unleashing that big attack earlier for no reason and letting me get away. Judging from his behavior, he wasn't the sharpest one around.

Beelzebub's Psychic Sense range shouldn't have been very wide. If we kept ahead of him and increased the distance between us, we'd probably be able to shake him off eventually. There was even a possibility that he'd given up and run back to Lilyxila as soon as he lost sight of my bulky frame.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I'd been stalked due to Lilyxila's malice and the slime's obsession for far too long, and I'd been prepared to die many times over already. But even so, miraculously, I'd managed to make it this far. And I was going to make sure I got away. And then, I'll fulfill my promise to Allo and the others...and to Partner.

Some time passed with me riding around in the black lizard's mouth. There was no sign of Beelzebub. When I realized I'd really escaped with my life, I let out a massive sigh of relief. My Human Transformation had been draining my MP, and I was close to being completely out.

Black Lizard, I think we can probably...

Suddenly, the black lizard's Roll sped up.

Huh? What was going on? I was about to ask the black lizard when I felt a powerful presence with my Psychic Sense. N-no way. You're kidding, right...?

"Well, well, well! I'm surprised. I never thought I'd be the one exposing such

an idiotic scheme! I knew you were bad at knowing when to throw in the towel, but I didn't think you were this much of a coward!" Beelzebub's loud voice echoed around us. He still sounded quite far away. But even so, he was coming! And he wasn't using Telepathy; he was using his real voice, which meant he was in human form! At the black lizard's current speed, there was no way we'd be able to escape!

"Come on out, you slippery little worm! If you don't, I'll come for you, and then you'll really regret it!"

No way! How had he found me?! Maybe he'd created new followers and had them scout the area? I screwed up. I should've at least let the black lizard know Beelzebub could share his eyesight with any of his followers. Black Lizard! It's no use! If you get out of here now, he might not notice you! Spit me out and get moving!

However, the black lizard continued to speed up, showing no signs of stopping. *H-hey! Black Lizard!*

"Come on, no time to think! I don't have all day! Get out here!" Beelzebub called.

The black lizard still didn't stop. Was this...the end? The only thing different now was that I'd gotten the black lizard wrapped up in all of this too...!

"Hng...? G-gah! Damn it!"

A chainlike rattle echoed through the air, and at the same time, Beelzebub stopped moving. Huh? What's going on? One more second, and he would've been on top of us.

Chains of light, holding back.>

I picked up on the black lizard's thoughts with Telepathy to get a description of what was happening outside. Chains of light...? Were they from one of his Special Skills or something? Or maybe...maybe Beelzebub had reached the farthest distance he could get from Lilyxila with Spirit Servant? That was the

only thing I could think of!

Regardless of how, Beelzebub was finally no longer an issue. I'd been thrown into crisis after crisis since I first entered Alban Castle. But now, it was finally over.

My nemesis, the slime, had evolved into Ruin, and it was only through Partner's Sacrifice that I'd been able to vanquish him once and for all this time around. Lilyxila had lost Seraphim, and we were now out of range of her other Spirit Servant, Beelzebub. She was likely still in the royal capital right now, or somewhere close by.

If that girl has any more secret weapons tucked away that she hasn't mentioned yet, then I'm screwed, but I think she's out of ammunition for now.

The black lizard and I increased the distance between us and Beelzebub. Being hit with Fly King's Gale from here would still hurt, but we'd already made it a good distance away. The skill's power would be much weaker by the time it made it all the way here. And plus, the black lizard was resistant to poison.

"I'm going to make you work for it, Illusia!!" Beelzebub's cry echoed around us. At the same time, I felt an immense pressure building behind me. It seemed like Beelzebub had released his human form. Was he coming? Or would he try to use Inhale instead? But at this distance, we should be able to overcome it with Roll!

Watch out, Black Lizard! He's about to use suction magic!

"Ksshiii!"

A moment after, I felt countless presences rise up around Beelzebub.

"Ksshht?"

H-huh? Was I wrong?

«I've got a little present for you! And get ready, because I'm about to turn this place into a living hell with all the HP and MP I've got in me! I don't like ending things this way, but I gotta do what I gotta do! Enjoy your boring, pointless

death, Illusia!>

About ten figures appeared from Beelzebub's center and began to head for me. Did he use Multiply Followers...? Wait, don't tell me his followers could go past the Spirit Servant range?! H-his followers were rank C+! Sorry, Black Lizard, but you gotta get outta here! Hurry!

"Kshiiiiii!"

My MP was almost gone, and my whole body was hot and aching. I probably wouldn't be able to take on more than one rank C+ at a time right now. On top of my low HP and MP, all of my limbs were damaged from the Fly King's Gale I'd endured in human form.



I could feel them: the presence of ten giant flies flying behind us, closing in. This was bad. Very bad.

Finally, the first fly reached the black lizard and kicked it in the back.

"Kshhht!" The black lizard spat me out, and I rolled helplessly along the ground.

Somehow, I managed to get my crushed limbs underneath me and returned my body to its original size. I was numb and sore from head to toe, thanks to the extra small Human Transformation.

Beside me, the black lizard was lying on the ground, limp, after being slammed into a large rock by the fly. I crawled on top of the black lizard and became a living shield to protect it from the incoming flies.

D-damn it. Why'd I have to drag the black lizard into this mess?

Suddenly, I noticed the ground around us was full of reddish-brown clay. Wait, was this...Alban Mine...?

"Gale!" A gust of wind blew overhead, catching the flies in its vortex before knocking them away.

A-Allo! You waited for me!

"Welcome back, Master Dragon." Allo smiled at me as she raised her arms again.

The last of the flies scattered by Allo's Gale were approaching and seemed to be aiming directly at me. A figure jumped out from behind Allo and landed right next to me with a quick slash that sliced cleanly through the neck of the closest fly. The slain fly toppled over the figure's shoulder and rolled limply across the ground, splattering bodily fluids.

"Not a bad blade, if I do say so myself. Not quite as good as my dearly departed wife, Leral, though." The figure was a large, half-naked man wielding a greatsword: Volk. I looked at the sword in his hand and realized it was Grandpa Magiatite in his sword form.

Volk...? But didn't the Holy Knights capture you?

"As if I would let myself be slain by those simpletons! I was only keeping a low profile to heal the wounds I sustained from the Demon King's underlings. I did... get a little angry and act a little brash, so I doubt I'll be returning to human habitation for a while."

O-oh, I see... So that's why he came all the way here with Allo and the others.

Allo stood in front of me protectively and glared at the surviving flies. One of them tried to escape, but it suddenly seemed to get stuck, struggling in midair. Then Nightmare emerged from the tree nearby, opened her huge mouth, and sank her fangs straight into the fly's abdomen.

The rest of the flies, seemingly unwilling to retreat, focused their attacks on me. Each one flew in at a different direction to surround me and try to pounce. However, Allo and Volk intercepted them one after the other, and in no time at all, the rest of the flies were destroyed.

"Kshiii..." The black lizard hovered anxiously near my face.

Don't worry. These guys are friends. We're safe now. We did it.

Treant appeared from over the small cliff in the mine's entrance where Allo had been standing before, fashionably late as usual. It stretched its trunk proudly.

C'mon, you didn't even do anything... But even so, seeing Treant act the same as always made me breathe a sigh of relief. I just knelt down on the spot, boneweary.

Too many things had happened in a row without stopping. The fact that my HP and MP had held out this long was nothing short of a miracle. This was the first time I'd been backed into such a dangerous corner since I'd first been reborn in this world.

And I'd never experienced this level of loss before either.

Allo, having just wiped out the last of the flies, came up to me. "Master

Dragon! I'm done taking care of those monsters... M-Master Dragon?"

She looked at me—or rather, the empty stump next to me—and her eyes suddenly went wide. The severed stump was still smeared with blood, and the neck bone was exposed. Perhaps because I'd pushed my Human Transformation beyond its normal limits and used it until my MP was completely exhausted, I still looked a little crushed now that I was back in my dragon form.

Although I'd been gradually regaining my normal appearance as time passed and my stats healed...it seemed like Allo, who'd been busy fighting off enemies until now, had been unaware of Partner's absence until that moment.

This was tough. It'd be especially tough explaining what happened to Nightmare. The thought crossed my mind that I wouldn't have to do it if I just dropped dead here and now.

But of course, I couldn't do that. Not after Partner sacrificed herself to save me.

Now that the immediate crisis was over and I had a chance to breathe again, I couldn't help but think about how unbalanced and weirdly light my body felt. Now that the fighting was done with, the fact that Partner was dead, really dead, came back to me with full force.

Before I knew it, tears began to fall from my eyes. I put my head on the ground.

Partner...is dead. She was killed protecting me. Both Allo and Treant stood in place, stunned, as they received my telepathic message. Nightmare stopped moving too and stared at me.

"I...I see. So that's what happened," Volk said, his eyes downcast. Nightmare came down from her tree and headed straight for me.

Initially, Nightmare had been much friendlier toward Partner than she was with me. I was sure she didn't think highly of me for coming home alone, having

let Partner sacrifice herself to protect me. I could understand if she felt like she needed to say something to me. Whatever it was, I'd take it.

Instead, Nightmare gently caressed the top of my head with her front leg. It was hard for her too, no doubt about that. But with that, at least, I knew she didn't blame me. I'm sure it was because she knew exactly how I felt.

After a few moments of silence, Volk spoke up. "Ouroboros...what do you plan to do now? The saint seemed to want you dead at any cost. She will likely come after you soon."

The only thing I can do...run. I don't know the range at which the saint is able to control the monsters she has under her command, but if Beelzebub manages to get all the way out here somehow...then it'll be all over. We can't win against him.

"I meant after you were done running."

After that, huh...? Well, I was sure the saint would come after me no matter where I went.

You know...even after she betrayed me, I still wanted to make amends with Lilyxila if I could.

After I defeated the slime, when Lilyxila attacked me...I hated her from the bottom of my heart. But after I thought about it for a while, I began to realize that maybe Lilyxila's position meant she had no other choice.

Or maybe that was just what I wanted to believe.

It was no exaggeration to say that Lilyxila, with her Sacred Skill and Beelzebub under her command, was probably the face of the human race right now. She'd had no choice but to consider the possibility that I might bare my fangs at humanity. That's how I chose to believe she made her decision, anyway.

For example, I could evolve and become a monster like Ruin with no soul left inside, and turn my vast, unchecked power against humanity. Or one day, I could decide I was dissatisfied with my treatment and choose to rise as the next

Demon King. I had a feeling those were the kinds of situations she was forced to weigh in her mind. And I'd hoped maybe, just maybe, if she saw me risking my life to take Ruin away from the royal capital even after her betrayal, she might find it in herself to change her mind.

However...it had become clear to me that I was wrong. Lilyxila had sent Beelzebub after me. Especially considering Beelzebub's speed, he'd caught up to me too quickly to think she'd hesitated even for a moment. As soon as she realized I was trying to escape, she played her trump card and unleashed Beelzebub on me.

First things first...I need to build a base and prepare, I told the others. If I evolve, I should be strong enough to go up against Beelzebub. And then...I'll take my revenge on Lilyxila.

I wasn't losing any more of my friends. And if that meant going up against Lilyxila, or even the Divine Voice itself, then so be it. Lilyxila might be the most powerful human out there, and the Divine Voice might be the most confusing, but I didn't care. I'd rise above them all and take them down.

Part 3: Partner

W HEN I CAME TO, I found myself walking forward step by step in the pitch black. It seemed like I was in a forest. Turning my head to the side, I could make out the vague outlines of trees growing here and there.

What is this place? Where am I? I can't remember anything. And it's starting to freak me out.

I was dazed, barely on the edge of consciousness, but for some reason, I seemed to be the one moving our body. *Huh? What, is Partner slacking off for some reason?*

When I turned my head toward Partner, I realized that his head was hidden from view, as if shrouded in heavy mist. Hey, where'd he go? What's the big deal? Is this a dream or something?

I still couldn't remember exactly what happened, but I knew I shouldn't have been sleeping. What the hell happened to me? I remember... Yes, the saint, that stupid amateur, betrayed us and attacked us, and the Demon King was chasing us... And then we couldn't escape, so I...

Oh. Right. So...I guess I'm dead?

In the dimly lit forest around me, there were many beings moving forward along this path, the same as I was. They were beings of all kinds: some monsters, some human. All of them were completely colorless, like they'd been rendered in black and white. Their faces were blank and soulless as they trudged forward.

As they walked, their bodies began to melt. A majority of them had been half turned to mush. The ones who could no longer move forward melted into the ground before disappearing.

"Graaa, graaah!" I tried to call out to the figures around me, but none

responded.

"Graaaaaaah!" Nothing. There was still no response.

I had a vague inkling of what this place was—it had to be some sort of afterlife.

I tried to use a skill, but nothing happened. It was as if my ability to use skills itself had slipped from my mind.

But I'm not like everyone else here. I can keep my wits about me and stand my ground. Maybe there's even a way for me to get back to my original world?

I looked behind me. It was more than just pitch black; the darkness was complete and unending. There was no path leading behind me. *Welp. Guess there's no going back.* I had no expectations, so I just took that fact in stride.

I started moving forward again, looking around at the unchanging scenery. As I went, I wondered about what happened to my Partner after I'd left him. I could only vaguely remember that the Demon King was nearly dead when I went down. I wished I could say it was a noble death, but...

I spotted a human boy sitting under a tree along the road, holding his head and crying like a lost puppy. Perhaps he had too many regrets that prevented him from moving on.

I let out a sigh, remembering Partner, Nightmare, Allo, and Treant. Then I stopped moving forward and instead walked up to the kid. He was so startled by my appearance that he immediately stopped crying and looked up at me in awe.

"A-are you...the grim reaper?"

Sorry, but no. If the grim reaper were here, I'd be beating him to a pulp and making him bring me back to life already.

I couldn't turn into a human anymore, so instead I lay beside him for a while. I pretended to nibble on him, then set him up on my head, and took him along with me as I walked. After a while, the boy seemed to relax a little, so I set him

down and he started to ask me questions about this and that in a familiar manner. I answered his questions with a simple nod or a shake of my head.

Since there was nothing else to do, I decided to pick the boy back up and continue forward. There was no turning back. I tried to go sideways but ran into an invisible wall at some point that prevented me from going any further.

The farther we went, the fewer and fewer walkers we saw around us. More and more of them were left disfigured on the ground, and they reminded me of the slimes.

I wonder if the Demon King ended up here too. I looked around, but there was no sign of him. I doubted he would die so soon, but with all the departed souls sent here from all over the world, there was no way this was all of them. Maybe the afterlife is divided up into several different places? Or maybe this is just a dream I'm having on my deathbed that I can't escape.

"Who are you looking for? A friend?" the boy called out to me from his place on my back. I shook my head.

Then the boy talked about himself for a while: the country he was born in, what kind of family he came from. I wasn't particularly interested, and I didn't know much about the human world anyway, and he spoke about it all like he thought I knew what he was talking about. It was almost refreshing, in a way. But I nodded along and made noises to give him the impression I was following along. The kid seemed satisfied with our conversation, so that was good enough for me. It wasn't like I didn't understand *any* of it.

Gradually, the boy's words began to slow down and eventually they stopped. When he didn't speak up again after a little while, I looked back at where he'd been sitting and realized he was gone. *Maybe telling me his story was enough to let him move on.* I hadn't noticed him leave because my senses were all almost completely numb.

I turned my head to the front and sped up. When I checked my surroundings, I realized the trees were all gone, along with all of the piles of muck I'd been

walking on before. Now there was nothing left but a grayscale expanse of grass.

As I continued walking, I came across a tree in the middle of the path. A boy was sitting against it. At first, I thought he was the same ghost I'd met earlier, but when he stood and turned his expressionless eyes to me, I realized it wasn't him. This ghost was somehow...unsettling.

It is nice to finally meet you. I am Laplace, the keeper of this world's laws.

Wait, does that mean you're the Divine Voice or somethin'? So you've been sneaking around and hiding in here all this time?

What you call the Divine Voice is simply another entity that calls out to this world's inhabitants and interrupts my own voice.

Oh yeah? If you're the head honcho around here, why not kick that guy out and be done with him already?

Because I have no authority to do anything other than judge, authorize, and enforce the instructions given to me in accordance with conventional values. I can bend the rules a little here and there, but in essence, I can't take charge of anything that would upset the world's balance. They could not predict which steps I would take if they gave me only a sense of purpose, so I have no free will either. Fearing that I would take unnecessary actions, they limited me to only being granted higher authority over basic values and operations, as well as self-preservation.

The kid walked up to me as he went on and on about these things I didn't understand. Maybe Partner would be able to understand better if he were here.

So, to be clear: I can't help you get back to your world. I can only calculate probabilities, grant higher authority, and defend myself. However, what I can do is grant you a few minor, yet effective skills.

As the kid reached his hand up toward me, a red light flashed through my head, then faded and disappeared.

I looked at the kid with suspicion. So? What do these skills do? I can't even use 'em in here, can I? I mean...what's the point of giving 'em to me now, anyway? What're you hoping to achieve?

I am simply trying to fulfill my purpose with the actions I have been given.

The kid who called himself Laplace then sat back down again at the roots of the tree.

It may be nothing, but why don't you sit and wait here for a little while anyway, just in case?

The kid raised his head slightly and looked behind the tree, toward the end of the path.

Of course, you are also free to pass by and go on to the other side whenever you please.

Bonus Story 1:

The Tale of Greenhorn and Grandpa Silver

1

On A BEACH near Alban Mine in the Kingdom of Ardesia, a single monster lay upon the sand. He was a rank D Forte Slime that had tried to attack a certain forest village before being intercepted by a Plague Dragon named Illusia and thrown to the bottom of a cliff.

After smashing into the surface of the water at terminal velocity, he had nearly been killed by the turbulent waves, but the slime's regenerative abilities had saved him just in time. However, because he had been in a restless state both physically and mentally for a long time, and because he had also not eaten properly in a good while, he no longer had the strength necessary to move his slimy body properly.

Am I...alive? God... And Illusia, is he...?

The slime prayed in his mind, searching for answers, but was met with no response.

God...? Are you... Are you not going to answer me?

Still, there was no response. Then the slime remembered something.

The slime had been asking his Divine Voice questions for a long time. And the Divine Voice answered him. He recalled God saying, "I wish to bring forth a monster of great power who can aid me in my own designs." And he also remembered answering that he would do whatever he could to make that happen.

Perhaps his own defeat at the hands of Illusia had caused God to abandon him. For the slime, that was perhaps the most terrifying thought of all.

I'm...I'm not dead yet! I'm still here! I haven't lost! And next time, I'll win! This time, I won't let him beat me! I'll be ready, and this time, I'll defeat him for sure!

Illusia can't save you, God! I'll, I'll help you, so please, don't abandon me...

While the slime desperately tried to appeal to the Divine Voice in his mind, a large crab monster approached the slime. It was called an Emerald Scissor and was a three-eyed crab with a shiny, emerald-green carapace. In terms of size, it was about one size larger than a human.

The slime immediately checked the crab creature's abilities with View Status. Th-thank goodness, I can still see the status screen! God must be watching over me! This monster isn't that tough! I'll take it down nice and quick and steal its HP...!

The slime formed long tentacles and tried to extend them forward toward the crab, but soon he ran out of energy and the tentacles dissolved into nothingness. His life force had already reached its limit. Slowly, the Emerald Scissor approached the slime and raised its massive shears.

Oh, oh God! Am I going to die?! But I can't! Not here, not now...!

That was when it happened. A tiny red-hot beam crossed the slime's vision, then fell down to the Emerald Scissor's feet and drew a black line along the ground. The Emerald Scissors panicked and ran away.

Did someone...save me? The slime used Psychic Sense to scan the area, looking for the person who'd emitted the heat ray.

<Any chance you possess Telepathy? You are an unusual color... Where did you come from, stranger?>

Inside a floating pool of liquid metal, the slime could see a mass that resembled a nucleus. He checked the monster's stats and found out it was a rank B— monster called a Magiatite Heart. Not only was its rank high, but so was its level. The slime knew that if they were to fight, even if the slime was in perfect condition, there was no way he would be able to win.

«Why did you save me? What is your goal? What do you want from me?»

You are...an unusual color, and you caught my eye. I do not wish to harm you,

but I would like to know where you come from.>

You have some...interesting concerns. I was being chased by a monster and jumped into the sea to escape. That's all. The slime lied as quickly as he could. He felt like it might be a bad idea to tell this Magiatite Heart the truth. In nature, there was only predator and prey. There were few situations in which answering honestly would prove to be particularly beneficial.

«That is all, you say? Then forgive me for stopping you. There are many
powerful monsters in this area, so I would advise caution.»

Once the slime agreed to keep an eye out, the Magiatite Heart proceeded in the opposite direction of the slime.

I can't believe I ran into a C+ and a B— monster already. Are the monsters around here tougher than the ones in the forest? It might be difficult to survive here. But if I manage to defeat some of them, I might be able to level up pretty quickly... And if I do, God might call out to me again.

The slime thought for a moment, then spoke to the Magiatite Heart's retreating back with Telepathy.

'Wait! You're strong, aren't you? Would you be willing to protect me? I have to become stronger. Whatever help you can offer is fine by me.'

The Magiatite Heart's nucleus broke away from the pool of molten metal and headed back toward the slime.

«I wish...to simply maintain the peace in this land, that is all. If I help you, what will you do? We monsters exist to consume other creatures. If I help you, other monsters will die in return. I do not care whether your thinking abilities are above average. Aiding monsters outside of one's species goes against my personal beliefs.>

«But...I-I assure you I'll do no harm, and I'm sure I'll be able to repay you for
your efforts someday!»

«I am satisfied with my current lot in life, and there is nothing I want that you

can provide. Forgive me, but I must take my leave, Greenhorn.>

The Magiatite Heart's nucleus began to retract, leaving the slime where he stood.

U-urgh...

The slime crumpled to the ground, having lost all hope.

Just then, a small hole appeared right next to the slime. From the hole, the Emerald Scissors from before emerged once more. It moved through the ground, hoping to hide its presence and catch its prey alone.

The Magiatite Heart shot an attack from afar and struck the Emerald Scissors's shears. The shears shattered and, panicked, the creature burrowed its way back into the ground.

(So...saved me again, did ya?)

The Magiatite Heart made a face of disgust at the slime's question. <1...just did not feel like watching you die after just saving your life once.>

<Oh? So that's how it is? I had no idea.>

<Anyway, I shall take my leave now.>

«Right. About that... I can't move, you know. Would you at least mind looking over me until I can recover? I mean, if you left me here, it'd be like you were leaving me to die.>

...Fine. But this is the last time. I mean it.>

In the end, the Magiatite Heart had to stick with the slime for a while. When the Emerald Scissors attacked again, the Magiatite Heart's heat rays returned fire, and the slime fed on the Emerald Scissors's corpse to restore his life force. The day's hunt was followed by a day of roaming the beach, resting in shifts to get through the night, and before long, the two had reached the following morning.

«Thank you for everything. You've been a huge help. But...I thought you

believed monsters were made to eat each other, not help those outside of our species?

«I could not help it. I wasn't going to leave you to your own devices just to get you killed. I, too, was taken in by another.>

<Hmm... Is that so? That's tough.>

<...You're a strange one, Greenhorn.>

(To be honest, I've never had a real relationship with anyone before until now.
It was always either hunt or be hunted. This is the first time someone else has
helped me. It seems like you've grown on me a little.>

<It seems I've picked up something quite nefarious.>

<Hey, you know, if I get really strong someday, I'll let you be my right-hand rock. Deal?>

«Where did this sudden burst of confidence come from?»

The slime and the Magiatite Heart remained together for the rest of the day, never parting ways. The next day, the Magiatite Heart helped the slime raise his level, and at dusk, they moved from the beach to the rocky mountain.

<Jeez, Grandpa Silver. You're fast.>

(Who gave you the right to call me—)

«What? You called me Greenhorn, didn't you? Anyway, where are we?»

(The humans named this place Alban Mine. But I call it home. Come, it's about time I showed my face to my troublesome companion. He's an old friend.)

The two monsters entered the tunnels underneath the mountains. On the way, the Magiatite Heart dispatched a group of rank C+ ant monsters with shining jewels on their backs called grim ammo. The slime took advantage of the opportunity to form his slime body into a massive pair of shears and snipped through a grim ammo with a poisoned blade to finish it off.

The two reached the depths of the mine shaft. There, another Magiatite

Heart crawled along the ground. <Oh, comrade! I was worried!>

The slime listened to the second Magiatite Heart's telepathic message, which he found much easier to understand than Grandpa Silver's. (You've been away for a while, so I was afraid you'd finally been hunted down by some humans...)

The second Magiatite Heart approached slowly, then stopped in his tracks once he saw the slime.

«Oh? You must be Grandpa Silver's friend?» The slime immediately checked the other Heart's status. His Grecian Language and Telepathy skills were higher than Grandpa Silver's, which meant he could impart not only his thoughts through Telepathy but also his speech. His communication abilities were one notch above Grandpa Silver's. *«Well, it's nice to meet y—»*

A sudden burst of heat rays penetrated the slime's mucus. The temperature inside the slime rose sharply, and a large number of bubbles began to form inside him, warping his shape. As the slime struggled and writhed in agony, another heat ray was added to the mix. Grandpa Silver rushed out in front of the slime and dispelled the heat rays.

<What the hell are you doing?!>

«Brother, I don't mind your good-natured spirit, but this slime...I sense a dark, bottomless pit of evil in his depths. My Mind's Eye, which can see through to the true nature of opponents, says so. This monster...is a devil. I have never met another individual quite so dangerous. I want to kill him here and now.>

The second Magiatite Heart extended a tentacle of liquid metal and pointed it at the slime. For a moment, Grandpa Silver and the second Magiatite Heart stood frozen, glaring at each other. Then they began to move.

2

N THE END, the slime was not killed. The second Magiatite Heart—the one with Mind's Eye—agreed to let the slime go on two conditions: The first was

that Grandpa Silver would never bring the slime into the mine again, and the second was that he would always keep a close eye on the slime.

Grandpa Silver and the slime could no longer go into the mine, so they had to make the area around the mine habitable.

«What the hell was that guy's problem? He almost killed me!»

cForgive me... He is usually not like this at all. He must have seen something truly strange in you... By this point, Grandpa Silver was starting to feel somewhat uncomfortable with the slime as well. He'd noticed that the slime's mentality was a little dangerous based on the words he'd presented him with when they first met. The fact that his old friend who had Mind's Eye was wary about the slime only added to the uneasiness.

In fact, he knew his friend placed a lot of credibility in his Mind's Eye skill. He was not the type to make such accusations lightly. However, Grandpa Silver thought, this slime was not so strong. He should be able to guide it through, get it on the right path. He told himself that the slime's volatile nature was simply due to its immature mind.

The slime continued to hunt under Grandpa Silver's watchful gaze. And in the meantime, he was rapidly growing stronger.

Initially, Grandpa Silver didn't know that the slime could steal skills from other monsters. He found out during their second day of hunting, when he asked the slime about it.

«Didn't I tell you? I'm special. I can see who can do what, as far as skills, and I
can use that knowledge as I wish,» the slime told Grandpa Silver with
confidence.

<I can't believe it. Such codswallop...>

Grandpa Silver's plan was to take time to assess the situation and make up for his poor behavior in the meantime. If the slime really had such an extraordinary skill at his disposal, he would gain power very quickly. He had no time to be cautious.

In fact, the very next day, the slime evolved. His transparent blue slime had turned into a murky, indigo mass. Then, in front of Grandpa Silver's eyes, an upper body resembling a human grew out of the indigo mass. Three large arms extended from the pool of indigo water surrounding the human body.

«Heh, heh heh heh... These stats aren't bad. Rank B— monsters are on a
whole different level.»

<Th-that appearance...>

«Nice, right?» the slime said happily. «It's a Dread Paint, a species that specializes in physical attacks. It should make it easier for me to deal damage to OP enemies. Just gotta slow 'em down first with my skills, then hit 'em with this arm. I chose this evolution because it seemed like it'd give me the most possible experience points. The slime seemed to be enjoying himself, but all Grandpa Silver could feel was a growing sense of discomfort.

¿Does that mean...you were able to choose that evolution specifically?>

Yeah, 'cause I'm special, remember? I have to choose my evolutionary path carefully. I had a hard time finding the right species to fulfill all the requirements...but I doubt you understand any of this.>

<Wh...what're you talking about?>

Well, you know, God is watching over me. He's watching over me right now and keeping me safe. You're lucky, Grandpa Silver. You already have my blessing. Heh heh heh... One day, I will become the Demon King...or, no, perhaps even the god of this world.>

Grandpa Silver trembled. He began to wonder if he really wanted to let this slime go unchecked. If he were to follow his friend's advice, the only chance he'd have to do so was now, when the slime had just evolved. If the slime continued to improve his level, he would surely become more powerful than Grandpa Silver—and if that happened, no one would be able to stop him.

But even so, Grandpa Silver did nothing. He chose to remain passive and not take any action, although he felt a growing sense of foreboding. He was mild mannered, gentle, and timid. It was in the Magiatite Heart's nature to run away.

And this fear, this foreboding that built each day soon proved to be for good reason. The days passed slowly, and soon the slime was already surpassing Grandpa Silver in terms of strength.

Normally, it was impossible for a monster to gain so much power at such a rapid pace. Grandpa Silver had lived for nearly a hundred years, and it had taken him all that time to reach his current level of strength. But it was the slime's ability to steal others' skills that enabled him to rapidly increase his level. Just the sheer quantity of skills he was able to acquire was enough to put him toe to toe with even some of the most powerful monsters out there.

One day, Grandpa Silver went to Alban Mine alone to consult with the owner of Mind's Eye.

(You already know what I'm going to say,) his friend told him. (The same thing I said the first day I laid eyes on him: You should kill that monster. Immediately.
You say the slime wants more power than he needs to live peacefully here, and he won't tell you why?)

<He...talks about many things that I do not understand. Things about gods, and the world, and everything else.>

That monster is dangerous. And if you stay near him for too long, comrade, I fear your life may be in danger as well.>

«But...he doesn't seem bad. At least, I don't believe him to be.»

I find that hard to believe. That slime is evil incarnate.>

The two Magiatite Hearts fell silent for a little while. Then, Grandpa Silver spoke again.

(By the way, you said you've seen monsters just outside the tunnels lately? What kind of monsters?) As if to hide his awkwardness, Grandpa Silver changed

the subject. The second Magiatite Heart picked up on this but opted not to pry.

«Ah, yes. A great metal giant has crawled from the depths of the mine. It was
asleep for years, and now it's making up for lost time. The tunnels are partially
collapsing, the monsters inside are fleeing out, and there's a great deal of
commotion going on.

<A powerful monster, sleeping deeply beneath the mines... Who would've thought?>

«Anyway, it's high-ranking, and we are not great opponents for it. As neighbors, I don't want to set pleasantries aside, but we must find a way to coexist somehow.»

After consulting with his longtime friend, Grandpa Silver made his way back out of the mine. When he returned to its entrance, the slime was waiting for him.

<Y-yes, Greenhorn? What is it?>

Nothing. Just curious about what you had to say to that Mind's Eye fellow.>

«Ah...nothing important. I'm sure you've noticed that many of the mine's
monsters have been showing up outside the mine lately, yes? I've been trying to
find out the cause. According to my comrade, a dangerous monster has
appeared inside the mine. I have a feeling there may be something wrong...

In truth, Grandpa Silver was embarrassed and wanted to talk about anything other than the slime himself. A metal giant sleeping in the mine felt like an appropriate topic. But that story was one better left untold to the slime.

«Oh...? A nasty monster, you say? Interesting. I'm getting to the point now where I'm not getting enough experience from my normal battles, so perhaps I need a few new skills instead.»

<N-no, we cannot enter the mine! The other Heart said as much!>

«He won't be a problem for me anymore. I'm stronger than him already; even I
know that.»

<N-no, you can't! I...I will not allow it either!>

«Sorry, but I can't just let that monster go to waste, even if you ask nicely, Grandpa Silver. You see, I have an important purpose to achieve.

The slime ignored Grandpa Silver's words and pushed forward into the mine.

On his way down, the slime came across the Mind's Eye Heart, and he forced the Heart to leave. After that, he defeated the mine's metal giant with ease.

And thanks to the slime's effort, the peace of Alban Mine was preserved. It would have been better if the tale had ended there, but it didn't.

After that, the slime began to enter the mine again and again in search of stronger monsters. And as the days went by, the slime began to ignore Grandpa Silver's words and hunt the monsters inhabiting the mine on his own. Many monsters escaped from the mine, and the rarest ones perished under the slime's tremendous power.

One day, four human adventurers visited Alban Mine. Grandpa Silver entreated the slime to stay hidden. If the humans found them here, even if they managed to kill them, the next adventurers venturing into the mine would surely come to take them down. However, the slime paid no heed to his warning and killed all four of the adventurers.

At this, Grandpa Silver became furious and formed his liquid-metal body into a pointed blade. (I have seen enough! Do you have any idea what you've done, what you're still doing?!)

«Can it, Gramps. Don't tell me what to do. Your crude Telepathy rings in my head so badly that it makes me sick.) The slime's body formed a massive arm and poked Grandpa Silver's blade with his finger, shattering it. *«I told you, didn't I? I am to become the God of monsters. I won't be stuck in this run-down, abandoned mine forever. It's you who doesn't understand, Grandpa Silver. What is the point of keeping the balance between all of these irrelevant monsters? If they die, then I'll just go somewhere else.*

<How...how dare you...>

After that, the slime continued to kill every adventurer that came to visit Alban Mine. He no longer paid any heed to Grandpa Silver's attempts to stop him.

One day, amid these happenings, the slime began to tremble, then separated the mucus from his own body and formed it into three lumps. As Grandpa Silver watched, each of the three lumps began to shift and move, each with a will of its own.

What...are these? Grandpa Silver asked.

«These are the offspring of my newly acquired skill, Slime Plant, that I got by leveling my Dread Paint skill. It's a skill that allows me to mass-produce as many rank F monsters as my HP will allow. Amazing, isn't it?

<...And what do you intend to do with them?>

Alban, the royal capital of Ardesia, for myself. I will then reign as the Demon King of this age. Next, I will seize control of the world from the humans and make it all mine. A wonderful plan, don't you think? The slime blurted out this terrifying plan like it was the most sensible thing in the world.

<Wh-wh...what?!>

«Of course, that's only a checkpoint. I wouldn't expect you to comprehend that, though.»

Are you trying to destroy the world?! If you do that, not just humans, but monsters and everything else will cease to exist! You can live peacefully in this land, free from all who would do you harm. Is that not good enough for you?!>

«That's the logic of the weak, Gramps. I am the one with the power to turn this
world on its axis and assume my rightful place as king. And not just that. I aim to
go beyond and have the world at my fingertips!»

(Greenhorn...!)

Yes? Do you wish to try and face me again? At this point, I could easily crush you with a single swing of my fist, you know. Heh heh heh... Your skills sure are interesting, you old fart. And rare too. Perhaps I should add them to my list before I ascend the throne as Demon King. What do you think?

The slime morphed to give himself a massive arm, then snapped his fingers. Grandpa Silver braced himself, prepared to fire a beam of magic straight through the slime's body.

«Now, now. I was only joking, Gramps. But remember: Don't tell me what to do.>

After that, a total of ten slime segments were spawned in Alban Mine. This was already more slimes than Grandpa Silver could handle. Before long, Alban Mine was overrun with slimes, and they all used it as a free-for-all buffet to raise their own levels. With Alban Mine as their base, the slimes were able to begin hunting farther and farther away from the mine.

The slime had reached its next evolution. The dark-indigo body of the Dread Paint became more translucent and began to shine with rainbow iridescence. His evolved form painted a fearless yet beautiful figure in the light.

«A Chaos Ooze... Heh heh heh, I made it to rank A much faster than I expected, and it's all thanks to you, Grandpa Silver, for offering me your aid when I first arrived here. With this much power at my disposal...perhaps I could disguise myself as a human and go stir up some trouble in Alban. The slime's minions lifted both hands and applauded hard for the new evolution of their host body.

<How incredible!>

<That's our master!>

«Be careful! You'll be in trouble if one of the knights catches you by surprise.»

Grandpa Silver was horrified by this self-indulgent display. The slime's minions were simply pawns that worshipped, praised, and obeyed the slime's every word. Perhaps because of their lack of intelligence, or because they were

formed from the slime's body, they had little to no will of their own.

«Master, if you intend to invade the capital, you would do well to get your
skills up to speed first,» one of the slime's minions advised.

Yes, you're right. I suppose I ought to prepare.>

One day, the slime disappeared along with his minions. Grandpa Silver waited outside the mine with one of the slime's remaining minions. These days, he always had one of the minions with him. In the past, when he'd secretly try to consult with the Magiatite Heart with the Mind's Eye, he'd been caught by one of the minions. Since then, a watch had been placed on him at all times to prevent him from making any moves.

That being said, the slime minions weren't exactly intelligent. Eventually, Grandpa Silver managed to trick the slime into going deep into the mine shafts so that he could consult with his Mind's Eye comrade.

I...I made a mistake. And because of my carelessness, now the world is at risk. What on earth is that slime going to do? And what can I do? How do I stop him? The greenhorn sometimes makes me feel like he can't distinguish between real beings and playthings.

However, when Grandpa Silver arrived at the end of the mine shaft, he found the Mind's Eye Magiatite Heart slumped against the wall. His metal body was scattered all around, and his core was shattered into a million pieces.

In front of the corpse of his comrade, the slime, in human form, was surrounded by his applauding minions. The slime transformed his human hand into the metallic texture of magiatite.

(Oh, well done, Master!)

<That's an excellent look for you.>

The slime's minions showered him with praise.

What the hell...is the meaning of this? Grandpa Silver asked, stunned, at which point the slime turned around to face him.

"Damn it, Gramps. Did you manage to slip away from my minion to sneak down here again?" Instead of using Telepathy, the slime was communicating in the open air. Chaos Ooze's Mimicry skill required little magic, so in order to get used to his abilities, the slime often paraded around in human form these days. "As I'm sure you can see, I took his skills. I knew he wouldn't be able to survive if he was reduced to just a core, so I killed him as a mercy. Ha ha! Of course, I also wanted his experience."

«How...how could you?! What are you talking about?! He was right! There
were moments where I questioned your judgment, but I thought you could at
least see reason!»

The slime tilted his head in response to Grandpa Silver's fury. "What're you so torn up about, Gramps? Don't worry, I won't kill you! What I said before was just a joke, okay? Just a joke! In truth, I'm grateful to you."

The soulless eyes of the slime's minions turned toward Grandpa Silver. «Congratulations, Mr. Magiatite!»

(It is an honor to be recognized as a close associate of the soon-to-be ruler of the world.)

(You should be proud!)

To Hell with you, you...you demon! I see you now, for what you truly are! And now, it is up to me alone to stop you! Grandpa Silver kicked off the wall and leaped at the slime at top speed.

In a proper fight, there'd be no way for Grandpa Silver to win. Chaos Ooze was a rank A monster, and his minions were not a force to be ignored.

However, the minions were slow; slow enough, at the very least, to not respond to Grandpa Silver's first attack. And the slime himself had just evolved, so his level was still quite low. This was the only chance to defeat him.

Grandpa Silver struck the slime hard in the chest and succeeded in making him topple over. He then leaped into the air from the recoil.

```
"Gah! Gramps, I...I won't take your life, so...!"
```

You are pure, it's true. Pure evil. You were never meant to possess such power! I should have done this a long, long time ago! Grandpa Silver shot a heat ray at the slime from midair. The red spear struck the fallen, defenseless slime straight through his center. He thought he'd killed the slime, that it was over. But the next moment, Grandpa Silver was knocked to the ground by the slime's outstretched arm. Instantly, he was surrounded by a half dozen slime minions.

```
<...Have I been underestimating you all this time?>
The brilliance of Grandpa Silver's core began to fade.
<You fool!>
<Master offered you a place as his right-hand man!>
<What do you have to be dissatisfied about?!>
```

The minions whipped their tentacles at Grandpa Silver, attempting to beat him to death.

"Stop! Stop attacking him!" At the sound of the slime's voice, the minions all retreated at once. "Answer me, you old coot! Why?! Why did you attack me?! Yes, I killed him...but now, I have no reason to kill you! I already have the Magiatite skill within me! Why is that so difficult to understand? Are you an idiot?!"

When the other slimes stopped attacking him, Grandpa Silver took that opportunity to run. Back up the mine, back to safety, away from the slimes and their twisted ways.

```
<F-forgive me, Master!>
<We will hunt him down right—>
```

"Stop!" The slime's word came out in a shriek. Then, after a short pause: "... Stop. I don't care about him. Just leave him alone; he can't do anything to me anyway."

Bonus Story 2: What's Cookin' in Alban Mine

MY CAMP WAS SET UP in Alban Mine, near the royal capital of Alban, where I would infiltrate the castle and defeat the Demon King. I was supposed to lay low here and wait until tomorrow, the day that Lilyxila and I had decided to put our plan into action.

However...there was one small issue. Alban Mine was full of a variety of strange monsters with even stranger properties. In short, there were not a lot of monsters that we could actually eat.

There were the steel horses that looked almost like little tin toys, stone bears that were nothing more than blocks of ore that just happened to be in the shapes of bears, and grim ammos, which seemed edible but had a hard outer carapace and only a few edible parts. Grandpa Magiatite's species, Magiatite Heart, was also just a sentient lump of metal, so it seemed like monsters like them were par for the course in this mine.

I'd heard Grandpa Magiatite say, "Actually, there is something down here that other monsters enjoy eating," so I followed him to the end of a mine shaft. But what greeted me at the end was...

A carrot-shaped ore with an orange glow. Adamandogora. I couldn't help but laugh. No, Gramps, this is not a rare delicacy for us. It's a mineral. The dietary standards of the monsters around here are definitely out of the norm.

After concluding that the only food I'd find inside the mine would be something that subsisted off of rocks, I took Allo and the others to the surface of the mine to go look outside for a bite to eat.

"Graaaaa..." ("Food...food...food...")

Partner seemed like she was on the brink of starving to death. She kept making these small, pitiful noises and looking around for the first thing she

could sink her teeth into.

H-hey, c'mon, Partner. Keep it together.

W-was I gonna be okay? Partner wasn't gonna eat me by mistake or something, right?

I couldn't help but notice her drool sliding down my head and cheeks. When I thought about how she looked when she used Human Transformation, I had mixed feelings. You're a lady, aren't you? Shouldn't you have some manners?

As I gazed into the distance, considering walking to the ocean to wash my face, I spotted what looked like a cow covered in armor climbing up out of the mine. At that moment, common sense left the chat.

Armored Cown: Rank C Monster.

In order to survive harsh environments, the Cown acquired a steel body surface through evolution. However, because it is so robust and well defended, the only thing it can do now is slink around on the outskirts. Therefore, Armored Cowns take up space in the mountains or on hills and use the slopes to their advantage to Roll away when needed.

Oh, I see. So that metal is its body? I felt a strong affinity for the cown, considering we were both Roll experts.

"Oho! An armored cown, eh? Once they get the armor off, they sell the meat in the capital. We should be able to eat it with no problems."

("Ooh! Volk, you're real familiar with human culture, aren't you? Nice!")
Partner nodded, impressed.

"W-well..." As expected, Volk had a complicated expression on his face.

J-jeez, Partner...you're so naturally rude. Of course Volk knows human culture—he's human, isn't he? I mean, his species isn't "Volk," y'know! I mean, I know

I've doubted it a little bit myself from time to time. But just a little bit, really.

Thankfully, there seemed to be several armored cowns scattered throughout the higher areas of the mine. All we had to do was hunt a few of 'em down.

I quickly approached the armored cowns that were trying to escape with Roll and slashed through their armor with my claws to finish them off. Since my stats were much higher, it wasn't difficult to catch up with the cowns' Rolls when I used the slope to increase my speed. We used the same procedure to successfully hunt the three armored cowns.

Now, all we had to do was pull off the armor, hang them, and drain their blood. I'd have to get another string from Nightmare. After that, we'd cut the meat into small pieces and roast them.

("Mm-mm-mm! Now that's some good meat!")

While I was thinking about our roasting procedure, Partner had already opened her big mouth and bit into the armored cown, crunching through the armor.

If you wanted to eat metal, couldn't you have just used a steel horse or a stone bear?!

I was somewhat relieved to see her spitting out pieces of armor.

H-here. I'll cook us some actual food. I used my claws to cut and peel the armor away from the armored cown's body.

"Pardon me. I must admit, I'm a bit peckish myself." Volk approached the armored cown with his greatsword at the ready.

Huh? Wait, what're you...

Volk slashed at the armored cown's thigh, grabbed the bone, and pulled off the entire leg for himself. All I could do was watch in amazement as Volk tore into a bloody strip of flesh with his teeth.

"Wow. I've never eaten an armored cown before, but it's really just a cown on the inside. Mm, it's good." Volk, are you...sure you're a human being...?

Afterword

H ELLO! I'm the author, Necoco.

Thank you again for purchasing *Dragon Hatchling*, Volume 9! I'm deeply moved to think that it's already been a little over three years since the first volume was released. Hmm? I feel like I wrote something similar two years ago, and last year too...

Three years is quite a long time. Long enough for a junior high student to graduate and move on to high school. If you multiply it by twenty, you get sixty years, so it's basically one-twentieth of your life span. Or, well...the average life expectancy is around eighty years now, so it's more like one twenty-seventh of a person's life.

Anyway, details aside, when I think about it, sometimes I feel like I need to work a little harder on actually living my life. If you're not paying attention, life can pass by in the blink of an eye.

I always have a hard time filling up space in the afterword, so I'm going to talk about something really unimportant, but I'm seriously afraid of the thought of becoming nothing after I die. That's why I like to believe that the Earth is actually a simulation created by some kind of crazy awesome super life-form, and that when humans die, we'll return to the realm of super life-forms. Although, if you think about it rationally, that's also kind of scary in its own way. Anyway. What were we talking about?

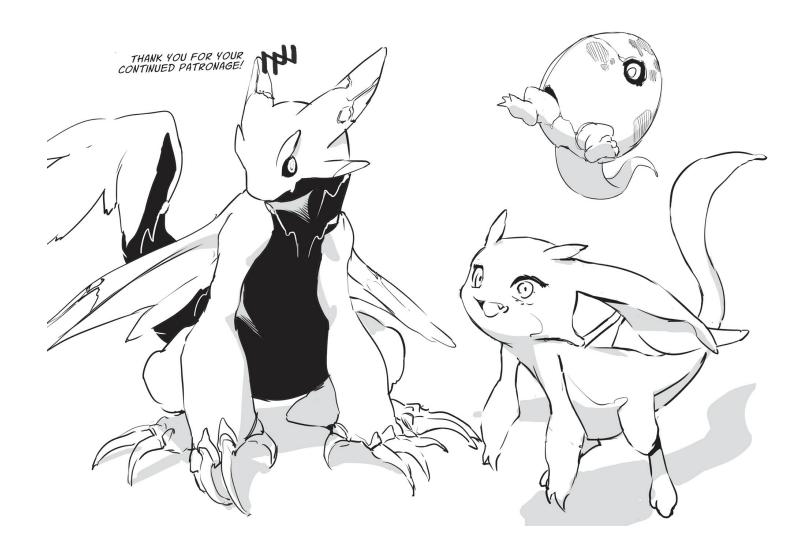
Seriously, in the first three volumes, I kept thinking I had nothing to write in my afterwords, but somehow they worked out all right in the end. But from Volume 4 or so, things really started to go south fast. After being pushed to the limit in Volumes 7 and 8, I feel like the afterword for Volume 9 is the final blow. I'm rather impressed I was able to hold out this long, to be honest. I hope you look forward to the afterword for Volume 10!

I'd like to take a moment now to talk about the contents of this volume. I've given this volume the title "Slime Showdown." Illusia and his friends barely scrape by in close battles with all three of the Cavaliers in the Demon King's personal circle. Then, finally, Illusia and the slime meet again. While the slime fights with the overwhelming stats and powerful regenerative abilities of a Chaos Ooze, Illusia uses his Ouroboros toughness and his guts to overcome it. After a fierce battle underground, Illusia supposedly comes out the victor, but...

Outside the city, Treant is left alone in the Alban Mine, gazing at the sky in despair. It is what it is, buddy...

This is the third act of *Dragon Hatchling's* "Defeat the Demon King" arc. Basically, the plan was to put this arc in two volumes for pacing. However, during the book production process, I found myself thinking, "Isn't this too much to fit into two volumes?" It ended up lengthy because there were too many things in my favorite scenes that I was deeply attached to. Even so, I don't particularly regret being able to spend more time in those special scenes. I will conclude this volume by saying this: Once again, thank you for purchasing *Dragon Hatchling*, Volume 9! See you in the afterword of Volume 10!

-NECOCO





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