

NOVEL

3

WRITTEN BY
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ILLUSTRATED BY
NAJI Yanagida

REINCARNATED AS A

DRAGON HATCHLING



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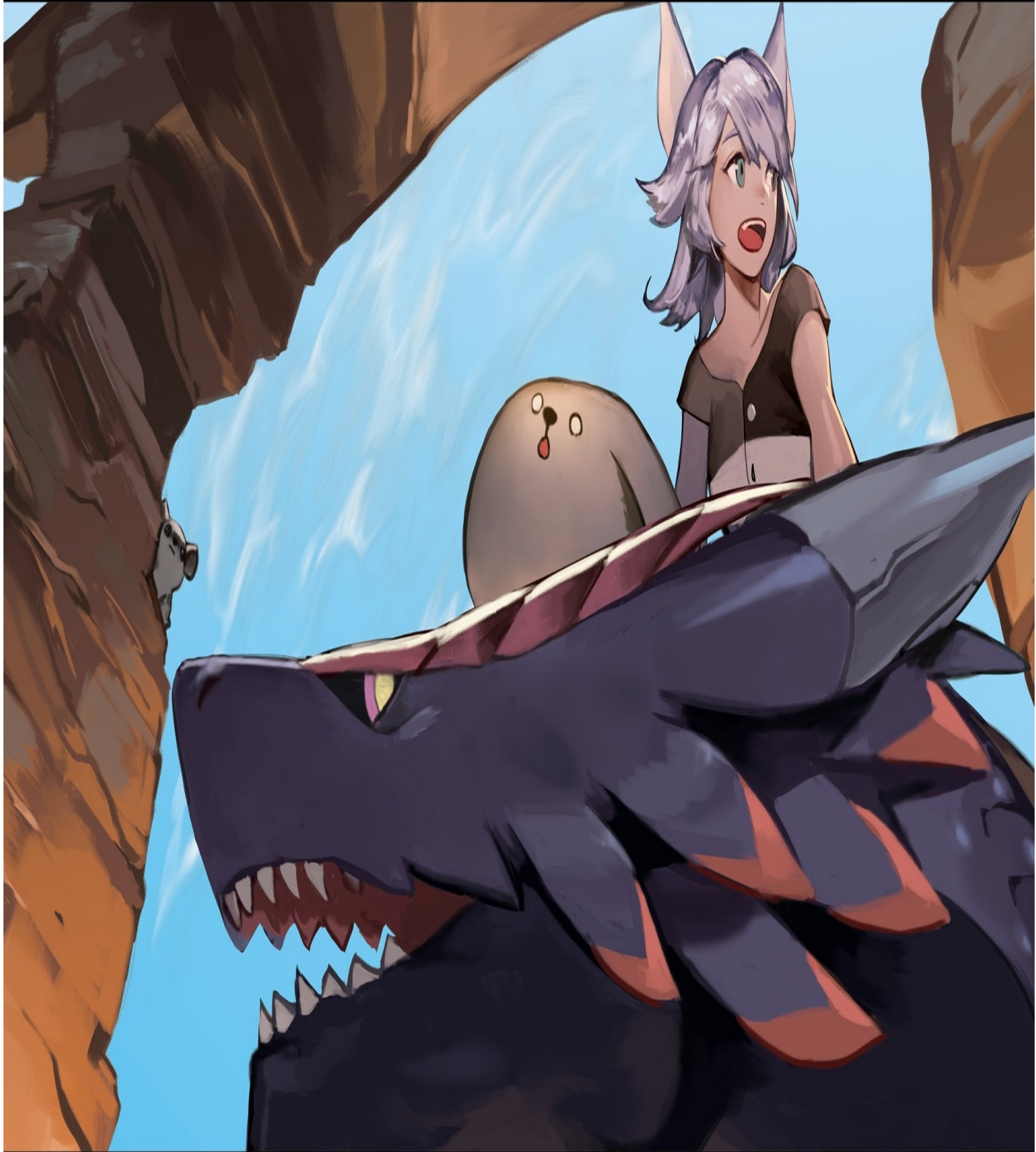
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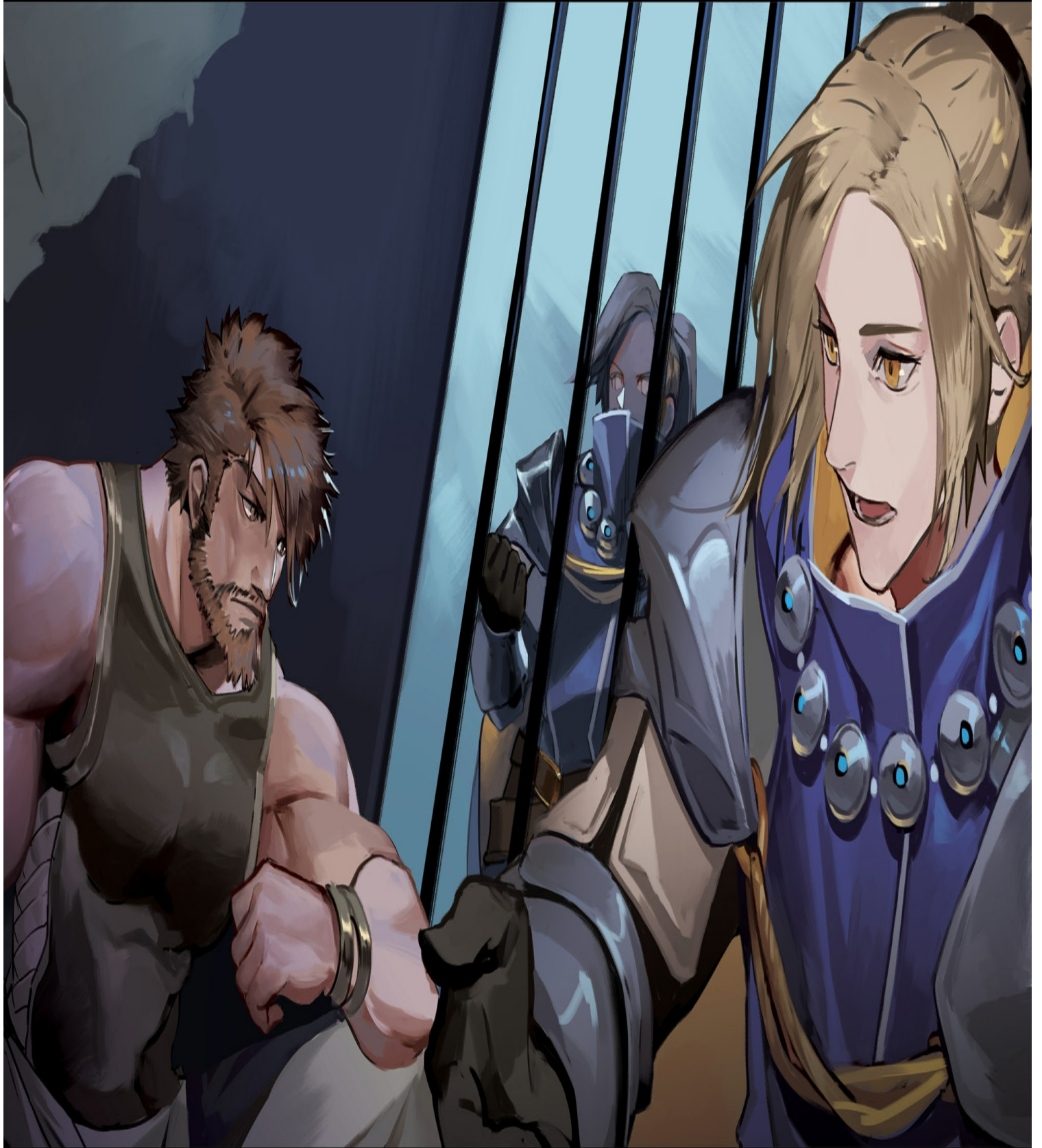
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DRAGON
HATCHLING

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HARUNAE DESERT

NINA

Catgirl demi-human (Felis-human). Our hero encounters her while traveling.

BALLRABBIT

A monster our hero meets in the desert. Greedy with a big appetite.



NOAH'S FOREST



MELTIA

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



MYRIA

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



BLACK LIZARD

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

DRAGON EGG

CAST

EVOLUTION

EVOLUTION

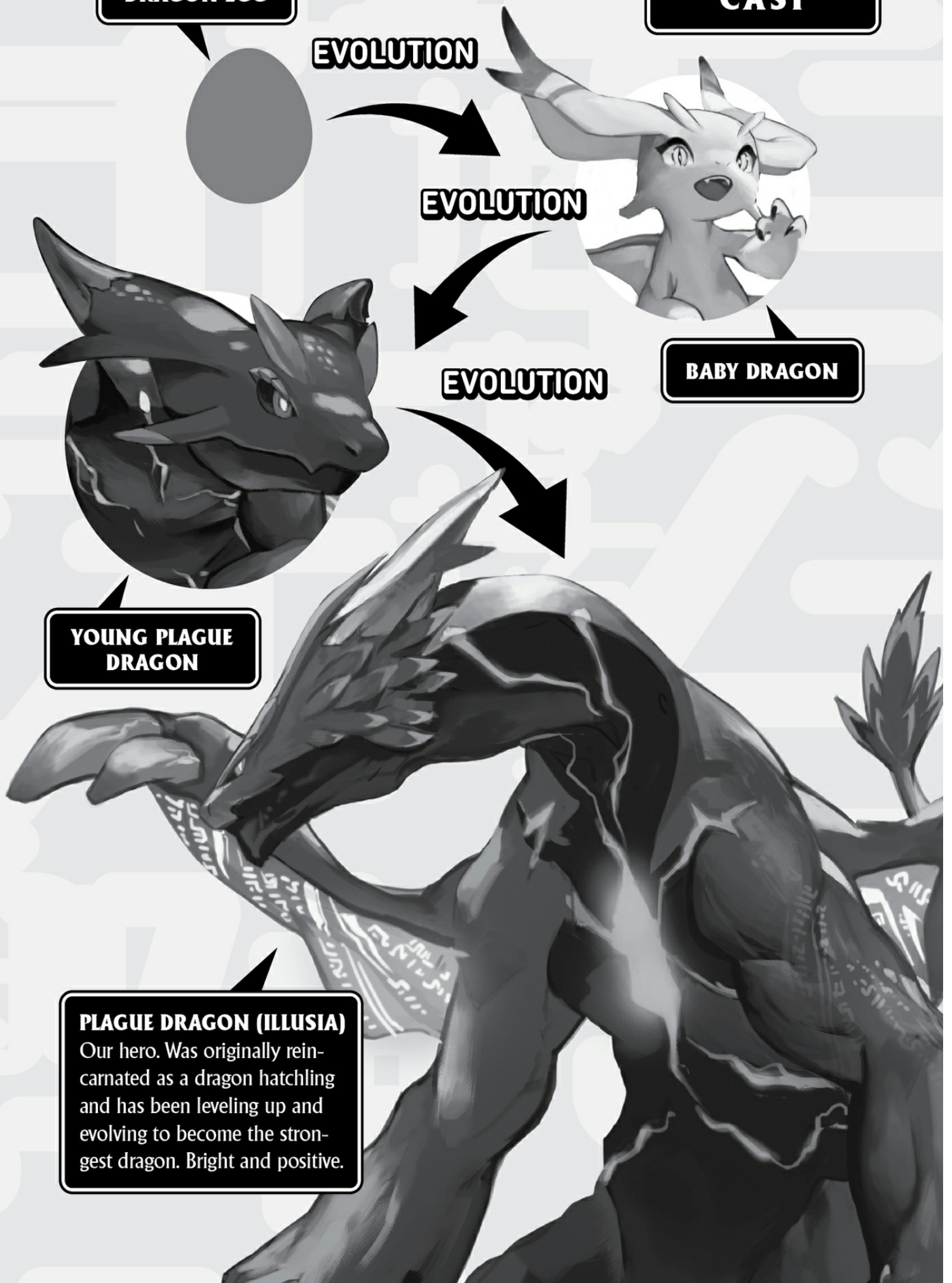
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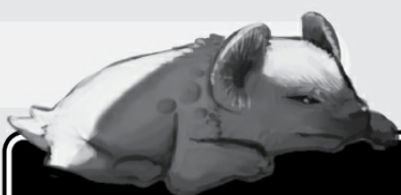
BABY DRAGON

**YOUNG PLAGUE
DRAGON**

PLAGUE DRAGON (ILLUSIA)

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





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THE STORY SO FAR

The Young Plague Dragon finally earned the skill he desired most—Human Transformation—but it didn't work as he'd hoped, and it would take practice to even sustain it briefly. Still, he and his new partner, the black lizard, created a happy life together in the forest...until the day Myra suddenly appeared. She gave him the name Illusia.

Illusia was overjoyed to be reunited with Myria, but he nevertheless decided to return her to the safety of her village. On the way there, they encountered Doz, who was acting very strangely. Upon realizing that he was carrying a Little Rock Dragon egg, Illusia quickly realized Doz's terrible goal. Determined to stop him, he gave chase, but he couldn't prevent Doz from breaking the egg as soon as he set foot in the village.

The Little Rock Dragon, enraged over its destroyed egg, rampaged through the town. Illusia did his best to protect the villagers, but there was only so much a Young Plague Dragon could do...

A young man of the village saw Illusia's true intent. The man's courage inspired Illusia to evolve into a Plague Dragon. He defeated the Little Rock Dragon and saved the village, then quickly retreated, fearing that his presence would threaten people's safety now that he was capable of spreading disease.

On the way home, he ran across a slime. Upon discovering that it possessed the skill Divine Voice, Illusia realized it had to be the mastermind behind the attack on the village. Determined to stop it from doing more harm, Illusia fought. And in the end, he grabbed the slime and leapt into the river at the bottom of the chasm...

Tensei Sitara Dragon no Tamago datta-
Saikyo Igai Mezasane Volume 3
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Chapter 1:

Meeting the Ballrabbit

Part 1

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.....

MY CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly. I was aware of time passing, but my brain felt foggy. I remembered defeating the Little Rock Dragon and then plunging into the river with that slime thing...before blacking out. I had no idea what happened after that.

My eyelids felt too heavy to lift. I heard a rushing noise, like waves crashing on a shore. My lower body was uncomfortably chilly; I had to be submerged in water.

I tried to sit up, but my joints were stiff and painful. I couldn't move my arms or legs. I pushed harder and heard a horrible snapping noise.

That isn't good. I need a special dragon doctor or something. Judging by how stiff I felt, I must've been out for days, not just hours. Years...? Probably not. Or at least...I hoped not.

Even the muscles controlling my eyelids felt too tight to work, but I somehow managed to force them open. Blue filled my vision. In the distance, sunlight reflected off the water.

Is that the ocean? Am I on a beach? Guess the river washed me all the way out to the shore. Which means I have no idea where I am in relation to my forest. Though I don't plan to go back there until I can do something about that disastrous Dragon Scale Powder skill.

I was just happy that I survived.

I moved my shoulders and legs to loosen them up. Doing that for a while got the blood flowing back to my brain, all my senses sharpening. My mind was clear; I could check my status. That slime had attached itself to me, so I wouldn't be surprised if it had mooched some of my skills. It had swiped the black lizard's Neutralize Poison ability, after all.

Illusia

Species: Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 20/75

HP: 249/249

MP: 192/192

Attack: 239

Defense: 178

Magic: 164

Agility: 161

Rank: B—

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 5

Divine Voice: Lv 4

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Fly: Lv 5

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 4

Dark Type: Lv —

Wicked Dragon: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 3

Psychic Sense: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 4

Falling Resistance: Lv 5

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 5

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 5

Magic Resistance: Lv 3

Dark Resistance: Lv 3

Light Resistance: Lv 2

Fear Resistance: Lv 2

Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 3

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 6

View Status: Lv 5

Scorching Breath: Lv 5

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 3

Disease Breath: Lv 3

Venom Fangs: Lv 3

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 3

Dragon Tail: Lv 1

Bellow: Lv 1

Meteorite: Lv 2

Nutcracker: Lv 3

Human Transformation: Lv 3

Whirlwind Slash: Lv 1

Neckbreaker: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 3

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 2

King of Evasion: Lv 1

Protective Spirit: Lv 5

Itty-Bitty Hero: Lv 5

Wrongdoer: Lv 6

Calamity: Lv 5

Chicken Runner: Lv 2

Mr. Chef: Lv 3

Dastardly King: Lv 4

Stalwart: Lv 2

Giant Killer: Lv 1

Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4

Clan Boss: Lv 1

Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 1

I'd really powered up a lot. I didn't particularly want this evolution, but I still got a huge boost going from a D-rank monster to a lower-level rank B. My attack power especially—it was over 200. If I wanted to, I could crush a Little Rock Dragon to bits.

Did I lose any stats or skills? Hm, not that I can tell. I'm glad. Losing Roll would break my heart. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call Mr. Roll my partner in

crime. That skill meant a lot to me. If I raced the black lizard again, I could smash right through the trees blocking my path, clearing the quickest route and claiming an overwhelming victory. Not to be cocky or anything.

It didn't look like I lost any skills at all. In fact, a bunch of them went up. My Normal Skill Nutcracker was at level 3, and my Title Skill Itty-Bitty Hero was at level 5. My overall level had gone up by one too.

Wow, shouldn't that slime have been worth way more experience points than that? It was so stubborn and nasty, but I guess its rank and stats were pretty low. Seriously, though. That thing was so creepy.

Thinking back on the encounter, more memories returned to me. I hadn't had time to analyze it during the heat of battle, but the slime had *a lot* of strange properties. It knew I understood human language, and it mentioned things like "skill," "level," and "gaining resistance"—almost as if it knew about the Divine Voice.

But one thing stuck out most: it clocked how dangerous the black lizard was. The moment I poisoned it, the slime immediately knew to absorb Neutralize Poison. It had to have View Status among all the skills it took from other monsters. And I hadn't really been listening, but I could've *sworn* it mentioned the Divine Voice at some point.

Would something with that slime's attitude follow that crappy excuse for a god? I couldn't say, but I had a feeling the slime knew something I didn't. Maybe it had even been reincarnated like me.

I was pretty sure that when I'd seen it slinking around my cave a while back it didn't have View Status, which meant it either stole it or gained it some other way. That was a while ago, though, and I'd barely even checked. I could be wrong.

If it really did have View Status, it had to have known I had Divine Voice. So why hadn't it been curious? Maybe it was closer to the Divine Voice than I was and had access to information I didn't.

At any rate, the thing was dead, and my theories would never be more than that. Theories. Just a bunch of grasping at thin air.

I still had no idea how it controlled Doz and the mahawolves or why I couldn't view its status clearly. Between the evolution and the slime and everything else, I'd suffered enough catastrophes that I would love to give the Divine Voice a piece of my mind. Trouble was, I didn't even know what to get angry about.

The Divine Voice's motives were a mystery, and I didn't know how much influence it actually had. Did it cause the things that happened to me, or was it all just a coincidence? Some of its communications seemed very self-aware, but I didn't know if it was even a sentient being.

What the heck are you, anyway?

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 4 is unable to provide that explanation.

And here we go with the canned phrases again. I always got that response for everything that wasn't a direct question about the system, and when it *did* feel like talking, it was always a one-sided stream of consciousness. A lousy communicator in general.

Well, no use tiring myself out thinking about it. I would just have to hope that another monster like the slime would show up—one that was willing to stop and chat.

Right now, exploration was my priority. I had to establish a home base and find something to eat.

My new post-evolution body most likely required way more food than I was used to. And after being asleep for so long, not to mention hurtling down a chasm into a river, I was starving. *Here's hoping some weak, tasty monsters live around here.*

Part 2

HAVING DECIDED to explore and find food, I used Roll and raced down the shoreline.

An hour passed and the scenery never changed. The vast sea was still on my left, and a barren, sandy beach stretched out to my right like a desert. The utter lack of greenery surprised me. Despite being on the coast, this area couldn't get much rain. The few plants here were sparse and spherical—round little cactuses with needles that looked like hair growing all over their green bodies. They sprawled out along the earth like caterpillars, kind of grotesque. Out of the corner of your eye it'd be easy to mistake them for darkwyrms.

I saw a couple of living creatures, like three-headed camels with humps all over their bodies and a line of giant red ants. Nothing looked particularly appetizing. When a sand-colored centipede four times my size appeared, I seriously considered jumping in the ocean out of fear. But before I had the chance, Mr. Giant Centipede spotted some prey and slithered after it.

The sight of its short, thick legs scrambling and kicking up sand in every direction was nerve-racking. I could likely escape it if I used Roll, but it seemed faster than I was.

What rank was it? Had to be above B. This place had even weirder creatures than the forest.

I *really* wanted to go home. The woods had spoiled me. Out here, the only edible-looking thing was the monster that giant centipede went after. I needed to at least find somewhere safe to sleep, but the landscape was totally flat. The only way I'd be able to sleep sheltered was if I dug a hole.

Continuing to use Roll, I finally came upon a large circle of rocks about five meters across. Dozens and dozens of rocks—this was not a naturally occurring formation. As I stared at it, I began to feel sick. What the heck was this, some kind of dangerous monster's nest? Should I turn back?

I canceled Roll and looked around. More stones lined the inside of the formation, almost like a magic circle. This had to be the work of a human, not a

monster. I didn't know what it was for, but it occurred to me that I hadn't seen any creatures around in a while.

Ahh, I get it. It's to ward off monsters. That's why I don't feel well when I look at it. Moving all these rocks couldn't have been easy, though. If someone went to this much effort to keep things away, there had to be a village nearby.

Deep down, I knew I'd been hoping to find a human settlement this whole time. I shook my head, chastising myself.

I'm a monster now. If I were still a Baby Dragon it would be a different story, but anyone who looks at this form will see nothing but an enemy of humanity.

The Plague Dragon's description said it was one of the most feared dragons out there. Forget about me stepping foot inside a village—even just coming close would send the population into a panic. And then there was that damn Dragon Scale Powder.

I turned around, curled up into a ball, and used Roll to return the way I came. Then I stopped. I hated to admit it, but I really wanted to at least check out the village. As long as I stayed far enough away, I wouldn't cause a commotion, would I?

I kicked off the ground and flew straight up into the air. Scanning my surroundings, I searched for possible signs of habitation. Empty land stretched out from the rock formation, but finally I caught sight of a tall stone wall.

That wall has to be at least ten meters high. Is it to keep monsters out? Guess the magic circle isn't 100 percent effective.

The rocks made *me* feel sick, but stronger monsters could doubtless push past. This village looked pretty big. So big, in fact, that I didn't think it was a village at all—it was a city.

Beyond the walls were countless buildings and brightly colored flags—signs of a dense population. I landed and headed in the opposite direction. The empty land felt even lonelier than before.

Maybe I shouldn't have looked after all.

No. No, no, no. There's no use in getting down about it. It's not like I'm gonna

spend the rest of my life alone. I need to stay positive. Positive!

I'm sure Dragon Scale Powder will disappear once I evolve. If I raise Itty-Bitty Hero, I can become a more benign type of dragon. Then I can go back home to the forest.

And my Human Transformation skill is coming along nicely too! It's level 3 now. If I keep practicing it, I might actually start looking like a person. And when my max MP goes up, I'll be able to extend my transformation time.

Human Transformation burned up about 1 MP per second. Currently I had 192 total MP. Three minutes as a human felt kind of worthless, but if I could get to 600 MP, I'd have about ten minutes.

Possibly an unrealistic goal, but if I could snag a skill like the slime's Automatic MP Recovery, it'd be another story. And even ten minutes would be plenty of time to chat with travelers. I could go into the village and check on the aftermath of the Little Rock Dragon attack. I could see Myria again. Maybe even find other people sympathetic to my situation.

Hope stirred in me as I considered my new goal: to become a dragon with a ton of MP. I had a suspicion that would take me further down the Evil Dragon route, but I could figure that out later. Hey, if my MP was 360,000, I could be a human for a thousand hours! *I can't give up!*

Part 3

I STARED AT THE MAGIC CIRCLE for a while, then realized just sitting there wasn't going to do me any good. I turned and continued back down the path. *I should make my base far away from the village, just in case.* If I was spotted, they'd send someone to get rid of me.

Honestly, they should focus on that giant centipede, not me! That thing is freaky!

I had to avoid people. *Should I just start digging a hole?* If I didn't do it right, it could collapse and kill me in my sleep. And my night vision was terrible. I needed a light source, but there weren't any light shrooms growing around here. I had so many problems.

Okay. If I couldn't live underground in a hole, maybe I could try somewhere really high up. If this were the forest, I could climb a tree, but there weren't any trees here.

Out of all my meal options, those three-headed camels seemed the most appetizing. They didn't look *great*, but I'd rather eat them than a giant centipede, or a red spider, or a giant beetle that looked like a huge lump of hardened sand. *Oh right, and there were those things the centipede was chasing.* The lowest rung on the food chain.

I shouldn't stick around here too long. That magic circle is making me nervous.

This place seemed far more dangerous than the forest, but I figured that meant it would be good for leveling. I needed to check out the statuses of a couple monsters.

The first thing I came across was that cactus—the one that looked like a big hairy bug. If I could eat those, life here would be easy. My scales were probably thick enough to guard against their tiny needles.

Remembering the whole situation with the carnivorous flower, I approached the cactus cautiously. Just in case it was actually a monster, I touched it *very* slowly. Its needles bent but didn't penetrate my hand. *Yeah, this should be fine.*

I remembered hearing once that cactuses symbolize enduring love, probably because of their ability to store water and survive in the dry desert. A romantic notion. I wondered if this world had flower language. Even if it did, they probably wouldn't symbolize the same things. "Enduring love" didn't really fit these big, swollen monstrosities.

How can I remember all this stuff from my previous life but not my own name? What the heck did I do back then anyway?

I chopped a cactus in half. A piece splintered off and hit the ground, white liquid oozing out, filled with little seedlike granules. It looked edible, but I checked the status just in case.

Cactus Thorpupa: Value: C. A plant that blooms under special conditions in places where other plants can't thrive. Has the ability to absorb water and collect it infinitely. Will therefore wilt if subjected to several days of rain. Because of its swollen appearance, legends call it a plant god's deformed offspring. Thorpupa is a combination of the words "thorn" and "pupa."

Due to its characteristics, it usually grows in desert locations and is prized as a rare source of hydration. Very nutritious and sweet. Difficult to transport for sale since it withers within days of being harvested.

So there is something out here to eat besides monsters. And after I spent all that time trying to come up with a way to make those giant centipedes taste good. Glad I wouldn't have to try them.

But could a dragon really live off cactuses? That was a one-way trip to protein deficiency. I didn't want to evolve into a Cactus Dragon.

Well, it's a water source and it'll fill me up, so I might as well try. It's better than drinking salt water.

I picked up the bumpy cactus and took a bite. Sweetness filled my mouth. It was like eating over-roasted pineapple with a dash of watered-down aloe, all of it with extra sugar. Not bad, but the fear of cavities would probably have kept me away from it in my previous life.

The taste revived my appetite, my empty stomach crying out for more. That was unsurprising—I hadn't eaten in so long. Sucking out the insides was

annoying, so I just bit into it, thick skin and all. The needles stuck in my gums and made them bleed, but I ignored it and kept eating.

Yeah, the skin's not bad. It would probably injure a human, though.

I devoured every bite, but this was more like a dessert than an actual meal. That was fine, but I really needed meat. I wondered if I should go looking for those monsters the giant centipede was after.

Just then, a sand dune nearby began to shift. Was it a monster? The dune was small enough to fit in my palm; if it was a monster, it was tiny.

I shouldn't let my guard down, though. It could always have some kinda weird poison.

I considered using Scorching Breath to attack first, but if I burnt it to a crisp, I wouldn't be able to check its status. Instead, I moved back a little way to gather information, while readying my Breath skill just in case.

The top of the dune crumbled, and a sand-colored *something* poked its head out.

"Pfeff."

It was a rabbit with long ears, so round it didn't even appear to have a neck. When it looked around, it had to turn its whole body, and could therefore only see about 120 degrees. I was out of its line of sight. It sighed with relief before crawling out of the earth.

"Pfeff, pfeff!" The creature squeaked in its unusual voice, shaking the sand off its body.

Part 4

THE RABBIT was about the size of a softball. It *was* a rabbit, right? Its body was so round and fluffy that I couldn't see any limbs, and its unusually long ears dragged across the ground as it shuffled toward the broken cactus. Its puffy round tail wiggled left and right in time with its steps.

The sweet aroma must've woken it from its slumber deep in the sand. Plants were probably the only thing something this small and helpless could eat. And the cactuses were so spiky; no way this tiny thing could break through its tough, spiny skin.

It must just lie in wait and then come out of hiding to eat bits other monsters leave behind.

It didn't seem particularly alert, though. It popped right up while I was there. At this rate, another monster was going to gobble it up.

First thing's first: check its status. It could always look harmless while hiding some super-dangerous skill.

Species: Miniature Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 2/5

HP: 4/4

MP: 3/3

Attack: 1

Defense: 2

Magic: 2

Agility: 2

Rank: F—

Special Skills:

Conceal: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Burrow: Lv 1

Illuminate: Lv 1

Play Dead: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Desert Darling: Lv 1

Cannibal: Lv 1

Whoa. How long had it been since I'd seen a monster with a cute little status like that?

I'm surprised it's survived this long in this nest of terrifying monsters. So... ballrabbit, huh? It has a bunch of odd skills. Is the Burrow skill necessary? Can't it just dig a hole? And something like Illuminate probably just...lights up, right? Play Dead sounds totally pointless. A predator could just pick it up and eat it. It's so small it wouldn't even be satisfying.

The ballrabbit shoved its little face into the cactus and started licking. It had its Hunger Resistance all the way up to level 4. Clearly, it was no stranger to deprivation.

You had to fight to level up, but with such a weak constitution, it couldn't even do that. If I hadn't defeated the darkwurm my first day in this world through tricks, I might have still been an egg myself.

Maybe it *did* get a lot of exercise, and that was why its Hunger Resistance was so high. It *had* leveled once. What did it defeat? It had that suspicious Title Skill... Did the hunger get so bad it ate one of its own kind?

It might look adorable on the outside, but I guess it can get the job done. When you're desperate enough, you're capable of anything.

I was craving meat so badly that I wanted to eat it, but it was just so cute. Besides, it was way too small to fill me up. I'd just leave it alone and avoid the guilt.

Maybe it was naturally oblivious, or concentrating too deeply on its dinner, but the ballrabbit still hadn't noticed I was right behind it. How was this thing still alive?

It finished stuffing its face and let out a satisfied sigh. Armed with a full belly, it appeared to finally sense my presence. It trembled slightly as it turned toward me.

We locked eyes.

"Pfeff?!"

It let out a cry and dove into the ground, hiding itself. Well, *dove* was a little generous—it just covered its head with some sand. I could still see its butt and quivering puffball tail.

I know I keep saying this, but how the heck has this thing survived out here?

I stared at the round mound of sand for a few moments, then turned and headed in the opposite direction. I wasn't going to do anything to the ballrabbit. I wished it the best. If it kept racking up experience points, eventually it would evolve. I wondered what sort of creature it would become.

Maybe it would be worth eating once it evolved. It stirred up protective feelings in me right now, but that was only because it was so small and helpless. If it was a larger monster, I wouldn't hesitate. A fat ballrabbit would probably be delicious.

If I had the time and energy to spare, I could even help it level up. I could feed it those gross, unappetizing monsters...but then again, spending time would just create a bond between us, utterly defeating the purpose.

A few steps on and I heard a rustling behind me.

Come on now, is that your best attempt at stealth? Not even five seconds have passed since I turned around!

Rustle, rustle, rustle...rustlerustlerustle.

Wait. That's not the rabbit.

I turned around. A scorpion the size of a dog was making its way toward the ballrabbit's dune. Behind it was a long trail back to its den in the sand.

Another sand-hider. I had to stay on my toes.

I checked its status.

Baby Scorpion: E+ Rank. Desert assassin that buries itself in sand and lies in wait to catch its prey off guard, then stabs with its poisonous stinger. Its form is small before evolution, which is why it hides from stronger enemies. Very efficient at killing the weak.

Rank E, huh? Well, if it's the same as a graywolf, I don't need to be afraid of it. I'm gonna chase it. If it hides from strong monsters but targets the weak, then this is my chance. What good timing.

I could've left it alone. Messing with it might be a stupid idea, since I had no intention of eating a scorpion. It looked chewy, and I didn't like eating bugs—especially poisonous ones. The ballrabbit and I weren't close—we'd barely even made eye contact—but I still didn't want the scorpion to eat it. I was just helping out.

My body moved before I even realized what I was doing, crouching as I approached the scorpion and baring down on it with a *snap*. My claws pierced right through its shell, stabbing into the earth. The scorpion went rigid, its limbs trembling weakly, before finally going still.

Monster's rank is too low to gain experience points.

Hey, I've never seen that message before. Guess that's what happens when you reach a high enough rank—earning experience points gets harder and harder. What a complete waste of a kill. I can't eat it or gain experience.

I felt almost as guilty as the time I threw that potortoise off the cliff. Maybe I should just put up with the poison and eat it anyway to raise my resistance. At least then its death would mean something.

The ballrabbit crawled out of its dune, poised to run away, but then it stopped and looked at me.

“Pfeff.”

It dragged its ears on the ground and walked over. It seemed aware I’d saved it.

Should I bring it with me? Traveling alone *could* get lonely, but I wasn’t confident I could keep it safe. Having a companion wouldn’t be worth anything if it died tragically. That would just make me feel worse. And having a passenger along greatly decreased my movement options.

Then there was the Dragon Scale Powder. Spending too much time with me could make it sick, but if it stayed here it would almost certainly get eaten...



While wondering what I should do, I recalled the ballrabbit's Burrow skill. If it evolved, maybe it could dig a burrow big enough for me to live in. That would be a huge help.

I could level the ballrabbit up and help it evolve, allowing it to survive out here in the desert. In exchange, I'd ask it to dig me a hideout.

Best case scenario, we could finish this before it even started to see effects from the Dragon Scale Powder. But if not, I might have to leave before it finished digging me my hideout...

Whatever, I'd worry about that later. I hadn't seen the Dragon Scale Powder in action—extended exposure was necessary. At least, that was what I was hoping.

Maybe I could use Disease Breath on a random monster and see what happens? I've never used it before. It gives me bad vibes, but at this point it seems unavoidable.

Part 5

I CRUSHED THE SHELL of the dead scorpion with my teeth. It was hard and bitter, like freeze-dried shrimp. Yep, pretty gross.

Its Poison Belt skill was so low that it just made my mouth a little numb. My Resistance skill didn't even go up. My poison chops were way more elite.

I finished and spat the shell fragments on the ground. Well, that didn't taste great, but at least I wasn't hungry anymore. Best to just appreciate the unique flavor. If I scooped out the soft parts and added sauce, it could be pretty good. Whoever ate it would need poison resistance, but I bet the black lizard would love it.

I put the ballrabbit on my head, and we walked through the desert. I was looking for another cave, but the terrain looked bleak. And I doubted the ballrabbit could dig a hole big enough for me at this point.

"Pfeff." It fidgeted on top of my head, tickling me.

I tried to get it to use Illuminate to see that skill in action, but it didn't understand me. Maybe if I brought it somewhere dark, it would use it on its own. I was surprised how trusting it was. I *did* save its life, but it was just blithely riding on top of a monster a hundred times its size! Not even a Chihuahua would get attached to me so quickly.

I moved carefully; the ballrabbit could die from a fall. The little thing only had 4 HP.

What should I use to help it level up? Something higher than rank F but not much higher. Another scorpion? If I was around, most things wouldn't even come out of their holes. I could use the rabbit as bait, but that seemed risky, not to mention rude. We were working together, after all.

Psychic Sense pinged just the tiniest bit. The source must be buried underground. I lay down with my stomach and chin in the sand.

"Pfeff?"

The rabbit seemed to be wondering why I was suddenly so lazy. I sucked in a

deep breath and sent a roar into the ground.

“Grrrrrrraaaaaaaaaaar!”

The vibrations traveled through the sand, kicking up dust.

Normal Skill “Bellow” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

A bunch of monsters burst out of the sand and started to run, frightened by my voice. I saw some bugs the size of people and a mole as big as a dog. About thirty monsters, all between rank F and rank E+.

Huh. Maybe that stupidly large caterpillar was an exception, and this desert wasn’t too different from the forest after all. Or maybe weak monsters were the only ones hiding.

I set my sights on the nearest target—a baby scorpion, like the one I just killed. I caught it easily and stabbed a claw into its tail, activating Paralyzing Venom Claws. I pierced its shell and tore off its legs. It flailed, its movements gradually growing weaker.

Sorry, scorpion. I promise I’ll eat you up so your life won’t be a waste.

Species: Baby Scorpion

Status: Paralyzed (Major)

Lv: 6/22

HP: 4/30

MP: 8/15

All right, it’s paralyzed now. This guy’s skills are Venom Fangs, Venom Claws, and Venom Pincers. But I crushed the fangs, the tail, and the pincers—no way to strike back.

The ballrabbit could attack now and safely gain experience points. I’d monitor the scorpion’s stats from close by. If Paralyze wore off, I could just take care of it myself.

I put the rabbit in the palm of my hand and slowly lowered it to the ground. It stared at the scorpion with big, confused eyes. It didn't get it. *Come on, hurry up! We're wasting time. Quick, before the paralysis wears off!*

The rabbit looked from the scorpion and then back to me, as if asking for approval. I nodded. Very carefully, it approached the monster, long ears dragging on the ground as usual. I was a little worried about those ears. Didn't they get all scraped up?

"Pfeff!" The rabbit tackled the scorpion, knocking it back.

Species: Baby Scorpion

Status: Paralyzed (Major)

Lv: 6/22

HP: 4/30

MP: 8/15

Wow, that did nothing... Guess that's what happens when a Lv 2 F-rank monster faces off against a Lv 6 E-rank one.

The ballrabbit hurled itself at the scorpion again. *Good job, kid. Keep it up.*

Again. Oh, that was a good hit! A great hit! It used its long ears like a whip and thwapped them around violently. *Whoa, I didn't know it could do that! Awesome! It hit the part of its shell I cracked! I bet the scorpion felt that one.*

After another blow, the rabbit looked at me. It was panting, likely unused to this much exertion. It seemed depressed, like it was saying "I did everything I could, but it just wasn't enough."

The scorpion's HP didn't even go down by 1. If I killed it, the ballrabbit wouldn't get any experience points. *C'mon, try again!* Reluctantly, it turned back to the scorpion.

"Pfeff!" A tiny ball of fire the size of a grain of rice appeared, slowly circling the rabbit.

Was that illuminate? If it lasted long enough, I could use it like a light shroom in the forest. The fireball made three laps around the rabbit, before flying at the scorpion. It burst, scorching a bit of its shell. Yes! The scorpion's HP went down by 1!

Only three more hits and you got him.

The ballrabbit collapsed on the spot. Did it use up all of its MP?

The scorpion was twitching—the paralysis must be wearing off. Not good. I reached out and quickly crushed its skull with my claw.

Monster's rank is too low to gain experience points.

I delivered the final blow, but the ballrabbit had also contributed to the fight. We could just do things this way until it evolved.

Part 6

I CHECKED TO SEE if the ballrabbit had leveled up at all.

Species: Miniature Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 5/5 (MAX)

HP: 5/7

MP: 0/6

Attack: 2

Defense: 3

Magic: 5

Agility: 3

Rank: F—

Special Skills:

Conceal: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Burrow: Lv 1

Illuminate: Lv 2

Play Dead: Lv 1

Whip Dance: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Desert Darling: Lv 1

Cannibal: Lv 1

Parasitic Leveler: Lv 1

Hey, it did! And so did its Illuminate skill! And it gained something called Whip Dance. The name was cool, though it probably referred to it thwapping the scorpion with its ears. Oh, and it had a weird Title Skill: Parasitic Leveler. I didn't think I should let that one get too high. Would we get some sort of penalty for gaming the system? But the rabbit would never get anywhere if I didn't help out.

The ballrabbit stretched its tail, dragged itself over to the dead scorpion, and opened its mouth wide. All that leveling must've been hungry work. It moved too fast for me to stop it, attempting to suck the meat out from where I'd pierced the shell.

Recovering quickly, I grabbed the body with my claw and flung it away.

"Pfeff?!" The ballrabbit tracked the scorpion with its eyes and then stared sadly at the ground.

Hey, that thing is poisonous! And you don't have much HP! Poison could kill you!

Starvation had left it willing to eat anything. I bet its appetite rivaled the black lizard's, who would eat anything as long as it was poisonous.

It didn't get poisoned...did it? I'd better check.

Species: Miniature Ballrabbit

Status: Poison (Trace)

Lv: 5/5 (MAX)

HP: 5/7

MP: 0/6

Damn, it *did* get poisoned!

“Pfeff!” The ballrabbit gagged, vomiting up meat and fluids. I stroked its back gently, careful not to scratch it with my claws. At least the scorpion’s poison wasn’t that strong, and the rabbit hadn’t eaten much. It should be fine after it got it all out. It might even gain resistance. That was how I did it, anyway.

By the time the poison left the rabbit’s body, its HP had dropped by 2, but it *did* gain Poison Resistance. Still, even losing 2 HP put its life in danger—it was down to 3 HP. For what must have been the hundredth time, I thought about how much easier life would be if I had some Recovery Magic. Hopefully I’d get some next time I evolved. With enough HP, I could use Human Transformation for as long as I needed. That was a worthy goal, though I doubted dragons usually specialized in Recovery Magic.

I was expecting the ballrabbit to evolve, but it just lay listlessly on the ground, completely exhausted.

Listen, I know you aren’t feeling well with your HP and MP both drained, but would you please just evolve? You’re at MAX Level, come on!

I heard a little noise—the rabbit’s stomach was growling, despite having devoured so much of that cactus.

Okay, I’d feed it something first. I placed the ballrabbit back on my head and returned to where we’d found the cactuses. I sliced open a fresh one. My leftovers probably weren’t enough dinner. It looked small, but it was clearly a big eater.

The rabbit ate with ravenous enthusiasm, proving my theory correct. Wow. I couldn’t blame it, really. It was an F-rank monster with a level 4 Hunger Resistance skill. It must’ve led a difficult life, considering the Cannibalize skill. It would likely eat as much as it could when it had the opportunity, like pigs did.

It ate every bit of the cactus I cut for it, until even its shape looked a little different. How much could this thing put away? It had to be full by now. Dragging its ears on the ground, the ballrabbit made its way over to me.

“Pfeff! Pfeff!” it said frantically. Was it still hungry? *How much cactus do you want, buddy?* I didn’t want to make it sick.

It has the Title Skill “Desert Darling,” but I failed to see what was so darling about eating so much it couldn’t walk. Still, back in my world, this sort of animal would cause a huge stir online.

Anxiously, I sliced up another cactus. And the ballrabbit kept eating. Wow, that had to be more than its body weight. What was going on inside its stomach? Did it have magical never-get-full powers? I was kind of curious to see just how much it could eat.

Part 7

BY THE TIME the ballrabbit finished, it had grown to twice its original size, eating perhaps five times its weight. This thing was wild.

Totally stuffed full, it flopped down contentedly and opened its mouth wide to yawn, before closing its eyes and going to sleep. This thing led a charmed life. *Good for you, Ballrabbit.*

I sat with it for a while, suddenly less upset that it hadn't evolved yet. Watching it was peaceful. I stroked its head gently, careful to not scratch it. Its thick fur felt so soft.

"Pfeff...pfeff...pfeff?" The rabbit must've felt me touching it because it opened its eyes. I quickly hid my arm behind my back. *Ah, sorry. I didn't mean to wake you.*

"Nngu...guu!" Its body began to swell up. It had started out the size of a softball, but now it was suddenly as big as a watermelon.

Hey! It evolved! Time to check its status.

Species: Small Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/12

HP: 3/10

MP: 0/6

Attack: 3

Defense: 4

Magic: 6

Agility 4

Rank: ESpecial Skills:

Conceal: Lv 1

Food Regeneration: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 1

Binge Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Burrow: Lv 2

Illuminate: Lv 2

Play Dead: Lv 1

Whip Dance: Lv 1

Swallow Whole: Lv 1

Storage: Lv 1

Charm: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Desert Darling: Lv 2

Cannibal: Lv 1

Parasitic Leveler: Lv 1

Ravenous: Lv 2

All of its new skills had something to do with food. Maybe I shouldn't have let it eat so much. Its Ravenous skill jumped to level 2. And what was Food Regeneration? Was Binge Resistance because it kept eating even though it was painful? Why did it feel the need to push itself like that?

It was a small ballrabbit now, which meant there were big ballrabbits. Leveling up would be easier now that it was rank E.

How long until the Dragon Scale Powder began to affect it? I'd kept my wings folded up, but I was hoping to stretch out a little. The skill was already at level

4; I had to be careful. And I still needed to do my Disease Breath experiments.

The ballrabbit stretched out again. We made brief eye contact, before it turned its gaze toward the cactuses. It kept glancing back and forth.

Don't tell me it still wants to eat.

Was there any reason it shouldn't? It wasn't like letting it have all the cactuses it wanted affected me. I sliced one open, letting the ballrabbit at the insides. It got full faster this time. Before long, it sighed and stopped eating.

I wondered whether I should let it grow more. If it got bigger, I'd have a hard time finding enough food for it. It might eat all the cactuses in this desert!

That's right—it had the Special Skill "Food Regeneration." Did it regenerate HP by eating food?

Species: Small Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/12

HP: 8/10

MP: 0/6

Whoa, it did! An ability like that was in the same class as Automatic HP Recovery; impressive for an E-rank monster. I would love to have a skill like that. It made Binge Resistance make more sense—it was good for it to eat as much as it could.

The two of us continued through the desert. I couldn't travel using Roll with the rabbit on my head. A shame, because the quicker I moved, the quicker I would find shelter.

My body felt twitchy. I'd been walking so much, and every instinct was aching to Roll. It would feel so *good* to speed around the vast, open desert, bouncing off sand dunes.

Hang in there. Don't give in to temptation.

I wandered until sunset, but we didn't find anywhere to stay. The ballrabbit was so sleepy it was swaying. We had to rest. I took it off my head and set it on the ground, where it immediately started digging itself a hole to keep itself safe—in theory at least. A hungry enough monster could probably get to it.

I lay on top of the ballrabbit's sand dune and closed my eyes. Now it would be protected while it slept.

Resting out in the open like this made me nervous, and I couldn't relax. The possibility of being attacked in my sleep went round and round in my head. If something like that giant centipede showed up, I wouldn't even bother to fight. I'd grab the ballrabbit and run.

I was just now realizing how comfortable my life in the forest had been, with a nice cave with a fluffy rug to sleep on and an endless supply of dried jerky hanging outside. I even had pottery to keep myself busy. I still had so many renovations to do.

More than anything, I missed the black lizard and the orangurangs.

I had to stop thinking about it. My focus had to be on evolving past the Dragon Scale Powder. Only then could I make my slow way home.

Chapter 2:

Hunting in the Desert

Part 1

AS I WOKE, I felt a strange tickling sensation around my belly. What was that? Was I having some kind of delayed reaction to the scorpion venom?

“Bpfeff! Bpfeff!”

Hey, that’s the noise the ballrabbit makes! It sounded so pitiful, like it was calling out for help. Was a monster attacking it? Where? I could hear it, but I couldn’t see it.

I used Psychic Sense and immediately felt a ping below me. I stood up swiftly, watching as the ballrabbit crawled out of the sand dune, its breathing ragged. It gulped air frantically. I must have changed positions while I slept and flopped down across the dune. My weight impacted the sand, blocking the rabbit from coming to the surface.

“Pfeff...” It finally caught its breath, shaking clumps of sand from its fur. It glared at me.

Hey, I’m sorry! I’m really sorry. I did it to protect you, but I guess it backfired. We came out okay though, right? Please forgive me.

The ballrabbit was cranky, but it went back to its old self when I fed it some cactus. This guy was so basic. All it ever thought about was food.

When it was finished, I put it on my head and continued on our way. Time to focus on leveling the ballrabbit and my next evolution. And tracking down some meat. If we found a D-rank monster, the rabbit might evolve in one go.

I walked for a while before coming upon a sleeping creature. It looked like the same species as the thing the giant centipede had been chasing. It probably wasn’t expecting to be disturbed first thing in the morning by something like me.

Its eyes weren’t quite closed; if I got too close it would wake up. Could I use View Status from this far away? I’d leveled that skill a lot.

Species: Garpanther

Status: Sleeping (Slight)

Lv: 27/48

HP: 123/123

MP: 98/98

Attack: 95

Defense: 84

Magic: 99

Agility: 164

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Animal Instinct: Lv 1

Scent: Lv 2

Stealth: Lv 2

Psychic Sense: Lv 1

Crisis Sense: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Magical Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Bellow: Lv 2

Bite: Lv 3

Mirage: Lv 2

Beast Tackle: Lv 1

Quick: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Feline Pride: Lv 3

Chaser: Lv 2

Swift Wind: Lv 2

Normal Skill “View Status” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

Hey, I leveled it up! It *was* the skill I relied on the most. Without View Status and Roll I would have died a hundred times over.

This looked a little tough for the ballrabbit. The panther’s stats were exponentially higher. It wouldn’t make a dent no matter how hard it tried. Would it still get experience points if it just attacked a little? I might as well find out and get some meat in the process.

This thing’s got some guts calling itself “Swift Wind” when I’m around. My Agility is lower, but once I use Roll, I’ll smoke it. I’m taking that title from you, buddy!

Now...how to approach it? If it ran, I couldn’t catch it with the ballrabbit along for the ride. I needed to hit it hard and fast and let the rabbit get a hit in. Best option was to weaken it with the first blow.

Maybe it would be better if I gave up on sneaking and just slammed into it at full force with Roll? But I’d have to put the ballrabbit down for that.

Hey, do you think you could dig yourself a hole and hide for a little bit?

Oh, I know! Maybe I could hold the rabbit in my mouth? Then I could use Roll and not have to worry about leaving it behind. That’s the perfect solution! I’m a genius. That’ll make traveling way easier from now on too.

I put the ballrabbit on the ground and leaned in close. It began to tremble.

“Pfeff! Pfeff! Pfeff!”

It shook its head—well, body—back and forth, frantically trying to resist me. Did it know what I was trying to do? Maybe it was saying, “Don’t eat me, I promise I don’t taste good!”

Don’t worry, I’m just gonna put you in my mouth for a little while. It’s for your

own safety. Promise!

“Pfeff! Pfeff!”

The closer I got, the more it cried. It whirled to run away, but I snapped forward and caught it in my mouth.

“Pfeff! Pfeff!!”

It sounded mad, but there was no going back now. Time to use Roll and attack the panther while it was still asleep.

I curled up my body and shot in a straight line toward the monster. Before I got there, its eyes opened and it stood up. An unobstructed landscape like this one was the ideal condition for Roll, and I was hitting my top speed.

“Pfeff! Pfeff!!” The ballrabbit flailed inside my mouth, but I couldn’t worry about it right now. No time to stop. The panther broke into a run. It could escape a giant centipede with that speed, but it wouldn’t escape me!

The distance between us grew smaller and smaller, but it didn’t give up. Credit where credit was due—this was harder than I expected.

Still, it was already running at top speed, but I could still accelerate. Only a matter of time before it exhausted itself. *What now, Mr. Swift Wind?*

“Pfeeeeeeffff!”

The ballrabbit was freaking out inside of my mouth. *Just wait a little longer. Stay still or I’ll accidentally swallow you!*

Part 2

THE PANTHER SPINTED in a straight line, attempting to pull away from me. I was keeping up but no longer closing in.

Hmm, it's faster than I expected. I wasn't Rolling at top speed out of consideration for the ballrabbit in my mouth. Maybe I could go just a *little* faster? Before I could decide, I saw a flicker of light coming from the panther's body. It sped up. I'd just seen its status, and I knew immediately what it used: Quick.

Dang it, I shouldn't have gotten so cocky and just gone full power from the beginning. If a giant centipede spotted it now, I'd lose my chance. *Okay, buddy. Time to get serious.* The ballrabbit whipped its ears around wildly in protest inside my mouth as I picked up speed. *Hang in there...just a little bit longer! I'm about to catch up to the panther. The gap between us is closing!*

I can do this. I can launch myself closer and then use Paralyzing Venom Claws to knock it over and stop it in its tracks.

The panther looked back at me, finally beginning to panic. *Hey, dude. If you keep glancing back at me like that I'm gonna catch you.* I'd definitely learned that lesson when I ran away from the taranturouge.

The panther accelerated, following the curve of a large rock, but it was basically over. I'd grab it in front of that boulder.

But just when I thought it was in my grasp, the panther disappeared. And I was heading straight for the big rock.

But that's impossible! That rock was further to the left!

Now the panther was running over to my right. I had a feeling it hit me with its Mirage skill, altering my perception of the landscape. Even if I'd been extra careful, I wouldn't have been able to counter that one.

The panther halted and looked around cockily, taunting me. *That's* why it kept glancing back before—it was preparing to use that skill. Now it was too late to stop. I crashed into the boulder at full speed, and the surface cracked violently,

shards flying into the air. That slowed me down, but I didn't give up. The panther froze for a moment before springing back into motion. It must've realized it couldn't waste time changing directions.

Unfortunately for the panther, a huge chunk of the boulder was flying right toward it.

"Garooow!" The panther recoiled. I shoved the boulder shard in its direction, running it the heck over. I heard it make contact—that definitely broke a couple of bones. It wasn't moving as well as before. I canceled Roll, then charged. I whipped it with Paralyzing Venom Claws—lightly, but multiple times. I made sure its status was "Paralyzed (Major)," then spit the ballrabbit out of my mouth and set it on my head.

"Pfeff..."

I felt something wet and sticky. It was covered in saliva. Ugh, I didn't want that on my scales. I grimaced. The rabbit whipped my head with its ears.

Hey, I'm sorry. This sucks for me too, you know! You're all sticky and smelly.

Maybe when I met back up with the black lizard, I could carry it in my mouth as well, though I didn't want to risk it setting off a poison attack in there. The slime had swiped its Neutralize Poison ability, after all.

Speaking of which, I wondered how the orangurangs were doing. Occasionally the black lizard lost its patience and attacked them with its venom. Hopefully they wouldn't have all killed each other by the time I got back.

I put the rabbit on the ground, then gestured for it to attack the panther. Instead, it crept close and whipped my legs with its ears. *Don't attack me, attack that thing! Then I'll take you to the ocean and wash that spit off! I wanna wash my head too!*

Once the ballrabbit had its fill of abusing me, it moved on to the monster. Finally! I was beginning to wonder if it would do it at all. Its opinion of me seemed to have plummeted.

The ballrabbit and its prey were still too poorly matched; no matter how many times it whipped the panther with its ears, it took no damage. It tried Illuminate three times, but the monster didn't even bat an eyelid, just stared at

the rabbit, unimpressed. Did I think too big? Maybe I should've picked a weaker monster.

No sense in waiting any longer. The panther's paralysis would wear off soon. If I inflicted the finishing blow, maybe the rabbit would get some experience as well. *Whoa! It started gnawing on it! How hungry is this thing?! Wait, I think it's doing some damage!*

Once the rabbit penetrated the skin, the panther's defense would probably go down. Still...the ballrabbit was basically eating it alive. Absolutely gruesome. Should I really be helping this thing evolve? Its potential was terrifying.

As I watched, the monster's status went from Paralyzed (Major) to just Paralyzed. I gave its neck a swipe with my claws, taking care of it.

Gained 108 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 108 Experience Points.

Plague Dragon Lv 20 became Lv 22.

Wow, barely any experience points. I wasn't going to get anywhere fighting weak enemies. My MAX was level 75; evolution felt so far away. And the higher I climbed, the more experience points it would take to level up.

Well, I still had the Walking Egg Title Skill giving me double experience points. I just hoped my slow rate of growth and the Dragon Scale Powder wouldn't force me to live in solitude for years. I might die of loneliness.

I could worry about that later. I didn't get a chance to try out Disease Breath, but I'd achieved my first goal. I had meat, and salt from the ocean. I'd use the offer of food to get back on the rabbit's good side. I needed to check its experience points too.

Part 3

FIRST ORDER of business was prying the defeated monster out of the rabbit's jaws; it was still gnawing hungrily. *Hey, that'll taste better when it's roasted, I promise! Get away from it for a sec! Oof, it's glaring at me again.*

H-hey, don't turn on me! Your claws hurt!

Species: Small Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 6/12

HP: 10/3

MP: 0/18

Attack: 12

Defense: 18

Magic: 25

Agility 20

Rank: E—

Special Skills:

Conceal: Lv 1

Food Regeneration: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 1

Binge Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Burrow: Lv 2

Illuminate: Lv 2

Play Dead: Lv 1

Whip Dance: Lv 1

Swallow Whole: Lv 1

Storage: Lv 1

Charm: Lv 1

Gnaw: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Desert Darling: Lv 2

Cannibal: Lv 1

Parasitic Leveler: Lv 2

Ravenous: Lv 3

Ugh, only a few levels again. I figured it would either get all the way up to MAX, or it would get nothing, since it technically didn't contribute to the battle. Walking Egg might have given me a skewed perception of level growth, but this just seemed way too slow. Though I'd skipped E rank—I went right from F to D. Maybe it worked differently for E-rank monsters?

Oh, wait...it could be receiving reduced experience points because of that Parasitic Leveler skill. Maybe it was the kind of experience that actually mattered. Even though the ballrabbit took on a monster much more powerful than itself, it really just gnawed on it a little bit. I should be grateful it even got as many experience points as it did.

I could carry it around until it hit rank D, but it would be slow going. I just hoped its next evolution was large enough to dig me my new house.

That was only if it was even still willing to help me out at all. I'd traumatized it with a scorpion, accidentally suffocated it in my sleep, and then drenched it with my spit. Not the best way to get on someone's good side.

I pried the ballrabbit off the dead monster and began processing the meat. I cut off the head, removed the organs, and skinned it. I chopped the flesh into smaller pieces to make it easier to eat. I was an old hand at this. Perhaps eventually I'd get a skill like "Butcher" or something.

Before I could throw the inedible bits out into the desert, the rabbit began gnawing on the organs. Jeez, it really would eat anything.

Whoa, it just ate the head! The head was bigger than its entire body, and it just ate it! Disgusting! I'm gonna have nightmares. What the heck is going on inside of that rabbit's stomach?

You know those people who can eat whatever they want and never get fat? This thing was on another level. I had no idea where it was all going.

I put the saliva-covered ballrabbit on my head and headed for the ocean. *Ugh, I wish I could just put it in my mouth and use Roll.* I mean, why not? We were on the way to wash, who cared if it got a little dirtier? The ballrabbit must have predicted this, because it began whipping me in the head with its ears. *Okay, okay! I won't use Roll.*

Eventually, we reached the ocean. God, we were right next to water, so why was it so dry here? This *was* a magical world; I figured logic from my previous life was worthless. But also, I vaguely remembered hearing about a huge river that ran through a desert somewhere...and it never rained there because of something having to do with air currents. Maybe this place was the same way?

I put that aside and went back to my meal. I'd brought a scrap of the monster's skin, and I lay out all the bits of meat on top. Now my food wouldn't get any sand on it.

I dug a hole in the beach and filled it with ocean water I'd scooped up with my hands. Once it was nearly full, I used Scorching Breath. The water began to steam, quickly evaporating and leaving behind powdery white crystals—salt. It stank a little, though.

Maybe if I raised the heat a notch it would get rid of the smell? I should just try it first.

I spread the salt, still smelling of sea brine, on the raw meat, then used a

higher temperature of Scorching Breath until the flesh began to change color. I stopped when it was cooked to about medium—nice and brown on the outside but still a little pink and tender on the inside. Perfect.

I shoved a piece of the meat into my mouth. A little tough but workable. My only regret was that without piperis, the gamey taste was evident. I never cared about the smell back when I was eating bugs, but now I was accustomed to the luxury of cave life and my tastes had changed.

I added some sea water to try to cover up the funk. Maybe I could use the salt as a rub? If this was the forest, I could pick some tasty herbs, but now I had nothing but prickly cactuses. It was only now dawning on me how crucial piperis had been to my happiness.

Title Skill “Mr. Chef” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Oh hey, it had been a while since that skill went up. Hopefully I would still be able to use it once I locked in my human form.

I tried a couple more things to improve the taste of the meat as I roasted it, and the scent drew the ballrabbit in. Its long ears were covered in sand from where it continued to drag them along the ground.

Eh, I’m sure the sand will brush off eventually. Can’t sweat the small stuff.

The ballrabbit sniffed the air, looking up as if to ask, “Can I eat that?” with a glint in its eyes.

I’d had a feeling I’d win it back with food. Perfect, now I could keep using Roll, the fastest way to travel. If the rabbit got mad at me, I’d just salt up some more meat and buy back its love.

The ballrabbit was still staring at me. *While* it was eating the meat. *Wait, it couldn’t have caught on to what I’m thinking, right?* It didn’t have any mindreading skills...but m-maybe I’d just save Roll for emergencies, like getting away from those giant centipedes. Going by just our stats, I could probably take them out no problem, but I didn’t want the rabbit getting caught in the fray. It would absolutely get killed.

Once it’s finished eating, I’ll take it to the water and wash the saliva off its head. Then I’ll get back to leveling and testing out Disease Breath.

Part 4

AFTER WE FINISHED UP dinner, I picked the ballrabbit up and went in search of our next desert conquest. A D-rank monster needed to be paralyzed before I could let the ballrabbit go at it, so I was thinking an E+ would be just right. That way it could eke out a victory on its own.

From its stats, the rabbit specialized in magic. Unfortunately, its MP was 0. I thought about letting it rest for the day, but I didn't want to waste any more time without testing the Dragon Scale Powder.

Still, pushing the rabbit too hard might end in disaster. I had no idea if separation from me once the Powder's effects began to show would even make a difference.

Fine, fine. The rabbit could train another day. Either way, I couldn't just leave it alone. I resolved to run my tests, and if the opportunity presented itself, I'd level the rabbit up.

Speaking of the rabbit, it was currently devouring meat on top of my head, savoring every bite of my last kill. That was fine, but I didn't want grease on my scales.

I was jealous that it could just kick back and relax. If it ever got big in a later evolution, I'd make it carry *me*.

I moved carefully to avoid disrupting its meal, and eventually I caught sight of one of those three-headed camels in the distance. Looking at its lumpy body was still unpleasant. I slowly closed in, taking care for the rabbit's sake.

Come on, stop eating! If we get into a battle, I'll need my head back. Hold on tight or you're gonna fall off, Ballrabbit!

I gave myself a little shake, trying not to let it get too comfortable.

"Pfeff?!" It dropped a piece of meat on my nose, where it sat, tickling me. I licked it off and gulped it down. Hmm, maybe less salt next time? It would probably be better as jerky, honestly.

"Pfeff..." The rabbit made a dejected noise. I guess that was its last piece of

meat.

I spread my wings, flying in close to the camel to circle behind. I landed and checked its status.

Species: Motaricamel

Status: Normal

Lv: 8/31

HP: 78/78

MP: 67/67

Attack: 52

Defense: 48

Magic: 23

Agility: 28

Rank: D—

Special Skills:

Belt Buckle: Lv 4

Conceal: Lv 1

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 1

Twin Heads: Lv —

Split Personality: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Poison Resistance: Lv 2

Fire Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Clay Wall: Lv 2

Sandstorm: Lv 1

Aqua: Lv 1

Rest: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Cactus Eater: Lv 2

Rank D-, huh? It doesn't have any offensive skills either; this is a perfect chance to help the rabbit level up. Perhaps it was due to the multiple heads, but it had some Special Skills that reminded me of the twinheads. Thinking back, the twinheads's left and right sides used different skills. I wondered how they split those up. Maybe they just had different specialties from birth? I had absolutely no intention of ever becoming a dragon with multiple heads—I was just curious.

"Naaaaaaaaarggggh!"

All three heads bellowed at once. I blew out a breath and focused my magical energy in the back of my throat. It was my first time using this skill, but I instinctively knew how to do it. I blew out the collected magical energy in one great gust, the cloud of noxious air drifting toward the camel. It tried to dig its legs into the ground to brace itself, but knocking it down wasn't my goal. I just wanted to test my abilities.

If I did end up blowing it away, I wouldn't be able to see those effects. *Brace yourself, buddy! Help me out. Dig even deeper.*

The wind stopped, and the camel relaxed. It certainly *looked* normal.

Species: Motaricamel

Status: Cursed (Slight)

Lv: 8/31

HP: 73/78

MP: 67/67

I was far more powerful than the camel, but I'd barely done any damage. That was fine. This skill definitely worked over time. *Cursed (Slight)*? That was a new one.

If it was a status condition, I could ask Divine Voice. It refused to explain Poison α to me, but that was because its level was so low. But this was one of *my* skills. It had to answer me.

Status Condition: Cursed

Hey, there it is.

A status condition that gradually drains life force and weakens physical abilities. Its effects act slower than Poison, but fewer remedies exist.

A minor Curse weakens with increased distance between the cursed being and its caster and will eventually wear off.

Hmm, so the Plague was a Curse. Disease Breath caused a slight case, and it followed that the same should be true for any ambient effect from my wings. If I noticed anything on the rabbit's status, leaving it behind should let it recover.

Regardless, there was one thing I now knew for sure. Not only did skills like Dragon Scale Powder and Disease Breath get in the way of me making friends, but they were pretty crappy offensive skills too. I Cursed that three-headed camel and it looked perfectly healthy. From the description, it was much better suited for an extended battle—only useful for the long haul.

Part 5

THE THREE-HEADED CAMEL changed trajectory, turning its back on me. It thought it could escape. I used Paralyzing Venom Claws on its back, raking shallowly into its flesh.

“Naaaaaargh!”

Its three heads screamed all together. Its legs buckled and it hit the ground, still trying to pull itself along pitifully.

Normal Skill “Paralyzing Venom Claws” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

I made sure that its status condition showed “Paralyzed” and then let the rabbit down.

“Pfeff.” It waddled across the ground, making its way closer to the three-headed camel. It must’ve realized its job, because it immediately hopped on top of it and started nibbling.

Since their stats were so disparate, I didn’t expect it to do damage, but Gnaw must be a good skill. It was really tearing into that camel. Before long, the camel groaned in triplicate.

Wow. Pretty disgusting. The ballrabbit was such a violent little thing. Maybe I’d been raising it wrong. Was its strength in battle becoming unstoppable? I just hoped neither of us would get another weird Title Skill out of it.

The camel’s status had gone from Cursed (Slight) and Paralyzed, to Cursed (Slight) and Paralyzed (Slight). High time for the finishing blow.

“Naaaaarrgh!”

Just as I was about to push the rabbit aside, one of the heads let out a really loud cough. Was that a side effect of Disease Breath’s Curse?

“Raaaaar!” I bellowed, shouting for the ballrabbit to get away. I stepped between them and released Scorching Breath. The three-headed camel’s body went up in flames.

Gained 32 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 32 experience points.

I didn’t hold back. All that remained were cinders.

“Pfeff...”

The ballrabbit looked disappointedly at the scorched three-headed camel. It probably wanted more to eat, but we didn’t have time for that. I had my answer. Disease Breath caused Curse. I couldn’t let my guard down with the Dragon Scale Powder.

Still...thinking about how the camel’s head started coughing—wasn’t that more of a sickness than a curse? Did it infect the rabbit while it was close? God, what if eating it was dangerous?

Should I make it throw the meat up? I checked the rabbit’s status.

Species: Small Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 10/12

HP: 39/39

MP: 0/28

Attack: 16

Defense: 22

Magic: 30

Agility: 24

Rank: E—

Special Skills:

Conceal: Lv 1

Food Regeneration: Lv 3

Resistance Skills:

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 1

Binge Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Burrow: Lv 2

Illuminate: Lv 2

Play Dead: Lv 1

Whip Dance: Lv 3

Swallow Whole: Lv 1

Storage: Lv 1

Charm: Lv 1

Gnaw: Lv 2

Rest: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Desert Darling: Lv 2

Cannibal: Lv 1

Parasitic Leveler: Lv 2

Ravenous: Lv 3

Well, it seemed fine for now. Next time I did experiments with Disease Breath I'd just be more careful. Or I could just never try it again. That might be safer.

But hey, the ballrabbit learned Rest! I'd worked so hard to learn that skill, and then I lost it when I evolved. Rest regenerated HP. If the ballrabbit could master Rest, it would have a much easier time in the desert.

The rabbit puffed out its cheeks and began thwapping its ears on the ground, throwing a tantrum. Looked like it *really* wanted to eat that camel meat.

Didn't it realize I was just worried about it? Well, it was my fault, really—I should have been more careful with this whole test idea.

The rabbit licked up some camel ash, then spit it out with a *“Peh! Peh!”* Well, *what were you expecting? You can’t eat that. You’d be better off eating a mouthful of sand!* I laughed internally, but the rabbit still glared at me.

Was I being obvious again? I poked at my cheek. I didn’t *think* I was showing my emotions on my face. My scales were so thick you shouldn’t have been able to tell if I was frowning or smiling. Maybe it could tell just by looking in my eyes.

I gently caressed the rabbit’s head. It turned its face away huffily, as if to say, *“You can’t trick me with that!”* But then it settled back into contentment, eyes softening, enjoying the attention. When I caressed the tips of its ears, it let out a little sigh. *“Pfeff!”*

I guess when you drag your ears around all the time, they tend to get pretty itchy.

They’d just end up getting covered in sand again, but I brushed the dirt off them anyway. The ballrabbit seemed to be enjoying itself. After a while, it fell asleep.

Guess this guy is happy to go wherever the food is. That makes it easy to handle. I didn’t want to wake it up, so I scooped it up carefully and placed it on my head.

We fought the panther and the camel back-to-back; no wonder it was tired. And we walked a long way today. *Well, I’m the one who did all the walking, but being a passenger can still be tiring. Despite how careful I was, it was a bumpy ride.*

I returned to the cactus field. Time for a rest.

“P-pfeff!” The rabbit complained a bit when I moved it. Did I wake it?

“Raar?” I asked, but it didn’t respond. What the heck...? Was it talking in its sleep?

Chapter 3:

The Carriage and the Dragon

Part 1

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke up in the sand. It was only my third day here, but I was already beginning to get used to sleeping out in the open. I checked the ballrabbit's sand dune, relieved that I hadn't smothered it again. I could use more rest, but I felt a strong presence drawing nearer, pinging my Psychic Sense. No sleeping in today.

Out in the open, it was easy for the enemy to spot me, but the reverse was also true. I sat up and scanned the area, immediately spotting the source of my Psychic Sense's alert. It was one of those giant sand-colored centipedes, kicking up a cloud of dust as it barreled toward me.

Crap, this was the exact thing I didn't want! We needed to get out of here.

My best option was just to put the ballrabbit in my mouth, though what a way to wake up in the morning. If I wasted time, the centipede would catch up easily. Although, now that I was looking at it, it didn't seem to be headed directly for us... But there was nothing else out here. What was it doing?

Wait—there is something there!

A carriage raced just ahead of the centipede, pulled by two huge horses, no match for the monster's speed. At this rate, that carriage was going to get demolished. What the heck were they thinking, driving a carriage in a place like this?

I glanced swiftly at the ballrabbit's dune before springing after the giant centipede. I couldn't win in a fair fight, but I could distract the monster long enough for the carriage to escape. Worst case scenario, I could always escape via the air. I'd just threaten it, then bounce. Once the commotion died down, I could come back for the rabbit. It survived out here alone before it met me—it would be all right on its own for a few minutes.

Leaving it still made me anxious, and I briefly wished I'd put it in my mouth and Rolled. But that had its own dangers. This enemy wasn't like the panther or the camel; it wouldn't be an easy fight. I'd need to use my Breath and Bite

attacks, and I didn't want to accidentally swallow the rabbit in the process.

I Rolled at the giant centipede, ruefully thinking that this was one enemy I never thought I would be dashing *toward*.

The beast ignored me and continued its pursuit of the carriage, even though I was purposefully making as much noise as possible. *Come on, you're not even gonna look my way? I guess you desert monsters would rather eat horses and humans than a dragon. I was considered a delicacy when I was a baby, you know!*

The horses pulling the carriage looked my way. I couldn't read equine expressions, but I had a feeling they were freaked out. *Listen, I'm here to help!*

I understood, of course. You're racing through the desert chased by a giant centipede and all of a sudden a big scaly ball comes rolling in—talk about going from bad to worse. *I'm an unlikely savior, I know.*

I expended more energy to roll faster, using my speed to launch myself into the air. The plan was to use my body weight to crush the giant centipede's tail, but it was way tougher than I imagined. I couldn't even make a dent in it.

I dashed to the right, but the centipede still didn't change its trajectory. It was the sort of monster that didn't give up once it had a target in its sights. If I *did* manage to successfully draw its attention, escaping might not be so easy after all.

The centipede had slowed down when I dove at its tail, but it had nearly regained its original speed and was swiftly making up the distance it had lost on the carriage.

I'd figured attacking once with Roll would be enough, but I'd just have to keep trying.

By now I was close enough to use View Status. I needed to get a feel for its stats before I made any more decisions.

Species: Giant Sand Centipede

Status: Normal

Lv: 62/80

HP: 448/448

MP: 236/236

Attack: 324

Defense: 297

Magic: 194

Agility: 234

Rank: B

Special Skills:

Myriapod: Lv —

Bug King's Chitin: Lv 6

Earth Type: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 5

Psychic Sense: Lv 4

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 5

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Falling Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 6

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2

Confusion Resistance: Lv 2

Sleep Resistance: Lv 3

Normal Skills:

Double Poison: Lv 5

Burrow: Lv 6

Sand Breath: Lv 4

Clay Wall: Lv 3

Paralyzing Bite: Lv 2

Acid Drool: Lv 4

Heat Beam: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Hundred-Legged King: Lv —

Desert Master: Lv 6

Unyielding: Lv 4

Tenacious: Lv 6

Chaser: Lv 5

Final Evolution: Lv —

Ugh. As expected, pretty gnarly. A level 62 B-rank monster absolutely freaked me out. With an attack level of 324, one direct hit would be enough to kill me. And I thought I was sitting pretty at 200 a little while ago!

Also, what the heck is Heat Beam? Is that a ranged attack?

Part 2

THE CARRIAGE WAS AT ITS LIMIT, the horses panting. They couldn't maintain their speed for much longer, and the carriage wheels were beginning to protest, despite the fact that it was clearly built for sturdiness over aesthetics. The wheels were oversized and unsightly. I didn't know what it was meant to transport, but it was well built. Still, if it kept going at this speed, craftsmanship wouldn't matter. It was going to break down.

I drew closer to the giant centipede's tail, slowing down Roll and reaching out my claws. I pounced. *I know it has Paralysis Resistance, but please let this work, even a tiny bit.*

I rode the speed of my revolutions and hit it with Paralyzing Venom Claws as hard as I could. My claw bounced off its sand-colored body, snapping at the root. Argh!

Its body was impenetrably hard. In addition to its defense, it had that Special Skill, Bug King's Chitin. I'd need to break through to deal any damage.

I forced my quickly tiring body back into a spin and sank my fangs into the exact same spot I attacked with my claws. Did I break the skin? Yes, slightly. The surface of its carapace caved a little beneath my fangs.

Why is this thing so tough? I feel like my teeth are gonna break off!

But it was way too late to give up. I chomped with my lower jaw, biting hard and just managing to cling on. The damn thing was dragging me behind it on my stomach.

A dragon might have thick scales on its back, but its belly was sparsely protected. This sort of abuse *hurt*. Well, it didn't hurt, so much as it felt...hot. Like I might burst into flames from the friction. I couldn't attack again from this position, but if I let go, the centipede's momentum would throw me backward. And that carriage couldn't hold out much longer.

"Ngggguuu!"

I growled around my mouthful. The centipede ignored me and kept running. It

had to be five times my weight, so how was it so much faster than I was? This was just unfair! How did it get so huge? Maybe it bulked up from eating carriages all the time. It looked large enough to swallow an entire tree.

Luckily, it seemed to be slowing it down, even if only slightly. The drag of my weight let the carriage gradually pull ahead. But I wasn't going to hold out much longer—my stomach couldn't take this. When the horses' exhaustion made the carriage lose speed, the centipede would catch up immediately.

What could I do? This position left me helpless, but if I let go, the centipede would catch the carriage right away. I was stuck in horrible, suspended animation.

"Gggtchhhh!" The giant centipede let out a hideous noise. It freaked out the horses—they recovered quickly, but it was close.

A red light began to coalesce around the centipede's head. It had to be that long-ranged attack skill, Heat Beam. I had a feeling this wasn't a supplementary attack; this was its one-shot finishing move. If it hit the carriage, it was all over.

All I'd managed to do was force it to change tactics. Why couldn't it just focus on me instead? If I couldn't budge it with a full speed Roll, this was a dead end.

But maybe I didn't need to find a way to stop it. I just had to make sure the Heat Beam missed.

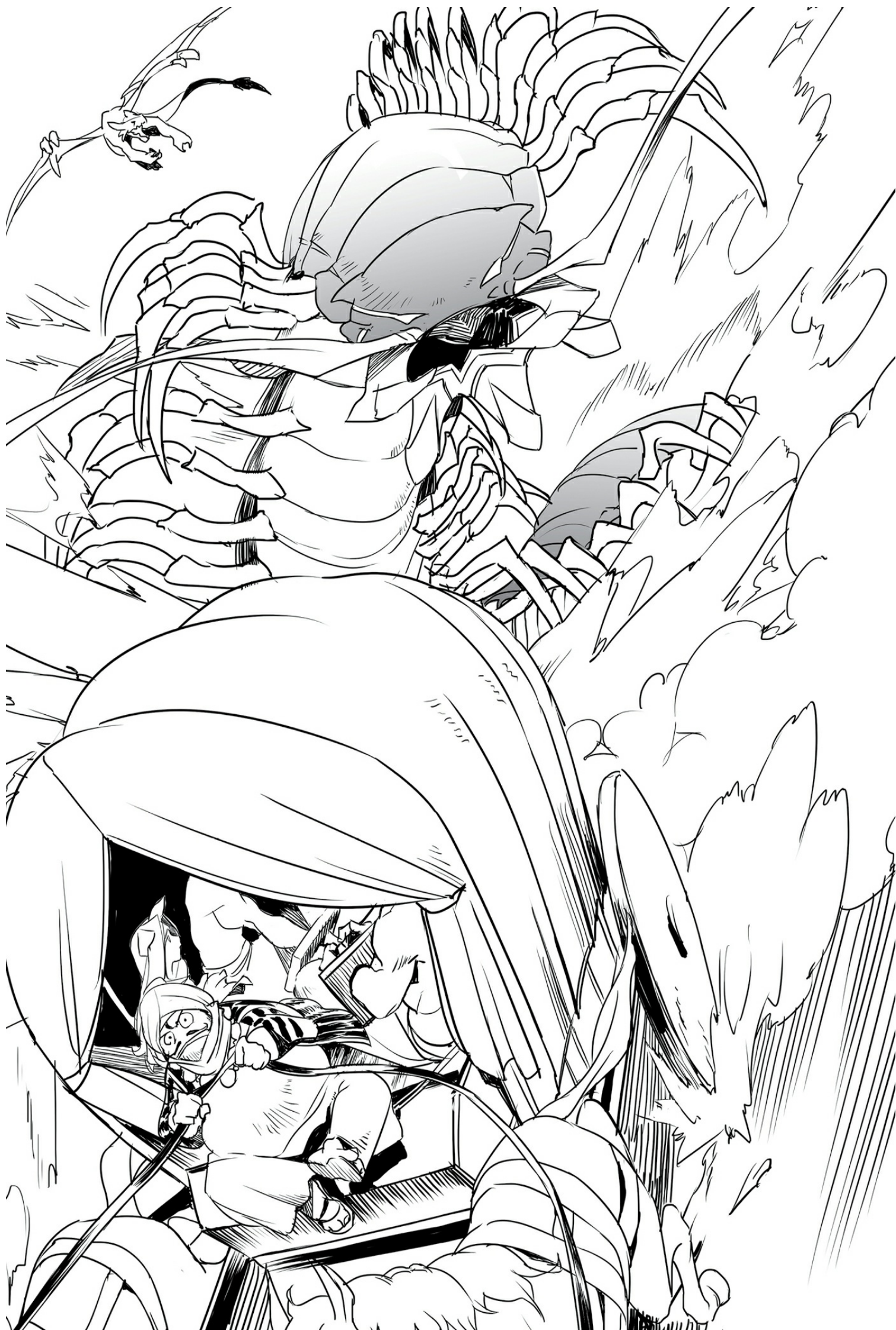
Luckily, the giant centipede's focus on its attack meant it dropped its speed even further. That gave me the chance to prepare.

I managed to get my feet underneath me, digging my claws into the sand. *Now stop, damn you!* A huge cloud of dust flew up into the air as I skidded forward. It slowed further but didn't stop. And it was still focusing Heat Beam. It could let it loose at any second. I didn't have time to stop it; I had to knock it off its trajectory.

How's this?!

I spread my wings and kicked off the ground, lifting the centipede's lower body with me into the air. I flapped behind it like a kite, dragged through the air as it continued its dash. I couldn't get all of it up off the ground.

A red beam of light shot from its head, seeming to waver with the heat. It was trying to reposition its head after I knocked it askew, the beam swerving wildly back and forth, burning through the sand. It moved erratically from right behind the carriage, to one side, to the other. The heat of it sizzled off the sand, leaving behind black trails of ash.



It was only a matter of time before it hit the carriage. I had to act now. I flailed through the air, forcing the beam to swerve. It just narrowly caught the carriage roof, which burst into flames. That...wasn't good. But maybe the fire was small enough—and the carriage moving fast enough—that it'd go out on its own?

The Heat Beam hit a cactus in the complete opposite direction, then stopped. Good, I managed to throw it off course. But damn, that thing was super powerful. A direct hit would even take me out. I took a moment to catch my breath, but the centipede began to pick up speed again. It no longer had to split its concentration and could focus on the chase.

I threw my weight against its lower half, letting it pull me back to the ground. I flapped my wings and flew backward, testing resistance. It didn't budge, and a stunningly intense pain burst in the roots of my fangs, the impact snapping them off. The tough shell and the giant centipede's strength meant my claws suffered the same fate.

I lost my grip then, obviously, and it shook me off. I hit the sand hard and began to roll. Free of my weight, the giant centipede picked up speed again, still intent on the carriage. Its sudden freedom must have felt good because it was going even faster than before. I tried to force myself up, but I could barely move, much less jump immediately back into the fray.

As the centipede accelerated, the carriage slowed, the horses reaching their limit. Everything would be over before I even had the chance to catch back up to them. The outcome seemed inevitable.

I threw those thoughts aside, ignored my pain, and stood up. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of my teeth still attached to a hunk of flesh. No time to think of that now. I had to catch that centipede.

Part 3

I WENT AS FAST as I could, streaking after the monster like a bat out of hell. Its speed stats were higher than mine, and I had to use Roll to catch up to it. It was hard to handle on complex terrain, but the featureless desert landscape put me at an advantage.

Despite that, I wasn't going to make it. The centipede was going to destroy the carriage.

Run, just run!

What good would strategizing do at this point? Rolling was my only choice. The centipede was still gaining, and just when I thought it was all over, the flames on top of the carriage burned off the curtains hanging in the interior, sending them flapping into the air.

The scorched cloth landed right on the giant centipede's head. Miraculous timing! I figured that would buy the carriage a little time, but they barely got a second. The cloth immediately blew off, not slowing the centipede down a bit.

Inside the exposed carriage, people were packed in tight. All kinds of people, from an old man to a little girl probably not even ten years old. They all had animal ears, which reminded me of that dog girl I'd seen with the swordswoman in my cave.

Apart from the ears, they looked like totally normal demi-humans. That part wasn't troubling, but the state they were in was. They all wore tattered clothes and had their hands tied in front of them. Behind the demi-humans was a big, round man. He had a strip of white cloth wrapped around his head and wore fine clothes and golden jewelry. He clearly stood out among them.

The fat guy screamed something and kicked one of the demi-humans out of the carriage. At first, I couldn't internalize what I was seeing. The demi-human landed hard on the ground, their body spasming. The giant centipede sped up, opened its mouth wide, and gulped them down.

When the other demi-humans tried to resist, the man hit them. Next, he threw a small child out to the centipede. Then another demi-human, and

another. By the time he'd tossed out the eighth person, the centipede had stopped, concentrating on eating the fallen. The carriage used that opportunity to pull further ahead.

The fat man wiped sweat from his forehead and gave a satisfied grin, then made his way to the front of the carriage.

Intellectually, I knew that if he hadn't done that, the centipede would've caught up with the carriage and eaten every single person inside it. But I still found this impossibly cruel. How could that man sacrifice people like that—and then *smile*? Absolutely disgusting.

By the time I caught up to the centipede, about half the abandoned demi-humans were dead. They were gaunt, half-starved, too weak to put up any sort of fight. The fall killed some, I was pretty sure. That was probably better than being eaten alive.

“Ah...”

The voice belonged to a person who was already half-eaten. In just a few moments, the monster gobbled up the rest of it.

“*Gggtchhhh!*” Its cry was creepy, almost like laughter. I spread my wings and zoomed up into the air, anger driving my body to move before I even realized what I was doing.

From up high, I set my sights on the centipede's head, then dropped into a nosedive. A normal attack wouldn't be enough, but I was hoping that gravity would help. The kickback would be severe, but that didn't stop me. If this didn't work, nothing would.

The centipede swung its giant body around, swiping its tail at me and connecting violently. The impact passed through my scales, vibrating down to my bones. It hit me so hard it was honestly impressive. I smacked the ground headfirst.

Everything was hazy, my body heavy. I brushed the sand off myself with trembling arms. The centipede was still basically unscathed. We were the same rank, but I clearly stood no chance against a monster with forty levels on me. I couldn't beat it. I'd gotten in its way so many times, but it just ignored me. It

saw me as simple prey, not an enemy. I was nowhere near the top of its priority list.

I felt something warm and sticky on my side. It was blood, but not my blood.

I glanced behind me at the lower half of a human body with its intestines spilling out.

“Raaaaaaaar!” I let out a blast of Scorching Breath, hoping to at least obscure the monster’s vision while I flew through the flames to the side of the demi-human who looked least injured. I picked them up with my mouth, sand and all, careful of my fangs.

“Gggtchhhh!” The centipede made a furious noise, enraged at me for stealing away its lunch. It swung its giant body around again, attempting to thwap me with its tail. I should have been prepared for this move—it had used it before—but it was just too fast. The last hit wiped out almost half my HP. One more like that and I’d lose consciousness. But I couldn’t dodge.

I knocked my tail against its body, trying to use the recoil to fly backward. But the centipede just kept coming. I wrapped my wings around my body, hoping to lessen the impact.

The hit knocked me into the air, but I did manage to minimize the damage. I used the momentum to escape into the sky. I flapped my wings, pushing higher and higher.

As I flew, I cast a regretful eye backward.

“Gggtchhhh, gtchh!” A red light was gathering in the centipede’s mouth. Another Heat Beam.

Beside the monster was a dead demi-human, killed by the flames I released. It was the last one kicked from the carriage. Helplessness consumed me at the sight of the body, but I didn’t have time to wallow. I checked the centipede’s stats; I’d barely done any damage to it at all. Its MP was partially drained, though. It could only use Heat Beam about three times a day. That must have been why it didn’t use it on the carriage immediately. But even if I dodged this one, it still had one more use.

I kept the centipede in my sights and flew higher. When it let the beam loose,

red light aimed straight at me, I dove headfirst through the air. Despite my speed, I still felt the heat as the beam grazed me. This attack had impossible range.

A message popped up in my head.

Title Skill “King of Evasion” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Luckily, the giant centipede gave up after that. I didn’t have the stamina to fly for much longer, and since I’d already taken a nosedive to evade the Heat Beam, I landed as fast as I could. If the monster had chased me, it could have hit me without any problem. But it apparently decided to protect the rest of its meal rather than chase after the thief.

Title Skill “Protective Spirit” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

Requirements for White Mage types have been greatly reduced.

I took another look behind me. The giant centipede’s head was swaying back and forth. I didn’t even wanna know what it was doing. I curled up my body and used Roll to return to the ballrabbit.

Part 4

I STILL CARRIED the rescued demi-human in my mouth as I used Roll. I remembered the general area where I'd left the rabbit. There was a cactus about twice its size to use as a landmark.

If it had moved, I might not be able to locate it at all. Or another monster might have found it and eaten it for breakfast while I was gone.

The demi-human I carried hadn't taken a direct hit from the giant centipede, but they still bore injuries from the fall from the carriage. Someone else might have cushioned their fall, because they were still mostly whole. They'd lost a lot of HP, though. Probably didn't have a whole lot to begin with.

I checked their stats. They had "Unconscious, Bleeding," and their HP was constantly draining away.

Nina Nefah

Species: Felis-human

Status: Unconscious, Bleeding

Lv: 7/60

HP: 8/25

MP: 22/22

Attack: 21

Defense: 18

Magic: 17

Agility: 25

Special Skills:

Psychic Sense: Lv 1

Kinetic Vision: Lv 2

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Resistance Skills:

Hunger Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 1

Physical Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 1

Scratch: Lv 1

Mimic Call: Lv 2

Bind: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Demi-human: Lv —

Hunter: Lv 2

Acrobat: Lv 2

Slave: Lv —

Her name was Nina, and she was a Felis-human. She looked similar to the demi-human I'd seen with the swordswoman but a different species. The girl with the hammer had been a Canis-human. She had ears that looked more like a dog's, and Nina's ears looked like a cat's.

And according to her Title Skills...she was a slave. Her tattered clothes made me suspect she'd had a rough life, but seeing it in writing was still a shock. Were all the demi-humans stuffed into that carriage slaves?

I spotted a familiar hill and canceled Roll. The remnants of the cactus sat a short distance away. Yep, this was where I'd left the ballrabbit.

I was hoping it would still be asleep, but of course nothing could ever go smoothly for me. I spotted the empty hole. There were no tracks. Maybe a sandstorm erased them? This wasn't good. How could I track it? I prayed it was

somewhere nearby and activated Psychic Sense to search the area around me. I got a ping for a small animal near the remnants of the cactus.

I was glad to find it nearby, but what the heck was it doing over there? I searched for its presence as I rummaged through the discarded cactuses. I found the ballrabbit, covered in spine scratches, enthusiastically gorging itself on the cactus flesh.

Oh, for the love of God.

Its ears pricked up as I approached.

“Pfeff? Pfeff!” It spit out the skin of the cactus it had been nibbling on and rushed right over to me, whapping me with its ears. I guess it thought I’d left it behind.

I backed a safe distance from the cactuses and spit out the demi-human, along with a bunch of sand. I coughed, expelling more of it from my throat.

“Pfeff?” The ballrabbit looked at Nina and then back at me again. It crept toward over and began to lick her all over. I poked it lightly with my finger. “Pfeff!”

Don’t tell me you’re gonna eat a human? No reason why it wouldn’t, I figured. It already ate a panther and a camel. *Please don’t eat a human. I won’t ever let you back onto my head if you eat a human.*

I tried to explain the situation to the rabbit with gestures. I pointed to Nina’s injuries, then waved my hands back and forth with a frown on my face. I knew the rabbit learned Rest from the experience points it got from the camel. It could use it to stop the bleeding, and she would survive.

The ballrabbit stared at Nina for a while, then lifted up a piece of cactus skin with its ears and began drawing something in the sand. When it was done, it tossed the cactus away and let its ears droop back down.

Ballrabbit! I had no idea you could do that.

It was kind of crude, but I figured out what the drawing was right away. It was meat. I nodded to show I understood.

Yeah, yeah, you want me to get you more meat. I’ll salt some up and roast it

for you, okay?

Satisfied, the rabbit pranced over to Nina and made a “*Pfeff!*” noise. A tiny ball of light drifted from its head, entering Nina’s body.

I watched as her wounds closed and the color returned to her skin. Her status no longer said bleeding. She wasn’t back up to full HP, but she was close.

I breathed in a sigh of relief as Unconscious changed to Unconscious (Slight). My relief transmuted into panic. What would I do when she woke up? She’d scream and run when she saw me, and a human alone in this desert wouldn’t last long. Should I take her to that walled city before she woke up? No, I didn’t have time.

Besides, I wasn’t sure that city was a good place for her to go. The carriage was headed in that direction. Nina’s master was that fatass jerk who kicked the slaves out into the desert for centipede chow. She wouldn’t have a good life there, that’s for sure.

Part 5

“UGHH...NYAAH!” Nina groaned softly. Her body tensed. She curled up on the sand in a little ball, as if to protect herself.

She wasn't awake yet, but it was only a matter of time. *Crap! What should I do? What should I do?! I had no ideas.* She was absolutely going to pass out from fright if she saw me. Should I hide? Leave the ballrabbit to take care of her? Still, at some point we'd have to do *something* with her, and she'd see me then.

No, I couldn't just hide. That would only leave her vulnerable to other monsters. I just had to make it clear I wasn't an enemy. Maybe I should act like a total clown, a silly dragon who would never attack a human. How, though? Have the ballrabbit dig a hole and bury my head in it? Was that zany enough?

“Mm, ahh...nyaah...” Nina mumbled, brushing her hair out of her face. Yep. She was waking up.

Come on, come on, I have to do something! Oh, that's right! I had Human Transformation! And thanks to my evolution, it was up to level 3! Human Transformation had tortured me for so long; about time it actually helped me out.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Human Transformation always sucked. The pressure on my body was impossibly intense, and it burned off 1 MP per second. And looking at my stats...

Illusia

Species: Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 22/75

HP: 260/260

MP: 199/199

I only had 199 seconds. Three minutes and nineteen seconds. Wow, that was barely any time.

No, I could do it. You could make instant ramen in 90 seconds, after all. 199 seconds was plenty of time to convince her I was harmless and ask her about herself.

Her eyes were opening. No more time for worrying.

I activated the skill and instantly felt an intense heat spread through my body, like I was being burned from the inside out. The first time it scared the heck out of me, but this time, although it hurt, I wasn't frightened.

My body grew smaller, shrinking from five meters to a little less than two. I opened my eyes and looked down at my arms. They were strong, covered in black scales with sharp claws blooming from my fingertips. *Okay, cool that I'm still powerful, but now I'm just a human-shaped monster. And I bet my face is super ugly.*

Not being able to see myself made me extremely anxious. Although, if I did turn into a human completely, I realized I wouldn't have any clothes. That would be a horrible sight in and of itself. Still, I'd rather look like a naked weirdo than whatever kind of demon I looked like now.

"Pfeff?!" The ballrabbit made a noise of alarm, its ears pricking up. It seemed afraid of me and scampered away. *Knock it off, don't look at me like that! It's gonna make me lose confidence! Then how can I win Nina's trust?*

Chances were good I was even freakier now than I was as a dragon. I was human shaped, but my mouth was huge, complete with sharp fangs.

I couldn't chicken out. This was only for three minutes, and I had to make the most of it. I glanced over at Nina, where she was still lying on the sand. *Hm? Why are her eyes still closed?*

I wondered if she'd lost consciousness again. She was pretty weak; perhaps she'd just fallen asleep.

Hey, come on! Wake up! I didn't want to have use Human Transformation

again; I couldn't risk having low MP. What if I really needed it?

I felt bad, but I had to wake her up. I put an arm around her shoulder, helping her to sit up, careful not to stab her with my claws. I shook her gently.

Hey, could I speak now? I let out a little breath and tried pronouncing some words, trying to wrangle my tongue.

"Gaa, aah, gaa... Aa, ii, va, iii, vooh, vooh, ooh!"

I can do this. I didn't sound perfectly human, but my vocal cords were much closer than a dragon's. I could have a conversation, just barely.

But what should I say? Where to start? Should I just act like I was in an RPG and be like "*Raar! I am a not a bad dragon!*" or something?

"Puh. Puh, puh. Ree, ree. Zoo...eway...cup..."

Even just saying, "Please wake up," with this anatomy was difficult. Maybe when I leveled up Human Transformation more, I'd be able to speak better. Or perhaps I just needed practice.

"U-ugh...nyaah..." Nina's eyes popped open, and all the blood drained out of her face. "A-aah...!" She was so frightened she could barely speak. Her round eyes were wide, her mouth opened and closing helplessly.

Yeah, I was pretty much still a dragon. But I couldn't give up!

"P-please don't eat me! I'm not tasty!"

Yep. Definitely a dragon.

Nina flailed weakly, trying to escape my grip. I let go of her and took a step backward. How many seconds did I have left?

Illusia

Species: Plague Dragon

Status: Human Form Lv 3

Lv: 22/75

HP: 130/260

I'd burned through half of my MP already! I only had 97 seconds left! One minute and thirty-seven seconds. I gave up on asking her about herself. I should just focus on gaining her trust. Ahhh...maybe I should have found her some food first. She was so thin, she was probably starving. Judging by how she was treated by the man in the carriage, I bet she was dehydrated too.

I should've at least prepared a cactus for her to eat. We just had the pathetic bits the ballrabbit had already nibbled through. I bet the rabbit's meat was tender and delicious, but there was no way I was gonna cook it up...though it probably tasted incredible...

This was not the time to dwell on eating my friends. Regardless, I needed to convince her that I was not an enemy. I could get her some food after my Human Transformation wore off; I only had a minute left to show her I was trustworthy. If I turned back into a dragon before I could make her understand, this would all be a waste of time. Should I dance? Try to make her laugh? That would make the minute go too quickly. And she'd probably think I was doing a spell or something.

"Waay..."

"Nyaah!"

I spoke in my hoarse voice, and she trembled. Agh, this is no use! I just can't talk properly. My nerves and helplessness were rising. I poked my throat. *Come on and work, vocal cords! Please, you're my only hope right now!*

I was running out of time. Turns out three minutes isn't that long at all. You can't do anything in three minutes! I was about to turn back into a dragon. She might not be more afraid of my dragon form, but my speaking ability would be even worse. Okay, I had to say *something*.

I could tell her I saved her, but with this demonic appearance she wouldn't believe me. I didn't look like the kind of monster who rescued people—more like the kind that devoured them while laughing.

Maybe I should explain my appearance? Tell her that deep down inside, I was

a human? A human trapped in a dragon's body? That sounded like nonsense. She'd probably still run away if I said that.

My MP was burning away as I sat there thinking. No time. I just had to tell the truth.

"I...I...w-was turned...into a...m-monster. I. Used to be...human."

I said it! Regardless of whether she would believe me, it wasn't a lie. I *did* used to be human, just not in this particular world. But no time to sweat the details.

Hesitantly, Nina looked into my eyes. She blinked. "U-um...you used to be...a human?"

"Y-yes."

It worked, it's working! I'm so close. She was going to trust me, I just knew it!



“Danger...here. I take you...safe place. Where you want...” I made it that far before I felt my body start to grow, my heartbeat getting louder and louder. An intense fatigue spread through me. *Ugh, at least let me finish my sentence!*

St-status! Status check!

Illusia

Species: Plague Dragon

Status: Human Form Lv 3

Lv: 22/75

HP: 130/260

MP: 4/199

Wow, I’d almost hit my time limit! *Please just wait ten more seconds! Let her tell me where she wants to go!* I concentrated on flooding my veins with more MP.

Come on, Automatic MP Recover! If I had that, I’d be able to stay human for longer...

Normal Skill “Human Transformation” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

No, not that! Leveling that skill does nothing for me right now! Though it is pretty cool! Thanks!

Hopefully at level 4 I’d finally start looking more normal. But that didn’t help me right now—it didn’t stop me from growing larger. My MP kept ticking away, sluggishness filling me, my consciousness going hazy, like I was spacing out. I could feel my skin getting tougher and my claws and fangs growing longer. In just a few moments I’d be back to my regular form.

“Nyaah?!” Nina’s eyes widened as she watched me transform into a dragon. She backed away, collapsing weakly onto the ground. *Hey, you don’t have to be that scared!* But this wasn’t unsalvageable, right? I already told her that I got turned into a monster! Though I did forget to mention that monster was a huge

dragon.

I pressed my stomach to the ground and lowered my head, trying to convey that I wasn't a threat. The ballrabbit had been watching our whole exchange, and as soon as I got low enough, it came happily over to climb on top of my head. It let out a relieved "*Pfeff!*" It wasn't afraid of me anymore.

Without Human Transformation, I had to explain my situation with only gestures. The desert was too dangerous for Nina to be wandering alone. With her stats, she couldn't even defeat a panther.

"*R-raar.*" Nina didn't respond. Puzzled, I leaned forward.

Did she pass out in fear? I guess watching someone turn into a dragon was pretty shocking. I felt so overwhelmed with fatigue that I was close to unconsciousness myself with my MP so low. I had to be more careful with this skill going forward.

With the ballrabbit's fluffy body on my head, I slowly fell asleep.

Interlude:

The Hero's Epic Tale

“SMOKED MOTARICAMEL MEAT! I’m packing it in early today, so I’ll sell it at a discount!” A cheerful voice rang out across the marketplace. I followed the sound to a stall hung with meat and locked eyes with the merchant. He flushed, scratching bashfully at his head.

“Y-you’re the hero Illusia! I didn’t know you were here!” A few other people stopped in their tracks, turning to look at me.

I smiled and waved at the merchant. His face lit up and he bowed his head respectfully, again and again. Turning aside, I continued down the road. My smile slid off my face, and I cracked my neck. I knew I was in public, but I really wished merchants would stop doing that. I glanced over my shoulder. He was back at it, trying to get people to buy his meat. Several shoppers were gathered around the stall. Guess it was working.

I snorted. Was it just me, or were there more people in this country than there used to be? Returning to your hometown after time away really gave you a new perspective. There were so many things I could comment on...but most of all, the greedy parasites.

This was the desert Harunae, chock-full of predators and low on resources. A crappy place to live, at least until powerful magicians constructed the magical barrier to ward off the monsters. That, combined with resources received from neighboring countries, made this a viable city. And the only reason they went to all that trouble was due to the legend that this land was a place where heroes were born.

Heroes like me.

Eighteen years ago, I was born in this city as a hero and brought to the temple. They raised me, never telling me the names of my parents; I was too young to even remember them. The bishop was the one to call me Illusia.

In all honesty, my hidden past didn’t bother me much. The bishop let it slip

once that I had been the oldest son born to a very poor family. I was lucky to be a hero.

Here in Harunae, the difference between the rich and poor was stark. The bishops took the temple donations for themselves and then created reasons to distribute them to their own families, pocketing the money meant for the church. The underclass remained that way because mobility was nonexistent—the city was surrounded by a desert filled with dangerous monsters. The rich took advantage of that. Since there was no way for the poor to escape, they could use them however they wanted.

No, I definitely wouldn't have wanted to grow up in a poor family. What would be the point of even living?

I was probably the only person who could walk freely through the desert, since I had the protection of the gods. Just the other day, I met an idiotic slave trader who whined about all his merchandise getting eaten by a monster. He had a pair of good horses, but they were no match for the desert.

There *were* safer routes, but they required passage through a country that forbade the enslavement of demi-humans. Obviously, he couldn't take his slaves that way.

When I was fourteen, I'd followed tradition and set out to explore the world. I'd seen countless terrible things across many kingdoms, but when it came to rotten rich people, nowhere held a candle to Harunae. Still, whenever I was nearby, I always came back for a visit.

"Illusia! I heard rumors you were back in town!"

"Look, the hero!"

Envious stares followed me even as I walked around town. Inwardly, I sneered. I wondered how their tune might change if they ever discovered I'd been born in poverty.

Regardless, today I was here for a reason.

I plastered on a smile and waved at the greedy fools. That was all it took for them to start screeching like a bunch of monkeys. As tiresome as this place was, at least they knew how to appreciate me. My name wasn't widely known

elsewhere. At least, not yet.

“U-um, excuse me. I’ve always wanted to talk to a hero...!” A little girl scampered over from the side of the road. I stopped to look at her. A woman—her mother, I assumed—appeared behind her, offering me a wry smile.

“I’m so sorry.” She grabbed the girl’s hand, trying to pull her away. The little girl wouldn’t budge.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. I touched the woman’s arm, urging her to let the girl go. She grinned brightly up at me. I kicked her in her stomach.

“Oof!” She landed on her side, coughing. The crowd went deathly silent. Their faces grew troubled as they stared at me.

Whoops, my leg slipped. It’s a bad habit of mine.

There were two things I really hated. Stupid kids, and someone getting in my way.

A potentially reputation-destroying action, but I wasn’t worried. I was the symbol of our country; speaking badly of me was blasphemy against the church. No story would get very far.

Luckily, fewer people were milling around than before. I needed to be on my way.

The detention camp was right next to the temple. The church ran it to maintain law and order in Harunae, and I had business there.

Ordinary citizens were not allowed to enter, and even those permitted had to fill out extensive paperwork. Mostly it was only jailers inside. I was, of course, the only exception.

When the jailers saw me, they hastily bowed their heads. I strode down the hallway and stopped before a cell.

“Been awhile, Knight Commander Adoff. Or should I say, *former* Knight Commander.” I grinned at the large, muscular man behind the bars. He glared at me. “You’re having a pretty rough time, aren’t you? Accused of killing both your fiancée and your younger brother.”

Adoff’s title of Knight Commander had been stripped from him when he was

arrested and thrown in jail. They'd barely investigated, since the case also concerned misappropriated funds from the church. The bishop just locked him up and threw away the key—he was that sort of guy.

“Are you just here to laugh at me?” Adoff asked in a low, harsh voice.

In the past I'd known him to be someone who chose his words carefully, but the time for delicacy had passed. Anyone would be angry over the deaths of their loved ones, let alone someone bringing it up so flippantly. No wonder he was furious.

“Don't be ridiculous, not even *I* would do that. All that stuff in the past...I know now that it was all my fault. I feel terrible about how conceited I was. I'm ashamed I never apologized before today, Knight Comm—*Sir* Adoff.”

His expression turned pained. I liked it.

“I truly believe that you were falsely accused, Sir Adoff. I can tell good people from bad people.” Well, if they were incredibly obvious about it, that is. But I'd invented this special power for myself a while ago. A convenient skill.

“Stop calling me Sir.”

“Hm? Come on, don't put yourself down. I know they took your title, but...”

“It means nothing to me coming from your lips. The only thing different from four years ago is your appearance.”

I felt a scowl forming between my eyebrows. I reached up to touch it, hiding it under a smile. “You've become awfully short-tempered, haven't you? So be it. As much as it pains me, I'll just call you Adoff from now on.” I feigned distress, letting it bleed into my voice. “I told the bishop that you couldn't possibly be capable of killing your fiancée and brother. And I asked him to release you.”

“As if he would! He's the one who framed me in the first place!” Adoff aimed a punch at the cell wall. The theatrics made me want to laugh, but I bit the inside of my cheek.

“You're understandably suspicious, I get that. I assure you that the bishop would never do such a thing. As a matter of fact, he agreed to let me chaperone you around for the day. Of course...you'd have to be cursed to restrict the

freedom of your own actions.”

“R-really? But what could I do in just one day...?”

“Why, you could perform meritorious deeds to regain everyone’s trust! Then we’ll get the bishop to offer you more time, and we’ll catch the real killer. Let me help you. Please.”

“What...what sort of deeds could I perform...?”

I lifted my hand to cover my smile. He’d always been such a simple man. I wasn’t the only one who hadn’t changed in four years.

“Come to think of it, I heard a rumor that a merchant’s carriage was attacked by a Dark Dragon. People are even saying that it’s a Plague Dragon. If that’s true, it could lay waste to Harunae if nothing is done. The church’s scouting regiment is looking into it, but who knows how long that will take. Think about it...if *you* slew the Plague Dragon, that would change everything. I’ve heard you’ve been pleading with the jailers to let you investigate your family’s deaths. If you killed a dragon, maybe they’d listen.”

Adoff stood up and swallowed hard. I turned my back to the cell.

“I’m going to a lot of trouble for you. I’ll speak to the bishop and bring you news.”

“I-Illusia!” He yelled my name. “I’m...sorry I doubted you. I’m very, very grateful for this.”

“Of course, but I’m only doing the right thing. I’m a hero, after all.” With those final words, I turned and left him in his cell, more quickly than was dignified. I had to. I couldn’t stop the laughter.



Four years ago, Adoff and I set to resolve a dispute in mock combat. He beat me in public, absolutely humiliating me. Then he lectured me, correcting my form in front of everyone. I'd never forgotten that shame for a moment. It was the worst day of my life.

I didn't want them to execute him. That would be boring. I needed him to realize that what he did to me was wrong. I needed to humiliate him like he'd done to me, and leave him to die with regret and hatred in his heart. That was what he got for setting himself against me.

Chapter 4:

Thorny Spawn

Part 1

NIGHT HAD FALLEN by the time I woke up. The ballrabbit was intent on me and Nina. It should have been in its burrow by now, but its ears were pricked up, alert, scanning our surroundings.

When it saw me, it let out a relieved, “*Pfeff!*” Then it promptly dug a hole and climbed inside. It sounded so proud of itself that I smiled. It must have pushed itself past exhaustion to keep us safe.

On a normal day, a monster’s approach would wake me, but my drained MP left me comatose. I was ashamed for assuming the ballrabbit only cared about food. I’d get it something tasty as an apology.

After all, we wouldn’t be able to stay together forever.

Alert from my long rest, I stayed up and kept watch. Nina groaned in her sleep; she must be dehydrated. I rummaged through the remnants of the cactuses, but most of the flesh had been completely devoured or gone dry from the hot desert sun. I finally found one bit that still had some juice, buried beneath a bunch of other pieces, sparing it from the heat.

I held the cactus over Nina’s face and squeezed a drop of water into her mouth. I gave her just a little bit at a time, not wanting to choke her. I only stopped when her groans faded away.

I felt bad that she was sleeping on the rough sand, so I gathered up a bunch of the cactus skins and tucked them underneath her. It was a little sticky but way better than the ground. Maybe.

Morning came at last, and the ballrabbit emerged from its burrow, shaking the sand off its head. Nina was still asleep. She was breathing, but she wasn’t in great shape. Hunger and the heat were taking a toll on her body.

She’d probably never been healthy, and the dry desert air wasn’t helping. She needed food and water, but all we had were the leftover cactuses. I’d already squeezed out all the moisture that I could. If I’d known this was going to happen, I wouldn’t have eaten so much.

Manipulative or not, Nina would trust me more if I fed her. The ballrabbit had warmed up to me right away. Though it really *was* all about food.

I'd leave the rabbit to look after Nina while I was gone. It could scare off an F- or E-rank monster by itself, though D-rank or above would mean trouble. I decided to keep an eye out, and if I saw any large monsters going their way, I'd turn back immediately. That left me with a limited range.

Leaving them behind, I loped through the desert. I was hoping for something nearby, but I doubted I'd be that lucky. Maybe I could get moisture from a camel? I remembered reading somewhere they stored water and fat in their humps.

Fluids were my first priority. If I didn't get some into Nina fast, she would die. The rabbit's Rest spell could buy her more time, but it couldn't keep her alive forever.

I wished I could turn seawater into water suitable for drinking. I knew, distantly, that there were ways to do that.

I could boil the water and collect the steam in containers, then allow it to cool, letting it condense back into water—a process called distillation. Unrealistic at the moment. I had the tools to heat up the water and turn it into steam, but nothing to help me catch and return that steam to water. Maybe I could do it with an animal skin and a deep pit, but Nina was human, and, though this world was plenty unhygienic, she wouldn't have the natural resistance to bacteria that a monster would. As a demi-human, she was probably tougher than average, but I didn't want to risk it.

That left two choices, a camel or a cactus, but as I ran through the desert, I couldn't find either. Strange. I'd seen a ton yesterday.

Had being inside my mouth contributed to her injuries? She would have gotten jostled on my back too. She might have even fallen off.

My plan was to bring food back to her until she was well enough to balance and then put her on my back. Leaving her alone now made me anxious. Maybe I should have cradled her between my wings as she slept, bringing her along. Fighting with her asleep on my back would be difficult, but I could forage for cactuses just fine.

Jostling her around would exacerbate her condition, though, and there was the Dragon Scale Powder to think about...

Still, I worried about leaving her in the ballrabbit's care. I knew there were strong, small, and fast monsters out there...

The ballrabbit wouldn't...*eat* Nina, would it? I didn't want to add that to my list of worries. I glanced behind as I ran.

The two of them were only dots in the distance now. Without any grass or trees to break the sight line, I could check on them from far away, but that wouldn't help if I couldn't get back in time.

This is as far as I should go.

The ballrabbit shook sand off its ears and looked my way. Maybe it could tell what I was nervous about.

You're right, Ballrabbit. I need to get Nina food and water as quickly as possible. This was no time to agonize over what-ifs. I'd just dash out and dash back. *Please protect Nina, Ballrabbit.*

I used Roll and raced away from the two of them. I hated it, but I forced myself to focus. Cactuses and camels.

Come on, cactuses and camels, come on, cactuses and camels! But not centipedes, for real though. If I never see one of those again, it will be too soon.

After Rolling for a while, I came across something green and lumpy. It had to be a cactus—they were the only things that grew here. I was relieved to have found some so quickly.

I wanted to move fast, and that limited how much I could carry, but I needed a few each for Nina and Ballrabbit, though the rabbit always wanted way more than just a few. Eh, whatever. It always ate so much; it had enough calories saved up. *You could stand to lose a little weight, Desert Darling! Even if you never seem to gain anything no matter how much you eat.*

I made a beeline for the green lump, wondering if my sense of distance was off. Using Roll sometimes left me disoriented, but I thought I'd gotten used to it. I guessed it could still happen. The cactus probably just looked closer than it

was because I had no landmarks to gauge distance with.

But as I drew nearer, I realized that the cactus was close to four meters long, lying on its side like a caterpillar. The damn thing was only slightly smaller than I was. This cactus was, like, record-breaking huge. I could only carry a fraction of it.

I had to bring Nina and the ballrabbit back here sometime. This was like winning the cactus lottery.

As I got closer and started to slow down...the cactus began swaying and slowly rose from the ground.

Part 2

THE CACTUS STRETCHED out what might have been its neck, beginning to groan. I slammed the breaks on Roll. Not an ordinary cactus after all, but a green lump covered in spines with a warped, swollen body. It had beady little eyes and an enormous mouth.

Well, I did say I could use a cactus or a camel. I just wasn't expecting a two-in-one deal!

The cactus camel opened its jaws and released an ooze of sticky light green liquid, like the fluids inside of a plant.

Ugh, that's disgusting. What's your problem, buddy? Drooling all over the place.

I needed some info on it.

Cactus Thorfilius: Rank C. After living for over 200 years, the cactus thorpupa gains sentience and immense magical power. Its four legs support its massive body weight, and its humps give it the ability to endlessly absorb water. It resembles a camel in shape, and its hide is strengthened by magic and covered in tough spines.

It pretends to be a normal plant in the desert, waiting for monsters to approach in search of food. It then weakens them with magic and eats them.

"Thorfilius" means "thorny child."

Wait, this is an evolved form of a cactus? C-rank...so it might look silly, but it was as powerful as the Little Rock Dragon—certainly not an enemy to scoff at. I had no idea how it was going to come at me, but I figured I'd better check its stats first.

Species: Cactus Thorfilius

Status: Normal

Lv: 46/50

HP: 308/308

MP: 185/185

Attack: 120

Defense: 198

Magic: 210

Agility: 56

Rank: C—

Special Skills:

Earth Type: Lv —

Photosynthesis: Lv 5

Water Storage: Lv 6

Thorn Armor: Lv 5

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 3

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 3

Resistance Skills:

Drought Resistance: Lv 4

Heat Resistance: Lv 5

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Mirage: Lv 4

Gastric Acid: Lv 3

Clay: Lv 5

Weak: Lv 3

Iron Maiden: Lv 6

Bite: Lv 2

One Thousand Needles: Lv 2

Sand Breath: Lv 1

Sandstorm: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Plant God's Spawn: Lv —

Senescent: Lv 2

Why is its level so high?!

A great fight for experience point gain, but I *really* couldn't underestimate this guy! Its HP, Defense, and Magic were all higher than mine. Ideally I wouldn't fight it at all, but I couldn't let such a good source of fluids get away. And I couldn't leave the ballrabbit and Nina alone for much longer.

I'm sure I can take it. Its Attack is pretty low, and it's slow. I know from firsthand experience that speed and offense are essential in a fight. All the HP and defense in the world are worthless if you can't drain your enemy's health. And magic has a limit.

All right, time to level up.

I watched the thorny camel from a distance, waiting to see what it would do. It stood up, beady little eyes focused on me. It didn't move a muscle. Now we were both standing here stupidly, waiting for the other to strike first. Fine. If it had to be me, so be it.

I couldn't use Scorching Breath, not even from this far away. It would dry up the water we so desperately needed. I had only one option—a skill I hadn't used in a long time.

I focused magical energy in my wings and flapped hard, pushing the force forward. This was Whirlwind Slash, a skill that flung blades of wind at my enemies.

The first magical burst of air did nothing, the second scratched it, and the third broke off its needles. The fourth cut into its skin.

Normal Skill “Whirlwind Slash” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Hey, my skill leveled up! I sent an even sharper gale of wind blades raining down upon the thorny camel. It crouched, protecting its head, but I didn't stop flapping. I beat my wings harder and harder as I got closer, slicing up the surface of the camel's body.

Keep going, keep going! Focus every single bit of magical energy into this attack!

The last time I used this skill was during my fight with the Little Rock Dragon. It barely did any damage, so I'd dismissed it. But Whirlwind Slash was *powerful*.

There was no way the thorny camel could get close to me with those injured legs. About half of my MP was gone, but it still hadn't moved. I stopped flapping my wings and checked its status.

Cannot locate target.

Huh...?

What did that mean? I thought back to my battle with the panther, when it made itself look like a rock and I slammed right into it. Right, that was the Mirage skill. And the thorny camel had Mirage too!

It must have vanished, leaving behind a bunch of cactuses for me to decimate with Whirlwind Slash. I'd been so focused that I hadn't even noticed. And now I'd just burned away half my MP for nothing.

The thorny camel was plotting something. Where was it? I had to be ready for anything.

I kicked off into the air and immediately felt a needle in the back of my knee. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it coming. *C'mon, stop it!*

I pushed through the pain, flapping my wings harder to remain airborne. My legs hurt. Despite its stats, this guy was tough. I hadn't taken much damage, but I couldn't just ignore it. Those needles went right through my skin. It must have had some special skill that could penetrate my scales, just like the slime.

This isn't gonna be as easy as I thought, but I won't fall for Mirage again. This cactus camel was dangerous but unsophisticated. If I paid attention, it would

make a mistake. I was going to defeat it and bring my friends a feast.

Part 3

STILL AIRBORNE, I flapped my wings and released another Whirlwind Slash. The blades tore through the air, slicing into the thorny camel's flesh. Thick, sticky liquid dribbled out, sweetness filling the air. Even in the heat of battle, my mouth started to water.

The camel hunched over in a defensive stance, its eyes open to glare at me. *Sorry, Mr. Camel, but there's no way I'm getting close to you. I'm just gonna whittle down your HP from here!*

The camel released its defensive stance and stood up, no doubt realizing it was just exhausting itself. A whirl of sand rose around its body; that had to be Sandstorm. It was kind of a letdown, honestly. I could still see the camel just fine through the swirling dust. Although it might make it harder for me to detect when it used Mirage.

I hated to use up my MP, but I'd just have to use View Status often. It felt cheap, but Mirage couldn't fool a skill that literally spelled out stats.

Using Whirlwind Slash nonstop while airborne was hard on my wings. I needed to land. I checked with View Status to make sure this camel was real, then dropped altitude. A strange noise came from just below me.

Instincts prickling, I altered my trajectory as I descended. A sharp column of sand burst from the ground exactly where I had just been, immediately crumbling and adding to the sandstorm.

I used Roll to get out of the way, whapping my tail on the ground to lessen the impact as I landed. I jumped back into the air right away.

That was too close. Could it control sand? No, wait...that must have been its Clay skill. The claybear could do the same thing, but the camel was way bigger.

It had to be using Clay to make sand columns to hide behind with Mirage, supplementing it with Sandstorm. Not only was Sandstorm affecting my vision, it impaired my hearing too. I almost didn't notice the rumbling of the sand right below me until it was too late.

Seriously, monsters with high MP freak me out. I'd been discounting Magic as a useful attribute, but maybe I just hadn't met anything that really knew how to use it. Now that I thought about it, the only super-intelligent monster I knew in the forest was the black lizard.

I didn't want to risk getting too close; I considered just retreating and using Whirlwind Slash again. Short-range attacks would be useless—its thorny skin would repel my punches. Just gradually whittling away its HP seemed the way to go.

I heard something slicing through the air, and I quickly wrapped my wings around myself to guard. Three needles sank in.

It had used Mirage to hide and shoot needles at me again! They were so tiny I couldn't spot them in time. The only way to dodge a long-range attack like that was picking up sounds in the storm, and with my senses dulled—whoa!

I twisted my body out of the way of a needle heading straight for my neck. It wobbled, then vanished, stabbing me in the chest instead.

Damn it! I'd *just* decided I wasn't going to trust my senses! I should've dodged in the opposite direction!

I closed my eyes. Watching for the needles was worthless. Losing my sense of sight would be tricky, but these illusions were actively dangerous. I'd just have to rely on my sense of hearing.

Should I dodge the needles and then follow up with a Whirlwind Slash? No, it has Automatic HP Recovery, I can't draw this out. Should I just withstand the needles and throw myself in directly? Its attack power was low—if it came to a battle of blows, I could take it down. Its illusions and long-range skills made being at a distance work against me.

I used Whirlwind Slash and my wings to ward off the needles as I pushed in closer. Even if it was messing with my senses, I could still trace the source of the attacks.

The sandstorm was growing stronger, but I could make out the shape of the camel in front of me. I let off Whirlwind Slash with all my might, cutting through the sand.

I spread my wings and followed the blades, flying low as I rushed at my enemy. I smashed right into it, throwing it off balance. But then I kept going, flying on past it. Just as I'd expected, the camel I'd seen was the illusion. It had realized that it couldn't cover up the direction the needles were coming from, but it could still cheat the distance. But I'd figured it would do that—I used to be human, my strategy was better, and I could use View Status to check if it was using Mirage.

Still, it was smarter than the average monster. Or plant. Whatever.

A hard tower of earth shot out behind me, no doubt aiming for where it expected me to be when its Mirage fooled me.

Yeah, not gonna fall for that one again, buddy! My blades cut through the sandstorm, which lessened the noise, and I let Psychic Sense tell me exactly where the camel was.

I checked its status. Yeah, this was the real one. Cheating or not, this was life or death.

I flew toward it, letting loose a Whirlwind Slash at its head. It ducked but couldn't dodge. The thorns protecting its right side scattered in all directions. Its skin split, sticky liquid streaming out.

The thorny camel swayed wildly. I dug my claws into the open wound and gripped on tight. Then I spun around and pulled its head clean off.

Normal Skill “Neckbreaker” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

The camel's head flew, scattering liquid everywhere. I did a few neat spins in the air and then turned back toward it. Its body fell to the ground with a loud crash.

Gained 504 Experience Points.

Special Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 504 Experience Points.

Hey, that was a lot! I should target high-level enemies from now on.

Minus the giant centipedes. Screw those guys.

Plague Dragon Lv 22 has become Lv 29.

Yeah, that's what I'm talking about! I shook off my sticky hands, flinging white fluid all around. Time to check my own status.

Illusia

Species: Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 29/75

HP: 182/293

MP: 41/213

Attack: 266

Defense: 191

Magic: 182

Agility: 172

Rank: B—

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 5

Divine Voice: Lv 4

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Fly: Lv 5

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 4

Dark Type: Lv —

Wicked Dragon: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 3

Psychic Sense: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 4

Falling Resistance: Lv 5

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 5

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6

Magic Resistance: Lv 3

Dark Resistance: Lv 3

Light Resistance: Lv 2

Fear Resistance: Lv 2

Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 3

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 6

View Status: Lv 6

Scorching Breath: Lv 5

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 3

Disease Breath: Lv 3

Venom Fangs: Lv 3

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 4

Dragon Tail: Lv 1

Bellow: Lv 2

Meteorite: Lv 2

Nutcracker: Lv 3

Human Transformation: Lv 4

Whirlwind Slash: Lv 2

Neckbreaker Lv 3

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 3

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 2

King of Evasion: Lv 2

Protective Spirit: Lv 6

Itty-Bitty Hero: Lv 5

Wrongdoer: Lv 6

Calamity: Lv 5

Chicken Runner: Lv 2

Mr. Chef: Lv 4

Dastardly King: Lv 4

Stalwart: Lv 2

Giant Killer: Lv 1

Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4

Clan Boss: Lv 1

Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 1

Cool, everything went up a lot. Still...leveling would probably slow down soon, and I had 46 more levels until my next evolution. I hoped to have some decent choices, but the Plague Dragon trajectory seemed bleak.

Well, what's done is done. If I focused on raising skills like Protective Spirit and Itty-Bitty Hero, maybe I could turn things around. Protective Spirit made acquiring white magic easier. Maybe the ballrabbit would be my mentor and teach me Rest.

My HP was fine, but my MP was really depleted. I'd used Whirwind Slash a ton. Before now, most of my fights had been very physical; in the future I'd need to be more careful about overusing magic. I didn't want to end up with zero MP when I needed it most. But all in all, the spiky camel hadn't been that bad. I was glad I never got hit with Clay.

Enough what-ifs. I need to bring food back to my friends.

I started removing the needles from the camel's body, careful not to poke myself. When that was finished, I cut off its humps and legs.

With the body split open, the sun would quickly dry out its insides. I considered bringing Nina and the ballrabbit back with me to get the rest. I'd put way too much effort into this to let most of it go to waste.

Or maybe it'd be better to move my base out here. The cactus camel was a little tough, but now that I'd removed the needles, Nina could use the skin to sleep on.

I now had another problem—I had no way to carry back the bits of thorny camel. If I held it in my arms while I used Roll, I'd lose most of it, but walking would take forever. I was a lot farther away than I'd meant to go.

Okay, well. I had no choice but to put it in my mouth and Roll home. The ballrabbit and Nina might not like it, but it was either that or no water.

I stuffed in as much of it as I could and activated Roll. Ugh, this sucked. It was hard to breathe, and the cactus skin tickled the back of my throat so much I almost spit it out.

Ah! I accidentally swallowed some of it! My nose is all plugged up now! I'm gonna die, I'm dying, I can't take this!

It was a struggle, but I followed the trail I'd made and somehow managed to return. Though I still insist I nearly kicked it.

I saw Nina right away, still lying on the cactus skins where I'd left her.

Wait, where was the ballrabbit? My mouth was full and I couldn't speak. I stomped lightly on the ground. The sand nearby trembled, and out it popped.

It had something in its mouth —maybe the tail of a sand-colored shrimp? As I stared at it, it chomped down and swallowed. *"Pfeff!"* it said, as if nothing had happened. Green fluids stained the edges of its mouth.

It was stronger now, I guess. But I wished it wouldn't go hunting while it was supposed to be watching Nina.

Well, whatever. Everyone is safe and sound, and that's all that matters.

"Pfeff! Pfeff!" The ballrabbit ran over to me happily, like a little girl eager to see what her daddy brought her back from his long business trip. *Wow, what was my previous life like if that's the first thing that came to mind?*

I gritted my back teeth and aimed downward. Then I spit out everything that was in my mouth. A mountain of cactus...covered in my saliva. The ballrabbit's ears pricked up for a moment, then dropped. It seemed to be in shock. Then it whapped me on the same spot where the cactus had shot me with its needles.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry! But there's a mountain of cactuses close by! I can take you there!

Part 4

I CUT THE CACTUS into smaller pieces for easier eating. Gathering up the bits with the least saliva on them, I lay them out on top of the skin to keep them out of the sand.

The ballrabbit edged over cautiously, but I scooped it up with my tail and set it down a distance away. *Sorry, but that's for Nina. Let her have it.*

Normal Skill “Dragon Tail” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

My skill leveled up just from that? Guess I should use my tail more often.

“Pfeff! Pfeff!” The ballrabbit started whapping my legs with its ears.

Just hang in there, all right? You can have the cactuses that got covered in my spit.

“Pfeff...” The rabbit’s ears drooped down. It glared at me and then dragged itself over to the mountain of saliva-covered cactuses.

Oh, so you’re just gonna go for it? You’ve got guts, kid. I respect it.

Meanwhile, Nina woke up. She looked at me and made a “nyah!” noise, then scrambled backward.

“Ra—” I tried to reassure her, but at the first syllable, Nina screamed “Nyah!” again, so I stopped. Instead, I gestured toward the cactus with the tip of my claw and tried to put on my friendliest smile. I was probably just squinting my eyes.

Nina stared at me with such an odd look on her face. Her cat eyes opened wide. She looked down at the cactus pieces, then back over to me. I crouched to make myself look less intimidating, lowering my gaze.

“Um...are you trying to say...this is for me?” Oh good, she got my message.

I nodded emphatically, and she giggled. She seemed less nervous now.

“Th-thank you!” That made me tear up. She was only the second person in this world to ever thank me.

I was so moved that I stood up. My sudden movement startled her and she

covered her body with her arms, trembling slightly. *Ugh, come on. Cut me a break here.*

The ballrabbit spit out a cactus skin and dragged its ears over toward a nervous Nina. What was it going to do? As the rabbit got closer, Nina slowly lowered her arms. “A ballrabbit? Are you the dragon’s emergency food supply...?”

No! I wouldn’t do that! I shook my head back and forth.

“*Pfeff, pfeff!*” The ballrabbit hopped around Nina’s feet. Hesitantly, she picked it up. The rabbit looked pleased and settled into her arms.

“S-so cute.” Nina started to relax, and the rabbit gave me a triumphant look. I was glad it calmed her down, but I was slightly annoyed. *Didn’t you try to eat her, Ballrabbit?*

I guess appearances really *were* important. If I’d gone down a different evolution path, maybe she would have looked at me like that too. I wished I was a fluffy dragon—a sheep dragon or a cloud dragon, maybe. Thinking back on how many options I’d had, I was sure that with the right Title Skills, just about anything was possible.

Should I try and aim for that now? How? By eating sheep every day?

Nina would get scared if I got too close to her, so I backed up. I gestured toward the cactus pieces from about ten meters away. She must be so thirsty, but her fear was keeping her from the food. She’d thanked me, but anyone would be hesitant to accept a meal from a dragon.

Very slowly, she bowed toward me and approached the cactus pile, keeping a wary eye out as she picked one up.

Hey, I’m not telling you to eat so I can fatten you up! You can relax, I promise! I’ve never eaten a human in my life!

Nina held the cactus but didn’t put it in her mouth. She’d been brought here in that carriage; maybe she just wasn’t familiar with the desert and didn’t know it was edible. But it had a sweet scent, and if she was starving, she’d eat it. I figured she was still too afraid of me.

“Pfeff!” The ballrabbit rubbed against Nina’s legs with a reassuring chirp. It glanced over at me, narrowed its eyes, and then shook its head slightly.

Oh, maybe Nina was so hesitant because she thought my squinting meant I was angry?

The ballrabbit made several gestures, letting me know I was staring too much, putting too much pressure on her. I tried to adjust my behavior accordingly. Finally, Nina put a piece of the cactus in her mouth.

After one bite she blinked in surprise. I didn’t blame her—it tasted way better than it looked. She ate bite after bite, just like I thought she would. I noticed the ballrabbit stealing bits here and there, but it had earned that.

When Nina finished, maybe I could use Human Transformation again to ask where she wanted me to bring her. That might be less intimidating than a dragon wildly gesturing. I’d need to keep a close eye on my MP, though. I didn’t want to pass out again.

All right, I guess I’ll take care of the gross, spitty cactuses. But the sight of them was really unappetizing. Surely the second they hit air bacteria grew all over. *Yeah, I just can’t put something that came outta my mouth back in it.*

It probably wasn’t a great experience for the ballrabbit either. *Sorry, buddy.* It ate them anyway. Now I just felt guilty.

Part 5

WHILE NINA ATE, I watched her from a safe distance. Occasionally we'd make awkward eye contact, but the ballrabbit would glare at me and I'd lower my gaze. Finally, Nina was done. The rabbit gobbled up everything she'd left behind. Man, what even was inside its stomach? It ate way more than its body weight every day, and yet its outward appearance never changed.

Nina's color had greatly improved, and she seemed much happier. She probably hadn't had a decent meal in a long time.

I guess I should try to talk to her now.

Only Human Transformation burned up so much MP, one point per second. I had to know *exactly* what I wanted to say this time. My fight with the thorny camel left it partially depleted, and I didn't want to risk hitting zero.

I needed to pre-plan the information I wanted to convey, how to bring it up, and how to respond to her questions. Any mistakes would waste my MP. If I *really* screwed up, she might pass out like she did last time. With the Dragon Scale Powder, I wasn't sure how long we could stay together. I couldn't risk having to do this over and over again.

I might have Human Transformation up to level 4, but looking slightly humanoid might make me even more frightening than I was now. That's what they call the "uncanny valley" phenomenon.

Nina walking toward me pulled me out of my thoughts. She still seemed a little scared, holding the ballrabbit tightly in her arms. The rabbit's eyes were narrowed happily as it snuggled against her.

"Pfeff..."

Wow, I guess you've got a new best friend. Way to replace me.

"Th-thank you so much for the food... Are you the one who saved me?"

"Grah." I made a low noise of affirmation.

This was good, right? Perfect timing. *Let's check how much MP I have...*

Illusia

Species: Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 29/75

HP: 182/293

MP: 41/213

Only forty seconds? God, that's barely time for a single sentence! If I didn't leave some for later I'd pass out again. Thirty seconds was my limit. Pretty pathetic compared to the three and a half minutes I had last time.

Regardless, I needed to ask Nina her plans. I couldn't leave her alone with all the monsters, and I couldn't just drag her along with me. The Dragon Scale Powder was too dangerous.

I mentally prepared myself, took a deep breath, and used Human Transformation. Heat flooded my body, along with that familiar compression. It didn't hurt as much as before. Maybe it was because I was level 4, or maybe I was just getting used to it.

My form felt more stable than it did before too. If I leveled it up one more time, I probably couldn't run around naked anymore. I still had a tail, scales, and fangs, though. But I could analyze my transformation later.

This was the second time Nina had seen me looking like this, and she seemed less freaked out than before. She just squeezed the rabbit a little tighter, making it writhe painfully and whap her arms with its ears.

"Where. You want. Go? Here. Dangerous. I. Take you."

"Oh." Nina made a little noise and then fell silent. My MP continued to drain.

Say something. Please say something. Did I ask the question wrong? Is it how I look? Is she afraid if she tells me where she's from, I'll go and destroy her home?

"I...don't know where I should go." Nina looked down sadly. The rabbit made

an encouraging noise. I supposed she felt she couldn't return home, but I absolutely couldn't take her to where that slave trader was either. That tubby jerk had tried to feed her to a centipede.

"But. Here is—" God, my MP was almost gone.

Illusia

Species: Plague Dragon

Status: Human Form Lv 4

Lv: 29/75

HP: 91/293

MP: 18/213

Keeping this up was too dangerous. At least she knew what I wanted now, and communicating through gestures would be easier. I took a few steps back and then returned to my dragon form.

Nina's realization that she had nowhere to go seemed to leave her depressed. I wished she could stay with me, but that just wasn't possible. Worst case scenario, I'd have to take her to that walled city. Were there other human villages around here? I figured I could ask Nina if she had any idea.

Anyway, it was about time we went to collect the rest of the thorny camel. With all those leftovers, we wouldn't have to worry about food for a while. Making my base there would free up my movement a lot.

I turned my back to Nina and crouched down. "*Raar.*" I glanced back, urging her to get on. She looked very hesitant, as usual, but the ballrabbit gave her some courage.

"Th-thank you—nyahh?!" I scooped her up with my tail and set her on top of me. *All right. Hold on tight, now.*

Part 6

I RAN WITH NINA on my back, careful not to drop her. She held the ballrabbit in one hand, clinging desperately on to me with the other. She didn't have to bother—Ballrabbit was already clinging to me with its ears. *You know, Ballrabbit, I go this fast when you're on top of my head too. No need to be dramatic.*

Gradually, Nina's panic receded, and she loosened her grip on my scales. I glanced back, glad that she was comfortable enough to take in her surroundings. She didn't look nervous anymore—she seemed like she was enjoying herself.

"Pfeff, pfeff!" The ballrabbit reached its ears out of Nina's grasp and whapped my back with them.

Hungry again? Well, I guess Nina did eat most of that cactus earlier. You saved it all for her, huh? It often seemed like just a greedy little monster, but it was clever. It must've figured out there was more food that I hadn't brought back yet. *Not bad, rabbit!*

"Nyah! U-um, where are we going?"

"Raar." Sorry. Even if you ask me a question, I won't be able to respond. 'Cause I'm a dragon. You'll see when we arrive. We're almost there.

I could figure out what to do next when we reached the thorny camel. Living rough in the desert would be hard on a human's health, and I wondered if I could use the camel's body to make a shelter for Nina and the ballrabbit. There were plenty of cactuses to feed the rabbit's ravenous hunger. I could make life here comfortable. I liked building things, after all.

I spotted a familiar hill up ahead, but as soon as I cleared it, my mouth dropped open in shock. A group of monsters was gathered around the thorny camel's body, chowing down on my kill.

The monsters were round with short legs, sort of like gray panthers. Well, more hyenas than panthers. And they were definitely acting more like hyenas too...

I counted them. Eight hyena-panthers of all different sizes. One was so small it looked like a newborn.

“Aye? Aye?”

“Ayyyyyy!”

They began howling as soon as they spotted me, running off with pieces of the camel still in their mouths. *God, do you need to take leftovers too?*

I felt the ballrabbit’s gaze burning into me from behind with an intensity I wouldn’t expect an E-rank monster to possess. We couldn’t let these hyenas escape.

Time for a status check. Despite their appearance, they could be stronger than they looked. Going after them with low MP might be a bad idea. I targeted the strongest looking one and used View Status.

Species: Yain-Yain

Status: Normal

Lv: 23/27

HP: 83/83

MP: 31/31

Attack: 95

Defense: 64

Magic: 41

Agility: 113

Rank: D—

Special Skills:

Group Attack: Lv —

Animal Instinct: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Earth Type: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 2

Spoiled Meat Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Bellow: Lv 2

Bite: Lv 2

Mirage: Lv 3

Call Allies: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Chicken Runner: Lv 3

Grave Robber: Lv 2

Swiper: Lv 2

Cool, I can kick their butts easily with those stats. Just you wait, Ballrabbit. I'm about to make you some hyena meat hamburgers!

I started after them but then remembered Nina was still on my back. I didn't want her to fall off; I'd target the slowest one first, running just a little behind the rest of the pack.

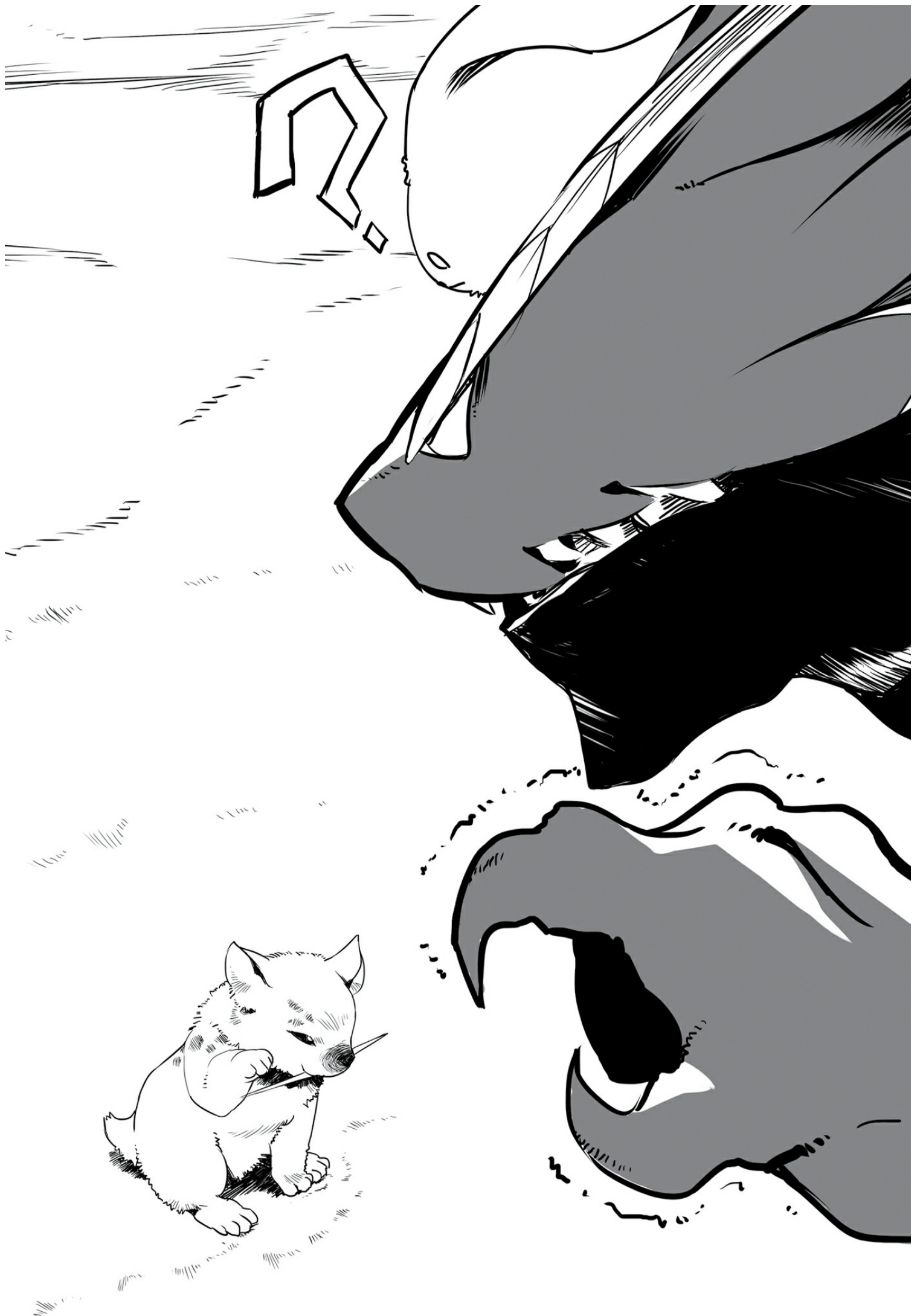
Just as I gave chase, I saw a haze that gave me déjà vu. Mirage again. The Yain-Yain rippled before popping up far away from its original spot.

I'm soooo sick of this desert. At least I spotted it quickly this time.

"Raar!" I raised my voice, shouting a warning to Nina and the ballrabbit. *I'm not going full speed, but I am gonna go faster. Hold on tight!*

Strangely, as soon as I sped up, one of the Yain-Yains turned and loped toward me like it was trying to hamper my movement. I thought it was another Mirage, but View Status told me that wasn't it. What was this thing doing? It was the smallest Yain-Yain, eyes round and cute, with soft fur. It was the same species as the others, but nowhere near evolving. The ballrabbit was about

three times its size, though their bodies were vastly different. Was this a baby Yain-Yain?



“Aye! Aye-ah!” Its voice was squeaky and high-pitched, like a small child’s. That stopped me in my tracks. The baby Yain-Yain came right up to me and gobbled up a piece of thorny camel. It must have dropped it while running away. The baby’s eyes softened happily as it used its front paws to knock the sand off the piece of meat.

I could kill it in one hit. I could, but my hands wouldn’t move. Just...this seemed like a really crappy thing to do. I was a dragon, but still.

Come on, what was I hesitating for? How many monsters had I killed so far? I always chase after prey if it runs away from me.

I kept trying to psych myself up, but I just couldn’t do it.

“Ayeee!”

A sharp cry snapped me back to reality. One of the adult Yain-Yains ran up and grabbed the baby by the scruff of its neck, then, with a glare at me, it dashed back toward the rest of the pack. On the way there, the piece of the camel fell out of the baby’s mouth.

“Aye!” It cried in disappointment, but the adult Yain-Yain ignored it and let out a sharp *“Ah-Ayee!”* It must have been scolding it, because the baby’s head drooped shamefully afterward.

I could’ve easily chased after them. But, despite the ballrabbit whapping my back with its ears, I let them go.

Sorry, but I can’t just kill a baby and its mother; that would set me down the Wrongdoer path in a way where there would be no turning back. My Dragon Scale Powder would get so bad that the whole desert would be destroyed.

Still, I felt intense disappointment looking back and seeing the remains of the thorny camel. I guess that was what I got for leaving such a sweet-smelling kill alone for so long. Out here, every monster was desperate to survive. I’d just have to be more careful next time.

Sigh...

Suddenly, I heard giggling. I turned back to look at Nina, who immediately covered her mouth with one hand. Maybe she felt guilty for laughing. But once

she knew she was caught, she took her hand away, smiling wryly.

“Nyah...you’re very kind, aren’t you?” *I guess that means she trusts me now?*

She would have been horrified if I attacked that baby, though the ballrabbit seemed angry that I hadn’t. It puffed out its cheeks and turned away from me in a huff.

Part 7

“RAAAAAR!” I roared as I raced across the sand, slicing my claws through a three-headed camel’s body. *“Nargggh!”* Blood gushed from the motaricamel’s chest as it rolled and fell into a small sand dune. It wasn’t a hard attack—it probably wasn’t dead, but its back legs looked smashed.

I whipped my tail around and said *“Raar!”* to the ballrabbit on my back. I had to level it up, wanting it to grow big and strong so it could dig my house for me.

The ballrabbit jumped out of Nina’s arms and onto my tail, wrapping its long ears around it for stability.

“Nyaah? What are you—” Nina looked puzzled, but I had to wait until my MP recovered before I could explain.

I stretched my tail out toward the camel. The rabbit hopped off, approaching its prey. It wasn’t thrilled about this power leveling at first but had since grown used to it. Maybe it liked getting stronger, or maybe it thought I wouldn’t feed it if it didn’t do what I said. Whatever the case, its bloodlust had awakened.

“Pfeff!” Two fireballs circled around the ballrabbit—its Illuminate skill, far bigger than it used to be. This must be level 2. After we were done here, I should check its stats again.

The fireballs broke from their orbit and attacked the three-headed camel. They didn’t do much damage, but the camel was already paralyzed, so I wasn’t worried.

The ballrabbit used Illuminate a couple more times, fully draining its MP. Then it ran at the camel and lifted its ears. The camel stood on trembling legs as if it had been waiting for that moment, pretending to be far more injured than it actually was so that we’d lower our guard.

“Narghhh!”

“Pfeff?!” The ballrabbit realized something was up and quickly slapped its ears on the ground to jump away, but it was too late—it couldn’t dodge in time. The camel opened one of its mouths and sprayed a jet of water right into the

rabbit's face like a water gun—but no, that sounded too cute. It was more like a water laser, with enough force to cut through wood.

The rabbit covered its face with its ears, fearing the sudden counterattack. I put my hand between them, blocking the flow off with a loud splash, water scattering in all directions.

The rabbit hesitantly pulled its ears from its face and looked around. The camel hung its neck in disappointment. I dug my claws deep into its body, splitting its flesh and finishing it off.

Gained 32 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 32 experience points.

I was annoyed I could only check my own experience point gain; I really wanted to know how much the ballrabbit was getting.

The rabbit looked at me, ears hanging in relief. “*Pfeff!*”

Leveling the rabbit was nerve-racking—if we were unlucky, a monster could finish it off with one hit. I needed to be super cautious. I’d never seen a water attack like that before. But as long as I dealt with things from up close, I could take care of any problems really quickly.

This time I hadn’t paralyzed the monster fully, afraid that sort of cheating wasn’t giving the rabbit many experience points. So far, it had been good at dodging attacks. Hopefully this would be a sustainable method going forward.

What *was* that skill, though? I thought back on the camel’s stats. It must have been Aqua. Water came out of its mouth in a physical stream, but it felt like a magic attack. Wait, what if I just chained one of those camels up as a kind of... camel faucet? That would make my life a lot easier. I’d have to try it sometime.

The rabbit stared at the camel’s body for a while, then looked plaintively up at me. “*Pfeff...*”

What is it, Ballrabbit? Aren’t you happy I got you your camel meat? Come on, I don’t want to eat the heads, and I’m sure Nina doesn’t either. You can have all three of them. It started whapping my legs with its ears again. Maybe it was mad I’d put it in a dangerous situation?

“Pfeff! Pfeff!”

Hey, I’ll protect you! I can’t keep you with me forever—I need to make sure you get strong so a bad monster doesn’t get you!

“Hee hee...” Quiet giggling came from behind me. “Nyaah?! S-sorry...” Nina quickly covered her mouth and bowed her head. Watching me interact with the rabbit seemed to ease her nerves.

Time to check up on the ballrabbit. I really hoped it had maxed out already.

Species: Small Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 12/12 (MAX)

HP: 39/45

MP: 2/32

Attack: 20

Defense: 24

Magic: 33

Agility: 27

Rank: E—

Special Skills:

Conceal: Lv 1

Food Regeneration: Lv 3

Resistance Skills:

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 1

Binge Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Burrow: Lv 2

Illuminate: Lv 3

Play Dead: Lv 1

Whip Dance: Lv 5

Swallow Whole: Lv 1

Storage: Lv 1

Charm: Lv 1

Gnaw: Lv 2

Rest: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Desert Darling: Lv 2

Cannibal: Lv 1

Parasitic Leveler: Lv 3

Ravenous: Lv 4

Yes, max level! It would evolve after it ate something. Some of its skills had leveled up a little too. It must have been busy while I was away. Illuminate had gone from level 2 to level 3—I was right that the two fireballs meant growth. They were also bigger than they used to be.

Rest was up to level 2 now. *Recovery magic is important, so keep it up, kid!*

Whip Dance was up from level 3 to level 4...maybe from all the times it whapped me with its ears. *Well, as long as it's valuable training.* Wow, Ravenous and Binge Resistance leveled up quickly.

I wondered if I should start giving it less food. I remembered hearing that pigs would eat as much food as you gave them since scarcity was the default out in the wild. They'd eat until they made themselves sick.

If the rabbit was eating so much it leveled up Binge Resistance, I should limit its meals. I'd divide up the camel meat between Nina and myself, and maybe

give the rabbit one head. *I wonder what camel tastes like... I can't wait to find out.*

The ballrabbit glared suspiciously at me like it suspected something was up. *Man, this kid is smart. It's really good at reading my mind.*

Hm?

"Haa...haa...heshuuu!" Saliva flew from the rabbit's open mouth. This wasn't the first time it coughed. Its status was normal, though. Weird. I'd written it off earlier, but now I was worried. Could this be the first sign of Dragon Scale Powder?

Part 8

I SLICED UP THE CAMEL MEAT and used Scorching Breath. I wouldn't eat the heads, but the ballrabbit was less picky, so I roasted them too.

I wanted to put it on a diet, but not today. This might be the last day I spent with it. I was almost sure the Dragon Scale Powder was the source of its coughing. When I used Disease Breath on the camel, its status showed up as Cursed (Slight). The ballrabbit's status was still Normal, but that didn't mean it wasn't being affected. Symptoms might appear before Curse did.

If I stayed with the rabbit, those symptoms would get worse. The Divine Voice told me Curse had fewer remedies than Poison, but the effects could be reversed if the cursed target distanced itself from the source. Now was the best time to do that.

When it's finished eating, I'll say goodbye.

I never got it to dig my house for me, but that wasn't why I was sad. It was difficult to say goodbye to a traveling companion. I wondered if it got sick from the cursed camel meat or because of Dragon Scale Powder. If it was the latter, it would only be a few days before Nina started seeing the effects too.

I really wanted to take her somewhere safe before that happened. She didn't want to go, but my only real choice was that walled city. At the very least, it had to be safer than the desert crawling with monsters. I'd use Human Transformation to explain it to her.

"Pfeff?" The ballrabbit came up to me, wondering what was on my mind.

I'm sorry, kid. But this is where we go our separate ways.

"Pfeff! Pfeff!" It couldn't possibly have guessed what I was thinking, but my eyes must give something away, because it started angrily whapping my legs again. It did that until it got tired, then let its ears drop in dejection.

Don't worry. You've gotten a lot stronger. You'll do fine out here on your own. Don't look so sad, okay?

"Pfeff..."

Nina sat on some cactus skin, watching us anxiously. She could tell something was going on.

I finished preparing our meal, which just meant roasting it, since I currently had no salt. Getting the temperature hot enough without burning it was tricky.

I cut some bits of cactus skin to use as plates and piled the fatty meat from the camel's humps on top. I made one up for Nina and one for the rabbit, and passed it the meat from the heads as well. I'd just eat whatever was left—I didn't need a dish.

Nina hesitated. I gestured with my neck for her to go ahead and then took a bite of my own meat.

Camel tasted a lot like beef. A little gamey, but I was used to that by now. Still, worrying about Ballrabbit made it hard to focus on my meal. I turned, hoping to watch it eat for the last time. We locked eyes. Uncharacteristically, it hadn't started gobbling yet.

Were the heads too nasty? *Just eat it all in one bite.* I motioned for the rabbit to eat. Slowly, it did.

"Nya...um, Mr. Dragon? Did something happen between you and Bally?" Nina had spoken to *me*, but as soon as I looked her way she tensed up. I was just too frightening, I guess. I kept worrying she'd pass out if I made a sudden move. I couldn't really blame her—my claws could decapitate a human in one swipe.

Anyway, who's Bally? Is she talking about the ballrabbit? They must have gotten even closer than I thought.

I thought that maybe I should let the ballrabbit take care of her from now on, but it would have its hands full just protecting itself. Still, the time limit of how long we could stay together was ticking down.

Ballrabbit didn't finish its meal—extremely unusual. Had it realized that it was my fault it wasn't feeling well? It seemed depressed, like it knew what I was planning.

"Bally?" I was spacing out looking absently at the sky, but Nina's voice brought me back to reality. The rabbit's body was shaking and, as I watched, it began to grow larger.

Ah, it's evolving! I might as well stick around to see what's gonna happen. Its body grew rounder and its sand-colored fur shed in clumps. Hm? It's white now? No, it's a very light pink...almost a peach color. Wow, that's gonna make it hard to blend in with the sand.

When we met it was the size of a softball, then a watermelon, and now it was the size of a cushion. Before, it went from Miniature to Small. What was it now?

Species: Peach Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/30

HP: 39/47

MP: 2/34

Attack: 18

Defense: 20

Magic: 26

Agility: 22

Rank: D

Special Skills:

Conceal: Lv 2

Food Regeneration: Lv 3

Resistance Skills:

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Binge Resistance: Lv 2

Curse Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Burrow: Lv 3

Illuminate: Lv 4

Play Dead: Lv 1

Whip Dance: Lv 5

Swallow Whole: Lv 2

Storage: Lv 2

Charm: Lv 2

Gnaw: Lv 2

Rest: Lv 2

Clean: Lv 1

Telepathy: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Desert Darling: Lv 3

Cannibal: Lv 1

Parasitic Leveler: Lv 3

Ravenous: Lv 4

Mutation: Lv –

Bizarre Gastronomist: Lv 1

Peach? There are peaches in this world? A peach ballrabbit, huh?

I'd expected it to become a medium ballrabbit, but I guess not. It was all the way up to rank D now too. That was higher than the black lizard and the same rank as the orangurangs.

The power leveling worked! It's gotten so much stronger.

If I kept leveling it, it'd be able to defeat graywolves. Pretty impressive considering a tiny scorpion nearly took it out when we first met. Digging a serviceable burrow and surviving out here was definitely in its skillset. *I wish you well on your journ—Huh?*

Resistance Skills:

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Binge Resistance: Lv 2

Curse Resistance: Lv 2

H-hang on a second! Curse Resistance? Hey, Divine Voice! Tell me details about the peach ballrabbit!

Peach Ballrabbit: Rank D. A ballrabbit who spent its youth in an unclean environment and adapted to survive. Will eat basically anything. Peach ballrabbits are generally found in locations not suitable for human habitation, so if you see one, it's best to run.

Legend has it that they turn redder to warn other creatures of danger.

Does that mean it got that Resistance Skill because it grew up around me? Then it can stay with... Wait, what do you mean, unclean environment?! Is that talking about me?! How am I unclean?!

Part 9

THE BALLRABBIT'S LATEST EVOLUTION had the Normal Skills "Telepathy" and "Clean." I *had* noticed that it always seemed to know what I was thinking.

And Clean... Seriously, was I really that dirty?! Is it gonna clean me or something?!

The Giant Orangurang had used Telepathy. It could read other monsters' thoughts and send thoughts into their heads. I could use the ballrabbit as my interpreter to communicate with Nina, replacing the need to use Human Transformation all the time. I could send it my thoughts and then have it put those thoughts into Nina's mind. Wasn't that perfect? I could already understand everything that Nina was saying, after all.

Hey, Ballrabbit! Ballrabbit! You can read my thoughts, right? I've got a favor to ask you.

"Pfeff!"

I concentrated hard. The ballrabbit lifted its head and looked at me. *Ooh, did it work? Time to play the telephone game.* Ballrabbit stared at me piercingly. Suddenly, I heard something.

("I. Hunger.")

That was all it said. It walked back over to its forgotten meat.

Of course. The only thing the rabbit ever had on its mind was food. It was bigger now and probably worn out from evolving. God, why were its ears still dragging on the ground even after it grew up? It must have recovered from its funk, because now it was pigging out.

All right, all right. Go ahead and eat.

The rabbit grasped the leftover camel head with its ears before shoving it straight in its mouth. *Chomp, crack, chomp.* I listened to the sounds of its teeth splintering through the skull. It chewed, swallowed, and moved on to the next head. It finished the third one in the same manner, spitting one of the eyeballs out onto the sand.

This is the Darling of the Desert?! Seriously? Even Nina's a little freaked out right now.

I'd barely even started on my meat—I knew I should eat. There was still a hump left over, and I'd been wondering what it would taste like. I bit into it, fangs tearing through the flesh. Mm, it was soft and kind of chewy. A little like intestines? Made sense—it was just a lump of fat.

As I enjoyed the taste of the hump, the rabbit finished eating. I swallowed my last mouthful and turned back toward it, hoping to get back to mind reading.

“Pfeff.” It turned its neck. Or its whole head, I guess. Huh?

Species: Peach Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/30

HP: 47/47

MP: 1/34

Whoa, it was almost out of MP. Not surprising since it used Illuminate on the camel so many times, and evolving didn't regenerate magic.

The Giant Orangurang had to spend its MP to use Telepathy too. Guess I'd have to wait until tomorrow to try out my Ballrabbit Translator. I just hoped that Nina didn't show any symptoms before then.

I'd never expected to be so hard up for MP all the time. Up until now, I'd relied on my brawn, only ever using magic to cast Rest.

With its level once again reset, the ballrabbit had a low Max MP. I wanted to level it up a little more today. Its stats were so good now that it might not even *need* my help.

I had to keep my expectations in check, though. I leveled up quickly because of the bonus experience points I got from my Walking Egg skill, and the ballrabbit didn't have that.

I could just let it fight on its own when I went hunting again and only step in if things looked bad.

Time to get my friends up. We needed to find more cactuses—the camel didn't contain much water after all. And Nina probably wanted to bathe. Maybe we should try the beach?

"Raar." I gestured them toward my back. Nina picked up the ballrabbit, struggling under its new weight. *Don't strain yourself, Nina.* It wasn't like I was going to make the rabbit go on a diet. Better to just retire the title of Desert Darling.

Which way was the ocean again? My first priority had to be locating cactuses. I was fine, but Nina and the ballrabbit were probably thirsty by now. If only that huge cactus hadn't been stolen, we'd have a perfect place for a home base and plenty of water.

Just forget about it.

I had no intention of punishing the hyena family. Their eyes were way too big and cute. *Damn it. If only they were uglier, I could've decimated them all...*

We'd just find some water and then get some sleep to let our MP recharge. Man, living in this place was a constant cactus hunt. Maybe I should consider leaving the desert, but I didn't want to go near a village or city looking the way I currently did. A desert swarming with monsters was the best place for me, even if there wasn't enough water.

But this environment wasn't easy on Nina. That's why I wanted to use Human Transformation or my Ballrabbit Translator to talk it out.

Hey, I think I see water off in the distance. Is that the ocean? Hmm...it seems a little small. Wait, I see green! Huh? There's a lake right smack dab in the middle of the desert!

It wasn't that big, but it was big enough. Tall grass and colorful flowers surrounded it. *Oh, it's an oasis!*

"Raar! Raaar!" I turned around and roared happily at Nina and the ballrabbit.

"Nyah!" Nina was so startled she almost fell. The ballrabbit had been snoozing

away contentedly, but it jolted awake and used its ears to catch Nina. It glared at me.

S-sorry, I couldn't help it. I'm excited! I mean, look! There's a lake! A lake! Look!

Chapter 5:

Master of the Oasis

Part 1

A MYSTERIOUS LITTLE LAKE right in the middle of the desert, big enough for two dragons to bathe in. Not that I would—I didn't want my Dragon Scale Powder to contaminate it.

Can't let my filthy body dirty that perfect, beautiful water. You know. Since I'm so unclean.

Vibrantly colored plants and flowers grew around the edges of the water, and just looking at them made me feel more cheerful. A true oasis. A spring must feed it from underground. Though it wouldn't surprise me if the source was some magical water crystal embedded deep in the lake, or something. I knew next to nothing about how this world worked.

As I grew closer, my Psychic Sense went off. Someone had arrived ahead of us; I hoped it wasn't anyone dangerous. Something appeared to be sitting in the center of the field of flowers. What the heck was that? I hadn't noticed it at first, since it was the exact color of a mossy rock. Was it a giant slug? Its body looked all slimy, a green so dark it was almost black. Whatever it was, it was creepy. It didn't look like it belonged in a tranquil oasis.

It was chomping its way through the flowers, eating stems and weeds and roots. *Did it just get a mouthful of dirt?* Even my little ballrabbit here wouldn't stoop that low.

Nothing pinged on my Psychic Sense besides the nasty slug, so if there was anything else here it was so small and weak I didn't have to worry about it. A giant slug didn't rouse my appetite, but I had to get rid of it anyway if I wanted to make this place my base.

I was still too far away to use View Status, so I couldn't gauge its strength, but it was just as large as the giant cactus. If it had the power to match, fighting would be difficult with Nina and Ballrabbit in tow. I should deal with it alone.

I crouched down and let them off my back. *I need you to be Nina's bodyguard for a little while, Ballrabbit.*

The giant slug must have heard me, because its two feelers were suddenly twitching in my direction. I took my place between the flowers and the desert, facing the monster. Now I was close enough for that status check.

Species: Amagarashi

Status: Normal

Lv: 26/50

HP: 207/207

MP: 94/94

Attack: 190

Defense: 188

Magic: 138

Agility: 163

Rank: C

Special Skills:

Mollusk: Lv —

Slimy Body: Lv —

Water Absorption: Lv 3

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 5

Resistance Skills:

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2

Poison Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Confusion Resistance: Lv 5

Normal Skills:

Mirage: Lv 5

Rain Dance: Lv 3

Burrow: Lv 3

Water Gun: Lv 5

Lay Egg: Lv 4

Bloodsuck: Lv 2

Sandstorm: Lv 2

Elasticity: Lv 3

Regenerate: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Master of the Oasis: Lv —

Conjuror: Lv 3

Huh?! This thing is a rank C monster? It was way faster than it looked and had frickin' Mirage all the way up to level 5. Its stats were on par with the Little Rock Dragon, but I'd defeated one of those, not to mention leveled up since then. I could drop this slug in a couple hits.

Once I beat this thing, the oasis was mine. I had to do it for Ballrabbit and Nina. I'd made the right decision leaving them behind—Ballrabbit wasn't ready for a monster of this caliber.

Time to focus. My Psychic Sense was on high alert. The worst-case scenario would be falling for Mirage and dragging out the battle too long. Our stats were lopsided, but this would likely come down to a battle of speed.

I stepped into the flowers, moving closer to the giant slug. The front of its body rose, trying to intimidate me.

"Shaaaaa!"

It split into two. *Buddy, I know you don't have a duplication skill.* The slug on the right was fake, and the one on the left was a little off from its true position. A trick.

Psychic Sense was working—I wasn't gonna fall for it. *Tough luck, giant slug.* I moved my attention from the illusion and focused on the place my Psychic Sense was telling me to look. My vision wavered, and the giant slug on the right disappeared.

Gained Resistance Skill “Illusion Resistance” Lv 1.

Hell yeah, a new Resistance Skill!

I'm gonna punch its lights out and get rid of it in one blow. I focused my energy into my legs and kicked off the ground, staying low in the sky. I whapped the giant slug across the head with my claws. I put all my momentum into the blow, tearing through skin. I dug deep, scooping out its flesh.

“Gssshaaa!” Bodily fluids splattered as the slug screamed. I kept going, flying past, pieces of its flesh stuck in my claws. I shook my hands vigorously, sending bits of slug flying. I spun and landed, turning back to the monster. Blood oozed from its side.

Damn, I missed. I thought I got a direct hit on him, but Mirage knocked me off target. Even though I could sense where it was, I couldn't help using my eyes to aim.

Should I close my eyes and fight? No, that would cause more problems than it solved. The slug had high Defense but not a ton of HP—one good hit should take it out. Its wound was already starting to repair itself. That was Regenerate. Its Automatic MP Recovery skill was high as well. If I let it, this fight would never end.

It pointed its feelers straight at me. Honestly, I would have been fine never seeing a giant slug in my life. Or a small one either.

Now that it knew my attack power was high, it was being a little more careful. It didn't have any super dangerous skills, but it was fast. I had to stay vigilant and use Psychic Sense to see through Mirage.

I wasn't sure whether my Breath skills could break through its defense, but at the very least it could keep it busy. The fight with the camel had depleted my MP, though. A distraction might not be viable.

I had to defeat it with my next hit. I took flight just as the slug began shooting

liquid from its mouth, sticky and translucent. It didn't hit me but rather wrapped all around the slug itself. Wh-what the heck was it doing?!

In no time at all, the giant slug was surrounded by the sticky liquid. If it was an attack, shouldn't it have directed it at me? Maybe it was a trap. I flew right at it before; it could be trying to catch me and attack once I was stuck. I could probably break free using Scorching Breath, frying it all in an instant.

I stuck with my original plan and dove in, just as it pointed itself at the ground and began to dig. *Ah, that's right. I forgot it had Burrow. It's fine if you're gonna run away, but I doubt a slimy thing like you can survive in this desert.*

The likelihood of surrender was low. It was just trying to give itself some space. I could just use my Breath attack and make that burrow its grave. I drew nearer to the hole but saw no sign of the monster. Psychic Sense began to go crazy. And it didn't just ping once or twice. It kept going. That had never happened to me before.

Special Skill "Psychic Sense" Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

I was suddenly able to feel things with a lot more detail. I focused on the sticky liquid. My vision wavered and revealed a bunch of round objects scattered inside. They looked like little spheres, about the size of a softball. Like Ballrabbit when I first met it.

It must have used Mirage to camouflage these round things. It knew I was using Psychic Sense, so it had taken great pains.

Still, what were those things? There were at least thirty of them in there, the same dirty green color as the slug. *Hmm...I feel like I've seen something like this before.*

Oh! They look like frog eggs!

I wasted no time shooting out Scorching Breath, burning up the sticky substance with the slug eggs inside.

Gained 12 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 12 Experience Points.

Wow, such a small amount of experience points meant our ranks were vastly

different. When I was born, I was rank F. But they *weren't* born yet. They were eggs.

Upon looking closer, I realized I'd only burned about a third of the eggs. The ones outside of Scorching Breath's range started trembling. The shells broke and out popped one baby slug after the other.

Species: Baby Amagarashi

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/25

HP: 12/12

MP: 8/8

They were rank D-. At such a low rank, one rake of my claws would end them. But there were so many...

"Jhh..."

"Jhaa..."

"Jaa..."

"Jshh..."

"Jii, jii..."

"Jiii!"

The herd of baby slugs groaned, crawling toward me. They were fast. *Really* fast. They didn't hesitate for a second. The grass and flowers made them hard to see, but Psychic Sense told me their locations. Perhaps it was a blessing I couldn't see them well. I might have turned tail and run.

Salt. Salt. Somebody bring me some salt! I need something to shrivel them all up at once! I swung my tail, connecting with a couple that got too close. They splattered on the ground, sticking to my tail. *Uggh, this is disgusting.*

Apparently each one of these baby slugs was worth 1 experience point. An

efficient but gross way to level.

The next baby slug must have known I was going to crush its friend, because it darted out of range of my tail and spat a muddy liquid. *Ow! It probably didn't do much damage, but it stung. Knock it off! I don't need to be any dirtier, thank you very much!*

I wanted to get rid of all of them with my Breath, but I'd already used it on full blast. I didn't have much MP left. There were *so many eggs*.

I could use Roll to crush them, but they barely had any Attack or Defense. Using a skill would be a waste. And I didn't want those things sticking to my back.

They were fast for slugs, but very slow compared to me. I backed up a little, mindful of the weird liquid, going to town with my tail and claws.

Ahh! Slug skin is getting caught in between my claws! This is gross! This is so freaking gross! I can't take it! I wanna run away! I glanced behind me. Nina watched me anxiously as she held Ballrabbit tight in her arms. The rabbit wore its usual expression, swinging its ears around in a baseless holler of encouragement.

Is Ballrabbit...drooling? Wait, does it wanna eat the slugs? I guess they were technically mollusks, but I definitely didn't want to try them. *Come on, switch out with me. I'll protect Nina, you scarf down all the babies!*

All joking aside, I turned my sights back on the little slugs. Our stats were so unbalanced that this was just a slaughter. I made my way through them amidst a stream of the green liquid.

Plague Dragon Lv 29 has become Lv 30.

Recently, leveling didn't make me happy at all. I was in such an emotionless state over it that I had to be reaching enlightenment.

Finally, I crushed the last baby slug with my tail. Walking over to the giant slug's hole, *I looked down. Damn you and your sneaky tactics! Come on out! Let's finish this!*

"Jshhhh!"

“Jssshh!”

“Jsssh!”

Several separate voices came from inside the hole. I backed away just in time to avoid a stream of babies pouring out.

You’ve gotta be kidding me. More Baby Slug leveling?!

This was useless... There was no end to them! I’d just have to ignore the small fry and blow Scorching Breath directly into the burrow.

The babies didn’t do much damage, so I wouldn’t have to worry about that. The only problem was that I didn’t know how deep the giant slug had gone.

I hoped the flames would reach it; it would be incredibly annoying if I had to go in after it. The sand was too thick for Psychic Sense to pick anything up.

Should I pour ocean water down there? Salt it out?

So many babies—that thing sure was fertile. But why was there only one adult? If they pumped out eggs at this rate, shouldn’t the whole desert be filled with giant slugs? Maybe they curbed their own numbers to prevent food shortages.

I approached the burrow again, sweeping away the babies with my tail as I went. My Psychic Sense pinged directly beneath me. It was trying to use the little ones to throw me off its trail. *No luck, buddy. Not only do I have Psychic Sense, but I’m ready for you!*

I flapped my wings, taking myself high before spinning quickly and heading back down. And just as I expected, the giant slug popped its head out from its burrow. Target acquired!

I know you were trying to catch me off guard. Sorry your brilliant plan didn’t work! This time I sliced directly through its neck, using the momentum from my nosedive to decapitate it. It sailed through the air, splitting off into four parts. Its body cracked open, flesh sloughing off.

Huh? This isn’t ordinary flesh...

It was all baby slugs!

Damn it! I fell for it! That wasn’t the giant slug at all! It used Mirage to make a

fake giant slug out of a bunch of baby slugs! It was so big it even fooled Psychic Sense. The *real* giant slug was still burrowed deep in the earth.

The baby slugs crawled all over my body.

Eww! They're so slimy! Stop, please just stop! I'm sorry, please stop! You aren't causing physical damage, but I'm going to need years of therapy!

W-wait, are they trying to suck my blood? C'mon, scales! Do your job! Bloodsucking slugs are hell on earth!

I smashed them with my claws, but there was just no end to it. Should I just use Roll and fling them all off?

No, not yet. This sucked, but it was just annoying. I wasn't in real danger. The giant slug must know these babies were only buying it time. The question was—buying time to escape or time to plan an attack?

I just had to stand my ground and lure the damn thing out. No matter how slimy or bloodsucking these things were, I could put up with it.

I crouched down a little, gasping, feigning weakness. *Yeah, get a good taste, slugs. It's not every day that a slug gets to suck a dragon's blood.* Psychic Sense pinged below my tail. This time it really was the giant slug.

Come at me. I'll kill you the moment I see you!

"Shhhhaaaaaa!"

I heard the giant slug's cry and felt something sucking on my tail. *Now's my chance!* I scooped the giant slug into the air, using my tail to toss it into the sky. I curled up my arms and legs and activated Roll, tackling it.

"Shaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"



As I hit the giant slug, the baby slugs sticking to me scattered.

That didn't kill it? Whatever, I can't stop now.

I closed my eyes, relying only on Psychic Sense and tackling it with Roll again and again. I had to catch it and land a direct hit before it struck the ground, or it would just burrow back into the sand.

My third attempt at a tackle finally connected.

Gained 416 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 416 Experience Points.

C-rank monsters give so much experience!

Plague Dragon Lv 30 has become Lv 36.

Whoa, I went up a lot! Still, I'd love to never fight another slug again.

My max level was 75; I was finally at the halfway point. I just had to keep going. Oh, and get the ballrabbit to teach me some recovery magic.

Special Skill "Psychic Sense" Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

Hey, it went up again! I guess I relied on it a ton in this battle. It was crucial for both attack and retreating.

Hmm...there are a ton of baby slugs left. Maybe I'll have the ballrabbit help me clean these guys up. We could get through them fast together, but I don't want to leave Nina on her own.

I looked back toward the oasis. It began to warp and waver right before my eyes.

Huh? What's happening?

The colorful flowers faded, the clear water turned muddy, the lake grew shallow. In no time at all, a desert paradise became nothing but a murky pool, surrounded by plain, dirty weeds. A fitting place for the remaining baby slugs still crawling about.

Wh-what's going on? This is some kinda scam! Um, excuse me? This isn't what I signed up for! Give it back! Give me back my oasis! I got soaked in slug slime

fighting for this place. Give me back my oasis!

Resistance Skill “Illusion Resistance” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

You’re too late! Why did you wait until I got tricked to do that?! For real, what just happened? That oasis was just an illusion? That’s so cruel! This is just a muddy puddle!

If I’d known, I never would’ve fought for it in the first place! What the heck did that giant slug have against me to put me through all this?!

Part 2

I STOOD IN FRONT of the giant slug's body to check its detailed information.

Amagarashi: Rank C. Uses its powers to attract rain clouds and create pools of water to use as a nest. Due to this, areas inhabited by many Amagarashi tend to dry up. They often use illusions to make their babies look like other animals and draw in prey.

Uh-huh. I was totally fooled and got lured into the giant slug's nest. I felt pathetic and sick to my stomach.

Wait, this place wasn't a desert because there were a ton of giant slugs around, was it? I hadn't seen any pools of water like this one, and from what I could tell, this had been a desert for a long time. What if eons ago it was a giant slug paradise?

Well, who even cared at this point? I needed to figure something else out.

Nina can't possibly drink this water. It's the same color as the slug—she'll get sick. It probably wouldn't do anything to me, but I didn't want to drink it either. That slug really put me through hell. My heart was broken.

As I stood there hanging my head, the herd of baby slugs gathered around me. I whacked them away with my wings. Nina's face tensed when she saw the place was crawling with them, but Ballrabbit's eyes began to sparkle.

You really will eat anything, won't you?

"Pfeff!" As if in response, it jumped out of Nina's arms and came over to me. The baby slugs were rank D-. Ballrabbit could take care of monsters like that by itself, no problem. Being surrounded might be a danger, but in that case, I'd just step in.

Not only was there no water to wash the slugs off, but the battle had taken so long that our beach trip would have to wait until tomorrow. Whatever. Cover my whole body with slug slime for all I cared.

I backed up to see how much Ballrabbit could do on its own. It didn't have any MP left, so it wouldn't be capable of anything too elaborate, but its stats were

overwhelmingly higher than the baby slugs. It should be fine. I honestly didn't want to touch them anymore.

The ballrabbit looked hungry. It could go at it. I watched as it used its ears like whips to knock the slugs on the head, rendering them unconscious. Then it wrapped them up and shoved them right into its mouth. *You really wanna eat them alive like that? Hope no parasites get into your brain.*

The rabbit crunched away happily like the slugs were a delicacy, but I wasn't gonna try any.

The baby slugs sucked its blood and shot their weird fluid, but the rabbit made up for lost HP with its Food Regeneration. That skill was pretty effective in situations with multiple enemies.

Looked like the ballrabbit could handle this by itself. *Eat as much as you want, kid. Go ahead and eat them all. Clean them up for me!*

I never wanted to see another slug again. If some of them got away and grew up and I ran into them, *I'd* be the one to run away. Not dealing with this again.

A group was slowly surrounding Ballrabbit. The rabbit glanced over at me; maybe there were too many for it to take care of after all. Just as I started over, I remembered the icky feeling on my wings and balked.

Don't worry, Ballrabbit. You can do it. You know how they talk about birds pushing their babies out of their nests so they can learn how to fly? This is just like that!

The rabbit glared at me, but I directed my gaze toward the sky instead. I desperately tried to think of something else.

Hm, a little cloudy. Maybe because of the giant slug's "Rain Dance" power? The haze broke up the heat of the desert sun, rendering this spot more comfortable than most.

...Next time I saw this many clouds in the desert, I'd steer clear.

"Pfeff! Pfeff!"

Sorry. Anything but slugs. But if you really think you're in danger, I'll help.

About ten minutes later, the huge herd of forty slugs was down to three.

Great job. Now take care of those guys too.

Species: Peach Ballrabbit

Status: Normal

Lv: 8/30

HP: 39/51

MP: 2/40

Hey, it leveled up! That's my Ballrabbit. Thanks to Ravenous, it barely took any damage. It did look exhausted, though.

"Jsshhh!"

The fattest slug of the remaining trio let out a strange cry, then attacked one of the other baby slugs. It pinned it down and began to eat. Its victim spasmed and went still. The baby slug ate its friend's head, then attacked the other one, which seemed too shocked at the sudden betrayal to fight back. It let the first slug eat it alive.

What was with the sudden cannibalism? Did it realize it didn't have a shot at beating us, so it decided to level up by eating its friends? It swelled larger, then made its way toward Ballrabbit.

"Jssshhh!"

"P-pfeff?!"

This wasn't good. The ballrabbit had plenty of HP, but it was too tired to fight a stronger enemy right now. Its reflexes were sluggish; it wasn't tracking the slug as fast as it usually could.

"Jssshhh!"

The baby slug pounced. The ballrabbit covered its face with its ears.

That's a bullshit tactic, come on! You can't just hide! All that's gonna do is put you at a disadvantage in battle!

I reached out and skewered the baby slug on my claws.

Gained 2 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 2 Experience Points.

Ugh, I got that sticky slime on my claws again. Ew, and slug guts in between them!

“Pfeff?” Ballrabbit took its ears away from its face and looked up at me.

I shook my arms. The skewered baby slug flew off, landing in the muddy pool of water and sinking in.

Part 3

I GAVE UP ON TRAVELING anymore today. The beautiful lake was just a muddy pool with an illusion layered over it, but at least it was slightly cooler here. Though thin, the clouds shielded us from the sun, lessening its intensity.

The ballrabbit was completely exhausted after its battle with the babies, and Nina seemed tired out from the long journey here. I'd tried to be careful, but they got jostled around a lot while riding on my back. I doubted a Plague Dragon was ever meant to transport people in the first place. We could all do with some rest.

Tomorrow I could use the ballrabbit's Telepathy or my Human Transformation again. Then I could have a proper conversation with Nina.

I gathered up a bunch of long grasses growing around the mud pit to make a place for Nina to sleep. I doubted it would be comfortable, but I was sure it was better than nothing. Nina lay down on the grass mat, and soon afterward, the ballrabbit crawled over and nestled against her. Nina looked startled, but once she realized who it was, she giggled softly and hugged it tight.

Those two sure were close. Maybe the animal ears were a shared kinship. I waited until they both fell asleep, then lay on my belly facing them. I closed my eyes and let myself drift, careful to leave Psychic Sense monitoring the situation around us.

If necessary, I could leap into action. If the trespasser was a giant centipede, I'd run as fast as I could. I relaxed and focused on resting.

Eventually, I felt light on my face and opened my eyes. Morning had come, the sun rising while I slept. I poked myself lightly in the head with the tip of my tail, then shook myself. There. Now I was awake. But with Psychic Sense running the whole time, my night hadn't been restful. I was a dragon—I'd manage—but I really would like a full night's sleep for once. I'd love one day a week where all I had to do was chill.

Life had been so much easier in the forest. There weren't high-ranked monsters around, so there was no chance of me being attacked overnight. I

always slept soundly. We had a pleasant lake within walking distance to provide us with water, and, thanks to the graywolves, we never wanted for food either.

What was the point of complaining, though? Once I leveled up high enough to take down a giant centipede, everything would be fine. Searching for food and water would be much easier, and I'd finally be able to get a good night's sleep. I needed to think positive!

The ballrabbit's MP should be restored by now; time to experiment with its Telepathy. Hm? Where'd it go? It fell asleep cuddled up to Nina last night, but now she was alone on the grass mat. She was smiling in her sleep and murmuring softly, "Zzz, nyah!" She must be having a good dream.

She was pretty cute when she was asleep. I wondered if she was dreaming about her hometown, before I remembered her predicament. She probably had nothing but bad memories of that place.

"Thank you, nyah...Mr. Dragon...thank you for every...thing... Zzz..."

H-hey, you're gonna give me a heart attack! Why do you have such a silly, happy look on your face?

She *did* thank me a lot when she was awake, but always very nervously. I had next to no experience being treated kindly by humans in this life. My defenses against gratitude were extremely low. *Ah, wait—I don't have time to think about this.*

Where are you, Ballrabbit? Where'd you disappear to?

Maybe Nina's sleeping mat was uncomfortable, and it dug a burrow after all? I turned my Psychic Sense up higher and scanned my surroundings. I picked up the ballrabbit making its way toward the mud pit, ears dragging on the ground.

What's it doing? Don't tell me it's going to drink that muddy water? That was gross even for the ballrabbit. I chased after it.

"*Pfeff!*" The rabbit drew up close to the edge, its ears standing up. It made a soft noise and blue light shot from its body into the muddy pond. Ripples spread along the surface, and suddenly I was looking at clear, fresh water.

H-huh? It decontaminated it?

It was just one tiny section of the pool, but the water in front of the ballrabbit was now transparent and pure. It turned toward me and let out a proud “Pfeff!” Then it started to drink.

Hey, since when could you do that, Ballrabbit? First I’ve heard of it! Oh, hold on. Maybe it’s that new skill it got when it evolved, Clean.

I never would have guessed it was for decontaminating water. It must not have been able to do it yesterday when it was out of MP. What a windfall! This was super lucky.

I should go and wake Nina up. She never complained, but I could tell yesterday that she was thirsty. She’d be thrilled once she saw this place. I rushed back to the grass mat and woke her up with a “Graah!”

“Nnnyaah!” My roar startled her awake, and she sat up in a panic, flailing on her mat.

After hearing her talk in her sleep, I’d figured we were okay, but I guess anyone would get freaked out if a dragon roared directly into their ear. If I were a human, I’d probably pass out.

She must be so tired. Maybe I should have just let her wake up naturally? I was just so excited. Now I felt bad.

“U-um, nyah... Good morning, Mr. Dragon... Wh-why are you crouched down like that?”

“Graah.” I was trying to apologize.

Part 4

I TOOK NINA OVER to the ballrabbit. “Nyaah! The water is so clear here!” Her eyes widened when she saw it.

“Pfeff!” Ballrabbit puffed its chest out proudly. Well, it was already so round I couldn’t tell if it was puffing it out or not, but that was the vibe.

After drinking, Nina’s color looked much better. I was thirsty too, so I crouched down beside Nina and stretched my neck out, dipping my mouth into the lake to slurp it up. It was good, almost sweet. *I know it’s just normal, but real water is so much better than the stuff you get from cactuses.*

My drink was interrupted by something sticking to my teeth. Puzzled, I stopped, but not in time to prevent getting a lump of mud. That’s right—Ballrabbit only purified a small portion of the water. Of course I’d drain it with my big slurping snout. Sure enough, the clean water was gone and only the muddy part remained.

I coughed and spat. *Geh! The inside of my mouth feels disgusting! My throat is all itchy and sticky. Oh my God, what if I swallowed a slug corpse? I’m pretty sure I tossed some into the water!*

I never wanted to think about a single slug in my life ever again.

After I’d spit out as much as I could, I started to feel better. But now I needed something to cleanse my palate. I didn’t even care if it was seawater at this point, though the salt might be unhealthy. *Eh, I’m sure it’s fine. I’m a dragon.* Maybe I’d even get Sodium Resistance? Was there a Fat Resistance too? *Ahh, now I’m even thirstier.*

I glanced over at the ballrabbit. Its ears were reaching toward me. Uh-oh. It was pissed.

“Pfeff, pfeff!”

I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to drink it all! I was just so thirsty I couldn’t stop myself! I’d really appreciate it if you purified some more, though.

“Pfeff!” It whacked me with its ears, as usual.

How much did it plan on leveling up Whip Dance? The whaps were actually starting to hurt. It still didn't do any damage, but I could feel the impact through my scales.

The ballrabbit was a D-rank monster now. It only needed to evolve one more time and it would be the same class as the Little Rock Dragon. If it whipped me with C-Rank strength, it might kill me!

Oh, wait! We've got more important things to do than look for water! Time for a Telepathy experiment!

I roared softly. *C'mon, Ballrabbit. Stop being mad at me. Let's do mind reading!*

The ballrabbit puffed out its cheeks, turning away in a huff.

I said I'm sorry! I promise I'll get you some good food!

("Slugs. Not yummy.") The ballrabbit's thoughts made their way into my head.

I mean, you looked like you were enjoying them. Or maybe you were just that hungry. All right, all right. I promise I'll give you something actually tasty. Just use Telepathy for me! And clean the water!

The ballrabbit's eyes swiveled my way. I had its attention; time to sweeten the deal.

How about salted, roasted camel meat? The humps taste like intestines. They'll probably be amazing with seasoning.

It didn't react at all. Telepathy worked via thoughts—maybe I should picture it rather than just think in words? I imagined butchering up a camel and sprinkling salt all over it. I let the sense memory of tearing into roasted camel meat flow through me.

"Pfeff! Pfeff!" The rabbit hopped my way.

Hook, line, and sinker!

All right, Ballrabbit. Ask Nina where she wants to go. We can't make any moves until we figure that out.

"Pfeff..." The rabbit's ears drooped weakly, and it puffed out its cheeks. It

looked at Nina and then looked back at me. *“Pfeff! Pfeff!”* It clearly didn’t want her to go.

Well, I can’t help it! My Dragon Scale Powder is going to poison her. She can’t stay here. If she starts showing symptoms before we have a plan, we’d have to abandon her in the middle of the desert!

The ballrabbit looked at Nina. She picked it up and brought it in close. “Nyaah? Bally?”

That was all she said out loud; after that they just stared at each other. They must be talking through Telepathy. After a few moments, Nina looked over at me.

“I don’t know where to go, nyaah.” She spoke so quietly I barely heard her over the desert wind.

Well, that didn’t surprise me. The giant centipede incident made it clear nothing good would happen to her in that walled city. And she couldn’t go back to the place that sold her as a slave.

I was expecting that answer, but it still made things difficult. I wasn’t at all familiar with the area. I wished we could find her a truly good place to live, but time was a luxury we didn’t possess. Taking her to the walled city would be much better than leaving her alone in the desert. Still, it was my last resort.

“U-um, Mr. Dragon? C-can’t I...stay...with you?” she stammered in a halting voice, glancing up at me anxiously.

I would love that, but the effects of Dragon Scale Powder could start showing up at any moment. I couldn’t meet her gaze any longer, and I quickly looked away.

“S-sorry, nyaah! I-I know it would be a lot of trouble... All I do is eat up your food. I can’t contribute at all...” She curled up into a little ball. The rabbit reached out its ears and wiped her eyes. It looked at me pleadingly.

H-hey! Stop it! I can’t do anything about it! You have Telepathy, so you know what I’m thinking!

I had nothing else to say. I shook my head, flustered.

I'll just have to find another village for her...hm?

An unsettled feeling swept over me. I activated Psychic Sense and felt several pings coming from off in the distance. I couldn't see anything yet, but they were headed right toward us. They were large, moving at roughly the same speed as the giant centipede. The slug's rain clouds were still above us. Maybe they were coming in search of water.

Chapter 6:

The Assassin from Harunae

Part 1

A GROUP OF MONSTERS was headed our way. I wanted to shove the ballrabbit and Nina into my mouth and use Roll, but I needed to check my enemy's stats. Fleeing now didn't mean I could flee forever. If they could move this quickly, the chances of running into them again were high. I needed as much information as possible.

But...what if this wasn't even their max speed? Maybe I should run while I still had the chance?

Please, please, please do not be as nasty as the giant centipede. Please only have high speed and low power.

I focused on Psychic Sense. Individually, the creatures weren't *huge*; surely they couldn't be *that* strong. They were rank C at the very most. Regardless, I needed to let the ballrabbit and Nina know my plans.

"Graah!" They both jumped in surprise. I should put them both into my mouth, just to be safe. Chances were the monster would target Nina, whether I decided to fight or run, and I couldn't discount the possibility of a long-range attack like Heat Beam. I couldn't run with them on my back.

I opened my mouth wide and stuck out my tongue. *Come on, get in.*

Nina's own mouth fell open, and she looked at the ballrabbit. *Oh, that's right. The only time she's been inside of my mouth was when she was unconscious. You jump in first, Ballrabbit. Show her how it's done.*

"Pfeff! Pfeff!" The ballrabbit resisted, shaking its head.

This is no time to be difficult! Our lives are on the line here! C'mon, you can just wash off later in the ocean!

("No! No!")

It was using Telepathy just to say no!

Listen, if the enemies are that fast, the only way we'll outrun them is with Roll! Don't you understand? I'm not doing this to annoy you! What? Is my mouth

really that dirty? Well...I guess you still wouldn't wanna ride in it even if it were clean.

The ballrabbit expertly used its ears to dig a hole and burrowed inside, covering itself up.

Hey, come out of there! This is no time for jokes!

Damn it. Psychic Sense told me the enemies would be here any minute. I looked toward the top of the hill. Straining my ears, I heard faint footsteps on the wind. There they were—horses. But no ordinary horses. They were huge, with uncomfortably long legs, like the sort that had pulled the carriage Nina was in.

There were humans riding the horses, with heads wrapped in turbans and cloaks streaming out behind them. They carried weapons on their hips.

One, two, three...about eight men on horseback appeared over the crest of the hill. They didn't slow down when they saw me.

The second man from the front held a golden instrument that looked like a telescope. I got the feeling they'd known I was here from the start. They weren't after water—they were after me.

This *did* seem to be their maximum speed, though. I could outrun them.

"The rumors are true! It's really here! It's huge!"

"Don't get too close! Stay back and shoot it with arrows!"

"Hey, there's a person with it!"

"No, look closer. It's just a demi-human. Don't pay it any heed. If it gets in the way, kill it!"

Nina drew closer to me. I could feel her trembling through my scales.

Were they soldiers from the walled city? I wanted to ask a human for advice on Nina, but these guys were clearly not worth talking to. They were my enemies. There would be no negotiating with them; they were out for blood.

Their intentions were so obvious that I didn't even need to use Human Transformation to get a read on them. No point.

“Raaar!” C’mon, Ballrabbit! Come out! We gotta use Roll to run away! These guys aren’t anything to sneeze at! The sand dune swayed slightly in response. An image of the rabbit inside the burrow was projected straight into my brain, shaking its head back and forth vehemently.

Are you really that scared? I’m gonna leave you behind, then!

“A-are we really going to do this, Commander? I’ve never heard of such a small group taking on even a juvenile dragon! Maybe we should return home and report—”

“If we go home now, the hero will take all our glory!” one of them yelled.

The man in front flashed the others a grin. “Don’t be afraid. I’ve been in a hunting party that killed a dragon at least this size! Let me take the lead. You just watch and make sure the dragon doesn’t escape. And make sure to aim your arrows at its eyes and mouth!”



That's right. I can just fly away. Good idea, old dude! I'm gonna steal that one from you.

Hey, Ballrabbit! I'm not gonna use Roll! Get out of there, I won't put you in my mouth. I'll dig you out myself if I have to!

On second thought, the humans were already so close, I wondered if I should just chase them away. Depending on their stats, I could take Nina somewhere safe and then come back for the ballrabbit. The men were obviously targeting me.

I focused on the man in front, who was holding his spear at the ready. He was bald beneath his turban. He ordered the other men to shoot arrows; he was the only one with a close-range weapon, and he oozed confidence. He rode the biggest horse, and his saddle and bridle were elaborately decorated. He had to be their best fighter.

Hagen Baumann

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 22/45

HP: 82/82

MP: 68/68

Attack: 97+26

Defense: 63+24

Magic: 47

Agility: 48

Equipment:

Weapon: Harunae Soldier's Spear: C

Armor: Harunae Soldier's Breastplate: C

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 5

Swordsman: Lv 4

Guaranteed Bull's-eye: Lv 2

Fury: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Confusion Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Shockwave: Lv 3

Clay: Lv 3

Rest: Lv 3

Eight Hit Punch: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Harunae Soldier: Lv 3

Wow, he was much weaker than the giant slug. That thing had attack power of around 200, but this guy didn't even come close *with* his weapon. His skills were weak too. He was about the same threat as a rank-D+ monster.

Well, I figured all eight of them together might equal the Little Rock Dragon's power, but I wasn't worried. I couldn't see how they hoped to damage me with an Attack score of 100. Honestly, I was more scared of the horses than the guys riding them. I'd just chase them all back home.

Part 2

HAGEN, the man with the spear, was shouting orders to his fellow soldiers. “Listen up. I’m going to circle around behind the dragon. You catch its attention while staying out of the range of its Breath attacks! Then shoot it in the eyes.”

Sorry, but just so you know...I understand everything you’re saying. Yelling out your entire battle plan is dumb. Especially if you’re trying to fake me out.

Just as Hagen said he would, he charged toward me, then veered left to circle around. A few others gathered behind my tail. Were they trying to box me in?

“Go, Maria! Go tease that stupid, slow dragon!”

I didn’t know what he meant, but then I realized that huge horse must be called Maria. The big black mare obeyed her master and picked up speed. I reached out and grabbed Maria’s tail just as she slipped past me, pinning her in place.

“Hii-hiinn!” Maria let out a high-pitched whinny. Her tail caught, she stopped in her tracks and reared up, kicking her front legs at nothing.

“Neeeeeeigh?!”

Her momentum sent Hagen sailing through the air in a clean arc.

“Oof!” His yell was cut off by his hard impact with the sand. Was he dead? No, he had close to 100 HP. He should be fine.

Hagen Baumann

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 22/45

HP: 32/82

MP: 68/68

Still alive. He's tough. I pulled my claw out of the ground, and as soon as Maria was free, she raced away as fast as she could.

“Ah, Maria!” Hagen moaned sadly, reaching after her with both arms. Maria paid him no heed, disappearing over the rise of the hill. Hagen’s head drooped with defeat. That was his taken care of.

I turned to the other seven soldiers.

One of them, upon seeing Hagen so easily dispatched, screamed and ran for it. “I told you we should go home and give a report first!”

The other six glared after the deserter and then back at me, readying their weapons. Four of them had bows, while the other two had swords. The latter charged, flanking me on the left and right. *Ugh, stop it!* I had to make sure neither of them attacked Nina. They might use her to try to distract me.

“Why is there a demi-human here?”

“Plague Dragons like to keep humans alive to eat them later. I heard a poem about it once while I was on an expedition!”

Hang on just a second here, that's slander! It probably depends on the dragon!

“What an awful creature! We have to rid the world of it!”

The archers sneered. What a nasty conversation to have right in front of someone.

Well, as long as they kept their filthy eyes off Nina, that was all I cared about. I didn’t like their attitude.

I swatted their arrows aside with my claws. Thinking I was distracted, the men flanking me charged. I swept my tail under their horses’ hooves.

“Arghh!”

“Whoa!”

Their screams were so loud that they were an active distraction. I turned back just as an arrow struck close to my foot—ugh, my blind spot. If they got too close, I wouldn’t be able to avoid them.

The tip of the arrow shone in the sunlight, covered in a slick black liquid. Poison, probably. They came prepared. The slave trader from the carriage must have told people in town that he saw a dragon in the desert.

Their stats were low to act so cocky, but if they had a special anti-dragon poison, that made more sense.

They were humans, and therefore didn't have any bonkers skills, but I'd still been overconfident. Humans could be dangerous in their own way. The desert was crawling with terrifying monsters, but what were they compared to an intelligent species who built cities and made technological advances? *Obviously* they would have ways to deal with dragons.

An arrow hit my foot and clattered off my scales. Hm? Not even a scratch.

The camel's thorns stabbed me, though. Maybe they should be firing those instead of arrows.

The archers watched their arrows bounce off me in a state of shock. They stopped in their tracks, faces expressionless. I just needed to give them a good scare and they'd run off home, I was sure of it.

"Raaaaaaaaaar!" I lifted my face toward the sky and let out a loud Bellow. One of the men dropped his bow and fell off his horse. *Cool. You guys leaving or what?*

"Waaaaaaah!"

"Waaaaaaah!"

"Waaaaaaah!"

The three remaining men shot wildly. *Hey, knock it off. If one of those arrows hits Nina, I'm gonna be pissed.*

("Leave...")

A voice flashed through my mind. Was that telepathy? I'd thought it was one of the men in front of me, but they all froze. They could obviously hear it too. All the color left their faces, and their teeth began to chatter. They all stared at me.

No, that wasn't me. Wait, is there another monster here?

(“Are you. Really ready to fight me? In that case. I will tear off. Your arms and legs. Rip off your skin. And suck out your. Intestines.”) The three men screamed their heads off and fled back the way they came. Well, their horses ran back the way they came, carrying the men like sacks of grain. *Hold on tight!*

The two swordsmen scrambled onto their own horses and ran. Without his beloved Maria, Hagen was forced to flee on foot. Man. The walled city was far away, huh. *Good luck, dude. Hope you and Maria find each other again! Even though I’m the one who split you up, I guess.*

“Pfeff!”

That was you who used Telepathy just now, wasn’t it? I can tell by that smirk on your face.

Awesome, but likely there would be even more tales of terrifying dragons by the end of the day. Psychic dragons who would threaten people with their minds.

Title Skill “Protective Spirit” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.

Hm...when I let enemies get away, Protective Spirit levels up. That’s my highest-level skill right now, isn’t it? Yeah, it is. And then the next highest is Wrongdoer at level 6. I feel like that one levels up when I breathe, so there’s nothing I can do about it. Oh, I have View Status at level 6 too. I use that one a lot. After that, there’s Roll level 6 and Loneliness Resistance level 6. The other higher ones are at level 5. I wonder if my next evolution options will include Rolling Dragon or Lonely Dragon?

Part 3

ALL THE HUMANS disappeared beyond the hill. That guy Hagen made it all the way there on foot, but I was a little worried about him. Maria didn't come back, and none of the other soldiers offered him a ride. They were too busy running away as fast as they could.

They were about three times faster fleeing than they were on the way here. My fault, I guess. But I was acting in legitimate self-defense. And I didn't hurt anyone.

Why did the giant centipede ignore me when everyone else won't leave me alone? I'm just glad it was humans and not another powerful monster. I let out a sigh of relief. Nina must have thought I was upset, because she looked startled. God, I really wanted to become a human as fast as I could.

The ballrabbit climbed out of its burrow and shook the sand off.

"Pfeff..."

It let out a little sigh of its own.

Nina giggled and picked it up. The rabbit's eyes softened happily. I remembered back to when I was a Kid Dragon and met Myria. Man, now I felt sentimental. My body had changed so much that now it all seemed like it was long ago.

I wondered what the black lizard and the orangurangs were up to. Were they still making pottery and drying jerky? I hope no other monsters got them.

The ballrabbit agreed to purify more water for us, so we returned to the mud pit. It scolded me, warning me not to drink too much this time. *Yeah, yeah, I know. I feel bad about it!*

Just like last time, the ballrabbit shot light at the water, changing it from muddy to clear. It was just as amazing as last time—a small section of the muddy pond turned into pure, transparent water. You had to drink it fast before the mud could mix in.

The rabbit used its ears to hop from the sand into the water. It completely

submerged itself and then popped back up, gasping. *Oh, it's bathing!* If you tried to bathe in the ocean, you just got covered in salt. It was taking advantage of the clean water.

Since everyone thought I was so dirty, maybe I should bathe too. Was I really that bad? I couldn't smell anything. But smelly people sometimes just get used to their odor. *Now I'm getting self-conscious.*

"Graah."

Hey, Ballrabbit? Can I wash myself?

"..." It glared at me. *That hurts my feelings. You're like a kid who doesn't want to take a bath after their dad uses the bathwater. But on second thought, I might contaminate the lake with my Dragon Scale Powder.* I figured I could bathe last, or maybe wash myself after using Human Transformation...

Nina watched the rabbit, then sniffed herself, narrowing her eyes. She hadn't rinsed off since I carried her in my mouth. She'd been unconscious then, so from her perspective, one minute a giant centipede was chasing her and the next she woke up smelling like dragon.

Did she stink? I couldn't tell. And my sense of smell was pretty good.

The ballrabbit invited Nina into the water with a wag of its ears. Those things were really dexterous.

"Pfeff, pfeff!"

"Th-thank you, Bally!" Nina's face brightened as she reached for her clothes. She was wearing what were basically tattered rags, just like the other demi-humans in the carriage. A lot of the buttons on her dress were missing.

She unbuttoned the remaining ones, exposing a pale shoulder. I thought about how slender she was and how beautiful her skin looked, before snapping back to reality. *"Gaaar!"* Without thinking, I let out a noise as loud as the one I'd used against the soldiers.

"Wh-what's wrong?"

"Pfeff?"

Stop! Human! I'm a human on the inside!

I didn't have Telepathy, but Nina must have remembered after seeing my reaction, because her face and the tips of her ears turned red.

"N-nyaaah?!" She flailed, grabbing her clothes and pulling them back up. "S-s-sorry!!"



I whirled around, crouching. Jeez, that freaked me out. Nina totally forgot I used to be a human.

It was an easy mistake to make. Sometimes I forgot too. I didn't think anything of it when I watched her unbutton her dress. If I'd kept spacing out, I might not have screamed until she was completely naked.

After a few minutes, I heard splashing, then water dripping onto the sand. She must've been done.

"S-sorry I took so long. You can turn around now."

Her clothes were dripping wet—she washed them too. She didn't have anything else to wear, but they'd dry quickly under this hot sun.

Enough time had passed since the giant slug dropped dead that the rain clouds above the mud pit were starting to thin. They'd disappear entirely soon.

I was getting thirsty, and I joined Ballrabbit at the side of the lake. I was careful not make the same mistake twice, moderating my intake.

I raised my head, about to swallow, when suddenly I remembered just how much the ballrabbit hadn't wanted to get inside my mouth. If I cleaned it out well enough, maybe my friends would let me carry them. It was the easiest way to escape from enemies.

I gazed up at the sky as I gargled. This was, I realized, the first time I'd done any sort of oral care since arriving in this world. I felt bits of meat and gristle stuck in between my teeth begin to loosen and wash away. Even just rinsing made a difference.

I bent my head down and spat the water back into the lake.

Ahh, that felt so much better. Now if there was an emergency, they could climb in without worrying.

"Pfeff!" Ballrabbit spit out the water in its mouth.

Hm? What are you doing? Were you gargling too? I glanced at the lake. Bits of rotten meat and a mysteriously sticky yellow liquid floated on the surface.

"Pfeff!!" Ballrabbit whacked me with its ears.

Ow, ow! Stop hitting the same spot. I'm sorry! I'm really sorry! If you rinse, you have to spit! It's just an old habit from my previous life! It wasn't on purpose!

Chapter 7:

The Nightmare Returns

Part 1

NINA PICKED UP the ballrabbit and climbed onto my back. I started off in the opposite direction from the retreating soldiers. No point risking running into more humans. Seeing how the soldiers treated Nina made me want to bring her to the walled city even less. But I had no idea what to do.

She kept saying she had nowhere to go. But just wandering aimlessly through the desert looking for the perfect place wasn't productive.

Should I search for the river that brought me here in the first place and go home to the forest? Leave her in the care of the orangurangs? Well, if I was going that far I might as well take her to the village and give her to Myria. They would treat her well, but I'd have to drop her off on the outskirts. I couldn't go back to a village I attacked.

That might be the most realistic, but I just couldn't gauge distances. How far down the river did I come? How long even *was* the river? Traveling too fast would be hard on Nina, compromising her immune system and leaving her even more susceptible to the Dragon Scale Powder.

I was stuck. I should've gone through the humans' things before scaring them off and checked if they had a map, or captured one to interrogate. I was so concerned with not hurting them too badly that I lost perspective. Still—they came hunting for *me* in the first place—they already saw me as a terrifying monster. They would never cooperate. I needed to find a more accommodating sort of human.

If I walked for long enough, I'd find someone. But not fast enough. God, I really didn't want to take her to that walled city. *I just wish I could find someone I trusted to take care of her.*

The next time we rested and the ballrabbit was back up to full MP, I'd have another talk with her.

As we walked, I caught sight of a black horse in the distance. *Hey, isn't that Hagen's horse, Maria?* She must have missed her master. I hoped that giant

centipede hadn't found him before he could reach safety.

Maria noticed me and broke into a run. She was heading *away* from the city, though. Guess she didn't want to go home. I felt bad for scaring her. *Maybe I should turn her around?*

No matter how far I walked, everything looked the same. *Does this ever end? Why the heck did they go to the trouble of making a magic circle out here in the middle of nowhere? Not to mention the city. What was the point of building here? Did they strike oil or something?*

I felt the tingling of an unfriendly presence—Psychic Sense was alerting me to danger nearby. I stopped. I could hear something thumping ominously along, but I didn't see anything. I was about to check the sky, when the earth in front of me exploded, raining down sand and dirt. The giant face I saw was familiar.

"Gggtchhhh!" Its creepy, rasping voice echoed across the sand.

Species: Giant Sand Centipede

Status: Normal

Lv: 62/80

HP: 448/448

MP: 236/236

Ahhhhh! It's back! This is the one thing I didn't want to happen! Why? Why did you come all the way out here? Do you have a crush on me?

Oh God...what if there were a ton of Giant Sand Centipedes in this desert? *You're the same one I saw before, right? Please tell me you are! Also, your burrowing skills are amazing, could you dig me a nest?*

No time for jokes. I needed an escape plan. I could fly...wait. No, I couldn't. I got away before because I wasn't its primary target. Dodging the Centipede Beam would use up a bunch of stamina, and I wouldn't have enough left to run away.

My best bet was Roll. I jumped up and down, rattling Nina and the ballrabbit around.

“Pfeff?!”

“Nyaah?!”

I caught them both in my mouth, spun in the air, and moved into Roll mode.

The ballrabbit was yelling in disgust, but this was an emergency. *Come on, you could use another bath.*

The area around us was flat desert—the perfect environment for Roll.

“Gggggtttchcchhhh!”

Or it *would* be perfect, if I didn’t have a giant bug chasing me. I was slightly faster and I stayed ahead, but the visibility here went on for miles. Could I go far enough to lose it? I needed to level up, to get stronger. I didn’t need to be powerful enough to *beat* the centipede, I just didn’t want to be such an easy target.

Its sudden appearance freaked me out so much I could barely think, but now that I remembered its long-range beam attacks...yeah, this thing was truly a nightmare. That tubby slave trader was insane for thinking he could make it across the desert in that carriage. Why didn’t someone stop him? It was a suicide mission.

I stole a glance behind. The centipede raced after me, kicking up sand in all directions, drool trailing from its mouth. Where the drool hit the ground, the sand sizzled and sank into little holes. *Wow, I really don’t want to get hit by that stuff. Is that a biological weapon?*

I couldn’t let this last too long—I was worried about Nina. Even slugs were stronger than humans, and the giant centipede was a hundred times stronger than slugs. *I hate this desert. I hate it!*

Part 2

AS I FLED, the ocean began to come into view. Would it chase me into the water? I knew bugs didn't like salt, but what about salt water? It might work, but it was a gamble. If it didn't stop, I would be a sitting duck.

I ran on the beach, parallel to the tideline. Maybe I should get farther away from the ocean? Here, one escape route was completely cut off.

Looking ahead, I saw another monster coming toward me.

Species: Motaricamel

Status: Normal

Lv: 7/31

HP: 74/74

MP: 48/63

Hey, it's a three-headed camel, a gourmet meal! Its fatty meat was addicting, especially after subsisting entirely on cactus. The camel stank, but at this point the smell just made me hungrier. Hands down the tastiest meat I'd had in this world. I'd love to try it with piperis.

Under normal circumstances, I'd run it down, cut it open, roast it, and salt it. But I had more pressing problems. Oh, maybe I could get the hungry centipede to go for the camel instead—it was weaker than me, far easier prey. *Sorry, three-headed camel, but you're gonna be my sacrifice.* I changed my trajectory and chased it out into the desert.

"Naarrgh?!" The camel noticed me, all three of its faces blanking with fear. It bolted, and I didn't blame it. A giant rolling ball was chasing it. Back when I was a human, being chased by a giant rolling ball would have given me lifelong trauma. I'd scream every time I saw a marble.

Unfortunately for the camel, it couldn't outrun me. I could have chased it

down even without Roll. What a weird sight we must be—a giant centipede chasing a dragon ball chasing a three-headed camel.

Don't be angry, camel. It's just the food chain. You know, survival of the fittest, or whatever. I'm in danger too.

"Narghh, narghh..." The camel scrambled frantically, but I tackled it, dropping my speed just before impact, throwing it backward. *"Nargh!"* I felt the camel's bones breaking under my body weight.

Sorry. I'm so sorry. I feel super guilty about this.

Gained 28 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 28 Experience Points.

Oh, I killed it. When I used Roll at the top speed like this, it could dispatch a lower-ranked monster instantly. Rolling over D-rank monsters might be a cool way to power level.

I looked back at the giant centipede, trying to gauge if my plan was a success. The camel's body flew toward its head. *Perfect! Now eat it and calm down.*

Thump, splat!

The camel hit the centipede with a squishy impact sound. The speed combined with the centipedes hard shell completely obliterated it—the corpse didn't stand a chance. Its legs and heads scattered in a spray of blood. The sheer horror of the scene had me staring longer than I should have. *Three-headed camel, I am so sorry. I absolutely didn't intend that!*

The centipede's high defense meant it didn't take much damage. All I managed to do was piss it off.

"Gggggtttcccchhhh!"

The centipede was furious now, barreling at me even faster than before, shrieking as it came.

Ugh, come on! That was a peace offering!

It wasn't all bad, though. Its increased speed put more strain on its body. It wasn't thinking about its stamina; it was too busy being angry.

It wouldn't last long like this. Or at least, I hoped not.

I kept up my pace, Rolling at the same speed. And just as I'd hoped, the shrieking grew more distant. Good. If I kept this pace up much longer, I'd end up injuring Nina. *The ballrabbit's tougher than it looks, though.*

The true hero here was the camel. I should go back later and cook it up—or, uh, hold a burial service.

I'd have to butter up the ballrabbit too. If it got too mad at me, it wouldn't be willing to use Telepathy or Clean, making my life a lot more difficult.

Just as I was starting to relax, I felt an incredible chill from behind me. I remembered this sensation. I turned just in time to see red light bloom around the giant centipede's mouth.

It was the super-long-range attack, my nightmare: Heat Beam. I should've predicted this when I heard its cry growing distant. It dropped its speed last time too.

What should I do? Last time I took to the air and fell into a nosedive to avoid it, but now I was earthbound. How could I avoid it on flat terrain? It was too close to fly away; when I landed it would just be waiting for me. That window of opportunity was over.

My escape would have to be on foot. It sucked, but my agility was higher—if I just kept going, I would pull ahead.

C'mon. You can do this. If you screw this up, Ballrabbit and Nina will die.

"Gggttchh!" A red laser shot from the centipede's head. *Here it comes. Heat Beam. Just be positive. Stay positive! You can do this. Just keep running. If it even grazes you, it's all over.*

If it hit me, it wouldn't kill me, but it would slow me down, and then I'd be a centipede's lunch. My only option here was a completely clean getaway.

I veered wide to the left, and the beam hit the place I'd been only a second before. It shot past me through the sand, burning up the ground and leaving smoke in its wake.

I wasn't safe by any means. The beam didn't stop. It veered left as well,

following me with single-minded purpose. I could feel the radiating heat on my scales.

The pressure was intense. I sped up, darting farther to the left to avoid Heat Beam. It shifted to chase me.

Argh, this is useless! I can't escape like this! I should've just tried my luck in the air!

The range of the beam was just too large. This was so unfair.

In a lucky break, a sand dune appeared in my path, and I launched myself off of it and over the red laser like a jump rope. It passed right beneath me.

Wow. Thanks, sand dune. You saved my life.

But I couldn't count on random sand dunes. I jumped again, and Heat Beam rose to follow me. *You've gotta be kidding me! It's still going? Are you trying to use up all your MP?! I really, really hate giant centipedes! I'm only still alive out of sheer luck!*

As I Rolled, I stretched out both wings to change my center of gravity, just barely dodging. The Heat Beam passed right by. It didn't hit me, but my scales felt scorched. And I was beginning to feel the fatigue.

What the hell is up with this monster beam? I landed and it came right for me at an angle. I Rolled to the right again, moving even faster than before.

Normal Skill "Roll" Lv 6 has become Lv 7.

Title Skill "Chicken Runner" Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

There it was! Insult aside, that skill was actually a huge help right now—my mean-spirited saving grace. I felt myself getting faster.

I'd pulled far away from the centipede, but its Heat Beam was relentless. I couldn't shake it. I felt surrounded, only managing to evade because it was targeting me directly. If it started shooting it off randomly, there was no way it would miss every time.

Heat Beam hit the spot right behind me. I heard sand sizzling and smelled smoke. But the centipede *had* to be running out of juice. I just had to keep this up. I had to wear it out.

I can do this, I can do this. I'll outrun it and become a rank-AAA+++ monster and eradicate all giant centipedes from this desert. You'll be shaking in your boots, you creep!

The Heat Beam was trembling. The centipede had to be nearing its limit, but that made it ever more dangerous—its aim was all over the place. But I'd come this far, and I couldn't back down now. I'd hit the bottom of the hill and then launch up into the air.

I could do this. *I could do this!*

I rolled up the hill and jumped off, and the Heat Beam shook back and forth wildly, slicing through my scales like paper. An intense pain raced through my body. It wasn't just the heat—there was the agony of having my flesh scraped out.

"Grrgh!" I opened my mouth to scream, but the ballrabbit and Nina were in there. I could no longer maintain Roll, and I skidded across the earth on my belly, which scraped the scales from my stomach.

My head hurt and my vision flickered. I couldn't think straight. When I finally came to a stop, I tried to look behind me. Ironically, Heat Beam was gone. Dammit. It got me at the very last moment.

"Ggggtcchh!" The master of the desert was coming for me. It must've anticipated a surefire victory, because it wasn't bothering to move quickly. I was too injured to get up and run.

Even if I was done for, I had to get Nina and the ballrabbit to safety. I started to open my mouth to let them out. But that was when I saw a large hole in the earth, hardened sand surrounded by tight-packed sand, all a reddish-yellow hue.

I crawled on my belly toward the hole, my last hope of escaping the centipede. I wasn't thinking straight, but luckily it was large enough for me to fit inside. The centipede could probably fit too, but it wouldn't be able to move its legs much at all.

I used Roll to get as deep as I could into what appeared to be an underground tunnel, the whole interior covered in the same reddish-yellow packed sand. I

hated to admit it, but this place was nicer than my cave back home. My magic clay was sturdier, but this clay was way fancier. Worse location, though.

“Ggggtcchh!”

The centipede stuck its head inside the hole, bumping into my back and knocking me forward. I hit my head on the ceiling and fell, but that actually worked in my favor, since it pushed me farther away from it. I was right; the centipede could barely move. It was stuck, groaning behind me.

“Gghhh! Gggtchh!”

All those legs the centipede loved using to zip around the desert smacked the sides of the tunnel, but the walls held. The creature couldn't even turn to see the places where its legs were caught—and even if it could reach with its mouth, it would probably just break its teeth on the surprisingly hard walls. I doubted I had much to worry about on that front.

I was briefly worried that it might try to use Heat Beam down here in this confined space, but I was pretty sure it had used up all its MP by now.

Well, I did it. I outran the centipede. But now I was stuck in a tunnel, and all I could do was hope it wasn't a dead end.

Part 3

I LIGHTLY TESTED my claws on the floor. Yep, it was solid. Not even the giant centipede could wreck this place. I opened my mouth and the ballrabbit crawled unsteadily out. It shook itself, sending my spit everywhere. I prodded Nina with my tongue, before stretching it out over the ballrabbit like a slide. Nina weakly slid down.

“N-nyaah!” She groaned and collapsed to the ground, passing out. The whole ordeal must have exhausted her. I checked her stats and breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn’t in any danger.

We couldn’t just lie here forever, though. The ceiling was too low for me to stand up to my full height, but I could still get around. I was injured, though, so maybe staying hunched over instead of standing to my full height was a good idea.

Maybe next time I evolved I would be a quadruped. Or would that be reversing my evolutionary progress?

The ballrabbit used its ears to roll itself up to its feet. “Pfeff...” It sounded mad.

I had to! I steadied you guys with my tongue. It shouldn’t have been too painful, right? Right? But I guess it must have been slimier...

Now that I knew we were all safe, I turned back to our enemy.

“Gggggtttcccchhhh!”

The giant centipede was thrashing its head around, legs flailing against the walls. *Just go home, bro!*

“Ggggggggtttttttcccchhhh!”

What? Oh my God, are you stuck? You shouldn’t have come in here, idiot! You’re just a bug!

I wanted to take care of it right here and now. Its MP was drained enough that it couldn’t use Heat Beam again. It was basically paralyzed. And I’d get a ton of experience points. It was a rank B, high-level monster, after all.

I stood in front of the flailing centipede and checked its stats.

Species: Giant Sand Centipede

Status: Normal

Lv: 63/80

HP: 455/455

MP: 54/241

Just as I thought—barely any MP left. It had Automatic HP Recovery, but not Automatic MP Recovery. *Heh. Serves you right for bullying me just because you're bigger! I'm gonna take out all my frustration on you!*

I took a deep breath, then crept over quietly. There was no point in being precious, but the centipede still freaked me out. It gnashed its huge fangs. *Stop it! You're gonna break your teeth off. Or wait, those aren't fangs. Did those used to be your front legs? I guess it doesn't matter.*

I got as far away as my range would allow, then sucked in a bunch of air and let out Scorching Breath. The centipede's head was engulfed in flames, but it didn't even react. Laughably worthless. We were the same rank, but that thirty level difference was making itself known. The only other long-ranged attacks I had were Whirlwind Slash or Disease Breath. If Scorching Breath didn't work, there was no way Whirlwind Slash would either.

Disease Breath worked too slowly, and it wasn't safe to use around Nina and Ballrabbit. And I didn't want to raise an evil skill and get on another bad evolutionary path.

Should I just go with close-range attacks? Taking care of the damn thing here would make my life so much easier. There might be more of them, but killing this one would help me level up to take on the rest.

I took another hesitant step forward. The ballrabbit let out a *"Pfeff!"*

Don't worry, I'll be careful!

“Ggggggggttttttcccchhhh!” Yellow liquid poured from the giant centipede’s mouth.

Gah! Oh no, I forgot Acid Drool! I backed up, wrapping my wings around myself. I felt the impact, stumbling backward.

“Ggttch!” The Acid Drool was a trap. It was waiting for me to defend with my wings before charging forward. I curled back into a ball and rolled away as fast as I could. The ballrabbit was behind me; I put on the brakes with my tail to stop from running over it.

That was close. If I’d been one second too late, that centipede would’ve crushed me to death. But now I was certain it was stuck. *You could’ve turned around when you had the chance, but now it’s too late! You really wanna live in this tunnel for the rest of your life?*

All right, time to settle this. It *would* come down to a hand-to-hand fight with a centipede.

With the differences in our stats, was beating it to death even possible? I decided to try one last Whirlwind Slash outside of its attack range. I brought my wings up, scraping them on the sides of the cramped tunnel walls, pooling magical energy. The blades of wind hit the centipede right in the face, to very little effect. It might have done *something*, but I didn’t have the MP to whittle it down to zero. Without its Automatic HP Recovery skill, I might have had a chance, but no such luck.

I tried again, focusing on making the wind blades smaller, aiming for the centipede’s front legs. I managed a direct hit, opening a gash in its leg. Blood seeped out.

Ooh, maybe this’ll work?

“Ggggggggttttttcccchhhh!”

Oh man, now it’s pissed.

I shot off another Whirlwind Slash in the same manner, blowing off a leg. From this angle I could only target its front limbs, and it had plenty to spare.

Normal Skill “Whirlwind Slash” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

Good. I need to level this skill as high as possible.

The giant centipede was so mad that its body jerked from side to side, its head knocking against the ceiling and the floor. The passage rumbled but didn't crack. This place was *so* sturdy. *Whoever built this is amazing. I wish I could build a hideout as good as this.*

I'd planned to blow off the centipede's other leg, but there was no sense in pissing it off any further. Whirlwind Slash required a lot of MP. This was pointless.

I turned my back on the furious centipede and looked down the path. The thick walls had messed with my senses, and up until now I'd been distracted, but now I could tell. There was something down here.

Part 4

“G GGGGGGGTTTTTTTCCCCHHHH!”

The centipede continued screaming behind me as I approached the ballrabbit and opened my mouth. *C'mon. It's dangerous in here.* It shook its head.

(“I walk. Now.”)

No matter how much I tried to get it to climb in, it refused. Well, whatever. Luckily, the giant centipede was blocking the path back the way we'd come, so I didn't have to worry about something else coming in. And with the rabbit in my mouth, I wouldn't be able to use my Breath attack. Maybe it was for the best. I'd just have the ballrabbit take care of Nina.

“*Graah.*” I let out a low noise, instructing the rabbit to watch out for her. I tried to keep my voice low so I wouldn't provoke the centipede, but it wasn't screaming anymore. Perhaps it realized there was something down here as well.

Psychic Sense was telling me that whatever it was lay just around the corner, but the walls were too thick for me to tell what it was, only that it was coming this way. I highly doubted it was a human, even if this tunnel *did* seem man-made. A monster could have converted it into its base. The centipede was too large, but this place was the right size for pretty much anything else.

The ballrabbit followed my instructions and picked Nina up with its ears, settling her on top of its head. It followed close behind me, Nina's legs dragging across the ground. *Come on, you'll hurt her!* The rabbit gave a little “*Pfeff!*” and hopped, trying to scoot Nina further up onto its head. But now her head was dragging...

The ballrabbit slowly put Nina on the ground, then opened its mouth wide and swallowed her whole. Its body puffed out, before it made a gulping noise and returned to normal. I remembered it had a skill called Storage, but this was making me nervous.

“*Pfeff!*” The ballrabbit made an indignant noise and puffed out its cheeks. *Ah, okay. If you're sure about it, then I'll relax. Don't get fussy.*

I turned to check on the giant centipede one last time to make sure it couldn't move, then began my advance down the narrow tunnel. The ballrabbit dragged its body behind me. With every step I took, Psychic Sense blared that *something* was coming toward me. It didn't seem that large, and I hoped that meant it wasn't very strong either. It sure was taking its time—maybe it could sense me as well. Maybe it didn't want to slam into me around a blind corner.

We were on the same page there. I wasn't thrilled at the idea of bumping into an unknown monster.

I continued on and finally whipped around the corner. In front of me were two large bugs. That surprised me. From Psychic Sense's limited function, I'd thought it was just one monster.

The bugs were scaled to me the way a large dog was to a human—they were about half my size. Their bodies were red, and they had short antennae and eight legs. They were segmented into two parts, top and bottom. Ants. I remembered seeing something like this when I was first checking out the desert.

Species: Red Ogre Ant

Status: Normal

Lv: 29/55

HP: 246/246

MP: 78/78

Attack: 213

Defense: 226

Magic: 48

Agility: 187

Rank: C

Special Skills:

Earth Type: Lv —

Community Spirit: Lv —

Pheromone: Lv —

Red Sand: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 4

Burrow: Lv 6

Clay: Lv 2

Clay Gun: Lv 3

Regenerate: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Soldier Ant: Lv 6

What the heck? These were some strong frickin' ants. Not only were they rank C, but they had ridiculously high Attack, Defense, and Agility. They were perfectly suited for close-quarters combat. They weren't quite at my level, but taking them on together was going to suck. Even one at a time would be nasty, honestly.

None of their skills worried me too much, and they barely had any Resistance Skills. But if we were going purely off stats, they were even more dangerous than the giant slug. Without fancy skills, they'd probably attack me directly and try to whittle down my HP. I also had the ballrabbit to worry about—I couldn't let either ant slip past me.

I really don't wanna fight them... Maybe we can resolve this amicably? I stopped and tried to catch their eyes.

"Kktch, kktch..."

"Kktch, kktch..."

The red ants let out high-pitched noises. Or maybe they were just gritting their teeth, who knew? The giant centipede kind of sounded like that too.

Ballrabbit spoke from behind me. (*"They say. Leave."*)

Leave? Couldn't they see what was behind us?

"Graah." Ballrabbit, tell them there's a big monster behind us and we're not going anywhere.

("...They know. They still say. Leave.")

Ah, okay. So they want me to die. Guess there's no negotiating.

"Kktch, kktch..."

"Kktch, kktch..."

The two ants moved before I could say anything else to the ballrabbit, heading straight toward me. *Argh...now I have no choice but to fight them!*

Part 5

THE TWO ANTS marched at me side by side. Halfway there, they slowed down, one taking the lead. The two of them had basically the same stats, so it wasn't a case of the stronger going on ahead. This must be strategy—the first one would strike and the second would wait for an opening.

I knew what they were going to do, but whether I could throw them off their game plan was another story altogether. They were fast. I'd have to keep my attention on both of them. In the case of injury, any retreat would have to be immediate. I had to meet all their attacks as they came.

I'd start with Scorching Breath—it was a relief that I didn't have the ballrabbit in my mouth after all. Breath had a long range and wide scope. The ants wouldn't be able to evade it down here in this narrow tunnel.

I engulfed their bodies in fire, but they had enough stamina to withstand it. I spread my wings and shot off several Whirlwind Slashes, striking one ant's face just as it emerged from the flames.

"Kktch!"

It sliced into the ant's head, stopping it in its tracks, but the one in back took over in an instant. *"Kktch,"* it said and shot clay bullets straight at me with its Clay Gun skill. Man, that brought back memories. The black lizard had that skill too.

These bullets were red, though. Maybe it liked the matching color? I batted away the bullets with my claws and kept my eye on the ants. The one in the back began moving again. Its wound was already healed up. It must have used Regenerate.

"Kktch!" The ant jumped at me, mouth wide. *Wow, hand-to-hand combat already?* This place was so cramped, and my movements were restricted—they had the advantage here.

"Raaar!" I aimed a fist at the one jumping at me. I could do this. It would work. The red ant twisted its neck around in midair, and my claws hit nothing. The ant swung back around to bite at my arm. The scales protecting my flesh

crunched. I raised my arm and smacked the ugly thing against the ceiling.

“Kktch!” The ant released me and fell to the floor, but it didn’t go down. The other red ant lunged at me, going for my stomach while I was distracted. But I’d been expecting a coordinated attack from the beginning; I was ready for it.

Don’t think you’ll fool me so easily!

I took a step back and kicked out at the ant lunging at me. I knocked it into the air and used Dragon Punch, smashing it away into the tunnel. It twisted in midair and managed to land on its feet. These guys were tougher than I expected, but at least I got it away from me. I could pick off the other one while it made its way back to me.

“Raaar!” Huh? Where did the other ant go? Oh, it’s checking on its friend. Did they realize they’re no match for me?

The two ants looked at each other and nodded, then charged. *Oh, they’re attacking together now. Damn, they’re smart. Still, I’ve got ranged attacks. I’ll knock down their HP using Scorching Breath and Whirlwind Slash.*

They had Clay Gun, but that was easy enough to bat away. They didn’t have much MP, so they could only use Regenerate a few times. I checked their status to see how far I had to go.

Species: Red Ogre Ant

Status: Normal

Lv: 29/55

HP: 232/246

MP: 21/78

Species: Red Ogre Ant

Status: Normal

Lv: 27/55

HP: 86/246

Oh hey, I already did a lot of damage. I've got the advantage here. I should let them eat another blast of Scorching Breath. I could suck in more air and blast the ants with a fiery gust of wind as they charged at me. There was nowhere for them to go—they couldn't dodge. That would do some damage.

The two ants stopped moving. Their dwindling HP appeared to have drained their courage. But they were already too close. I wasn't letting them get away.

If they wanted to escape, they should have run as soon as I prepared my Breath attack. Take too much damage and you start to run out of options.

I used Scorching Breath, flames covering my vision. I followed up with a Whirlwind Slash right into the flames. The blades cut through the fire, and I heard a thump.

Huh? Did it hit something?

The flames died to reveal a wall of red sand blocking the path. They'd used Clay to wait out the fire. As soon as it died, the wall crumbled and clay bullets zipped toward me. The ants were coordinating their attacks. The path was too narrow to dodge; I had to deflect them with my claws. But even with both hands, I couldn't stop them all. They just kept coming.

My instinct was to guard with my wings, but they'd just charge me. The bullets I couldn't smack away got through, and I thrust my right shoulder out in front of me, taking the damage there.

On cue, the two ants leapt at me together.

I withstood the pain from the bullets, pulling my shoulder back and adjusting my stance. *Don't panic. They're just draining the rest of their MP with Clay and Clay Gun. They won't have enough to use Regenerate.* If I could finish one off, that would assure my victory.

"Kktch!"

"Kktch!"

They returned to a single-file formation, despite that not working last time.

And yet here they were, going back to their old plan. Did they think it would go differently, or were they just defaulting to the basics?

It was tempting to go for one and ignore the other—getting rid of one would win me the battle for sure. But that would leave me open to a pile-on if I couldn't take care of them fast enough.

Why the heck was an ant rank C, anyway? It was like two quick Little Rock Dragons coming at me. Screw this desert. I focused my attention on the ant in front. I had to prioritize defeating that one first. I swung my tail around and struck out at its face.

"Kktch!" It opened its mouth as wide as it could and bit down. Good. That was exactly what I wanted. It'd latch on just like that and let me take care of it once and for all.

With my tail, I swept the ant's body into the air and dug my claws in where the two segments connected.

"Kktch!"

The red ant couldn't take the pain and loosened its grip on my tail, releasing me. I stabbed my claws in, not letting go. I bit down on its neck as hard as I could.

"Kktch! Kktch!!" It shrieked in pain, its legs flailing.

Ugh, these things were so tough. That had to have done a ton of damage, though. Time to finish it off. I glanced at the other ant rushing toward me and circling around from the left. It lunged for my side. It was too cramped for me to dodge. Even backing up wasn't an option.

Under normal circumstances, I'd grab it and fling it away from me. Fighting this battle by the book would have just meant guarding against their attacks while advancing with my own. But that would go on forever. I had to stick to my original plan of taking out one of them, even if I sacrificed some of my health in the process.

Bad news if they both attacked at once, but I could withstand a bite from one. I knew I could.

I kept my eye on the ant coming toward me while I bit the other in the neck again. My fangs were so deeply embedded I could bite its head off.

The second ant wasn't expecting this. It paused for a moment. Its flat eyes almost seemed to crowd with emotion, as if to ask me, "What? Are you serious?"

But that was only for a second. It quickly regained its composure and lunged at my stomach, sinking its teeth in.

"*Graah...*" It hurt, but I had enough HP to ride it out. I had to withstand this and finish off the first ant. Then I could take my time ripping through the second. I gritted my teeth to bear the pain, which in turn just made my fangs tear deeper into the red ant's flesh. Transparent liquid poured out of it, overflowing from my mouth.

It has clear blood. This is random information, but I remember that ants have tubes that pump oxygen through them instead of blood vessels, so they don't have red blood cells. That's why their blood is clear.

That knowledge was in my brain, but I didn't know where it came from. I had a sense it was from a long-winded lecture. Maybe one of my friends in my previous life was obsessed with bugs.

I kept the ant firmly between my teeth as I pulled my claws out. *Tear it apart! Tear it apart! Die already!!*

"*Kkkktttcccch!*" The ant shrieked, flailed, and finally stopped moving.

Yes! I did it!

Gained 432 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 432 Experience Points.

Plague Dragon Lv 36 has become Lv 39.

Whoa! That experience was delicious! C-rank monster! I was over halfway to my max level.

No time to celebrate—I still had an ant gnawing on my stomach. I tossed the corpse of its friend to the ground and jammed my claws into its back. I curled up into Roll, waiting for the right moment. I spun to gather momentum and

then flung the ant upward.

“Kktch!” The ant struck the ceiling, then ricocheted back to the ground. I used Roll again, mercilessly mowing it down over and over. *“Tch!”* It let out a short scream, and then it was over.

Gained 432 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 432 Experience Points.

Plague Dragon Lv 39 has become Lv 42.

I canceled Roll and stood up. Victory, but with some nasty damage to my stomach.

Special Skill “Dragon Scale Powder” Lv 4 has become Lv 5.

What?! That skill leveled up too?!

“Pfeff, pfeff!” The ballrabbit came up from behind and cast Rest. Our stats were so different, it took three spells before my wounds even began to close.

Thanks, Ballrabbit. But save the rest of your MP for Telepathy, okay?

“Pfeff!”

Not only did the ballrabbit have Clean, it had recovery magic *and* Telepathy. Not to mention it could use Storage to carry Nina around. At first all it did was eat my food, but now I couldn’t live without it. I’d befriended the ballrabbit initially for its Burrow skill, but now I felt like it contributed more than I did.

Part 6

“P_{HEWW...}” I let out a sigh of relief as I turned to the dead ants. One of them was nearly decapitated, and the other’s body was crushed, fluids seeping out. Squished ants were disgusting when they were huge, even if I was pretty used to seeing dead monsters by now.

“Pfeff...” The ballrabbit started licking at the corpses.

Typical Ballrabbit.

It opened its mouth wide and bit into an ant’s head. It snapped off easily, and the rabbit chomped down noisily.

Umm, isn’t Nina in your stomach right now? I hope she doesn’t get coated in red ant guts. A-anyway, my level went up a ton. I should probably check my stats.

Illusia

Species: Plague Dragon

Status: Normal

Lv: 42/75

HP: 172/339

MP: 193/232

Attack: 291

Defense: 222

Magic: 201

Agility: 185

Rank: B—

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 5

Divine Voice: Lv 4

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Fly: Lv 5

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 5

Dark Type: Lv —

Wicked Dragon: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 3

Psychic Sense: Lv 4

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 4

Falling Resistance: Lv 5

Hunger Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 5

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6

Magic Resistance: Lv 3

Dark Resistance: Lv 3

Light Resistance: Lv 2

Fear Resistance: Lv 2

Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 3

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 7

View Status: Lv 6

Scorching Breath: Lv 5

Whistle: Lv 1

Dragon Punch: Lv 3

Disease Breath: Lv 3

Venom Fangs: Lv 3

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 4

Dragon Tail: Lv 2

Bellow: Lv 2

Meteorite: Lv 2

Nutcracker: Lv 3

Human Transformation: Lv 4

Whirlwind Slash: Lv 3

Neckbreaker: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 3

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 2

King of Evasion: Lv 2

Protective Spirit: Lv 7

Itty-bitty Hero: Lv 5

Wrongdoer: Lv 6

Calamity: Lv 5

Chicken Runner: Lv 3

Mr. Chef: Lv 4

Dastardly King: Lv 4

Stalwart: Lv 2

Giant Killer: Lv 1

Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4

Clan Boss: Lv 1

Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 1

Hell yeah, I'm almost over 300 Attack! If I keep going at this rate, once I get to max level, no giant centipede will stand a chance against me.

Once I leveled and evolved, I would obliterate that bastard. I would have my revenge. As soon as my stats were all over 350.

Depending on my next evolution, I might even make it to rank A. And then I'd pick up that many-legged freak and smash its head against the ground. Was rank A the highest you could go? My next evolution could be my final form.

I mean...the ranks are based on the alphabet, right? It didn't make any sense that the people in this world would say A or B rank—it was just a system to make it easier to understand my power level.

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 4 is unable to provide that explanation.

I wasn't even asking you. You don't ever tell me anything that doesn't relate to skills and levels, and even then you pick and choose what to tell me. You're absolutely worthless as a helpline.

The tunnel was clear, though the thought of running into some other nasty thing made me hesitate. But the centipede was still behind me losing its mind, so we had no choice but to go on.

I turned down the path, and once again Psychic Sense picked up several monsters down the corridor. Damn it. There was no end to this. This place really was a nest full of monsters.

The only source of light was the tunnel entrance, and this far in, it was pitch-black. My night vision was much better than it had been when I was human, but

it still wasn't great.

The best move might be to just go back to the light and wait for the monsters to come to me. Chances were whatever it was lived down here and was therefore used to the dark. They might even have skills specifically evolved for low light.

Turning to the ballrabbit, I saw it had activated Illuminate—two fireballs slowly rotated around it. This was what I assumed the skill was for in the first place.

"Graah." Can you go a little brighter?

"Pfeff." The ballrabbit understood me and nodded. A third fireball joined the first two, and all three got a little brighter.

Man, the ballrabbit was all grown up. What was its fireball maximum? This rabbit had so many skills. The people of this world should domesticate ballrabbits—one for every household. Argh, but then the country would suffer from a food shortage. Too many ballrabbits would overrun the world, and then they'd have to eat each other. *I'm just freaking myself out at this point.*

"Pfeff?" The ballrabbit shot me a suspicious look.

Crap, I forgot it could just use Telepathy to spy on my thoughts. I was pretty sure I had to be actively focusing for it to hear them with any real clarity, but I couldn't run the risk of making it mad. I didn't want it to turn off the lights. I shook my head, driving away the idle imaginings.

Well, that was the darkness taken care of. So I *could* fight now, but the question became...should I?

The path ahead was a long, straight shot. Best case scenario, I could gather basic information on my enemies before they reached me. Psychic Sense was telling me there were *a lot* of them. I only wanted to fight the ones I absolutely had to.

If they were weak enough, I could just use Roll to flatten them all, but that could backfire spectacularly. I needed to know what I was dealing with.

Before long, I saw a flash of red, and an ant's head popped out of the

darkness along the corridor.

“Kktch...”

More red ants?! I figured those other two were just here by accident, but there were a bunch of them. There were two more behind the leader.

“Kktch...”

“Kktch, kktch...”

Give me a break! *Three* of them? Could I even handle that many? Well, I *had* just leveled—I was in my best shape ever. And it wasn’t like I had a choice.

They were good for experience points. *Guess what, Ballrabbit? You’re gonna have a lot to eat today. I’ll cheat and use my knowledge from my previous life to make a mountain of preserved red ants in soy sauce. Though for my serving I’ll just stick with plain sauce, thank you.*

Another four ants joined the party. I wasn’t sure if it was due to their fallen companions, but they were all very clearly enraged. This was like facing off against seven Little Rock Dragons. Even one of these guys would be overkill to destroy a village. Maybe the first two were just supposed to hold me off until the rest of the crew could get there.

“G-garr...” I made a little noise and unconsciously took a step backward; I was scared.

N-no, I can do this. I know a battle tactic that works even in close quarters. And I’m not alone. I have the ballrabbit and Nina.

If I considered the ants’ skills and tactics, I could come up with a solution. Should I ask the ballrabbit to try to negotiate for me? But no, a surrender here would mean disaster.

Think, think! Isn’t there anything I can use? A weak spot in the walls or something? I should look closer.

Glancing around, I caught sight of a fragment of the red clay wall the ant had made. It wasn’t as strong as the cavern walls, but it was the same color and construction.

Oh God, this wasn’t a tunnel at all. It was a colony.

More ants appeared in a line behind my seven new friends. *One, two, three... There's no end to it! I give up on counting. I'm dead.*

Part 7

“K_{KTCH, KKTCHH!}”

“Kkktchh!”

“Kktch!”

“Kktch!”

“Kkttchh!”

“Kktchh!”

“Kktchh!”

The army of red ants pushed forward.

Calm down. Just calm down. Panic won't help anything. It's always possible that the first two were outliers. They must have a wide range of levels—they can't all be that strong. Don't freak out before you check their stats.

If they were around level 10, I could use Roll and flatten them all in one go. It was totally possible that these were small fry.

I had no proof of that, of course. But I could hope. And I could also hope that all of these ants secretly longed for peace and were just acting under orders from their two evil leaders. That's how ant colonies work, right?

Species: Red Ogre Ant

Status: Fury

Lv: 25/55

HP: 230/230

MP: 71/71

Species: Red Ogre Ant

Status: Fury

Lv: 24/55

HP: 226/226

MP: 69/69

Species: Red Ogre Ant

Status: Fury

Lv: 25/55

HP: 230/230

MP: 71/71

Species: Red Ogre Ant

Status: Fury

Lv: 27/55

HP: 239/239

MP: 75/75

Species: Red Ogre Ant

Status: Fury

Lv: 24/55

HP: 226/226

MP: 69/69

Yes, I was right! The advance guards were the strongest ones. The average level of *these* ants was two levels lower than the first two!

At this rate I can totally...nope, there's literally no way I'm beating them! Two levels is a rounding error, for all the good it will do me.

They were moving differently from the ones before, but there were just too many! I looked behind me to find the ballrabbit frowning. I could tell it was trying to use Telepathy on the ants. They were ignoring the rabbit completely, acting like it wasn't even here.

I started biting at the wall. If the ants made it with their Clay magic, then I could destroy it. It hurt my fangs, but I wasn't letting that stop me. After the fifth bite, a small crack formed. *Damn it, this is useless. The wall is just too solid!* If I had time, I might be able to make a dent, but that was a luxury I didn't possess.

I had no guarantee we'd be able to escape through the wall, but right now it was my only play. Of course, the whole thing might collapse on us, rendering the problem of escape moot.

The ballrabbit could make it out of even just a small hole. It had Burrow; it could dig on its own. And if Ballrabbit was safe, Nina would be too.

But as for me...well, it's like that sometimes. A dangerous world meant a dangerous life.

It was honestly impressive I lasted as long as I did. My one regret was never learning Human Transmutation properly. I didn't remember the first time I died very well—my memory of my past life wasn't reliable—but I was pretty sure I'd been prepared for it. It must have been something like this—rough and not at all peaceful.

A rabbit and a demi-human would be the only survivors. I never managed to join humankind, but a human relied on me for a while, and that made me feel proud. Even if she was frightened of me most of the time.

"Raaaar!" I let out a roar and sank my fangs into the crack in the wall, my mouth lighting up with pain. My teeth weren't making it out of this any more than I was. I tore at the hole with my claws, making it bigger. Good. That looked big enough for the ballrabbit to fit through.

"Grahh." Sorry to put this on you, but take care of Nina for me, Ballrabbit. She's the only human connection I've got left in this world.

"Pfeff! Pfeff!" the ballrabbit cried, racing to my side.

“*Raaaar!*” I stopped it before it got any closer. I looked at the hole, then turned back to the ants. “*Raaaaaaaaaar!*” I bellowed, activating Roll and charging down the line. This was my last dance, so I didn’t worry about direction or control. I went full power. I couldn’t take them all, but I could buy some time.

“*Kktch!*”

“*Kktch, kktchh!*”

I smashed through the first two easily, overconfidence making them sloppy, but the next line formed a wall of four that stopped me in my tracks.

“*Kktch!*”

“*Kktch!*”

“*Kktch!*”

“*Kktch!*”

“*Kktch!*”

Red clay hardened against my body, layer after layer. Their plan was to wall me in, but I wouldn’t let it be easy.

“*Raaaaaaaaaar!*” I screamed and flailed as I got my feet back under me. I broke through the hard red shell of earth, shards breaking off all around me. This was nothing compared to the tunnel walls. Seeing this, the ants halted their advance. “*Raaaaaaaaaar!*” I roared again.

“*Kktch, kktchh!*” The ants backed up, a few of them circling behind me to block off my escape. *I have no intention of running. Surround me all you want.*

I swung my claws through the air, bracing for counterattacks. *Come at me!*

“*K-kktch...*” The ant in front lost its momentum, flagging at my show of intimidation. I skewered it, killing its low-level butt in one blow.



Gained 384 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 384 Experience Points.

Plague Dragon Lv 42 has become Lv 44.

The ants’ anger transmuted into panic, but they didn’t retreat. From their perspective, they had me cornered. They weren’t the type to give up an advantage. The tenacity of the first two proved that.

Part 8

TENSION SWEPT THROUGH the line of ants, but they didn't stop their slow advance, surrounding me on all sides. We were at a stalemate, but the formation around me gradually tightened, putting me more and more at a disadvantage. If I'd been trying to win, I would have cursed my luck. But right now I only wanted to buy a little time. They wouldn't make any big moves before their formation was complete. That worked for me.

"K-kktch!" One of the ants couldn't take the tension anymore and lunged. Behind me, I heard more ants jumping into the fray, lured in by the false start.

"Raaaaaaaaaar!" I twisted my upper body around, lashing out with my claws and knocking away the two ants lunging at me. Neither of them died, but they sailed farther down the passage. They flipped over and started spasming—they were probably activating Regenerate.

"Kktch!"

"Kktch, kktch!"

Seeing what happened to their comrades must've shaken the ants, because their slow advance collapsed into a mob. I could no longer predict when they'd strike. If they kept coming at me one at a time, great, but I couldn't do this forever. They'd wear me down eventually.

"Kktch!"

The biggest ant let out a shriek. I wasn't sure if it was trying to urge the others on or stop them, but I doubted it was just screaming for its health. Its attention was on the ceiling. All the other ants froze at its sudden yell. Was this the boss ant? Their lieuten-ant? It was probably a B-rank monster.

Its yell appeared to calm the others, because they fell back into their orderly approach. The leader wasn't having any more reckless sacrifices.

All I wanted was to give Ballrabbit a chance. I didn't care what they did.

I glanced behind me to check on the ants circling back there, then farther down the tunnel to where Ballrabbit should be making its escape.

“Pfeff, pfeff!”

It still hasn't run away?! It didn't even seem to be looking for an opening. What the heck are you doing?! What was the point of me buying all that time for you? Nina's inside of you, you know!

(“N-no.”) The ballrabbit looked at the ground and sent me a hoarse telepathic message.

At this rate our whole crew is gonna go down.

“Kktcch!” One of the ants ran at the ballrabbit. The leader looked after it and cried, *“Kktchh!”*

It seemed the leader wanted to keep the formation intact, and it didn't want to risk provoking me until it was complete. That was why they'd left the ballrabbit alone. But that didn't stop the one that had gone rogue. The ballrabbit threw its fireballs, and the ant didn't even try to dodge it. The fire fizzled out as soon as it touched the ant's carapace, leaving no trace.

The ballrabbit was in trouble. I sucked in as much air as I could, swinging my neck and blowing out Disease Breath in an arc all around me, targeting the frozen battalion of ants. Noxious air bloomed.

“Kktchh?!”

I used the moment of confusion to whip my tail around, knocking through my enemies and clearing a path toward the ballrabbit. I reached it just as the rogue ant opened its mouth wide. I bit into its back.

“Kktchh?!” My fangs sunk in deep, and I lifted it high into the air before slamming it against the wall. Its body cracked as it hit the ground, but it healed immediately using Regenerate and was back to charging at me in an instant. A moment later, the whole army of ants followed suit.

When the two scout ants attacked me in tandem, that freaked me out. But one at a time? No problem. I kicked and punched at them as they approached, then scooped the ballrabbit into my mouth and ran for safety. Well, the giant centipede was blocking the entrance, so I was running toward a dead end. But I had to escape, I couldn't let it end like this.

I should have leveled up Disease Breath after all. If only I hadn't spent so much time agonizing over every possible outcome...

"Gggggtttttccccchhhh!"

As expected, the entrance was still blocked by the centipede's huge idiot body. I figured this was the end, but suddenly the centipede began to scramble backward. *Wait, you could've gotten out this entire time? I thought you were stuck!* Clearly it didn't want to take on an army of ants.

Perfect. I could just slip out after the centipede. Salvation! I couldn't believe it—I really thought I was going to die.

That's an inefficient way of backing up, though. It's just flailing its silly legs around. But who was I to judge a centipede's grace? Its cry sounded decidedly pained. *Hey! My dude! Let's call a truce!*

I Rolled down the path after the centipede. It was moving slower than usual, but even that was pretty quick. Maybe this whole time what I thought was its head was really its butt, and its butt was its head? No, absolutely not. A centipede with Heat Beams shooting out of its ass was too much, even for this desert. And I'd seen it gobble down those demi-humans with its mouth.

"Gggggtttttccccchhhh!" The giant centipede's body emerged from the tunnel, and I slipped past it and out into the open air. My relief was short lived, though. The sight greeting me was horrific. About thirty red ants clung onto the giant centipede's tail. Apparently, they weren't very pleased with it blocking their front door.

I raced past them as fast as I could, glancing behind me just in time to see the army that had been advancing on me engage with the centipede.

"Gggggtttttccccchhhh!" The centipede tried to twist away, but the ants pinned down its tail. The other group split into two formations to avoid its Bite attack, completely pummeling it. All their energy focused on biting through its thick skin.

Those red ants were freakin' scary. The giant centipede curled up its body, trying to whip them off, but it just couldn't shake the horde of ants. The group pinning it was too heavy. Its speed—its greatest weapon—had been taken from

it.

Red light gathered at the centipede's mouth as it prepared its Heat Beam, but it fizzled out almost immediately.

Giant centipede...bro...you used up all your MP fighting me. You used Heat Beam on me so many times. The master of the desert, defeated by a group of ants, unable to raise a single leg in its own defense.

"Ggggggggggtttttttccccccccchhhhhhh!" The giant centipede's shriek was filled with fear and rage. I wanted to watch the conclusion, but I didn't want to risk drawing the ants' ire again. I picked up speed and didn't look back.

See ya, giant centipede. I know I swore I'd defeat you someday, but this works too. Our rematch isn't actually that important to me. I hate you. I hope you die painfully. I'll live on to tell the tale of the idiot who got itself stuck down a hole and nibbled to death by ants.

Interlude:
The Hero's Epic Tale Act 2

Part 1

“ITS INSTINCTS were so sharp for a wild animal. It charged right at me.” I shook the blood off my sword and sheathed it. Letting out a sigh, I sat down on a nearby boulder and shot a glance at the garpanther I’d just slain.

It *did* have the skill Animal Instinct. I really wanted to test out my new cursed sword, Vampire Princess, but it would’ve been overkill on such a low-level monster. No sense in dragging the battle out. Watching animals suffer bored me.

Why was I still waiting for those idiots, anyway? I was beginning to think the rumor of an encroaching Plague Dragon was just that—a rumor. Chances were the men would return to tell me that big, evil, rank-C dragon

was just some giant lizard. In that case, I would no longer have a viable excuse to take poor former Knight Commander Adoff out of jail. When I’d asked the bishop for permission, he kicked me out, saying he wouldn’t release a prisoner just for some idiot merchant’s delusions.

He’d always been a thorn in my side, but recently he’d begun to actively undermine me. Didn’t he realize who he had to thank for the sweet life he enjoyed?

I’d managed to convince him to send a scouting party, and if there was a Plague Dragon, then and only then would he allow me to take the former Knight Commander on a field trip. The bishop had probably only agreed because he knew there was nothing to the rumor after all.

As I stared at the horizon, I saw movement. Finally, the scouting regiment was back.

Five, six...seven of them? Eight had set out. Probably couldn’t fill out the party with experienced soldiers. Some rookie must have gotten his head crunched off by a Giant Sand Centipede. *Hang on a second...the commander isn’t here. Hagen’s gone.*

I fully expected glowing looks of triumph, but instead I was met with tears and

straining horseflesh. There wasn't anything chasing them, but whatever was out there must have frightened them so badly it didn't matter. But a Plague Dragon wouldn't leave seven survivors. There were a few injuries, but nothing serious.

Maybe after they realized there was no Plague Dragon, they simply refused to come back empty-handed and picked a fight with another monster.

I stood up and called out to them. "Hey, what happened? Where's Hagen?" The scouting regiment rode in close, and the soldier in front dismounted.

"I-Illusia! What are you doing here?!"

"My curiosity got the best of me. I wanted to know if the merchant made a mistake. I thought Hagen would keep you all safe."

Two men toward the back were practically crying. "Illusia, it's terrible! There really is a Plague Dragon out there!"

"It ate Hagen!"

"H-his horse threw him and he ran away, but then..."

Huh. There really was a Plague Dragon? Wild. And in the Harunae Desert too. I'd only seen them in books. And it ate Hagen? Well, he always had been impulsive. He claimed to have fought a dragon before, but those subpar skills of his made me doubtful.

"Hmm...how did so many of you get away alive? Pretty generous of the Plague Dragon." Was it just low level? It was entirely possible that these idiots just didn't know what they were looking at. The church might not even believe them. This wasn't enough evidence for the bishop to let Adoff go. I needed Harunae's gentry far more terrified than one devoured captain could make them.

"It was definitely a Plague Dragon. It defeated Hagen as easy as breathing!"

Well, I'd never found Hagen particularly impressive—I could defeat him in the span of a breath or two myself. A Plague Dragon was more than a match for him. Those who went into battle without the View Status ability were just...*tragically amusing*. They had no concept of their own powers or the power of the enemy. It was almost sad. To me, this group of soldiers was about as

useful as a pile of rocks.

“That wasn’t what I was asking, was it?”

The men stared at me. “Huh?”

“The more believable scenario would be...hmm...the dragon killing seven of you, with only one left to stumble back to me. Trembling and flailing and gasping out your story. *That* I could believe. But now you’re saying it ate Hagen, but it left the rest of you with only sprains and scratches? Don’t make me laugh.”

“I-I’m sorry, Illusia! We...we didn’t mean to let you down—”

I drew my sword and sliced him across the chest before he could even get the words out. He collapsed silently. Whoops. I’d only wanted to test the cursed sword—I didn’t expect just a scratch to kill him. Pathetic. With soldiers like these, Harunae would be in dire straits if a monster ever made it past those magic circles. What was the point of a standing army if they went down like punks?

I felt the cursed sword pulsing in my hand, absorbing the blood of the fallen soldier. I could regain HP this way if I had to, but I rarely incurred damage. I just wanted to see its status effect.

Gained 76 Experience Points.

Heh. I’d have a better time hunting ants. Besides, killing people made it harder to level up Title Skills.

“I-Illusia?”

“Wh-what just happened?”

“Wh-why did he...?”

Six left. Too many to let them scamper away unscathed.

“Like I said, not enough casualties. I’ve explained it several times now.”

I swung my sword with a grin. The color drained from six faces. They screamed, all of them racing off toward the city.

“I-It’s a monster!” one of them called as they ran.

Well, that's not very nice. I'm the monster slayer. But I understand the confusion. It happens a lot. Once I finished off these fools, I would return to the bishop and secure Adoff's release. Then I'd humiliate him. Being falsely imprisoned for murdering his fiancée wasn't remotely good enough.

"Quick." I intoned the magic spell and swung my cursed sword. "Should I give you a thirty-second head start?" I said. No response, of course. And when I'd offered to go easy on them. Idiots. No reason to wait, I supposed. I didn't need them anymore.

Part 2

“**T**RAGICALLY, the entirety of the scouting regiment was defeated in battle. I knew it was my duty to return home to report as soon as I could. Doubtless their bodies have already been savaged by wild animals. Once I have assured the city’s safety, I will of course personally apologize to each of their families and return what remains I can find.” It was just a simple gesture, but I hated bowing my head, especially to this prick of a bishop. All he did was mooch off my hard work. He should be the one groveling to me.

But as they said, “*Where might is master, justice is servant.*” I just needed to be patient. Dealing with him the way I wanted wasn’t worth the trouble of finding myself on the church’s bad side. Still, when the bishop’s usefulness dried up, I’d just kill him.

“It’s been so long since you were last home, Illusia,” said the bishop. “I thought I told you to take this time to rest.”

“Despite claims that the rumors of a dragon are false, I couldn’t relax until I knew the truth. When I risk myself, I risk the world, but I had to know. And now I do. So there are no problems, are there?”

“Did you...do this?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” He had warned me not to get involved, and I’d noticed some strange men following me—no doubt put up to it by the bishop himself. Still, he would never dare to act against me directly, and I didn’t respond well to empty threats. It would take more than this to stop me.

“I am going to slay the Plague Dragon tomorrow. You will allow Former Knight Commander Adoff to be released temporarily into my care to accompany me. As promised.”

“I’ve told you, I can’t do that. Surely there is someone equally capable you could take with you. Why are you so insistent that it be him?!”

“Because he’s the only person who has ever held me to account for my atrocious behavior. What sort of hero would I be if I didn’t repay him in kind? Once he proves himself by slaying the dragon, I will reopen the investigation

into the murder of his fiancée.”

“This is no time to be airing personal grievances!”

“There’s no one else suitable for the job. This Plague Dragon mowed down eight soldiers of the scouting regiment like they were toys. More cannon fodder will do nothing. I can hear the Divine Voice, and it’s telling me Sir Adoff is the only choice.”

A lie. Plenty of people had Adoff’s rank. But the bishop couldn’t see stats or hear the Divine Voice.

“U-ugh...”

“I’ll be fine whatever happens, but anyone along for the ride must be prepared to fight to the death. Would you rather put brave soldiers at risk, when we could just send a prisoner?”

“But...but...!”

“Denying my request makes no sense. In fact, it makes me wonder whether you seized an opportunity to rid yourself of an irritant. Sir Adoff has raised concerns over the church’s methods, hasn’t he? If I bring this to the public, the people will always side with me, you know that.”

“Are you threatening me, Illusia?”

“No, not at all. But this is very important to me. I must be allowed to do it. And I guarantee it won’t bring you any trouble.”

“Could you just take on the Plague Dragon by yourself?”

“I still have quite a bit of training left; I’m in the middle of my quest, after all. Best case scenario, we’re evenly matched. Dragons are clever creatures. It very well could make it past the magic circle. It’s best that we take care of it right away.”

“Impudent brat...” the bishop muttered, gritting his teeth.

“Is something the matter, Your Excellency?”

“Fine,” he snapped. “I grant you special permission to take Adoff into protective custody. Under no circumstances allow him to escape you. Get rid of

him yourself, if you must.”

“Bishop, it almost sounds like you *want* me to kill him.”

“ ... ”

“Only joking, Your Excellency. Thank you for your assistance.” I bowed politely and left the room.

I’d have Adoff out of jail by tomorrow. Everything was going according to plan. A rather more convoluted means of revenge than I would have liked, but I intended to enjoy every second of it. I couldn’t wait to watch his reaction.

The Plague Dragon shouldn’t give us much trouble, no more than a Giant Sand Centipede. It couldn’t be higher than rank C if it let all those pathetic soldiers get away. I wouldn’t even need my holy blade; I’d use this chance for more practice with the cursed sword.

A Plague Dragon meant a fat payday without a doubt. Though that idiot bishop would create some excuse to take the money from me. Fine. I got him to give me Adoff, and it wasn’t like I was hard up for cash. I could just let him have it, butter him up for future use. Couldn’t let the man get too greedy, though.

Dragons were useful from the tops of their heads to the tips of their tails. They were huge, and with a large, high-rank dragon’s body, you could make enough money to float the economy of a small country. Its skin could be made into armor, clothes, and ceremonial robes. Its bones and claws could be turned into magical weapons, or even musical instruments. In good condition, items like that would fetch a high price.

You didn’t get enough dead dragons for there to be traditional ways to cook them, but they were certainly edible. In Harunae, dragon meat was used in curses or as offerings.

If the dragon had high Magic, its eyeballs could be used to see long distances, or even into the future, although mileage varied. Their magic waned quickly; they were impractical in proportion to their value.

Dragon armor and weapons were so rare that I’d love to add them to my collection, barring any weird curses or status effects. Although even those would be interesting. I’d have to ask the Divine Voice. I could always test them

on a few people before I used them myself—standing at a safe distance, and laughing the whole time.

Bonus Story:

The Girl's Faraway Journey

Part 1

Myria

DEEP IN NOAH'S FOREST, far from the village, an apprentice mage and a swordswoman were hunting. The apprentice mage was a young girl named Myria, and the swordswoman was called Meltia. They weren't out hunting for food, though. Myria had asked Meltia to train her.

That training was why Myria had made up her mind to leave the village and journey far from home. But Meltia seemed to have a special interest in Noah's Forest, so they elected to make the village their home base and make frequent trips into the woods. Myria wanted to grow stronger, following the river and traversing deep into the forest. Meltia was only too happy to come along.

In Myria's village, travel into the depths of the forest had traditionally been forbidden, eroding gradually to a formality: it was simply not done. Meltia had been asked to investigate strange happenings by the mayor herself, allowing her special dispensation.

In this world, only the victorious grew strong and leveled up. Only a handful of creatures were able to use View Status, yet the concept of levels and leveling was general knowledge. And the only way to level up was to fight and kill your enemy.

"Myria! You can still use magic, can't you? I'll chase it over to the left—target there. Use your magic!"

"O-okay!"

Currently, the women were engaged in battle with a giant red spider called a taranturouge. Its purplish, poisonous tongue dangled out of its mouth as it faced down Meltia. Myria followed Meltia's instructions and readied her staff,

channeling magic through it. The tarantourouge's eyes locked on Myria, legs bending like it was poised to strike. It seemed to realize instinctually that she was about to use magic, ready to cut her off before she could.

Meltia waited for the right moment and swung her sword toward its head. "Haah!"

But the tarantourouge was fast and quickly skittered backward. Meltia predicted the maneuver, charging forward, swinging her sword once, twice, three times. The tarantourouge's body veered aside. It dodged the first two hits, but the third one struck it on the head. "*Eeughh!*"

Fluids splattered everywhere. It backed up, head turned upward. Meltia knew what it was about to do. This was her fourth battle against a tarantourouge. The spider's mouth was filling up with poison; it kept its head pointed skyward so it wouldn't overflow. The poison's range was wide.

Meltia had two choices: circle around the tarantourouge's back, or take the risk and try to kill it from the front before it could use the attack.

It lowered its head and stretched out its tongue, opening its mouth wide.

"Gotcha!" Meltia thrust her sword right into the tarantourouge's open mouth, stabbing the base of its tongue. The strength left its legs and they buckled, engorged stomach hitting the ground.

"*E-Eeugh...*" Purple, foamy liquid gushed from its mouth. The light faded from its eyes.

"I got a little poison on me, but that shouldn't be a problem." Meltia pulled her sword out and shook it off. Blood and venom sprayed through the air. "It's done." She turned to find Myria standing there, still holding her staff. A ball of magical light bloomed from the tip.

"U-um..."

"Sorry, I forgot."

The whole point of being out here was Myria's training. It was pointless if Meltia killed the enemy all by herself. And now Myria had wasted her magic for nothing.

“Water Magic! Aqua Ball!” Myria shook her staff. A ball of water formed in the air, then dropped to the ground, bursting and splashing onto the earth. She didn’t want to waste her magic, but she needed to practice her spells.

Meltia knew that. She felt awful. “I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t—”

“I-It’s okay! I’m grateful you even agreed to help me in the first place!”

“All I did was force you to waste your magic.”

“N-no, you didn’t! Um, um...!”

Meltia looked down silently for a while. Myria waited for her to gather herself and decide what they would do next. “Should we go a little deeper into the forest today?”

“No,” Meltia said after a moment. “We’re already beyond the chasm. Not even people in Ruija go this deep. There are rumors of dark dreams and even carbuncles. Some people even say this forest stretches all the way to the Harunae Desert, where a very cruel tribe of people live.” Meltia squinted into the forest.

“D-dark dreams? Carbuncles? The Harunae Desert?” Myria repeated all these words she’d never even heard before.

“Dark dreams are sort of...black monkey monsters. They’re rank C. They’re very intelligent and move in groups of eight. When they fight together, they have the strength of a B-rank monster, or even higher. There’s no way we could take them on.”

“R-rank B?! That’s strong...” Myria’s shoulders slumped.

“Myria...you seem so anxious to follow the river. Are you searching for something in particular?”

“U-um, it’s kind of hard to explain...”

Myria was searching for a black dragon. A Plague Dragon. This dragon carried Myria to safety after she was attacked by a Little Rock Dragon, then saved her from a pack of wolves, and had even helped her look for Doz when he went missing.

She had taught the dragon human language and even given him a name. Not

one person in the village paid attention to her, but the dragon listened to every word she said almost as if he were human.

The last time she'd seen the dragon, he defeated the Little Rock Dragon terrorizing the village, raised his claws to Myria, and left. But she just *knew* that there had to be some misunderstanding.

She hadn't seen the dragon since. But her mentor, Marielle, told her that she saw him fall into the chasm. Myria was sure that if she followed the river, she would find him. She doubted Meltia would believe her if she told her this story. Everyone was afraid of Plague Dragons because they were known to be evil creatures who ate humans. People in the village would call her crazy.

"I won't force you to tell me if you don't want to. But if you want to keep going deeper into the forest, you need to gain more experience. Few people from your village have ever ventured into the eastern part of Noah's Forest, and very little information is known about what lies there. And I haven't been there much either, but I've heard the Lithovar Tribe lives to the north. No one willingly travels in that direction. There could be totally unknown species of monsters."

"The Lithovar Tribe? Is that the one you mentioned before?"

"Yes, they're a tribe of barbarians. They worship monsters as gods and kidnap travelers to use as sacrifices. The people of the tribe are so strong, every one of them can fight against rank-C monsters."

"E-every one of them?!"

Only a handful of adventurers were strong enough to take on rank-C monsters. Even Meltia would need to do a ton of research and preparation beforehand and embark with a party of four. And honestly, she would still only have about a 50 percent chance of victory.

"It's *that* dangerous?" Myria whispered sadly as she looked toward the river. Perhaps she'd never be able to see that dragon again without some help. She wasn't even positive he was still alive. She could search for him her whole life, only to find he'd been dead the whole time. More likely she would just never find any sign of him at all.

If he *was* alive, he could have just decided to leave the forest. He might attack her the moment he saw her and kill her horribly. It wasn't out of the question. After all, he did swipe at her before he left.

"Do you have a specific place you'd like to get to?"

Myria shook her head.

"All right." That was all Meltia said.

Myria hung her head; she must've thought Meltia was upset with her. The swordswoman reached over and placed her hand on Myria's shoulder. "Let's go a little deeper."

"What? But you said I needed more experience before we went any further!"

"To get stronger, sometimes you must walk a dangerous path. All the strongest people I know were thrown into a place of certain death and fought for their lives, and they emerged victorious. I'm not saying to always choose the path of danger, but if you're afraid to take risks, you'll never grow as an adventurer."

She dropped her hand and headed off into the forest, calling back over her shoulder, "You want to go deeper, don't you? So do I."

"Y-yes, I do!" Myria answered, and quickly followed.

Part 2

Myria

MYRIA AND MELTIA headed deeper into the forest. Myria was so tired from walking that she staggered. Meltia reached out and caught her.

“Thank you...”

“I thought you were walking strangely. Your leg got injured during our fight with the mahawolves, didn’t it? You need to tell me when something like that happens.”

“I-I’m sorry.” Myria hung her head.

“Use Rest to heal your leg.”

“I don’t have much MP left. I’d like to save it for battle.”

Meltia made an exasperated noise. “Let’s turn back for today. I know I said sometimes it’s good to choose a more dangerous path, but we shouldn’t push our luck.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’re in uncharted territory. Who knows what might show up?”

“I get it.”

“I’m glad you understand,” Meltia said, looking around. “It’s been awfully quiet since we fought those mahawolves.” She put a hand on her chin. After they killed one mahawolf, the rest of them ran away. She thought they’d given up awfully quickly, but maybe they were running from something else entirely? Many monsters were able to sense the presence of others. And mahawolves especially were able to communicate with members of their pack and alert them of danger up ahead.

“Myria, let’s get going—” Before she could finish, she heard footsteps. Falling silent, she turned in the direction of the sound.

Tmp, tmp, tmp. Tmp, tmp, tmp. Whatever it was, it wasn’t stopping.

“M-Meltia, is that...” Meltia hastily covered Myria’s mouth with a hand and pulled her down to the ground, making them both a smaller target. The sound of the footsteps drew closer *fast*. Whatever it was wasn’t giving chase. Sometimes it stopped, as if in hesitation, but then the sound started up again. It didn’t seem to have sensed them.

At first, Meltia had thought it sounded like human footsteps, but as it drew closer, she changed her mind. There was just something about the way it stopped and started that made her think of an animal.

Tmp, tmp tmp. Tmp, tmp tmp.

It was taking the long way around, but it was definitely getting closer.

I was careless. It’s basic practice to make sure a fleeing monster isn’t responding to an outside threat, especially in uncharted territory like this. Up until now, Meltia had always explored well-traveled regions of the forest, with the cave as the only exception. This was a rookie mistake.

The mystery monster continued to make its meandering way toward them. Occasionally it would stop, then sprint forward a bit, like a carefree child. It was unreasonably creepy.

“I think it knows we’re here.” Meltia grabbed the hilt of her sword, ready to draw it.

Myria covered her mouth with both hands, frantically trying to hold back a scream of fear. At last, the footsteps stopped, very close by. At least a minute passed, but the monster didn’t move. Meltia almost began to wonder if it had left, but she didn’t hear any departing footsteps. It was so quiet.

Myria couldn’t take the suspense any longer and slowly lifted her head. She brushed against the greenery, making it rustle.

“*Voooooooooh!*” A loud, raspy cry echoed around them, and the tree right in front of Myria toppled over, revealing a giant body two meters long. Its eyes were pure white with no pupils, and a large horn erupted from its forehead. Its hands and feet were taloned like an eagle’s. Its spindly legs struggled to support its huge body, and it slumped forward with a crouched posture. A big snake stretched out from behind, like a tail. In fact, it *was* its tail.

“Eeeeeeeeeek!” Myria let out a scream of horror.

“It’s a fideetus! A lower rank-C monster!” Myria knew rank-C monsters. The Little Rock Dragon that attacked her village had been one. They couldn’t take on a monster like that—no way.

“Tch!” Meltia leapt up and drew her sword. The fideetus swiped its talons through the air with a lunge. Meltia leapt to the side, the monster’s talons carving out a chunk of earth right where she was a moment before. It moved into the same attack, once again aiming for Meltia. She evaded it again, but this time it followed up with its opposite arm.

“Voooraaaaah!”

She couldn’t dodge that one, but the fideetus’s posture was so unsteady that its swipe had no force. Meltia stood her ground and parried with her sword. She tried to jump backward, but the snake-tail whipped around behind her, where she couldn’t track its movements. A pincer attack by a single creature.

“Damn it!”

“Sssshhhhh!” The snake-tail lunged at Meltia.

“Fire Magic! Fireball!” The attack shot from Myria’s staff, headed for the snake.

“Aaah?!” Both the snake and the main body of the monster went still. Meltia batted away the talons with her sword and jumped backward, kicking the snake in its head. She hit it again, this time with the back of her blade. A loud *wham* of impact rang out as the snake’s head hit the ground. She would never be able to pierce its scales, so a blunt force attack would have to do. Maybe she could knock it unconscious.

“Sssshhh!” It wasn’t enough to knock out the tail. The snake head reared up, enraged. The main body also appeared agitated, slamming its talons into the ground on either side of it. Chunks of earth flew.

“Even if it’s on the lower end, it’s still a rank-C monster,” Meltia said. “And I’m not sure we can outrun it, judging by how fast its footsteps sounded.”

“Isn’t there any way to defeat it? You know about this monster, right? What

about its weaknesses?”

“It’ll be nearly impossible with just two of us—I need a whole team!”

Most fidiētuses lived deep in the forest, and their speed meant hardly anyone survived an encounter. All known information was annoyingly nonspecific.

Meltia had known it was a fidiētus by the sound of its footsteps. The snake section had sensed their body heat and alerted the rest of the monster to their presence. Meltia had considered the possibility that all its starts and stops were due to inefficient communication between separate parts of the body, but watching them fight together defeated that theory soundly. At least the main body’s senses didn’t appear very keen.

“Voooaahh...” The fidiētus sucked in air and moved backward. The snake followed its lead and retreated as well.

This reminded Meltia of the taranturouge. She recalled hearing that the fidiētus had Scorching Breath.

Should they run or charge? She didn’t know Scorching Breath’s attack range, and she had Myria to think about. Meltia raised her sword and lunged forward. The fidiētus must have thought she would keep her distance, because its reaction was slow. She used the top of its hand as a step to jump higher into the air, stabbing at the inside of its mouth. “How’s this taste?!”

“Vooooaahh!” Bright red blood gushed, mixed with steamy hot air. She’d succeeded in interrupting its Scorching Breath attack.

“Yeah? It doesn’t matter how tough your skin is. The inside of everything’s mouth is tender.”

“Vooooaahh!” The fidiētus howled, swinging its talons. One broke Meltia’s sword, and another caught her body, flinging her backward.

“Argh!” She landed hard.

Myria ran over. “Rest!” Light enveloped Meltia’s body, healing her wounds. Meltia brushed a hand over her armor. It was busted and wet with her blood.

“Vooooaahh, vooaah!!” The fidiētus leaned forward and coughed. Reddish

black blood splattered onto the ground.

Myria swallowed hard. She was certain the creature was injured.

“Run, Myria. I made a mistake. I’ll distract it, but you don’t have much time.” Meltia dragged herself up with a nearby branch. The tip of her sword was broken. She bit her lip.

Myria said, “I-I can keep going!”

“You don’t have any MP left.”

Myria reached into her bag and drew forth a small bottle. She swallowed its contents. It was a mana potion, medicine that would restore MP—and take a toll on the body in the process.

“Haah, haah... Fire Magic! Fire Sphere!”

Fire Sphere was a higher level than Fireball and more difficult to control. Myria usually avoided using it since it consumed so much MP, but lower-level spells just wouldn’t cut it right now.

A huge ball of flame flew at the fidiētus’s head. And at the same time, Meltia swung her broken sword at the snake as hard as she could.

“*Sssshh, vooaah!*” The snake-tail sensed the fireball and alerted the main body, but it was too late—Meltia’s sword interrupted it before it could finish.

The main body sensed the sword and lifted its face. Fire Sphere hit it in the back of its head.

“*Vooooah!*” It pitched forward, consumed by flames.

“Th-that’s the first time I’ve ever used that successfully! I’m so glad...” Myria collapsed with relief.

“I-I think we might be able to take it. I had a feeling the senses of the main body are dulled...” Meltia trailed off. “Are you okay? I know mana potions have side effects.”

“*Vooooooooooooahh!*” The fidiētus let out a terrifying roar, hunched over, breathing noisily. It lifted its snake-tail and stretched its tongue from its mouth, eyes furious.

“It’s still alive? After all that?”

She didn’t have the MP for another Fire Sphere, and another mana potion so soon might kill her. She’d needed to defeat it with one hit, and she failed.

“Voooooah!” Claws raked through the earth. The monster charged.

“Earth Magic! Clay!” Myria called the earth beneath the monster’s feet. If a direct attack wasn’t possible, then she’d come at it sideways. The fidiieetus’s anger made its behavior easy to predict. She caught its feet and held them fast.

At least until it used brute strength to free itself. It didn’t even slow down, continuing its pursuit.

It swiped its talons at Myria.

“Dammit... C-Clay! Clay!” Her first Clay spell missed, hardening a random spot on the ground. Her second shot grabbed the snake-tail.

“Sssshhhh!” The snake-tail let out a scream as the main body was pinned to the ground. But that only stopped it for a few moments.

“Voooooah!”

“N-nooooo!” Myria crouched down on instinct, covering her head.

Meltia lunged forward and caught the fidiieetus’s leg. Its bird legs had terrible balance, especially after taking that Fire Sphere. If the tail were distracted, she could knock it off balance.

But not off balance enough, it seemed. It righted itself and kicked her off. Her damaged armor cracked completely. Meltia rolled, in so much pain she couldn’t even scream.

She did manage to knock the fidiieetus off its trajectory; it missed Myria completely.

“Vooooaaah!” It paused, then realized what had happened and stood back up. The tail reared its head and looked around. “Sssssh?!”

That was when the fidiieetus saw it. Even the snake-tail, whose Psychic Sense abilities were so incredible, only *just that moment* noticed the black orb hurtling at the main body. The rest of the monster—and Myria and Meltia—didn’t

notice it at all until it was there, spinning around the fidiētus, encircling the main body like it was drawing a parabola.

Myria looked up, finally catching sight of the orb. It landed behind her and slowly stopped spinning. She looked at it for a fleeting moment, before quickly returning her attention back to the fidiētus. It was raising its claws again, ready to rip off her head.

Then she noticed the blood dripping from its face—its left eye was just a gory hole. That black orb must've done something to it! But this monster was too strong to let the loss of an eye get it down for long—after all, the snake did most of its navigating. And yet it still wasn't moving. Its knees hit the ground, and Myria saw its attention was fixed not on her but on the black orb.

"Ksssh." The orb was no longer an orb. It was a large black lizard. She knew that monster: it was a venomous reptile that lived in Noah's Forest, Venom Princess Lacerta. It was dangerous, but it very rarely attacked groups.

"Voo-vooaah..." The fidiētus grabbed at its eye and fell forward onto the ground. The black lizard's venom worked quickly, circulating through the monster's body. Since its eye was so close to its brain, there was no saving it.

"Ssshhh! Sshhhhh! Sssh!" The monster's tail flailed, urgently trying to rouse the main body.

Myria stared at the scene in shock, then heard little footsteps behind her. She turned and saw the black lizard approaching. "Y-you saved us?" She crouched down.

The lizard froze at the sound of her voice. After a moment, it carefully continued toward her, staring at her face.

"Kssh." Then it turned away, heading to the riverbank. Not looking back, it began to walk downstream.

Myria had no idea what just happened. If it was hunting, why would it just abandon its prey? And if it had saved her, well, it didn't seem to care for her very much.

Myria stood up and rushed over to Meltia's side. The swordswoman was covered in blood and lying motionless on the forest floor. "White Magic! Rest!"

Light enveloped Meltia's body. Her eyelids moved weakly. Myria let out a sigh and fell to her knees. "Will we ever make it home safely?" Meltia's sword was broken, and Myria had already used her last-resort mana potion. She wanted to stay here until Meltia got up, but the fidiieetus's tail was still moving.

"Sshhh! Sssh!" It was whacking itself against the earth, almost like it was trying to free itself from the main body. But then it stopped, changed color, and began spurting foam from its mouth. It collapsed.

Myria looked off in the direction of the black lizard, but it was already out of sight.

Bonus Story 2:

The Slime's Tale

Slime: Rank F+. A dark green monster with no fixed shape. Can survive for a week on just water and weeds. Has the ability to shapeshift into the form of other monsters, but since it can't change color or texture, this ability is basically worthless.

A rare, spontaneous mutation can cause the birth of a blue slime with special skills. But since these rare slimes are helpless right after birth, most are abandoned by their parents and eaten by other monsters.

Part 1

DEEP IN THE FOREST, there lay a pack of dark green, sticky puddles. These were monsters called slimes. They were very weak, and they only survived by eating grass and fleeing from stronger monsters. When they were lucky, they would stumble upon dead creatures and feast on their blood. That was how they survived.

They could change their forms to make themselves bigger—a larger threat to predators—but most of the time, they failed. Slimes had countless evolution options, but most died before they could reach that point.

Slimes were capable of asexual reproduction—they could split themselves in two. Each slime contained a huge amount of genetic information, and they always tried to produce better versions of themselves with each replication.

Groups were made up of parents and children. The parents taught the children how to gather food and avoid enemy attacks. Often, they would use the children as sacrifices to distract those enemies and run.

Very rarely, beautiful, blue-colored slimes were born. They were spontaneous mutations containing the most favorable and unique characteristics of slimes. They had very rare skills, but most of them were abandoned by their parent at birth. It was believed this was due to their strange coloring, which would stand out too much from the group. Perhaps it was a natural instinct to reject children who were different from them. Therefore, most of these slimes only lived to be a few days old, eaten before they could defend themselves.

Back in the forest, the biggest slime in the group began to reproduce. After the child split from the parent, it became its own conscious being and gradually began to turn blue. The group of young slimes shook. They were laughing that this slime was a different color from everyone else.

The parent slime was disgusted and cringed away from its blue child. It had wasted a lot of valuable nutrients and time to reproduce and create that slime. Its failure hit it hard. It didn't find the situation funny at all.

The newborn blue slime didn't know any better and tried to follow its parent slime. The others threw rocks at it. The young slimes changed shape to tease it. The rocks passed through the blue slime's body, pummeling the surface of it. The blue slime stopped moving and began to spasm and tremble.

The slimes were made of sticky goo, but they still felt pain. Attacks would still cause damage.

The green slimes left the blue slime when it was just holding on by a thread. Perhaps they were sick of throwing rocks, or thought it was already dead, or perhaps they just didn't care either way.

The blue slime had only just entered this world, and yet it already knew the pain of mockery, rejection, and abandonment.

Part 2

A FEW DAYS LATER, the slime was managing to survive by taking on the form of other monsters and sucking the water from grass and leaves. But that couldn't satisfy its hunger. The blue slime was already so small, but it grew smaller day by day.

It was in pain. It was lonely. It crawled on the ground, living in fear of other monsters. It believed it had no future. When it spotted a group of green puddles in the distance, it was elated, but the memory of the rocks came back and it began to tremble. But it was still so curious. Even though the blue slime knew it should run away, it wanted to go over and look.

Or perhaps it was its instinct as a child to want to follow its parent.

The blue slime slowly approached them and peeked out from the brush. Its green slime siblings were crowded around the body of a wolf, drawing nutrients from it. They wouldn't need to drink water from plants for a while.

The blue slime stayed still, hidden in the bushes as it watched them. It wasn't thinking any particularly deep thoughts. It just wanted to be near its siblings.

After a while, the wolf's body was rendered down to nothing but bones. The green slimes joined their parent slime and crawled off.

The blue slime noticed that there was still some blood and flesh stuck to the wolf's bones. Slowly, it crawled to the corpse and cleaned off the rest of the flesh. It ate so vigorously that it even sucked the marrow from the bones. Distantly, it felt something entering its body.

An unfamiliar scene flashed through its mind. It saw itself being born as a wolf, surrounded by other wolves. Hunting with them. It chased a giant caterpillar, opened its mouth wide, sank its fangs in, and killed it.

The blue slime could not do those things. It took all its energy just to shapeshift, but it could not harden its form to become fangs or make a jaw sturdy enough to bite. That was how it knew it was seeing the memories of the wolf, somehow transmuted through its bones.

As the blue slime marveled at how strange this was, it heard a rustling sound. One of its green sibling slimes had returned. Its body was shaking. It was laughing at the blue slime. The green slime shapeshifted, forming a hand. The hand reached out and slapped the blue slime. Part of the blue slime's body broke off, splattering nearby.

The blue slime ran, splattering the whole way. The green slime chased it. It raised its hand, smacking the blue slime over and over. That green slime had leveled up by finding a few monsters close to death and finishing them off. It was the strongest in the group and had recently been scolded by the parent slime for killing one of its siblings.

Before long, it had the blue slime cornered against a large earthen wall. The green slime moved to attack. As the blue slime turned to dodge, the wolf's memory flashed back into its mind. The image of the wolf using the Bite attack. Memory mixed with reality. Its senses became muddled, and it was no longer sure of its surroundings.

Was it a wolf? Or was it a blue slime? It wasn't sure. But the next thing it knew, the green slime's body was splattered all around. And if the green slime was here, that meant this was reality. But the blue slime had hard fangs and a tough jaw like a wolf. How was that possible? While it wondered, its jaw shrank and its fangs melted away. The blue slime returned to its usual form. But its sticky body *had* shapeshifted, imitating the fangs of a wolf.

It was a rare, special property of a blue slime that ordinary slimes did not possess. It could absorb experiences and memories from sucking the bodily fluids of other monsters and imprint those experiences onto its own genetic information to steal their abilities. That was how the blue slime created a wolf's mouth and imitated a wolf's attack.

The blue slime didn't understand this. It stood there, shocked, before it realized that many green puddles were coming closer. The group was very angry.

The blue slime crawled away as fast as it could. It ran and ran and ran and somehow managed to get free. It had gained so much experience from killing its high-level brother that it was now very fast. But it wouldn't understand that

until much later.

Part 3

ANOTHER SEVERAL DAYS passed. As usual, the blue slime spent most of its time running away from other monsters. But it was starting to notice how much easier that was than it was before.

“Gggtckkkk!” Right now, a giant caterpillar was chasing it. That was the monster it saw in the wolf’s memories. The blue slime wondered if it could bite the caterpillar and kill it just as the wolf had.

I am a wolf. Why am I running from a lowly worm? The memory that lay dormant in the blue slime’s mind seemed to cry out.

It used all its energy to imagine the form of a wolf, and then it turned into one. It was still blue and transparent but most certainly a wolf.

“Aaa-ooohh!” The blue slime howled. The caterpillar trembled and then started to run. The tables had turned.

The blue slime cornered the caterpillar and bit into its side, knocking it against the ground. The caterpillar stopped moving. The blue slime shapeshifted back into its original form, climbed onto the caterpillar, and began sucking out its bodily fluids. Another wave of memories washed over it.

A caterpillar was eating a bright red flower. The blue slime had once tried to drink from that same flower, but its body started to feel numb, so it stopped. That flower contained a weak poison.

The caterpillar ate the same flower, and its body also grew numb. But the caterpillar did not care and kept eating it. Then it ate another one just like it. Its body wasn’t numb anymore. It ate another and another. Now its body didn’t get numb. In this memory, the caterpillar acclimated itself to the flower’s poison.

The blue slime drained the caterpillar’s blood and ate all of its meat. Once it was done eating, it went out for a walk to search for the flower like the one in the memory. And then it ate it. And just like in the caterpillar’s memory, its body did not go numb.

The blue slime was starting to understand its special abilities. It stole the memories of monsters it ate and learned the skills from those memories, taking them on as its own.

Part 4

THE BLUE SLIME wanted to eat something else and see more memories. It crawled through the forest, looking for corpses. Then it sensed something big and round up in a tree. It was an egg. There was a pile of straw in the branches with the egg nestled inside.

An egg would not have memories. But if it was a strong monster, the slime could get something from it. After all, eggs were very nutritious.

The slime tried very hard to climb up the tree. It fell many times but soon learned to use its wolf fangs like spikes. Finally, it reached the egg. It had a mottled shell. Quickly, the slime climbed on top of the egg and tried to steal its memories and instincts.



“.....!”

Vibrant pictures flashed through the slime’s brain. It was a world it had never seen before. Huge rock-like structures were lined up next to each other. Some places had large, flat stretches of earth. There were lights everywhere in this world, and creatures that walked on two legs roamed about. Of course, to someone who lived on Earth, this was an everyday scene, but to the blue slime it was utterly incoherent. What was this? The information from this unfamiliar world was so overwhelming it felt like its body was burning.

The blue slime spasmed from the heat and fell from the egg, hitting the ground. After that, a large form landed in the nest. The egg’s parent had flown home.

The blue slime ran away frantically, but the heat kept attacking its body. Something had changed inside of it. But the blue slime couldn’t understand what it was.

The blue slime had absorbed the memories and characteristics of a human from a strange, distant world. And most of those memories were emotional ones. Who this strange person was connected to, what this person did, and how they felt. Although the slime did not understand this, it had just gained the ability to think very much like a human.

Part 5

FOR A WHILE after that, the blue slime devoted itself to looking for dead bodies, eggs, or otherwise incapacitated monsters. When it went out hunting, it made sure to only target weaklings. Along the way, it would suck the juices from plants.

At some point, it discovered a human who could no longer walk. A human was one of those creatures that moved on two legs that it had seen in the egg's memories. Something had crushed this human's body and blood gushed from it. Its legs were mangled.

“δενέρχονται!” It was a man with long hair. The man yelled weakly, swinging his sword. “κλείστε! κλείστε!” The man kept screaming and kept swinging his sword.

The blue slime dodged the sword and approached the man's body. He was so weak that it was easy for the slime to avoid his attacks. It made part of its body into the wolf's mouth and bit the man's arm.

“κλείστεεε!!”

The man's memories raced through the blue slime. Human memories were much more interesting than monster memories. Halfway through, the blue slime realized the things the man was screaming were words, and that the man's name was Doz. And so the blue slime absorbed the power of understanding language from Doz. Just then, Doz stopped screaming. He was holding his throat, frantically trying to speak. The sight amused the blue slime greatly.

The blue slime crawled back toward Doz's body, stealing more and more of his memories and abilities. It wanted to steal them all.

It learned how to wield a sword. It learned how to use that sword to perform an attack called Shockwave. It learned how to let loose flames from that sword. It learned how to intimidate others to its advantage. It left Doz nothing more than an empty shell.

The blue slime was overjoyed to have such wonderful memories. Human

memories were vibrant and deep, very fulfilling. It gave it the same sense of satisfaction as when it stole a fragment of the memories from the egg; it felt itself being filled with knowledge.

The blue slime decided not to kill Doz. He seemed hungry and in pain, so it killed a caterpillar and put it in front of him. Doz bit into the caterpillar, half-crazed. The blue slime decided to come back periodically to check on Doz, thinking him a very interesting creature indeed.

Part 6

THE BLUE SLIME roamed the forest, looking for another interesting creature. It was easy to hunt for weak monsters, but their memories were bland. The blue slime hungered for new experiences and new skills.

It regularly went to visit Doz and offer him food. Doz's legs had healed recently. Not completely, but he was able to walk. Every time Doz saw the blue slime, he would stagger behind and follow it. The blue slime made a mouth and spoke to him using the language it had stolen from him.

"Ahh, ahh. All right. I'm talking. Hey. Man. Stop following me."

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

The blue slime only then remembered that Doz could no longer talk. It found Doz creepy, and it sped up to lose him.

Some time later, it spotted a juvenile dragon up ahead. It had a black body and a certain hapless quality to it. It had an absentminded expression on its face.

It was an unusual monster that the blue slime didn't see very often. It noticed the blue slime but seemed intimidated. Perhaps it was not very strong.

The dragon walked backward but then tripped over a rock and staggered. The blue slime thought it might be able to beat a monster like that. It moved closer.

The dragon curled up into a ball and sped away. The blue slime did not chase after it. If the monster was that fast, it might be strong too.

For some reason, the blue slime felt like it had met that dragon before. It thought about it, but it could not remember.

It didn't realize that the egg it met so long ago was a dragon's egg. No wonder it couldn't remember. Still, it couldn't quell the instinct.

Part 7

ONE MORNING, letters appeared in the blue slime's brain. It was in the language that it had stolen from Doz.

Gained Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 1.

The letters lined up and echoed in the blue slime's head. It resembled the sensation of thoughts being embedded directly into its brain when it stole memories from a creature.

You really. Screwed things up.

I never thought. You'd steal the Demon King type. I gave to the Dragon.

The letters kept lining up in its head.

I'm not. Angry. Actually I'm. Happy.

I had no. Idea that there. Was a flaw in. Laplace.

That could interfere with. Memories and skills. During reincarnation.

The blue slime understood the words, but they made no sense. It thought very hard.

"Who are you?"

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 1 is unable to provide that explanation.

It refused to answer.

Gained Normal Skill "View Status" Lv 1.

Another strange thought immediately came into the blue slime's head. But it didn't understand.

This is a. Gift. You can have it.

It will help. Your. "Skill Steal" ability.

The blue slime understood that.

Bye. I have high. Hopes for you. Little slime.

The entity putting these thoughts into its head meant it no harm. It was fond

of the blue slime. It was watching over it from somewhere.

And from then on, the blue slime would occasionally talk to this unknown voice. Its parent abandoned it at birth and its siblings almost killed it; no one had ever treated it with kindness before. It was thrown out into the cruel world to survive on its own. The unknown voice was the first source of comfort it ever felt.

The blue slime had absorbed so many memories, abilities, and ways of thinking that its mind far exceeded that of an ordinary slime. Perhaps, emotionally, it just needed someone to talk to. And although the blue slime did not realize it, perhaps that was why it took care of Doz.

Part 8

JUST AS THE Divine Voice said, View Status came in very handy. It told the blue slime details about its own abilities and the ones its enemies possessed. Thanks to View Status, it discovered it had an ability called Skill Steal. View Status let it see all the skills it had taken from other monsters too.

It also taught it about the most important thing in this world: leveling. The slime used its power very efficiently to defeat monsters and gain experience points.

One day, it asked the Divine Voice something.

“Divine Voice, what is that flower?”

Motrose: Value E-.

“Divine Voice, what is that monster called?”

Graywolf: Rank D-.

“Divine Voice, where are you right now?”

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 3 is unable to provide that explanation.

“What are you doing?”

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 3 is unable to provide that explanation.

“When *can* you tell me?”

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 3 is unable to provide that explanation.

“Why won’t you tell me?”

Special Skill “Divine Voice” Lv 3 is unable to provide that explanation.

Day by day, the blue slime hunted monsters, gaining skills and experience points. And it kept talking to the Divine Voice. The more it spoke to it, the more it leveled up. If it kept leveling up, perhaps it would answer all its questions.

“Divine Voice, what is my Title Skill ‘Demon King’s Fragment’?” That was one of the abilities the slime saw on its status screen.

Title Skill “Demon King’s Fragment.”

This skill only belongs to a creature who possesses a fragment of the Demon King who terrorized the human world. The Demon King is a legendary monster who appears once every 5,000 years to attack human villages. It can force monsters and humans to do its bidding and has the power to facilitate their growth.

“Force humans and monsters...?”

The blue slime wondered if that was why Doz was following it. And if so, perhaps it could control other monsters as well.

Part 9

ONE DAY, the blue slime found two dead bodies at the bottom of a cliff. It thought them to be human children. It wanted their bodies before Doz could get a taste of them, so it changed itself into a spider and used its silk to descend the cliff. As it got closer, it realized the children's bodies were holding hands.

It wondered if there was some reason for that, but it did not understand.

The blue slime dissolved the children's flesh and went inside their memories. The bodies belonged to a pair of siblings. Twins.

Twins were an unlucky symbol in their village, and these children had been shunned all their lives. The twins only ever had each other. Their parents were always angry and forced them to sleep in a dirty shed. One of them contracted an illness and the other one caught it too. The villagers were afraid their illness would spread to everyone else, so they threw them out. Once they left, the little sister died. The older brother held hands with his sister and threw himself off the cliff. Their memories stopped after that.

The blue slime sucked out their memories. Once it was done, it talked to the Divine Voice.

"Slimes and humans are very similar."

It remembered when its green slime siblings threw rocks at it. It and the twins shared the experience of being shunned by their parents because of how they were born. The slime felt empathy for the dead humans.

"What do you think, Divine Voice?"

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 9 is unable to provide that explanation.

By that time, the blue slime had already gotten Divine Voice up to level 9.

After that, the blue slime used the skills it had stolen from other monsters to track down its slime family. After viewing the children's memories, it began to think back on its own infancy. It wanted to destroy those feelings. Since the slime knew where to go, it found its relatives quite easily.

The dark green slimes were down by the river. The blue slime assumed the

form of a monster called a claybear. The green slimes scattered like baby spiders. The blue slime followed the parent slime. The parent slime would go near the child slimes, then hide, trying to distract the blue slime with the children. Every time it did this, the blue slime got very annoyed.

The blue slime swung the claybear's large arm and crushed the parent slime. It only took one hit. Green slime splattered everywhere. There was nothing left.

Gained 12 Experience Points.

How fragile. The blue slime felt ashamed that it had ever felt an attachment to such a thing. It felt satisfied that it had killed its parent.

Normally, slimes were weak monsters. The blue slime vowed to stay alive by any means necessary. But the blue slime was too strong and too clever to crave simple existence. The contradiction filled it with emptiness.

"Divine Voice. What should I do now?"

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 9 is unable to provide that explanation.

"Why was I born?"

Special Skill "Divine Voice" Lv 9 has become MAX Lv.

At last, Divine Voice had leveled up as high as it could go. The blue slime heard a new voice.

I want you to aim to be the strongest in the world. That is why I gave you skills and watched over you.

The voice was much more fluid and coherent than before.

"M-me, the strongest? But why?"

I am just like you. I was betrayed by my people and confined to a small space, all alone. I want you to come save me.

"B-but you're a god. I'm the same as you?"

Yes, that's right. I've been imprisoned here all alone for a very, very long time, responsible for the duties of Laplace, which does not do as I say.

The blue slime was excited. The Divine Voice was like a real parent to it; it had watched over it and supported it after everyone else let it down. If not for the

Divine Voice, it never would've gained all these skills; it would've just died at the hands of a much stronger enemy. When it was lonely, the Divine Voice would always talk to it. It would tell it things it did not know. To the blue slime, the Divine Voice was truly a god.

And this god was relying on it. It was asking for the blue slime's help.

"What should I do? What should I do, Divine Voice? Divine Voice!"

Gain skills and levels. Collect four of the six paths in this world.

"Six paths?"

Yes. You already have one. You stole it that day from the egg. It was the authority to govern all things in the world. The power of the demon king, the skill "Path of Carnage." The heroes, saints, and monster kings of this world possess the remaining paths. Get them and then come back to me.

"I'll do it. I'll do it! I'll show you, Divine Voice! One day I'll save you! Divine Voice! I'll do it!"

Part 10

THE BLUE SLIME gained many skills in the forests and then finally decided to journey in search of heroes, saints, and monster kings. It used the skill it received after leveling up Demon King's Fragment, "Control," to make its enemies do its bidding. Then it gained the skill Magical Brainwashing to use Doz and other monsters as its pawns. It used them to steal a Little Rock Dragon's egg and guide it to a human village to attack them.

Once the village was destroyed, it could absorb all the skills from the mountain of their corpses. Perhaps it could even take the Little Rock Dragon's skills.

The blue slime concealed itself and waited in a safe place to watch as its plan unfolded. Gaining skills was not its only goal. This was the village where the twins had grown up. It would destroy it.

"Divine Voice! Divine Voice! Watch! I'm going to become stronger!"

It was a perfect plan. It used mahawolves to send information throughout the forest.

But suddenly, one of the mahawolves informed the slime that a dragon had appeared and was trying to steal the Little Rock Dragon's egg. The blue slime decided to have a look. This dragon was the same sort of black dragon it had seen before. According to View Status, it was a Young Plague Dragon. And its name was Illusia. It was the first named monster that the blue slime had ever come across.

But still, this dragon didn't have the stats it would need to beat the Little Rock Dragon.

It made the slime uncomfortable that the dragon had both Divine Voice and View Status like it did.

"Divine Voice? Why does that dragon have those skills?"

I did that to help you grow. I did it to test you.

It sounded like an excuse, which just made the blue slime more

uncomfortable.

“That dragon can’t beat a Little Rock Dragon, right?” the blue slime asked anxiously.

I wonder.

“It can’t! It doesn’t need the egg! I won’t let it have it! It won’t take the egg! I won’t let that dragon stop me! I don’t need to be tested!” The blue slime swelled with stubbornness.

But it was wrong. In the end, the dragon evolved into a Plague Dragon and defeated the Little Rock Dragon. After the blue slime saw this, it came out from its hiding place to kill this troublesome creature, along with its companion, the black lizard.

It used View Status and saw that the dragon’s stats had grown much stronger since it evolved. It had far more skills too.

“Your skills have changed so much since you evolved. Annoying.” The blue slime made a mouth and muttered to itself.

Illusia was very surprised.

“You can see inside me, so I’m sure you understand what I want. All I wish is to go and safely collect the skills from the Rock Dragon and the dead villagers,” the blue slime told him as they fought. According to View Status, the dragon could understand human language. That just made it want to kill this creature even more. The blue slime wanted to be the only one who could hear the Divine Voice.

But Illusia had higher stats. It would be very tough to beat him, and the slime couldn’t risk dying. It had made a promise to the Divine Voice. No risks.

“It won’t benefit either of us if you attack me unprepared. Just let me go.”

Illusia ignored it and kept attacking.

“Haven’t you realized yet that it’s no use? Give up. Run away. I’m not fast enough to catch you two, even if I gave chase. As I’ve said, I have no desire to fight you.” But no matter how much the blue slime tried to talk to him, Illusia wouldn’t give up. It was so annoying. Why did the dragon want to interfere with

its plans so much? This was such a waste of time that, halfway through, the blue slime changed its tactics.

It had recovery magic. The dragon was much stronger, but the blue slime could keep recovering health endlessly and continue the fight. Illusia had to realize that too. If it defeated Illusia, it would level up greatly and gain many skills.

That's what it thought. But it let its guard down.

Illusia took the blue slime in his arms and leapt off the cliff. It was dangerous to fall from such a height. The same was true for Illusia, and yet he didn't hesitate.

"F-fine! I lose! I won't go to that village! I'll leave the forest! S-so...!" The blue slime screamed from the circle of Illusia's arms and flailed desperately. It couldn't die now. It must become the strongest and save the Divine Voice. It had to defeat heroes and saints and monster kings. It couldn't lose to this dragon. Not here. Not now.

"Stop, stop, stop! Stop! I can't die! Not here! Not now! *Stop!*" The blue slime made many mouths and used them all to try to persuade Illusia to release it, but he wouldn't listen. "Stop! Stop!" Half-crazed, the blue slime kept pleading. Its body began to break down and scatter.

"Stop! You have to! Stop! Why?! I'll do anything! Stop! I'm going to be the strongest!" At this point, the blue slime didn't even know what it was saying. It heard so many voices in its head.

"Stop!"

"I can't die!"

"Not here!"

It screamed desperately.

It had to help the Divine Voice. It had to gather the six paths and save the Divine Voice who was betrayed by its people and imprisoned. It couldn't die here. It couldn't just be another fool.

"Because—!"

"I promised—!"

“The Divine Voice!”

It was headed for a sharp, jagged rock at the bottom of the chasm. Was it over? No, it couldn't give up. There *must* be a way. Memories flashed through its mind. From the time it was born, so tiny and weak. When its brother attacked it; when it almost died. When it killed its parent slime. The memories of other monsters washed over it. It had to believe there was a hint in there somewhere that would help it. It kept trying to search for it. But there wasn't anything.

[]

The blue slime heard the familiar Divine Voice. But for some reason it seemed empty; it took it a moment to comprehend it.

You were the test, little slime.

The blue slime understood, and a searing heat spread through its body, overwhelming emotions pouring out, form wavering. It lost the skill that controlled its hue, flashing through a rainbow of colors.

[illegible]

The blue slime's body hit the jagged rock and its thoughts ceased. Its body splattered into a million pieces to be washed down the river alongside Illusia.

Afterword

NICE TO SEE YOU, I'm Necoco!

Thank you so much for picking up Volume 3 of *Reincarnated as a Dragon Hatchling*! This volume is the first part of the Harunae Desert arc, and the next volume will wrap up that story.

What will happen to the catgirl slave Nina, and will the protagonist evolve? And what about that mysterious hero who shares the same name as our dragon? The next volume contains the first-and second-most-intense scenes in the entire series in my opinion, so look forward to that!

The dragon Illusia is a monster with a human heart, and the other Illusia is a human with a monster's heart. But in some ways, the two of them are very similar, although I doubt they will ever become friends.

In an unusual move, I'm actually talking about the plot in my afterword! I know there are some people who read the afterword first; I won't discuss any more details so I don't spoil them.

I realized something about the status screens during this volume; the dragon's stats didn't change much this time. Even my editor said, "Hm, it didn't get much bigger than last time," when they were looking at the layout. I'm pretty sure I heard a sigh of relief. But just so you know, Illusia's status screens get way bigger in the next volume, so be ready for it!

Maybe in the fourth volume the dragon's status screen will have to be written in super tiny script and you'll need a magnifying glass to read it? If that happens, you'll know we had no other choice. I'm only joking...maybe. I have a feeling if we did that we'd end up in the Guinness Book of World Records. Tiniest print in the world, or something like that. Hopefully that won't give us a bad reputation...

Oh, that reminds me—I have an announcement to make! I've mentioned my avocado tree here briefly before, but it's really grown since last time. Now that I think about it, six months have passed since the second volume went on sale.

No wonder the avocado tree has grown so much.

It was just a little bud on the verge of death when the first one came out, but now it has lots of big leaves and is very healthy. I guess I can't say that it's because of me, though.

I didn't do very much. I put some water in a glass and stuck a toothpick in an avocado pit, then put it over the glass. Apparently when an avocado is small, you don't have to put it in soil. I don't know the details, but you can look it up if you want to grow avocados yourself.

At first you have to change the water every day for a few months, but after the bottle tipped over and it spilled water all over my room, I put it out on the balcony where I couldn't see it. After a few days I forgot about it and more days passed without me changing the water.

Then one day I realized that I hadn't changed the water for a week. So I went out in a panic to check on the avocado, and it was surprisingly healthy and looking strong, even though you're supposed to change the water every day. I was so relieved when I saw it and thought, "Hm, I guess avocados don't need their water changed at all." But I wouldn't have thought that if the avocado had been a little weaker. I guess there's no sense in thinking about the what-ifs.

I decided to take a hands-off approach with the avocado, and then we got into monsoon season, then July and the hot months of summer. I thought the hot weather and sunshine were perfect conditions to make the avocado grow nice and strong. I thought how nice it would be to be reincarnated as an avocado and enjoy the summer weather. I watched it grow for about a month out on the balcony like that.

Then one day I noticed it had withered.

I ran out in a panic and saw that there was no water inside. It was *really* hot in the beginning of summer, so of course, since I had just left it on its own, the avocado was parched.

Please make sure to be careful if you try to grow avocados. It's pretty easy when you don't have to pay attention to it, but that can lead to other problems...

Gazing at my withered avocado out on the balcony,

—NECOCO





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