



NOVEL

6

WRITTEN BY
Necoco

ILLUSTRATED BY
NAJI Yanagida

REINCARNATED AS A
DRAGON
HATCHLING

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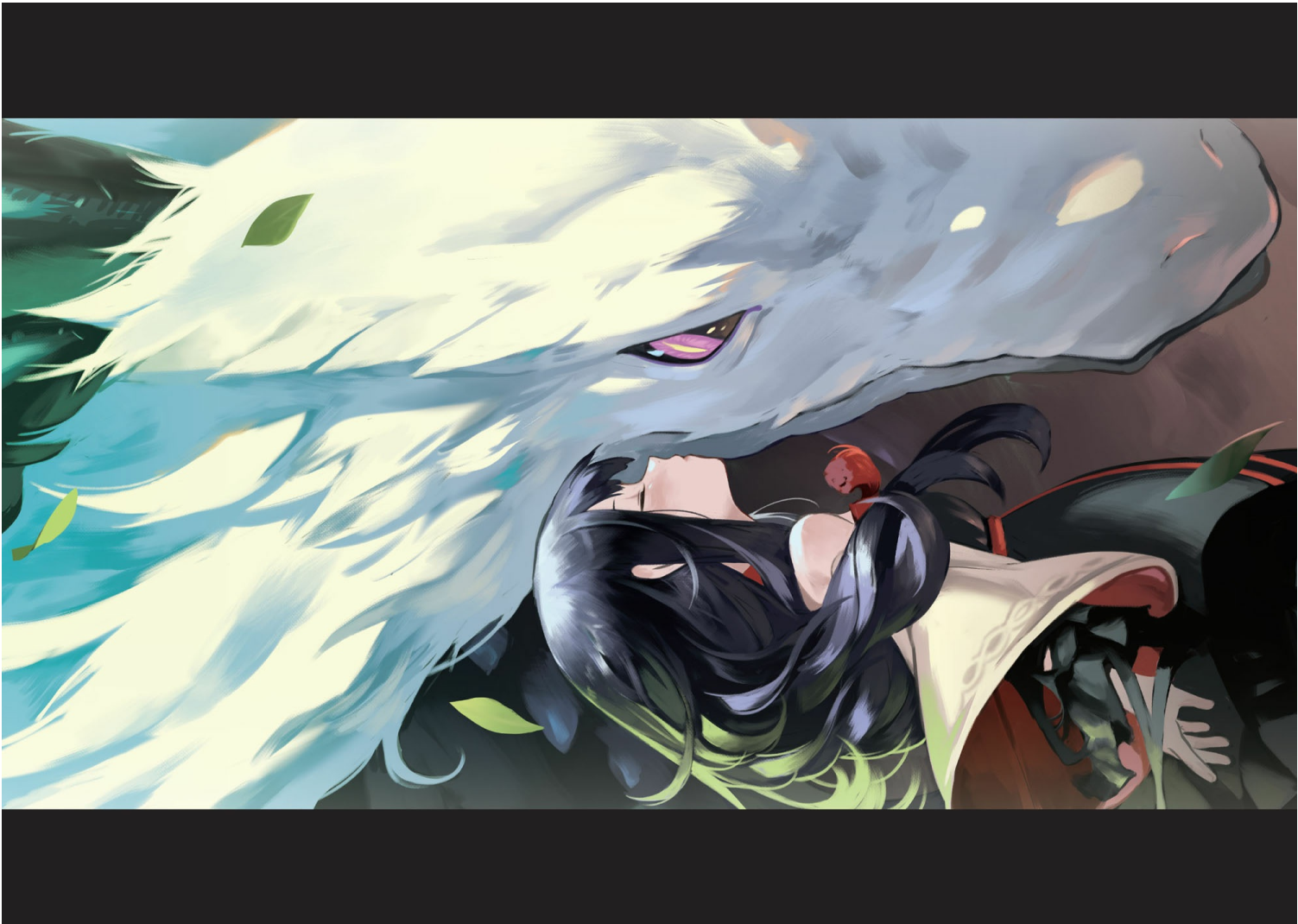
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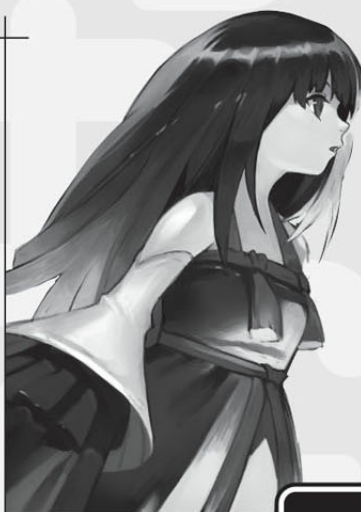


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LITHOVAR TRIBE

HIBI

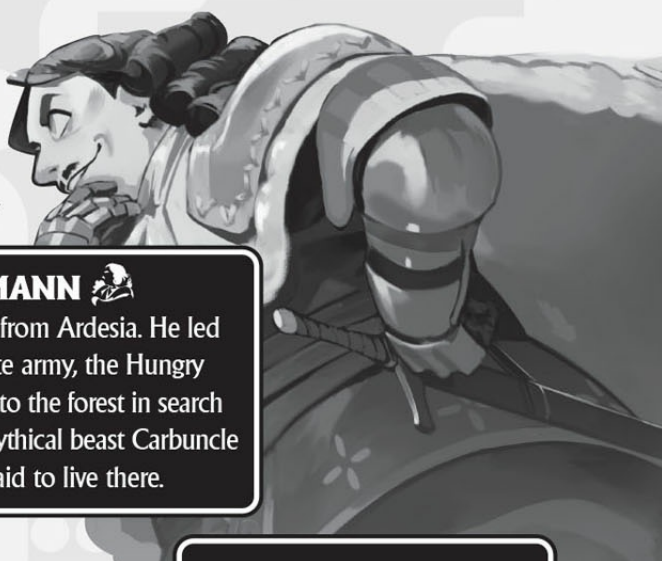
The priestess of the pro-dragon god faction. A skilled magician, she can use Telepathy to communicate with Illusia to convey his will to the tribe.



ALLO

A young Lithovar girl who was sacrificed to the Manticore. She was brought back to life with the Ouroboros's skills and has regained her body due to evolution.

HUNGRY HUNTERS



TOLEMANN

A noble from Ardesia. He led his private army, the Hungry Hunters, to the forest in search of the mythical beast Carbuncle who is said to live there.

VALON

Hibi's bodyguard. A skilled swordsman, but he shows his emotions easily.



NOAH'S FOREST



MELTIA

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



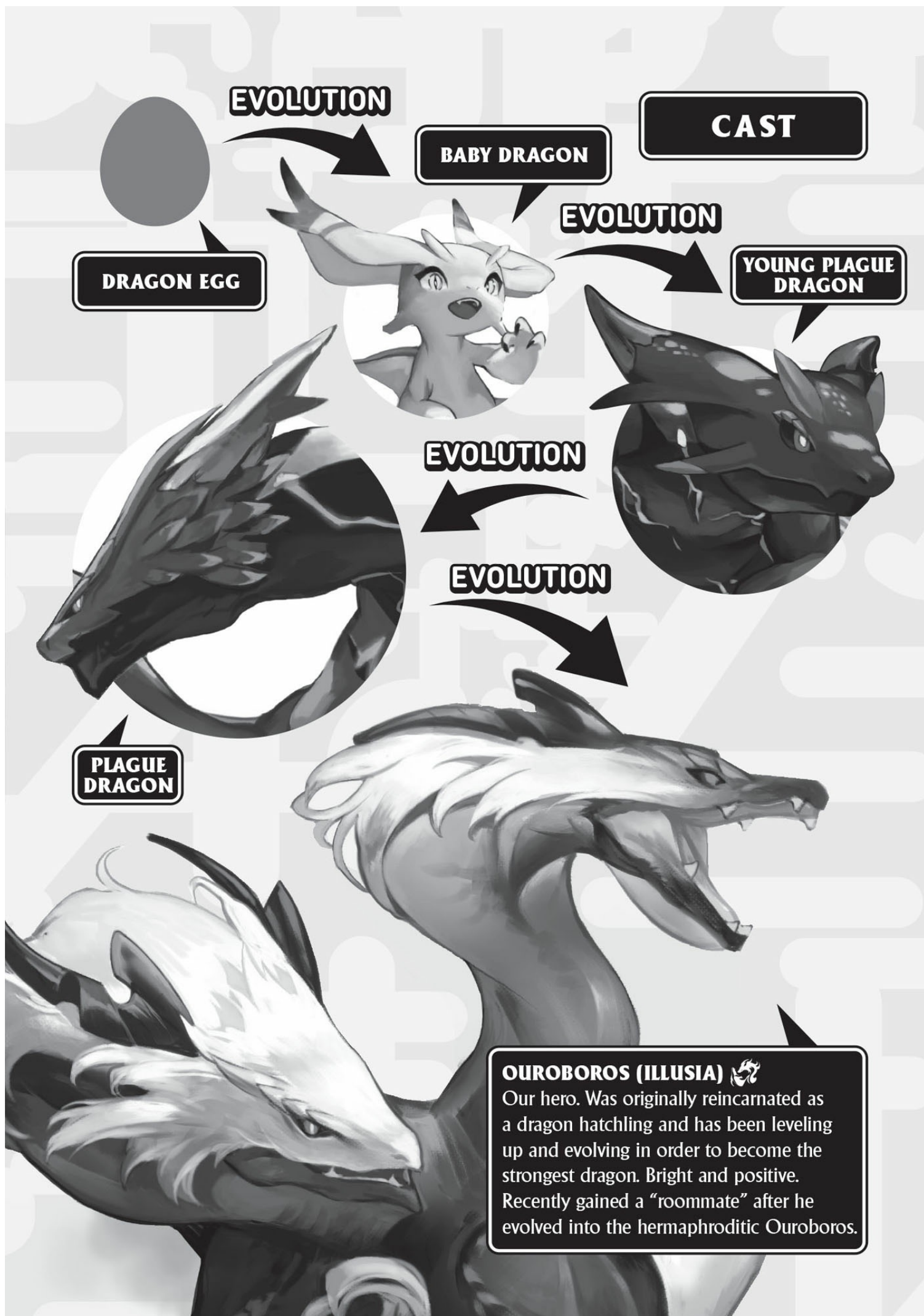
MYRIA

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



BLACK LIZARD

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





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THE STORY SO FAR

After leaving the desert, Illusia arrives at a nearby forest. The forest is said to be inhabited by a dangerous demonic tribe called the Lithovars, but they don't seem dangerous at all once he actually speaks with them. The Lithovar Tribe live alongside two-headed dragons and worship them.

At some point in their history, another giant monster appeared. At the recommendation of the two-headed dragon, sacrifices were offered to the giant monster. When they had trouble finding enough people to sacrifice, the tribe began to attack travelers who passed by.

For some reason, the two-headed dragon they saw as their god disappeared between then and now. Before long, some began to doubt their faith, and now the tribe is split into two factions: the dragon god faction and the anti-dragon god faction.

When the two-headed dragon Illusia appears and defeats the giant monster who demanded sacrifices, the essential problem between the two tribes is solved. The anti-dragon god tribe gradually opens up to the idea of supporting the dragon-god faction.

Then, just as Illusia is getting used to his life as a dragon god, the Lithovars consult with him about the overpopulation of a small forest-dwelling monster—the avyssos. Although small, the avyssos have a tendency to attack humans, and so Illusia decides to invade the avyssos nest and slay their boss.

Alongside a bevy of new forest companions, Illusia descends into the avyssos nest. With the help of his friends, he slays the avyssos boss, Mother, solving a problem that has plagued the Lithovar Tribe for years.

Tensei Sitara Dragon no Tamago datta-
Saikyo Igai Mezasane Volume 6
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Chapter 1:

The Anti-Dragon God Village

Part 1

AFTER SLAYING MOTHER, the boss of the fearsome insect monsters called avyssos, I spread my wings and left the avyssos nest. I joined up with the petit-nightmare, araneae, and lesser treant who were waiting for me above ground.

“Kiii, kii!”

“Raaar!”

The petit-nightmare tried to climb up on Partner’s head, but she didn’t like that. She glanced over at me for help, but I ignored her and looked around. When I was at the bottom of the chasm inside the avyssos nest, I’d seen the forest sprites called laran leaning over the edge looking down at me. It seemed like they were trying to tell me something.

They’d pointed in the direction of a village, and when I looked that way now, I saw the forest sprites hanging off a nearby tree branch. They disappeared the moment we made eye contact. *I’m pretty sure they’re trying to guide me somewhere. But should I follow them? I wonder what kind of relationship they have with the Lithovar Tribe?*

According to the Divine Voice, the laran were protectors of the forest and survived by absorbing magical energy from trees, so I didn’t think they were my enemies. I’d ask Hibi the next time I saw her, just to make sure.

There was something else I had to ask Hibi, anyway...and that was about where the dragon god stood. I wondered if she was lying to me and the Lithovar Tribe.

Honestly, part of me didn’t want to know, but now that I knew the truth, I had to say something. It might make things awkward, but I couldn’t just stay silent anymore.

“.....”

Allo was staring uneasily toward the spot where the forest sprites had disappeared, toward the direction of the village. I needed to question Hibi, the

priestess, for information about the dragon god, but I wondered if Allo knew anything about the forest sprites.

“*Raar.*” I let out a low noise, and Allo turned toward me.

“The Feared Gods almost never show themselves so meaningfully like that...”

Hmm. Her voice still sounded a bit halting, but she was speaking normally. It really hit home just how far Allo had co—huh? “Feared Gods”?

I frowned, and she gave me a confused look. *Apparently, that’s what they call the forest sprites around these parts.*

Come to think about it, there were many feared gods, but just what did these guys do to deserve that title?

“A long time ago, our ancestors angered them and they caused a huge landslide,” Allo explained when she saw my confusion.

What? But are they sure it was the laran who did it? Maybe Hibi was exaggerating. Her story about the dragon god was fishy, so I was a bit reluctant to just believe everything she said at this point.

But if the forest sprites were really capable of such a thing, I should be careful not to anger them. Still, if they were trying to guide me somewhere, then I wanted to follow them. I doubted they’d be mad at me if I was trying to obey them. I was concerned something might be happening over in that village.

What if there were other avyssos that were confused now that their boss was dead and they streamed into the village? Ugh, I wouldn’t even be able to look at them.

I decided to leave Allo and the others at the dragon god’s shrine on the way there and head to the village on my own.

I thought maybe Allo would want to go to the village, so I asked her. She thought about it for a while and then shook her head slightly. She didn’t have the courage to do that yet, probably. I wouldn’t force her, either. I’d just wait until she came to me and told me she was ready.

As I headed to the Lithovar Tribe’s village, I noticed that something seemed off. It was strangely quiet. In fact, I didn’t see a single soul—and an avyssos

rampage didn't seem to be the cause, either. There were no traces of blood anywhere on the ground.

"*Graar?*" Partner also thought it was strange, and she twisted her neck to look at me. I tried using Psychic Sense and managed to detect the presence of people inside the buildings.

"*Raaaar!*" I roared. Normally, Hibi would come running when I did that. I'd have her explain things to me. I didn't like to forcefully call people to come out like this, but something was seriously weird here.

A few moments later, a pair of two spear-wielding Lithovar Tribesman came running over to me. I thought perhaps they'd been guarding some other area.

"Wh-what should we do? The dragon god is here!"

"B-b-but...!"

Hm? They don't appear to be welcoming me very much. They seem shocked... What in the world happened?

The other members of the Lithovar Tribe began to emerge from their huts too, but they were acting very strangely. Some people had to be propped up by others to walk, and there were several others who seemed sick. Their expressions were dark, as if they were exhausted beyond belief.

N-normally they're excited to see me...

I tried making eye contact with one of the sickly-looking men. He was drenched in sweat and leaning up against a wall to stay on his feet. The others were worried about him and seemed to be telling him it was okay for him to stay back.

Logi Rogum

Species: Lithovar

Status: Poisoned, Paralyzed

Lv: 27/65

HP: 26/155

P-poisoned and paralyzed? Did the anti-dragon god faction do something to him? They'd done the same thing to Partner, after all. I'd hoped they might change their ways after I defeated the Manticore, but apparently not.

Well, I couldn't be positive they were the cause of it. The fact remained that I had to do *something*. Maybe Hi-Rest? It wasn't just one or two people who needed it, though. *How's my MP? I should have enough...*

I needed to get all the people in serious condition gathered in one spot. But in order to do that, I needed Hibi to read my thoughts. I decided to call her out here.

"Is anyone around who can hear the dragon god's voice?" an old lady shrieked hysterically to everyone around her. "If we don't borrow his wisdom, we'll all be in big trouble! We'll be abandoned if we don't act soon!"

All she got in response were flustered faces.

Huh? U-um, is Hibi not here?

"Let's look for where the ceremonial items are stored!" one of the Lithovar Tribe suggested to the old lady.

"No! Only the priestess can enter there! You'll anger the Feared Gods if you do that!"

"B-but now that Priestess Hibi is dead..."

H-Hibi died?

At first I thought I heard wrong, but it didn't seem to be the case. According to what the Lithovars were saying, Hibi sensed a suspicious presence from outside and took her attendants to go investigate. It was then that she was killed.

("Hey, Partner...")

.....

("Um... Don't you think we should. Heal them?")

Y-yeah, I guess so. There are some people on the verge of death. I don't know what happened here, but that should be our first order of business. Hibi was the bridge between the Lithovar Tribe and the dragon god, so now that she's gone, the tribe must be feeling very anxious.

We needed to hurry up and heal them to reassure them.

Partner, can I count on you?

("Y-yeah...")

I went toward the man whose status I'd checked earlier, the man named Logi. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was ragged. I looked at his hand, which was placed on the wall, and noticed he was clawing at it painfully. A woman who seemed to know him was by his side and looked anxious. Once Logi realized I had approached him, he opened his eyes and began to cry.

"I-I can't believe the dragon god is concerned about me," Logi said with contentment, but then the strength in his hand gave out. His body pitched to the side, slamming his cheek against the wall. His knees crumpled, and he collapsed to the ground. The woman behind him screamed and swept his body up in her arms. The other tribespeople began clamoring around him with concern.

"Th-that's why I told you to rest!"

"His family should have stopped him!"

"We couldn't help it! Once Logi heard that the dragon god had come...!"

I gave Partner the signal, and she nodded. *"Graar."*

She used Hi-Rest. A gentle light enveloped Logi. The color of his skin began to gradually improve. The Lithovars all held their breath as they watched over him. Logi weakly opened his eyes, and they cheered.

"Am I...alive?" he asked, rising to his feet with his eyes wide.

"I-I thought you were a goner!"

"Amazing! That's the dragon god's healing magic for ya!"

Excitement ran through the gathered Lithovars. Their dark expressions

immediately brightened.

Thanks, Partner. It might've been too late if we hadn't done something.

At any rate, we needed to walk around the village and check things out. Still, it was unusual for Partner to express that kind of concern, since she usually had little respect for human life. But perhaps she'd had a change of heart now that we'd interacted with the Lithovars more.

("It's just because. It was unusual for you. To look so shocked.")

Ah, I see. Thanks for your concern, Partner.

I decided to check Logi's status, and it now showed "Poison (Slight)" and "Paralyzed." I had Partner use Hi-Rest again, and his status changed to "Poison (Slight)" and "Paralyzed (Slight)." One more Hi-Rest spell, and his status went completely back to normal.

It seemed that using Hi-Rest could lessen the effects of Paralysis and Poison, at least somewhat. I suppose that made sense, since Rest-type spells gave the target vitality and activated their natural healing powers.

It was a big discovery, but having to revive a total of HP more than my own maximum was bad for my MP consumption. Especially now, since I had no idea how many people I had to treat.

I wanted to talk to the Lithovars too...but now that Hibi was gone and could no longer use Telepathy with me, that was impossible. At this rate, I had no way of telling them what I was thinking. I wasn't sure whether I should use Human Transformation or not. I had a feeling that if I turned into a human, the village would descend into chaos. After enough time, they'd probably get used to it, but my MP was very important right now, so I didn't want to burn through it by using Human Transformation at this point.

I had a lot of things I needed to get to the bottom of: What happened to Hibi? And what was the source of these mysterious status ailments? But the most important thing to me right now was making sure no one else died.

I walked around the village and had Partner use Hi-Rest on everyone who needed it. I prioritized lessening their symptoms, rather than completely curing them, in order to preserve my MP.

There were around three hundred people in this village, and more than half of them were suffering from that mysterious illness. The other half had the strange status effects, and their HP was draining. It was clear that they would need Hi-Rest soon too.

But that wasn't the worst of it. When I came back to check on those who I'd already cured of their status ailments, they were suffering again. I'd thought I had bottomless MP, but I was starting to see the bottom now.

What in the world was going on here?

As I went around healing the villagers, my Hi-Rest skill rose to level 6 and then level 7, while my Hero skill went from level 6 to level 7.

I learned many new bits of information by listening to the Lithovars' conversations. Apparently, Hibi and her attendants had wounds as if they had been stabbed with swords, and their bodies had marks like they'd been dragged and moved elsewhere.

It was clearly the work of an outsider. No one used swords in the Lithovar Tribe. They all used spears.

They began to raise suspicions about Derek, who had visited the village the other day. He didn't seem like a bad guy, but after this it was hard to believe it was just a coincidence. A sudden visit from an outsider, the murder of the dragon god's priestess, mysterious poisonings... These events had to be related somehow.

The Lithovar Tribe had no idea what the source of the poison symptoms could be. The poisonings began right around the same time as Hibi's body was discovered; soon after, tribe members began complaining about not feeling well.

The first ones afflicted were those who were already weak, but there was no common thread for the cases that came after. The affected folks hadn't gone anywhere strange or eaten anything out of the ordinary. Some outside force must have caused this. But what was it?

I remembered that they'd said Hibi's body had been moved. Did her killer not want anyone knowing where she was killed? She had sensed a suspicious

presence near the village, went to investigate, and that was when she lost her life. The person—people?—responsible for her death had to be the same culprit who came to poison the villagers. And if they didn't want anyone knowing the murder location, it must be because that's where they had stashed the poison.

But if they'd spread poison outside the village, then how did it spread to everyone else inside? *There's gotta be some kind of trick to it.*

It'd be unusual for every single person in the village to eat the same meal at the same time. So what else could all of the villagers have ingested? Water?

Suddenly I had an idea. I used View Status on a nearby barrel of water.

Cursed Water Barrel: Value F-. A barrel filled with water that has been cursed.

Anyone who drinks the contents of the barrel will surely suffer an array of negative status effects.

Bingo. Someone did something shady here. Now, what did they poison? A river? Hibi might have been killed by the riverside.

I guessed that the target was the Lithovar Tribe itself. Adoff said the tribe was feared and people thought of them as demons. And it seemed like a faction of the Lithovars would kidnap travelers and feed them to the Manticore. I wouldn't be surprised if someone had motive to harm them.

On the other hand, that faction was forced to commit human sacrifice by the Manticore who had threatened their lives. Many Lithovar Tribe members had been sacrificed as well. Also, the tribe was gradually opening up contact with travelers now that the Manticore was gone. That much was clear from Hibi's attitude toward Derek.

If they continued to interact with travelers, then gradually the word would spread that the tribe wasn't to be feared, that they were human just like everyone else. I'd bet anything that some people out there only hated the Lithovars because they didn't want to acknowledge that. And someone like that

had to have killed Hibi—Hibi, who wouldn't raise a hand against them. Then they poisoned the river to try to weaken the tribe. It was cruel beyond words.

I had a feeling someone close to the culprit was kidnapped by the Lithovars, and so whoever-it-was came to get revenge. I couldn't say I didn't sympathize. *But even then, I can barely hold back my rage about what they've done.*

I gritted my fangs, feeling absolutely helpless.

Part 2

AS I GAZED AT THE WATER BARREL for a while, I remembered the skill Holy. The hero tried to use it to escape the curse of the Muscas Demi-Liche. Maybe I could use it to draw the curse out of the water? *Hey, Divine Voice? Pull up the deets on that, just so I can make sure.*

Normal Skill “Holy.”

A magic skill that high-ranking clerics can acquire after a long period of training.

The holy light envelops the target and brings a warm feeling of happiness, while at the same time removing all Curses. Additionally, for a certain period of time, the target will receive the status effect “Blessed” that prevents them from being Cursed again.

A more unconventional usage is to deal great damage to undead.

So, it had the effect I was expecting. Uh-oh, great damage to the undead... I need to make sure to never accidentally aim it toward Allo. Come to think of it, her default status was Cursed. Might be trouble if that one went away.

All right, Partner. Use Holy toward that water barrel.

(“It’ll use up a lot. Of MP.”)

That much?

(“Yes. And that’s not the. Only water. Barrel.”)

I’d used up a ton of my MP using Hi-Rest on the tribe. I had an automatic recovery skill, but I sensed in my gut that it’d take up a lot of time.

(“Also. I think you. Know, but there’s. Danger nearby.”)

She was right; the enemy had to be lurking somewhere close. I’d need to

conserve my MP. What I really needed here was to buy time by securing several safe water barrels and then stop the source of the curse.

If my hunch was right, they'd done something to the river—where Hibi had been killed.

(“I’ll use Holy, then.”) Partner lifted her head and cried, *“Graar!”* A light enveloped the barrel in front of us.

“Wh-what’s the dragon god doing?”

“Ahh, if only the priestess were here! And if only our Bela hadn’t left the village...”

The tribe members couldn’t figure out what we were doing.

Bela? Was that another priestess? My wondering was interrupted when someone grabbed the man who brought Bela up by the collar.

“Don’t speak that traitor’s name at a time like this! And ‘our’? Why would we ever claim someone like that?!”

A tense mood filled the air. When I looked over, the man who grabbed the first man had a guilty look on his face and let him go. The first man awkwardly bowed his head toward me.

Uh...?

I shouldn’t worry about it right now. What mattered was the water. I really hoped the curse was gone now, but it looked the exact same. Was it really okay to drink?

(“It should. Be fine? I used more. Magical energy than. Usual.”)

She didn’t sound overly confident, though, so I decided to check.

Blessed Water Barrel: Value C+

A barrel filled with holy water, blessed by the dragon that governs life and death.

Whoever takes a sip of water will experience a mildly sweet taste and warmth throughout their body.

Slightly reduces status ailments.

W-wow, not only did it take away the curse, but it's gonna give some kinda weird effects too. Didn't ask for that part, but hey! Glad that it reduces status ailments.

"O Dragon God—what is going on?"

A large man stepped out from the crowd whom I recognized as one of Hibi's former bodyguards, Valon. Everyone else hesitated, but he came right toward me.

I'd assumed he'd been killed along with Hibi, but it turned out she had other attendants with her at the time. I felt conflicted but relieved to know that Valon was alive, since we'd met and all.

I gestured toward the barrel with my chin and waggled my front leg, trying to tell him to gather all the barrels. I thought it would be tough communicating like this, but his eyes widened in understanding.

"Do you want me to gather up the water barrels?" Valon asked as he moved his hands. He'd managed to read my gestures pretty well.

"*Raaar!*" I answered, and the Lithovar Tribe cheered.

"The dragon god wants us to gather up all the barrels!"

"Is there poison in the water?"

"That's certainly possible!"

The relatively healthy tribe members all began running around to gather up the water barrels from around the village.

("I said. All barrels not. Possible.")

I nodded. *Yeah, I know.*

I set a portion of them to the side and screwed the lids off the rest, dumping the contents. The tribe members followed my lead, discarding the contents of the water barrels. Once we were done with that task, I had Partner cast Holy on the remaining barrels. I checked each one with View Status to make sure that

the curse had been broken on them.

“What’s going on?” Valon asked me again. The other Lithovars were silent. Valon had completely taken over the role of the priestess, it seemed.

I opened up a water barrel and leaned my face in close, taking a small sip of the water. It did have a vaguely sweet taste. Once the liquid ran down my throat to my stomach, a warm sense of happiness welled up from deep within my belly and slowly spread throughout my body.

(“Does it taste. Good?”) Partner asked after seeing my reaction. She stuck her tongue out, saliva dripping from her mouth as she leaned her head toward me, so I gave her a light headbutt.

This water’s precious. Save it for later. Once this commotion has died down, you can drink as much as you want.

I waved my front legs again, gesturing for Valon to drink the water. He hesitated for a moment, looking around at the faces of his fellow tribe members. They must have been nervous, since they had just been told the water was poisoned. I had drunk it in front of them to demonstrate it was safe, but perhaps they thought a dragon like me could stomach poison that humans couldn’t handle sipping.

“I-I couldn’t possibly drink after the dragon god...”

Oh, so that’s why you’re hesitating? I gestured for him to go ahead with my legs.

Valon nodded emphatically and approached the barrel. “I-I’m so happy and honored. Well, if you insist...” He scooped up some water with his hands and drank. “I-It’s delicious! It’s absolutely delicious! The second the water passed my lips, a sense of serenity spread throughout my whole body! The light we saw before must have been the dragon god removing the poison!” he shouted, and once again there were cheers.

Technically, there was never any poison in the water; the water was cursed so that whoever imbibed it would then suffer abnormal status effects. The problem hadn’t been solved yet, though: I had to find the source of the curse. If my hunch was right, I would find it by the river. But first, I needed the tribe

members to understand what was going on. I should probably have someone come with me.

“Raar,” I said, and Valon, who was facing the other Lithovars, turned back to look at me.

“Y-yes! Um, did you want something from me?” He didn’t seem to know what I wanted, but he did realize that I had called him out individually.

I nodded and looked over at my partner. We’d narrowly averted the danger of the Lithovar Tribe members losing their lives in a way that kept our MP cost low. But if Valon was coming with us, it would be a good idea to heal his status ailments completely.

“Graar!” Partner cast Hi-Rest on Valon, using a high amount of magical force. She did it once more, and I checked that his status ailments had disappeared. Then I began leading him toward the river.

Part 3

I HEADED UPSTREAM of the river that ran near the Lithovar Tribe's village. Taking a peek at the water, I saw the dead bodies of fish floating belly-up on the surface. Victims of the curse. My hunch about the river had been right.

I turned around to make sure that Valon was following me, then quickened my pace. There was a monster collapsed at the base of a tree beside the river. It resembled a bear. I checked its status—it was both paralyzed and poisoned. Seeing this monster that had succumbed to the curse, Valon gulped.

As we continued walking, Valon seemed to grow more concerned with our surroundings. Figuring that something was up, I used Psychic Sense, but I didn't get any response. I wondered what was going on, but all of a sudden Valon ran past as he turned to look at me.

"Dragon God! Dragon God!" He waved his arms frantically, desperate to tell me...something.

I-I don't know what you're saying! I could tell he was frantic, but it looked like some strange dance to me. Wouldn't it be faster to just use his words?

"Raar?"

"It's them! Their domain is up ahead! We shouldn't agitate them under the current circumstances, I fear... And aren't they your enemies, anyway?"

"Them"? Oh, right, the other village was upstream. But I had to figure out the source of the curse, so I'd have to impose.

As I pondered what to do, my Psychic Sense suddenly picked up on an ominous disturbance coming from the bottom of the river. The grass on the riverbank was stained with blood. Was that Hibi's blood, from when she had been stabbed?

I gritted my fangs. If that was Hibi's blood, then there must be something here. I stopped walking and stretched my neck out toward the river. I could see several stones gleaming suspiciously at the bottom of the river, surrounded by a

shining magic circle. A purple light emanated from within that circle, mixing with the water and flowing downstream. I was confident this was the source of the curse.

“Raar!” I bellowed. Valon came running over with his great spear, cautiously looking around. He peered into the water.

“I-Is that the poison? I’ve never seen a trap like that before. It must have been done by outsiders...”

“Graar!” Partner roared, and a gentle light appeared, then sank slowly into the water until it reached the bottom. Once it touched the magic circle, the light bounced off violently. The magic circle faded, then disappeared. The stones lost their light, turned into powder, and were washed away with the current.

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

Good job, Partner. Now I could let Valon explain the situation to the rest of the tribe. Next, I had to be cautious of Derek’s faction, who would probably attack directly.

I was concerned about how many enemies there were. Five, six? Even twenty would be fine, but any more than that and it would be difficult for me to protect the entire village.

We had healed the villagers, but only just to the point where their lives weren’t in danger. Very few of them would be strong enough to fight. And without their priestess, it would be very difficult for me to direct them. If the enemy attacked from multiple directions, there might be casualties within the village.

“Let’s go back and tell everyone, Dragon God!” Valon gestured wildly with his arms.

“...Raar.” I roared deeply and shook my head. We couldn’t go back yet. There was something else we had to do here. And I needed Valon to help me.

“Dragon God?”

If there was a risk that I might not be able to protect the village, my only choice was to get more security from the anti-dragon god faction. There should be a woman there who could use Psychic Sense. I had a feeling that was the priestess who they were hesitant to name earlier. But if I could get her cooperation, I could tell the villagers what I wanted to do.

I had saved one of the anti-dragon god village’s children and defeated the Manticore, so they couldn’t think I was *all* bad. Plus, I’d been thinking for a while now that I’d like an opportunity to reunite the two factions. This would be jumping the gun a bit, but the only reason I hadn’t done it yet was because I wasn’t sure the factions would agree to it.

But now that the dragon god faction was in danger, I had no other choice. And if I left the anti-dragon god faction alone, they might get hurt too. They had good reason to help me. Plus, I knew the identity of the former dragon god now—I could convince the anti-dragon god faction they’d gotten things wrong. I didn’t think it was a bad plan.

It was kind of miraculous that the curse had manifested in this specific way. Derek and his faction must not have had any idea that the tribe had a difference of opinion and had split. They probably thought if they placed that magic circle upstream from the village, they would wipe out the whole tribe. But the anti-dragon god faction lived upstream from where they had placed the curse, so they should all be healthy. I might as well try to ask them after coming all this way up here.

(“I hate. Them.”)

Why? You were the one who healed all those kids with Hi-Rest in the cave where the sacrifices were.

(“Those cocky. Sons of...”)

Huh? Who are you talking about? Oh, Yarg and Nagrom? I guess those two are pretty unlikable... And Yarg has a grudge against us, since you bit off his finger...

“Dragon God. They might come here. We should really leave...” Valon flailed

his arms every which way, trying to communicate with me through gestures.

I can understand you, you know. "Raar," I said, gesturing for Valon to follow me upriver.

"B-but, Dragon God!" He followed after me in a panic. "I think they might have been the ones to poison us!"

Apparently he suspected the anti-dragon god faction were the ones behind this, and he thought I was going there to attack them. I had no other way to communicate with him other than roars and gestures, though, so I picked him up with my mouth and set him on my back, then started running.

Part 4

I RAN TOWARD the anti-dragon god faction's village with Valon on my back.

"Raaaaaar!" I charged in with a roar, letting my presence be known. I didn't know how hostile they would be toward me, so I needed to be cautious. No, actually—I didn't have time for that. This situation called for some recklessness.

The anti-dragon god Lithovar Tribe immediately came running out when they heard me roaring, three of them forming a wall in front of me.

"There he is! The dragon god is here!"

"Wh-what should we do? The last time he was here, he defeated the Manticore for us..."

"Yeah, but Chief Nagrom said we gotta kill him! We could at least appease the Manticore by feeding it people, but this thing is different! We've gotta keep him away from here! If we don't obey the chief, he'll really kill all of us!"

Nagrom still wanted to kill me, then... I thought I had cleared up the misunderstanding, but apparently he was holding a grudge. And since he was in charge, it might be tough getting their cooperation...

"Dragon God, please put me down!" Valon shouted. "I, Valon, shall charge into battle in your honor!"

The other three immediately tensed up.

N-no, that's not why we came here...

"L-Listen, don't be scared! Battra, you go back and tell Chief Nagrom about this! Novarre, follow me!" one of the men shouted and thrust his spear forward, charging toward us. The tip of it hit the base of my front leg, but it didn't penetrate my skin. Instead, it slipped off and only left behind a shallow scratch.

"Did you do it?"

Partner silently picked the man up in her mouth and tossed him through the

air. He dropped his spear and screamed as he fell. His side struck the ground, and then he rolled.

“He got me! He got meeee! Avenge me!” The man’s fear must have got the best of him because he didn’t realize he wasn’t really that hurt. The remaining two just stood there fidgeting, with no clue as to how to proceed.

(“That was. Fine, right?”)

Yeah, you did a good job.

At this rate, there was no point in having them call other small fries over, although I wished they’d summoned someone who could use Telepathy so I could tell them I meant no harm. Might as well just give up and go right to Nagrom.

I ignored the enemies who charged toward me, sometimes picking them up in my mouth and tossing them aside as I made my way toward the village.

Once I got there, the village immediately descended into chaos. The children all scrambled away from me at once, replaced by spear-wielding men who leapt toward me with frantic looks on their faces. I easily pushed them aside and continued forward.

Despite everyone else fleeing from me, one little girl ran up to me.

“H-hey, look out!” one of the men shouted.

“Someone get that child!” yelled another.

But the little girl smiled. “It’s the dragon goddess!”

“The dragon *goddess*?”

The other Lithovars seemed confused by the girl’s statement. Looking closer, I realized she was one of the children who had been inside the cave. The villagers must’ve finally realized I meant no harm once they saw that I didn’t do anything to the girl even though she was right in front of me, because they all stopped in their tracks. But now there was even more confusion in the air.

“H-hey, do you think it defeated the Manticore to save us?”

Their demeanors softened.

I heard a voice coming from up behind my back. “D-Dragon God... What’s going on?” Valon asked, seeming confused.

I felt bad leaving him hanging, but I needed to find someone who could use Telepathy here.

I could have used Human Transformation to tell him myself on the way here, but it was a gamble whether or not the dragon god faction would accept the fact that the dragon god could use Human Transformation. Not only that, but I wanted to conserve as much MP as possible so that I could use Hi-Rest on the rest of the village when I returned, in addition to whatever MP I recovered with my Automatic MP Recovery skill. I didn’t want to use Human Transformation unless it was absolutely necessary. It just used up way too much of my MP.

Not only that, but when I was in human form, I was much smaller and my physical abilities decreased—with this many people, they’d all gang up on me before I even got the chance to talk to them.

Suddenly, a clear voice rang out. “Everybody just calm down! Back away from the dragon god!”

I turned and saw an old man walking toward me; he looked like he was in surprisingly good shape. It was the chief of the anti-dragon god faction, Nagrom. His face was pale. He hadn’t expected the dragon god to come so deep into their village, I guessed.

He was surrounded by young men wielding spears, who I assumed were his bodyguards. Standing next to him was the woman I had seen when I came close to the village before. I had a feeling she was Bela, the supposedly treacherous priestess’s kin who I’d heard about before at the other village. From her face and age, I thought she might be Hibi’s younger sister. Nagrom had probably brought her along so that she could talk to me using Telepathy.

“Ah...!” Valon looked at Nagrom, his face twisting with disgust. After all, this was the chief of the tribe that was the enemy of his own. I’m sure he had many strong opinions about this man.

“Bela, be careful,” Nagrom said to the woman. “He might’ve called us both out here so he could eat us!”

She nodded in response. So this *was* Bela.

“And I’m sure you already know, but don’t tell him anything unnecessary about us,” Nagrom reminded Bela in a reprimanding tone. “First tell me what he says, and then I’ll decide whether or not we can let everyone else know. We can’t let them get confused unnecessarily. It’s my responsibility to lead everyone in my own way. You must run it by me first, for the sake of the tribe.”

This old coot was totally gonna stand in my way. It would clearly be easier to just tell the whole village at once, but nope, I’d have to go through him and Bela first. I didn’t know anything about her personality, but the old guy was hard-headed and stubborn.

If I told him how the village was in danger, would he think he lucked into a surprise attack? Last time I came here he served someone poison with a smile just because they had a weird look on their face. The way he was reprimanding Bela right now already seemed shady. Much as I hated to resort to it, in the worst case-scenario, I might have to make a show of power to force them to cooperate.



I glanced around at the other Lithovars. Most of them appeared confused, like they didn't know what to do. But a portion of them were looking at me expectantly. The fact that I had defeated the Manticore must've improved my reputation in their eyes.

On the other hand, Nagrom was staring at me with a look of disgust on his face. Clearly, it would be easier to persuade the others over him.

("Should we. Knock the geezer out?") Partner asked.

The villagers had finally calmed down; if I did something like that, they would certainly descend into chaos again. That would make it difficult to get the message across to Bela. *Please don't do that, Partner. Even if you get irritated, just...control yourself, okay? We're here to ask for their cooperation.*

Bela bowed her head to Nagrom and then took a step forward. Two spear-wielding guards flanked her.

"Dragon God... Um, what is happening here? Dragon God?" Valon asked me anxiously.

Bela closed her eyes and intoned something, then raised her staff toward me. I remembered Hibi saying the same thing before, so I figured she was about to use Telepathy.

Bela. If you can hear me, tell Valon—the one on my back—that I've come here to negotiate.

After I sent that message to her, her face grew tense for a moment, and then she turned toward Nagrom to get his permission. He crossed his arms and stood there for a moment. His eyelids fluttered when he received the message via Telepathy from Bela, and a smile crossed his face.

"The dragon god is saying he wants to tell you that he's come to negotiate with me. In other words, it seems you were brought here without knowing what was going on."

I turned to look at Valon and saw that his face was pale.

"I'm guessing that something happened to incapacitate your priestess, which has made it difficult for the dragon god to communicate with your tribe,"

Nagrom went on. “And so he’s come to steal Bela away from us. I see... So that’s why the dragon god came all this way, pretending to be friendly.”

Well, he was about half-right. I felt my heart skip a beat. I was going to tell him about Hibi anyway, but on second thought, it wasn’t the greatest idea to tell the enemy tribe that the other tribe was missing their priestess. No wonder Nagrom smiled and Valon went pale. I needed to think carefully about what I should and shouldn’t tell them.

Still, I definitely need to clear up the confusion first.

“Chief Nagrom?” One of Nagrom’s guards stepped forward. “What have you found out?”

“I’ve found out everything,” Nagrom replied. He raised his voice and told the other Lithovars, “Ever since he came to defeat the Manticore, I’d thought something was fishy. I have a feeling the other tribe’s priestess is dead. He came here and defeated the Manticore to try to win our favor so that he could take Bela from us. He waited a while and then came back to negotiate. The proof is that he didn’t bring the other priestess with him!”

That was a logical explanation, but can’t he just listen to me first?

“H-he came to take Bela?!”

“That was his goal from the very beginning?”

“But...he’s much stronger than any of the other dragon gods, probably because of his evolution. If he attacks us, how could we ever fight back?”

The situation was gradually getting worse. I could see the guards tightening their grip on their spears.

That damn geezer... He was using pure speculation to drum up hatred for me. If I didn’t hurry up and tell them what was actually going on, things would be really bad.

“Raar...” I said, trying to get Bela’s attention back on me.

The reason I came here to negotiate is because I need your help with an outside enemy. Outsiders have come to do harm to the Lithovar Tribe. If we don’t hurry up and take care of them, they might come and attack your tribe

too. I know your tribes oppose each other because of me, but I really want you to join forces right now. Because if you don't, you could both be killed.

Hopefully that message went through. It seemed like Bela's Telepathy skill level must not be very high, because she was having a bit of a rough time hearing me. But finally her eyes opened wide with surprise—*at the very least I think the message that there was impending danger got through.*

"O-oh, no..."

"Hey, Bela! What did he tell you?!"

"Outsiders..."

"I told you to only tell me first, idiot!" Nagrom shouted at her. She quickly intoned a spell and switched to Telepathy.

We *really* didn't have time for all this.

"Wh-what did you hear, Bela?"

"Now I'm even more curious since the chief stopped her..."

The guards, and the tribe members who hadn't fled, all started questioning Bela and Nagrom. Nagrom completely ignored them as he listened to Bela's message via Telepathy.

Can you please stop butting into other people's business? This is taking forever, and you've turned Telepathy into a confusing game of Telephone bound to cause a bunch of misunderstandings... Wait, is this old geezer stalling on purpose?

"Hmm... I don't see any proof that this story is true," Nagrom muttered.

He said that knowing that I could attack them if I felt like it. And if I was hostile, what would be the point in telling them lies?

"Don't you agree, Bela?"

"What? U-um, but if it's true, isn't there no choice but to join forces with them and deal with it?"

"If it's true. If he kidnaps you, there's no guarantee you'll comply. So that's why he must be trying to figure out a way to take you away from us." The other

Lithovars were looking on anxiously. Nagrom turned toward them. “Would you all really agree to that? The reason why we left that tribe in the first place was because we didn’t want to be swayed by the evil dragon’s instructions to begin with! And now, all of a sudden he’s coming to kidnap Bela by showing off his strength and threatening us! They called Bela a traitor all this time, and now the tables have turned on them!”

“A-aren’t you going to tell us what the danger is?” asked a tribe member.

“Did you really leave the other tribe with such half-hearted feelings?” Nagrom snapped. “I’ll ask you again! Are you going back to being the dragon god’s puppets? Huh? If the reason he defeated the Manticore wasn’t to try to negotiate with us, why didn’t he kill it off earlier? Instead, he left it alone and let it stir up trouble with us!”

“U-ugh...”

Well, he didn’t have to put it like that.

That old geezer Nagrom... He just didn’t want to give up his power. If the anti-dragon god faction helped the dragon god faction, that could lead to peace between the two tribes. After all, the source of their discord—the Manticore and the previous dragon god—were now both gone. Nagrom must be anxious about the tribes reuniting.

When I went to the chief’s place before, there were several young women living there in that huge mansion. It seemed like he was really enjoying being the chief.

“But if the dragon god goes on a rampage,” Bela said, “since now the power dynamics have become so clear, doesn’t that mean for the time being there is no other choice but to accept the other side’s request entirely?”

“That’s what they want us to think,” said Nagrom, lowering his voice. “They’re showing a display of power, making it so if we accept, we look like we’re the ones at a disadvantage. But there is a way that we can take advantage of it. Even if we accept their requests, there are many ways to turn it in our favor.”

“Y-you bastard!” Valon was furious, but Nagrom completely ignored him.

“Now...let’s resume the discussion.”

Bela closed her eyes and intoned the spell again.

Damn it. I didn't have time for this! The precious MP I'd recovered with my Automatic MP Recovery skill was supposed to go toward using Hi-Rest on the other villagers, so they'd be battle ready... But if things got any worse, I'd have to use Human Transformation to convince them.

Should I try to get Bela on my side first? I hadn't told her the whole story yet, and she didn't seem to understand much about the dragon god. If I could convince her, maybe she would become the intermediary, regardless of what Nagrom said. This was a complete gamble, though. If I was wrong, then I'd immediately lose their trust. Even if I was right, I could cause panic within the Lithovars at this crucial moment.

Part 5

BELA CLOSED HER EYES and turned toward me. (*“Dragon God, can you give me more details...?”*)

There’s something I gotta tell you first. It might be a long story, and there might be some things you don’t understand. But don’t stop me or listen to Nagrom’s instructions until you hear me out completely.

(*“.....”*) Bela seemed to hesitate.

“What is it, Bela?” Nagrom asked, but she just kept hesitating.

I ignored him and continued talking to Bela.

I’m a completely different dragon from the previous dragon god. I just happened to have a connection to the Lithovar Tribe, so I support them. However, I learned something about the previous dragon god—perhaps your older sister, Hibi, didn’t even know about it until she became a priestess.

Look, the previous dragon god wasn’t even smart enough to think about a plan for peace with the Manticore. It wasn’t cold-blooded or anything else you’ve heard. It hunted the avyssos purely on instinct and was just a carefree dragon who was happy to be worshipped by the Lithovar Tribe as their guardian god. I don’t think it was even capable of interfering in the village business.

Bela’s face went pale. I knew that meant she had no idea about any of this, since she had never become a priestess. I’d suspected it was a very closely guarded secret within the priestess’s family. And it looked like I was right.

It wasn’t the dragon god who split the village into two factions by offering the sacrifices to the Manticore to stop it from rampaging. It was probably the dragon god’s priestess.

I suppose she thought it was the best way to reduce casualties. It would have been the best course of action, but she didn’t think everyone would obey the priestess. And if even one person didn’t listen to what she had to say, the whole plan would collapse and no one would sacrifice themselves. Why would anyone

agree to be a sacrifice after that? So that's why she told everyone it was an order from the dragon god.

For generations, the priestess has heard the voice of the dragon god and managed the village. Maybe they got the villagers to adhere to standard practices by slapping "It's an order from the dragon god!" onto everything. I honestly don't think that Amphis, the dragon god, had the wisdom to manage the village's politics, so it's just process of elimination here.

I told her that whole story in one go via Telepathy.

"Th-that's impossible... Because, well..." Bela's eyes were wide, her mouth flapping helplessly. I had a feeling it was all sinking in. That only supported my theory.

"Bela...?" Nagrom said, and then suddenly she was unsteady on her feet.

"Bela! Are you all right?!" The two guards threw down their spears and leapt forward to catch her.

"Bela! Bela, wake up!"

"Ahh, ahh! Someone get some water!"

"I'm on it!"

I couldn't blame them for being flustered. She'd just learned that the Lithovar Tribe's worship of the dragon god was a political tool...and she'd heard it straight from the dragon god himself.

Not only that, but she learned that the division between the two tribes had been nothing but a farce the whole time. The anti-dragon god tribe had been the ones who offered sacrifices to the Manticore to get it to look the other way.

Most damningly, the dragon god—the object of worship—presented this story without showing any signs of hostility. If she conveyed this to the others, it would mean it would be impossible to believe in the dragon god in the future. And without a dragon god offering divisive orders from on high, there was no longer a reason for the tribes to be split up.

"Ch-Chief Nagrom... There's something I have to tell you," Bela panted.

"D-don't say it out loud! It'll cause confusion, I told you!"

Bela fell silent, closed her eyes, and intoned the spell. She had begun explaining things to him via Telepathy.

“A-as if I’d believe that!” sputtered Nagrom. “It’s impossible, impossible, I tell you! Nothing but a bunch of lies! I won’t be fooled!”

It seemed more like Nagrom didn’t want Bela to spill the beans than that he didn’t believe it. Bela must’ve thought the same thing; anger flashed across her face, and she immediately looked away from Nagrom.

She bit her lip and clenched her fist. “Everyone, I want you to listen to me!”

“St-stop it! We can’t have them confused at such a crucial time! If you’re going to tell them, let me do it so there’s no misunderstandings! Listen—”

“It seems there was a certain role that was known only to those who were chosen as the dragon god’s priestess, to use him to give the tribe instruction,” Bela began. “I didn’t know about this until now, but I had some idea—”

“Stop it! I said, stop!” Nagrom grabbed on to Bela, one hand pressed against her head, the other strangling her neck. Bela immediately started choking, and the two guards who were nearby quickly pulled Nagrom off of her. Once she was free of his grasp, she fell to her knees.

“Calm down, Chief Nagrom!”

“H-how can I stay calm after hearing such a ridiculous story?!” Nagrom howled. “And you, Bela! Who in their right mind would believe such rubbish? How long are you going to let that dragon god make a fool out of us?”

Bela got to her feet. “They need to hear this.”

“Stop! I told you to stop!” Nagrom shook off the two men and kicked her back onto the ground. He got on top of her and held his arm up in the air, brandishing his fist.

I immediately swiveled around to knock Nagrom away with my tail. Once he saw me make a move, his mouth twisted. Wait—had he done it on purpose to provoke me, so he could tell everyone the dragon god had come to attack him?

I hesitated and slowed the momentum of my tail.

But before Nagrom’s fist struck Bela, a Lithovar spear stabbed him right in the

back. He fell forward, planting his hands on the ground. The spear had stabbed him right through. An incredible amount of blood began to gush out of his wound, spreading onto the earth.

The man who stabbed him went completely pale. “I-I was just trying to stop him...”

“Ooooooooooooooooooh!” Nagrom let out an animalistic howl as he grabbed at the dirt. He must’ve used a lot of force; his fingers made five divots where he dug them into the ground. He appeared to realize that moving around would send the spear tearing around the inside of his body, because he twitched as he desperately tried to restrain himself from flailing.

“H-hey! It’s deep!”

“Idiot! Don’t just try to pull it out!”

Hey, Partner. I know you don’t really want to... But go ahead and use Hi-Rest on them.

“Graar.”

Partner roared, and a gentle light surrounded Bela, who had fallen unconscious after being choked and kicked by Nagrom. Her color returned once Partner cast Hi-Rest on her.

“Th-thank you...” Bela answered, seeming confused.

U-um, Partner? Go ahead and save the old geezer too.

Part 6

“THE PREVIOUS DRAGON GOD is already dead, and his body is in the ruins of the avyssos nest.”

After we tied Nagrom up, the talks went smoothly. Bela relayed most of what I said to the rest of the tribe. The tribe listened seriously, intent on getting to the bottom of this.

“S-so what has all this been for, then...?”

“Did Nagrom use our resentment to his advantage and manipulate us this whole time?”

One by one, villagers began to murmur after Bela’s explanation had ended.

“If only Hibi had told us all of this when the tribe split...” someone complained.

She never had the chance. They were right in the midst of the Manticore drama when the tribes split. If the pillar that had been supporting the sacrifices had crumbled, then it would’ve evolved into a bigger problem than the tribes merely splitting into two.

A dark cloud seemed to hang over the village, but there was no longer anyone who seemed to bear ill will against me.

“It’s lies! All lies!”

Well, except for Nagrom, who was currently tied up with the rope they used for giant monsters.

(“Hey. Can we. Kill him? Can we? No one would care. If we killed him. Now...”)

N-no, I don’t want anyone to say we used violence to get them to cooperate. I don’t want anyone in the village to have any grudges against me either, so I don’t want to do anything violent here now... Let’s just leave the old geezer alone. I’m sure the Lithovars will punish him appropriately for his crimes.

“Hey,” one of the Lithovars said. “What should we do with Nagrom?”

“We were the ones who went along with the split,” said another, “but I can’t just look the other way when he tried to kill Bela.”

Y-yeah, appropriately...

“I was trying to shut her up before she confused you all with the dragon god’s blatant lies!” Nagrom screamed, red-faced.

“Should we dump him in the river?”

“No, we can’t do that. I want to leave his body. We should keep his head so that we don’t threaten the other tribe. If we have his head, they won’t be deceived, either.”

And after a pause...

“It’s lies! All lies! You’re being fooled! Why can’t you all see that?!”

I couldn’t stand watching any more of this, so I lightly flicked my tail against his head. His body swayed, and then his head limply rolled forward. Now he’d shut up for a while.

“It might be better to not tell the other tribe about this,” Valon said solemnly from his place on my back.

“You don’t look surprised about this, Valon,” Bela noted, and he nodded quietly.

“Even if the previous dragon god only ate the avyssos as food, he still protected us from the avyssos for generations,” he said. “And the current dragon god has saved the village from crisis many times... There’s no reason why we can’t pay respect to both of them.”

Hearing those words warmed my heart. I felt ashamed of myself; I’d been so scared that they’d think I was an evil dragon faking the whole god thing and that they might even kill me after revealing that I was not the original dragon god.

“However, I don’t know if everyone will accept it that way,” Valon added. “We should hide the matter and give priority to reconciliation and cooperation.”

I nodded in agreement.

Anyway, it was important to establish a cooperative relationship as soon as possible. If they compromised their way of thinking and came to help, then as long as I was there, the other tribe would just think that the dragon god had persuaded them.

“After making preparations, let’s head to the other village to offer assistance,” said Bela. “And for the time being... Free the three who are being held captive in the cave under Nagrom’s orders.”

There were that many who went against him? If only they’d been awake at that time, these talks would’ve gone a lot smoother.

I looked at Bela, thinking this over. She must’ve thought I wanted to say something, because she looked a bit hesitant. She closed her eyes and intoned the spell.

(“I-Is there something the matter, Dragon God?”)

Huh? N-no, it’s not that...

She didn’t seem as strong-willed as Hibi, but maybe that was just because Hibi had been trained up for the role of the dragon god priestess.

Why were the three of them arrested?

(“Aknae opposed Nagrom’s methods and so he was arrested. Tataruk tried to let the sacrifices escape...”)

Tataruk... Oh, right, the guy who came to the sacrificial cave to lead the escape and tried to cut the ropes off Partner’s arm. I guess he got arrested even though I defeated the Manticore.

(“Yarg expressed several times to Nagrom that perhaps we should trust the dragon god and that is why he was arrested.”)

What? Yarg did that on my account? I thought he held a grudge after getting his fingers chopped off.

Well, he *was* the one who directly saw me and Partner kill the Manticore. Even when he was escorting Partner, he seemed more concerned about the travelers who were captured to be sacrificed, so maybe he wasn’t such a bad guy. Maybe he was the one to thank for so many people here being surprisingly

friendly?

("Well I. Won't forgive. Him.")

Just don't bite him if we meet him face-to-face again.

Using Telepathy, Bela told me, *("I'm going to go explain the situation to those in the tribe who aren't here, and then I'll procure weapons and medicine before heading to the other tribe. Is that all right?")*

Won't it cause a commotion if you show up with weapons? I responded. *They have plenty of weapons over there, and it'll take time to get weapons here. I want to get things moving along as quickly as possible, because I don't know when the enemy will show up.*

("Nagrom ordered us to improve the mors poison and develop an antidote for those who were injured with it by mistake. I believe our weapons are better.")

O-okay. That's reassuring, but wasn't that the poison he gathered a bunch of so he could kill the dragon god...? Well, it's all about how you use it, right? As long as I was there, the other tribe would surely trust them.

Part 7

BY THE TIME they had gathered up the necessary weapons and medicine, it was dark. It was certainly possible the enemy would stage a night attack, but there was also a possibility that they would find out I had destroyed the magic circle and thus discovered their strategy, and respond by rushing into an attack.

The other tribe might be anxious about my disappearance during this time of emergency too. So I decided to take the warriors from the anti-dragon god faction over to the other village during the night. However, the anti-dragon god village would be in serious danger if the enemy decided to attack after I'd taken away all of their strongest men. So after discussing it with Bela and the others in charge, we decided to have half of the approximately two hundred people from the anti-dragon god group come along.

In the unlikely event that the enemy attacked the anti-dragon god faction, we prepared an evacuation route in advance, and the guards were still available, so it shouldn't be that much of a problem.

And so, nearly one hundred anti-dragon god Lithovar warriors walked along the riverbank with me. Certainly, with this much help, we could deal with the enemy. Bela told me there were about three hundred Lithovars in the dragon god faction, with over two hundred of those able to fight. So all in all, we'd have three hundred warriors on our side.

Many people in the other village hadn't completely recovered from the effects of drinking the cursed water, but since I had already destroyed the source, it shouldn't have gotten worse than before. Additionally, I'd avoided having to spend any more MP by persuading the anti-dragon god faction to come here, meaning I should be almost completely recovered by the time I arrived. We'd have plenty MP available to use for casting Hi-Rest and Holy to maintain our number of troops.

Plus, I'd be there. If it were a bunch of humans standing against us, surely the fight wouldn't be *that* hard. I'd been strong enough to fight against multiple

humans ever since I was a Plague Dragon. An Ouroboros specialized in long-range battles, so I should be able to continue fighting for a whole day.

So really, I wanted to ask the Lithovar warriors to buy time rather than working on repelling the enemy. Once I repelled them, the battle should be over.

As I proceeded forward, deep in thought, I noticed that the muscles around Partner's chin were trembling. I thought it was strange, so I gave her a closer look, and I noticed her eyes were darting around. Had she picked up on a strange presence?

What's up, Partner? If you picked up on something, let me know.

("Not a. Big deal.")

That terse reply was the only thing I got. After that, she seemed to be consciously restraining her eye movements. That only made her seem more suspicious.

Hey, if something happened...

("Hard to stay calm. With them there.")

I checked behind me again. The large group of the Lithovar Tribe walked in a line behind us. Some were carrying spears, while others pulled wagons carrying pots. It *was* kind of unnerving. I hoped that the other tribe wouldn't get scared when they saw them.

Once the village came into view, I used Whistle to let out a, well...a whistle. A shrill noise resounded throughout the night. The villagers must've heard it. I felt bad waking up the sick in the middle of the night, but we couldn't afford to worry over that right now. This was important.

Tweeeeet!

Another whistle sounded. This time it wasn't from me but from Partner. I looked over at her, and she looked straight forward, a cool expression on her face. *Hey. You just wanted to copy off me and use it too. Eh, whatever, it's fine.*

We heard a strange, high-pitched sound in the distance responding to our whistle. Immediately, three groups of five dragon faction warriors appeared

from different directions. They were patrolling the area, I guessed. One held a whistle made from monster bones. That had to be the source of the high-pitched sound we'd just heard, probably to alert the village.

"Wh-what's this? D-Dragon God, what's going on here?" The men looked confused when they saw me and raised their spears toward Bela, but they quickly lowered them at Partner's glare.

Amid this tense atmosphere, Valon jumped from my back and landed on his feet. "Don't worry. They know we're in danger and have come to help us. The dragon god acted as an intermediary. For now, we're going to cease fire."

Once the men heard Valon's voice, they dropped their weapons. "Th-the dragon god did that...?"

"We've brought antidotes and other essential medicines," Valon told them. "Go tell the rest of the tribe!"

The men hurried back into the village to relay the news.

Although it took some time, we were given permission to enter the village. I thought that they'd put up more of a fight, but it went more smoothly than I had expected. That they had no other choice might have had something to do with it.

The two factions seemed a bit awkward toward each other, but there were no major problems. Not to speak ill of the dead or anything, but the absence of the dragon god's priestess might have worked in our favor, what with her being the reason for the split in the first place. That also meant I had laid the blame with the priestess's family. *Sorry about that, Hibi. But I swear that I'll protect the Lithovar Tribe, no matter what.*

After we entered the village, Bela and the other influential members of the anti-dragon god faction were invited to the meeting hall. I figured they must have a lot to discuss, between settling the current situation and planning their future actions.

Meanwhile, I assisted the members of the anti-dragon god faction as they went around healing the other tribe. Even though they were quite used to handling poisons and antidotes, no one could compare with Partner when it

came to recovery magic. She used Hi-Rest to heal up the warriors and treat those seriously injured by the poison. My presence guaranteed that no unnecessary conflicts would arise, and if they did, I would be able to immediately mediate.

Once we were done treating the sick, I couldn't help but worry about what was going on in the meeting hall, so I headed there.

The best course of action was for me to attack alone, if possible. I wanted to attack the enemy's leader by myself as a threat. However, I also couldn't risk leaving the village and having it attacked in my absence, so I wanted to follow whatever decisions the Lithovar Tribe made before I took any action. Unfortunately, it didn't seem as if Bela and the others were coming out anytime soon. I had no idea when the enemy might attack. I didn't want to stay inside the village; I wanted to go around and try to detect the enemy's location as soon as possible.

I put my ear to the wall of the meeting hall, trying to make out the voices inside, but I couldn't hear much of anything. Anxious, I peered through the window.

Inside, three people who seemed to be leaders from each faction were sitting on chairs, facing each other across a long table. Each faction had five bodyguards in attendance. They seemed overly alert, carefully watching the other side's movements.

Bela and Valon were leading the discussion, which was a bit of a surprise in Valon's case. Since he was still standing and holding his spear, under normal circumstances he'd count as one of the bodyguards.

Suddenly, an old woman from the dragon god faction who was sitting in a chair noticed me stuck to the window and fell over on the spot.

S-sorry. I needed to find out what was going on, so sue me!

I immediately pulled my head away from the window.

Chapter 2:

The Hungry Hunters

Part 1

AFTER THE MEETING was finished, Bela came over and spoke to me using Telepathy.

("Forgive me, Dragon God. But may I ask you to search for enemies around the village?") she asked, and I immediately nodded. That's what I had intended to do in the first place.

Can you tell me what you decided in the meeting?

("We don't currently know the number of outsiders, their motives, or when they will attack. They could come and attack at any time. However, we can't send off all of our able-bodied warriors to fight. I believe there's a good chance they will try to attack during the night, but if we're wrong, we would be exhausting our warriors unnecessarily.")

I see... If they just charged in full throttle, not only would they alert the enemy to their presence, but they'd wear themselves out too.

If we're really just gonna wait and see, I can mitigate the damage from the cursed water in the meantime, so in a way that helps me out... But since we have options, I think we should plan for the worst-case scenario.

("Right now we have two hundred and fifty Lithovar warriors with both tribes combined.")

While we were traveling here, Bela had told me that the number of warriors in the dragon god faction was about two out of three. When I went around the village treating people, there were about three hundred villagers in total, so I assumed that there would be more than two hundred warriors in this village alone...but there were about fifty fewer people than I expected.

But there were still a lot of people who weren't in great shape because of the cursed water. It seemed like there were some people who were still dealing with fatigue caused by the curse even after their HP and status ailments had been cured. And among those two hundred and fifty people, there must be

some who were just forcing themselves to get up and get moving.

I'd have to check with View Status from time to time to see if anyone was overdoing it.

("We will have about a hundred people—roughly half the total—stay awake while the rest of them sleep,") Bela said. *("Seventy of the one hundred people will be divided into five person squads to guard outside the village, and the remaining thirty will be prepared for any dangers inside the village.")*

So if they attack, the focus will be on reducing the damage. I hope that's not necessary, though.

("The enemy is probably waiting downstream. There are no signs that they have approached our village, and no one has been spotted. That might mean they have no idea that our village even exists upstream. So I want to guard the three downstream sides of this village with the seventy people I mentioned earlier, along with you.")

I see. How far do you want me to go?

("Just at the outside range of the sound of two trugas.")

Hm? Two trugas? The outside range?

("U-um... A truga is a flute made from the bones of a graffant... If you blow into it, it makes a sound...")

Bela must've thought I wouldn't easily understand what a flute was, because she frantically mimed using a flute and blowing into it. Times like these really made her seem rough around the edges compared to Hibi. Hibi was calm and levelheaded. But she was never cold. Even when Derek had been cruel to her, after he had been attacked by a monster and nearly died, she treated him with sincerity the entire time.

Remembering her made me sad.

I shook my head to try to calm my feelings. I needed to focus on the enemy who was coming from the outside.

Now, speaking of the truga, I did remember seeing the guards carrying a whistle. That's probably what she was talking about.

(“By infusing the truga with magical energy, the sound can be heard from quite far away. So the outside range of two trugas would be the distance of two humans blowing into trugas and calling to each other.”)

Yeah, I had no idea what that meant, but I’d leave that to the other Lithovars. If I was searching for the enemy in the middle of the day, it would be faster if I flew high in the sky... It was a shame that the terrain here wasn’t suited for it. The enemies could be hiding in the trees, after all. I could test it out in the daytime, of course, but it would be impossible in the middle of the night.

I gathered up those who were in bad condition once again and had Partner cast Hi-Rest on them one more time before I left. I made sure to keep at least half of my MP in reserve. With that much remaining, my Automatic MP Recovery skill would make sure I didn’t run out during the battle.

After that, the seventy Lithovars were divided into four groups: three groups of twenty and one group of ten. I took ten of them and followed the route along the river to head to the outside edge of the forest. Bela came with us so that we could communicate quickly in case of emergency. She would occasionally close her eyes as she walked, raise her staff, and intone spells. I guessed she was using Psychic Sense. I was using that skill as we walked as well, but I hadn’t picked up on anything suspicious yet.

We had been walking for some time when I picked up on an unusual presence some distance away. Evil magic was afoot. That was the only way I knew how to put it. And it was hard for me to believe that the source of it was human. I squinted into the dark forest...and saw Allo and the araneae staring at me. The moment they noticed my gaze, they all immediately hid. They must have come out here because they felt anxious.

Bela evidently sensed Allo’s magic presence too, because she anxiously waved her staff back and forth. But then she lowered it, muttering to herself, “Must’ve been my imagination...”

Honestly, I was freaking out.

I realized that Allo was scared because her village was in danger, but it would cause a huge commotion if anyone saw her right now, so I really needed her to just stay hidden and be quiet. *Please just let me take care of this...*

“No one’s here.”

“They might have taken another route. Maybe we should just be on alert and head back the way we came?”

The Lithovar warriors were starting to show signs of fatigue after the long walk, and I heard many of them discussing what we should do. They were already mentally exhausted from the tense situation, and they had been woken up in the middle of the night and sent to guard.

Had they physically hit their limits? I looked over at Bela to confirm.

She turned toward the warriors behind her. “We have the dragon god with us. Even if we’re isolated, we have the best chance of winning if the enemy attacks. Should worse come to worst, the dragon god will return to the village alone, and it will all be over,” she explained to them apologetically.

“Still... There just doesn’t seem to be anyone around,” said a warrior.

I watched the exchange out of my peripheral vision as I continued forward. Suddenly, I sensed humans nearby. Not one or two of them. There was a large group of humans up ahead. I had guessed there would be around twenty of them, but there were much more than I had predicted. Fifty of them at least.

“*Raar...*” I let out a low roar, alerting Bela and the others.

“Huh?” Bela quickly closed her eyes and used Psychic Sense.

Meanwhile, the enemy group had quickened their pace. Someone on their side must have had Psychic Sense as well. We wouldn’t be able to avoid this battle. Judging by the means they’d used thus far, they were clearly coming to destroy the Lithovar Tribe. And since they had killed the priestess and cursed the river water, the Lithovars weren’t going to take this one lying down.

I realized then that I would end up having to kill many humans. I strengthened my resolve, remembering Hibi, and set my gaze forward.

Part 2

I COULD LOCATE ABOUT fifty people with Psychic Sense, but odds were high there were more than that. Most of the people who the Lithovar Tribe captured to sacrifice to the Manticore were travelers who were passing through the forest. In other words, I had a feeling the outsiders knew exactly how many had gone missing.

Because the Lithovars lived in the forest and had many strange customs, they were avoided. But as a threat, I thought bandits far outranked them. I doubted they had done anything to the extent that some lord would see them as dangerous, and it was unlikely that anyone in power would be holding a grudge against them.

These fifty people probably weren't acting as decoys or a split squad—I expected this was the main force. It was difficult to think that there could be more than this number mobilized.

"The enemy is coming! There are more than forty of them!" Bela told her comrades. "They're too strong! Let's hurry back to the village before we're surrounded! Trugas, hold back until we can see them! It seems they've sensed us too, but they shouldn't be able to figure out our exact location yet!"

The man who was about to blow his truga hurriedly put it away.

"Th-this is preposterous!"

"I thought you said there would be less than thirty!"

The Lithovars were in a panic. And actually...it wasn't forty, but more than fifty.

Judging by their speed, they were mounted. It seemed many of them had Psychic Sense, so the Lithovars had no hope of outrunning them. I was just glad that our troops were the ones who spotted them first. I definitely didn't think there'd be more than fifty of them. If another unit had discovered them, the enemy would have the terrain advantage and they would barely be able to

escape without everyone being killed.

If I hadn't dealt with the river and guarded against the early morning raid, they might have been completely destroyed.

"Dragon God, let's hurry and run away! We should report to the warriors who are in the other units."

"*Raar...*" I shook my head and stood in the direction of the enemy attack. I didn't know how strong they were, but I was an Ouroboros with unlimited stamina. No one stood a chance against me.

"Th-the dragon god has chosen to fight!"

"Then I'll stay too! I'll fight with all my might!"

The other Lithovar warriors grasped their spears even though I'd thought they were about to run.

U-uh, I can always escape by flying away, you know.

"Frug! You're the youngest. Take Bela and go back to the village!"

"B-but..."

"Hurry up and go, you fool! If you screw up and don't deliver the message, I'm gonna kill you!"

"O-okay! Bela, this way!"

Why were they acting like we were gonna lose? I guess I'd feel the same way if I'd gone out on a recon mission and was suddenly faced with fifty enemies. I thought it was pretty rare for a human to have Psychic Sense. I certainly never expected there to be fifty humans in one place with that skill.

Oh well. If we're gonna have a battle in the forest, c'mon and gimme all you got!

Our unit contained ten Lithovars, excluding Bela, and one person was going to relay the message to others, so there would be nine people left. We were outnumbered by more than five times.

I suddenly noticed that the responses I was picking up from Psychic Sense were spreading out beside us. Hm? Were they ignoring us and going after the

messenger? Nope, not quite it. They were spreading out on both sides, maybe to surround us. I wondered if they were planning on enclosing us so that we couldn't run away, to kill everyone.

Since I couldn't see the enemy, it put even more pressure on me. I knew with certainty that this enemy was used to combat. They wouldn't be attacking on an individual basis but as a group. At first I'd thought that the enemy was just a bunch of people who banded together in a hurry, but I'd been mistaken.

Clip, clomp. Clip, clomp.

I heard the sound of horses' hooves. Around us, the trees began to shake.

"*Raaar!*" I let out a low growl and dashed diagonally backward. We would definitely end up surrounded if I headed to the front. The safest thing to do in this situation was to attack from the unfinished corners as they tried to surround us. The nine Lithovar warriors ran after me.

Eight mounted soldiers appeared all at once. They wore tight-fitting navy military uniforms just like Derek had worn. Iron breastplates covered their chests. These guys were really put together. But something was weird about this whole thing.

"The dragon god is coming this way!"

"All right! Don't be careless and get too close to the dragon! Keep your distance while keeping it in check. We'll be in trouble if you screw up before the other units come and it flies away. Not sure if we have enough firepower, so I'll leave killing the giant to the magic unit. Everyone else, start with the small fry!"

The one blandly barking out orders was a man in the back with a little mustache. It seemed like he knew about the Lithovar Tribe's dragon god culture. I'd hoped they thought I was an Amphis to make it easier on me, but it wasn't likely to be a disadvantage in any scenario.

"Captain!" one of the soldiers called over to him. "We haven't killed in a long time, so can you at least have some more enthusiasm?"

"I don't like this. I just wanna attack the village. Why are we scouting out here in a place like this?" The captain glared at me with a tiresome look on his face and yawned. "Shouldn't they all be dead from the poison already?"

They hadn't killed in a long time? This whole thing *really* seemed weird. If he was an adventurer whose relatives were killed, it would be strange to mobilize fifty people for the fight, and on top of that, they were obviously accustomed to fighting in a group like this.

I thought that the poison-curse gambit was just a trick to even up their numbers, but apparently there was more to it.

"We need to hurry up and kill these guys to make up for lost time," the captain said. "We came all this way, so it won't be fun for us at all if Lord Tolemann kills 'em all. Hurry up and go so I can give out orders and we can start healing people!" He clapped his hands. Something inside of my head snapped at the sound.

The seven mounted soldiers lined up in front of the captain drew their swords and charged toward me.

"No fixin' the captain's lack of enthusiasm!"

"He's so good, he could get a promotion if he just put in a little more effort..."

"Idiot! It doesn't matter how smart you are if you cut corners!"

They were all joking and laughing back and forth even though they had come to kill people. I guess they thought they were home free, since they had forty other soldiers backing them up.

"Th-they're here!" I heard one of the Lithovars say.

"Dragon God!" another called to me. "Leave this to us and go alert the others!"

I kicked off the ground and charged at full speed toward the line of mounted soldiers.

"Whoa! He's fast!"

I knocked them off their horses, and they fell to the ground, covered in blood. The captain stared up at me, stunned. I bit into his stomach and then lifted him high above my head.

"C-Captain Bareth!"

“Agh, agh... Rest! Rest!”

The man they called Captain Bareth kept spitting out spells. I would be lying if I said I felt nothing witnessing that pitiful sight, but nevertheless, I slammed him hard on the ground. The impact thrummed all the way up to my face.

I suffered a bit of damage. I had slammed him too hard, compensating for the hesitation. Captain Bareth’s body bent at an unnatural angle. Blood exploded from his head as his skull split open. It was a disgusting feeling, one I had never experienced in all the time since I had become a dragon. This was the first time I had killed a human being with malice.

Gained 192 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 192 Experience Points.

More experience than an avyssos. He wasn’t all too different from those cowardly parasites, judging by the way he had jumped at me.

The enemy soldiers stared at me, completely frozen. I opened my mouth and let Captain Bareth roll to the ground. It didn’t feel good to kill someone of a lower class. Especially not a human.



Title Skill “Wrongdoer” Lv 8 has become Lv 9.

Yeah, yeah. Say whatever you want. I’m not gonna hold back at this point.

“I know you’re. Not used to this. You can let. Me take care of. Them.”

I can’t rely on you to do everything for me. Also, I’m actually kinda grateful to the enemy. I don’t know what their motives are, but if they’re this easy to understand, it won’t be too hard to defeat them.

“W-we can do this!”

“We’ve got the dragon god on our side!”

The Lithovar warriors wielded their spears and charged toward the enemy soldiers. They were still stunned that I had killed Captain Bareth, and began scrambling away. One fell off their horse. I sensed a large number of footsteps approaching us at once, so I worked with Partner to check our surroundings.

The rest of the enemy had finally caught up to us. We were surrounded on three sides. There must have been around seventy of them—eighty, counting the unit I just destroyed.

That was a lot more than the fifty I’d originally picked up on. Eighty enemies... I wondered if there were even more lined up in wait somewhere else.

I couldn’t afford to take them all on at once. Their conversation implied that there were other units heading toward the village right now.

“We were right! Look at that huge thing!” a large, one-eyed man said from his position at the front. He laughed.

“C-Commander Hannibal! This dragon is a whole other dimension different from what we expected!” one of Captain Bareth’s subordinates screamed at the man with one eye, spittle flying out of his mouth. “We need to retreat!”

“Are you from Bareth’s unit?” the one-eyed man said in response. “Guess your captain’s lack of balls was contagious! And here we finally got a chance to go all out! Just watch us and learn!” It felt more like he was giving a speech. Apparently, this guy was the boss of the eighty men here.

From what I could tell, he was forming a unit of about eight people. Captain Bareth had seven with him; each unit must be made up of eight people. Which meant that this commander was in charge of ten units. I decided to check Commander Hannibal's status, just in case. I wanted to get a feel of how strong the boss was, after all.

Hannibal Glaziers

Species: Earth Human

Status: Normal

Lv: 39/60

HP: 262/262

MP: 72/72

Attack: 241+60

Defense: 184+55

Magic: 65

Agility: 143

Equipment:

Weapon: Mythril Great Spear: B

Armor: Mythril Breastplate: B

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 6

Spearmanship: Lv 6

Stealth: Lv 5

Battle Instinct: Lv 4

Morale Contagion: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Poison Resistance: Lv 4

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 3

Normal Skills:

Shockwave: Lv 3

Surprise Attack: Lv 5

Power: Lv 2

Poison: Lv 6

Great Leap: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Former Gray Bandit Leader: Lv —

Hungry Hunters Commander: Lv —

Spear King: Lv 4

He had a pretty flashy weapon, but he was weaker than Adoff overall. As I thought, Adoff must have been the upper limit of human possibility. I'd have no trouble taking care of this guy. The only thing that worried me was the cooperation between the units. It would take a long time to take on so many enemies. But I could end this quickly if I defeated Commander Hannibal to spook the rest of the troops.

"Even-numbered units in close proximity should surround the dragon!" Commander Hannibal barked. "Units standing in front keep him in check! Odd-numbered units should protect the magic unit! We, the 61st Unit, will be looking for openings on both sides to give the decisive blow!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Understood!"

They all moved together under his orders. The cavalry began to surround me.

"Raar..." I inclined my head to look below me as I called out to the Lithovar

Tribe. I hope this gets across...

“D-Dragon God?”

“I think he’s telling us to get underneath him!” Valon interpreted my gestures well.

I nodded in response.

“You idiots! You bastards! Let’s grill ’em all together! Hee hee, haa haa!” A man from the cavalry shouted loudly to those around him in the back, then aimed a metal rod toward me.

“Fire Spirit Boost! Keep going, keep going!”

A red light appeared around me.

“Firespread!”

“Flame! Grim Burner!”

The cavalry in the rear continued waving their rods. Red lights appeared from the tips, and then flames of various shapes flew out.

Some were flame bullets, some were like flamethrowers... Although each one looked slightly different, it was clear that they were trying to burn me and the Lithovar Tribe.

I lifted my neck and concentrated all my magical energy into my belly. Then I shoved my face forward and exhaled all that magical energy at once—it was my Scorching Breath skill. The breath of fire that spewed from my mouth immediately swallowed up the smaller flames coming from the enemy. I whirled my neck around.

“Gaaah!”

“What’s happening? It misfired!”

“Stand up! Everyone who lost sight of the commander should get away!”

My fiery breath was starting to burn down everything surrounding me. A horse, its body on fire, let out a scream as it bucked off its rider and tried to run away. The soldier who fell rolled around, covered in flames. In an instant, the whole area was filled with screams.

At the very most, an earth human's MP would be in the mid-200s. I was an Ouroboros. My MP had broken 1000, and my defense was over 500. Magical attacks from humans did nothing to me.

Gained 1203 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 1203 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 87 has become Lv 88.

Title Skill "Calamity" Lv 7 has become Lv 8.

All that from one breath, huh? This was a pretty efficient way to get experience, but I had no intention of keeping that up. At this rate, I'd have all my villainous title skills maxed out before we went back to base.

"Aah, ahh... I-It shouldn't be like this..." The man who had cast the first fire spell stood there looking astonished. He stood there alone while the rest of the cavalry fled. His horse had been overturned by the fleeing cavalry, leaving him as a heap on the ground. He'd let go of his staff.

"Captain Hawn! We should retreat for now!" A soldier rode up and extended a hand to him.

Hm, so this guy was a captain too. Should I hurry up and take his head first to get rid of the rest of them?

"Raaaaaaaar!" Still remaining cautious of the Lithovars by my feet, I stepped forward and kicked the cavalryman in my way. His sword broke with a single blow, and his body was crushed. I swept my tail back and forth, covering the ground with dirt to make the horses lose their footing and extinguish the remaining flames. At the same time, I flapped my wings and let loose a total of six Whirlwind Slashes, one of which hurtled toward Captain Hawn.

The blades of wind split the earth and caused a recoil of gusting air. The horses caught in the crossfire collapsed, while the mounted soldiers were thrown to the ground. They frantically crawled away from me.

Screams and neighs filled the air.

Gained 588 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 588 Experience Points.

The wind blew away the smoke and the dust. Everywhere the six Whirlwind Slashes had landed, the ground was blown away leaving behind gouges in the earth, blood, and lumps of flesh.

Part 3

“**R**-RUN AWAY! It’s useless! *Useless!* Why’s a monster like that in this forest?!”

“B-but if we run away without reporting back, Lord Tolemann will kill us later!”

“Not the time! Look at that thing. You’re worrying about reporting back? Seriously? You’ve gone crazy from fear! That’s no ordinary dragon!”

The cavalrymen kept scattering.

At this point, it seemed like there was no point in continuing to fight. I looked at the dent in the earth that used to be Captain Hawn. A single arm was sticking out of the earth, mixed with blood and flesh. His metal staff, which had been blown away from the impact, lay a little further away, covered in blood.

I inadvertently looked down.

Immediately after that, I saw cavalry riding in from the opposite direction of where the others were fleeing. It wasn’t just one rider. There were six—no, seven of them. As they passed the fleeing cavalrymen, a man collapsed from his horse, blood spurting from his body. The man’s eyes were lifeless. *W-wait, did he just kill his own comrade?*

“Heh heh. You fools! How dare you run away without avenging Hannibal’s life?” One of the incoming cavalrymen sneered down at the collapsed man.

Is this dude insane?

The incoming cavalry dodged the arrows being shot at them by the Lithovars. The man must’ve been grazed by one of the arrows on his cheek; blood coursed down his face. He licked it from his lips and smiled confidently. He goaded his horse right over the dead bodies to get to me as quickly as possible.

He was fast, almost as fast as me. I should’ve checked his horse’s status. I knocked off three Whirlwind Slashes in succession. Two of them hit their targets, but the last just barely dodged it. He didn’t drop his speed as he

charged toward me.

“Raar!”

Black light swallowed one of the cavalrymen. Partner had cast Death. The man immediately fell from his horse.

Gained 522 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 522 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 88 has become Lv 89.

There were four of them left, and they were coming within reach of me.

“Do it now!” one of them screamed, and the rest of them threw their swords at me and flung up their hands. I didn’t dodge the swords. I just decided to ignore them. The swords left scrapes on the surface of my body and fell to the ground.

“Poison!”

“Paralysis!”

The cavalrymen cast spells simultaneously. Purple smoke and yellow smoke all mixed together, enveloping me from the front. It spread out quickly, coming all the way up to my face.

It was status effect magic. That wouldn’t do much to me. No, wait! They were trying to obscure my vision! I swung my arm down to where I thought the cavalry were, dividing the poisonous smoke into two. The moment I knew that I had missed, cavalry charged from either side toward my back.

“Cough, cough! Damn it, I inhaled it! This is terrible!”

“I’m gonna grab on to it!”

I was about to launch a delayed attack, but something felt strange. Did they really want to throw down their weapons and run away? They had still wounded me, even if those wounds were shallow. If the poisonous smoke got

into my scratches, it could seep into my body, but that still wouldn't be enough to inflict negative status effects on me. After the four of them escaped from the poisonous smoke, a large, jet-black horse charged toward me. One of the horse's eyes was gouged out—it looked like a very old wound. No one was riding it. I used my front claws to slice it up from the bottom. A dark red line slashed across the horse's chest to its face. It tumbled toward me, spurting blood.

Gained 124 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 124 Experience Points.

Just the horse? Where's the guy who was riding him? Before I could find the answer, I felt something right in front of my head.

“Power! Power! And more Power!”

I heard a clear, familiar voice. It was the commander, Hannibal.

“I summon all of my strength for this attack!” There he stood, the one-eyed man with a large spear in his hand. He thrust it into my forehead. Sharp pain bolted through my head.

He made his subordinates shoot out the poisonous smoke to distract me, used Stealth to weaken his presence, and then Giant Leap to jump off of his horse and aim for my head. This guy was something else.

“Raar...”

“Take another blow!” Hannibal used the recoil from his thrusting spear to whirl his body around and aim his fist toward the butt of his spear. That drove it deeper into me. Blue blood gushed out from my forehead.

“That's our leader!”

“You did it!”

“Our leader is the strongest!”

“Bwa ha ha, you fool! Hannibal, the commander of the seventh unit of the Hungry Hunters will—”

I aimed at Hannibal as he fell and struck his jaw.

“Wh-what...?!”

His body twisted, and his jaw caught my shoulder. Through his chin, I could feel his bones breaking.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” He opened his mouth and screamed.

The moment he crashed onto the ground, Partner gently placed her chin on top of Hannibal’s body and sandwiched it against the ground. There was a crushing noise.

Gained 234 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 234 Experience Points.

I swung my head toward a nearby boulder and used it to snap off the spear that was stuck into my forehead. It gouged deeper and then flew through the air.

Partner. Sorry, but can you heal me?

“*Graar,*” Partner roared, and then a light appeared in front of me, seeping into my wound.

It healed immediately. I turned my attention to the four people who seemed to be Hannibal’s direct

subordinates, who had left after spraying the poisonous smoke. The moment they saw me, the smiles vanished from their faces and they turned pale.

“C-C-Captain!”

One of them stopped their horse and tried to come back toward me.

“G-go back! The captain’s dead!”

They spurred on their horses and hurried away.

I looked around. I didn't see the other eighty soldiers anywhere. A mountain of corpses, nothing else. Most of the rest had gotten away.

Title Skill "Calamity" Lv 8 has become Lv 9.

Yeah, yeah, keep going up. I'm prepared for it. Maybe I should just not evolve next time.

Part 4

“**T**H-THAT’S JUST what I expected from the dragon god! He’s unbelievably powerful! In that case...”

“Is it just me, or did he not even need us? Maybe we just got in his way?”

The mood of the Lithovars had brightened considerably since they first got here. If you asked me, though, I thought that the battle had just begun. That last fight taught me that I could deal with them fine by myself, but I had no idea just how large their army was.

I wanted to head back to the Lithovar village, just in case. I was concerned about the village’s defense. If I were alone, I could return to the village immediately.

We’d be in big trouble if the other units were attacking the village right now. I had completely misjudged the scale of the enemy. I’d thought there were just a few dozen, but now I figured the unit of eighty I’d chased off wasn’t even the main unit.

There was no logical sense in splitting the units up unnecessarily. At the most, I hoped there weren’t more than eighty left, but I should probably stop being optimistic about the numbers. And since I didn’t know the enemy’s motives, I really couldn’t speculate on anything at this point.

If they were attacking due to a grudge, they would have split up into multiple units to massacre the Lithovar Tribe no matter what, but I didn’t get that sense from this recent wave of soldiers.

It seemed more like they were charging through, intent on crushing everything in their path.

Suddenly I heard a high-pitched noise resounding from the direction of the village. It was a familiar noise. It was the signal the Lithovars used—the truga whistle.

The enemy had reached the village. The Lithovars, who were so happy after

our victory, immediately went pale.

“*Raar...*” I let out a low roar to get their attention and looked toward the village.

“Dragon God?”

“He’s going to return to the village. We should go too...”

I shook my head and then ran at full speed toward the village.

“D-Dragon God!”

“Please take us with you! We need to help save our village!”

Sorry, but you guys’ll just slow me down. And then I wouldn’t be able to protect the village from the enemy *or* move around how I want.

There was a danger that some of the enemies might have stayed behind and would attack then, but if I took too long to make a decision, I’d be putting the village in further danger. Plus, with any luck, if there were any soldiers around, they wouldn’t dare to attack the Lithovars anymore after hearing what just happened to their comrades.

I needed to prioritize the village.

I kicked off into the air and flew high up into the sky. I spread out my wings and flew straight toward the village at a low altitude. Branches caught against my legs and snapped off, so I picked up my altitude.

I spotted smoke rising from the direction of the village. For a moment, my mind went blank, but this was no time to stop. I turned my hesitation into anger and flew faster.

I saw the extravagantly dressed enemy soldiers fighting against the Lithovars near the village. There were about one hundred and fifty enemy soldiers, but only eighty Lithovars.

Horses lay on the battlefield with arrows piercing their legs. There were traces of holes in the ground and earth that had hardened in strange shapes. Apparently, they had dug pitfalls and used Clay to create bulges in the ground to trip up the horses, then used arrows once they had fallen.

“Hey, you guys are pretty clever!”

I saw an enemy soldier knock a Lithovar’s spear out of his hand with his sword. The enemy gripped his sword and aimed for the Lithovar’s head. Three arrows suddenly stabbed him in the side. There were other Lithovar warriors hiding in the shadows by the trees, waiting to strike.

“Y-you cowardly barbarians!” the man groaned as he crumpled to his knees. The Lithovar he had been fighting against stabbed the man in the throat with his spear, finishing him off.

The tribe seemed to be in good shape, setting up traps that took advantage of the land, and were skillfully dealing with the attack. Unfortunately, they were still woefully outnumbered. The enemy had a decisive advantage. The tribespeople wouldn’t be able to keep this up for long.

I landed on the battlefield and let out a loud roar. The sound of it echoed, silencing the sound of clashing swords on the battlefield.

“The dragon god has coooooome!”

“We have the dragon god on our side! Fight to the last breath, for the honor of the Lithovar Tribe!”

That sounded like a rousing morale boost for the Lithovars. Meanwhile, the enemy looked clearly annoyed.

“There’s the Lithovars’ dragon god!”

“This was a tougher battle than I thought. Why’d he have to show up now?”

“We can’t have him flying all around. Kill him first! And if you can’t do that, at least crush his wings! Hey! Has anyone ever slain a dragon before?!”

I figured out before that there were eight people per squad, and ten squads made up a battalion. If there were one hundred and fifty people here, that meant that there were two battalions. And there was smoke rising from the village. I couldn’t waste too much time here. Were there more than three hundred enemies? There wasn’t time to deal with them all. I needed to focus my attacks on the captains, the commanders, and the commanders’ direct subordinates. The morale had been high in Hannibal’s squad too—but once I

took care of their captains and commanders, the whole battalion would collapse. Then the rest of them would flee on their own.

“C-Captain Libras! Where are you going?”

“R-retreat! Daddy never told me the battle would be this tough! This isn’t what I signed up for! I never heard anything about a dragon like *that!*”

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw it was a plump young man yelling.

“Monsters often change their forms!” the young man’s subordinate told him. “Listen, Lord Tolemann hates deserters more than anything! If you desert as our captain, all the soldiers under you will be disgraced as well! The only reason you can tell us to retreat is because you don’t know how terrifying Lord Tolemann is!”

“Wh-who cares?! My daddy is friends with Marquis Tolemann! If I die here, you’ll all get executed anyway! Don’t you know that?! Daddy just told me all I’d have to do is stand here! But this isn’t what I signed up for! It’s nothing like it! I’m going home!”

Huh. I guessed being a captain didn’t guarantee that you had morale.

Getting involved would just slow me down, so I decided to ignore that whole situation.

Part 5

TWO BATTALIONS meant two commanders. I swung my neck around to look for the other one.

(“Hey. Is that. It?”)

Hearing a message from Partner, I followed her gaze—and spotted the commander. It was a woman, carrying a long staff and wearing gaudy makeup. She looked to be in her thirties.

“Everyone forget about the small fry and distract the dragon!” she ordered. “I’m gonna drag out his entrails!”

“Yes, Commander Ernesis!”

“Very well...but would you mind if we just defeated it?”

The other soldiers around her were in super high spirits.

Ernesis Ermanea

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 37/60

HP: 188/188

MP: 218/264

Attack: 63+14

Defense: 138+55

Magic: 268+62

Agility: 110

Equipment:

Weapon: Mythril Long Staff: B

Armor: Mythril Breastplate: B

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 7

Mage: Lv 5

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 1

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Circle Staff Dance: Lv 4

Concentration: Lv 4

Rest: Lv 5

Care: Lv 2

Physical Barrier: Lv 4

Fireball: Lv 5

Slow: Lv 4

Poison: Lv 4

Fire Arrow: Lv 2

Dark Sphere: Lv 3

Demon Hand: Lv 1

Death: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Black Witch Bloodline: Lv —

White Mage: Lv 4

Black Mage: Lv 6

Master of Staff: Lv 4

Death Witch: Lv —

Hungry Hunters Commander: Lv —

Looking at her Title Skills confirmed that she was one of the commanders. She had a bunch of skills that would work on me. She wasn't that strong, but she apparently had a bare minimum of close-ranged combat knowledge. And, combined with her staff's bonus, she had over 300 Magic. I'd never seen a human with a Magic skill of over 300 besides the hero. Of course, I had three times that amount.

I made eye contact with the female mage Ernesis, who snorted and looked down at her subordinates. They differed from the magical attack unit in that they carried swords and spears. I guessed their strategy was to have Ernesis cast spells while the others fought in the vanguard.

"Buy me ten seconds of time and then guide me there! I'll kill him at once, just as I have before!" Ernesis shouted, and her subordinates cheered.

"Commander Ernesis is going to bring out her Demon Hand!"

"Commander, I'm not sure that—"

"Right, you only got assigned to this unit for this fight. Watch and learn. Heh heh. You're not gonna believe your eyes. It tears both humans and monsters into pieces hilariously fast."

A confused man had asked his comrade for an explanation. The Demon Hand he mentioned must have been the skill I saw in her status. Its skill level was low, but it could be a very difficult skill to level up.

Ernesis stood behind them, holding her staff upright and closing her eyes. Veins bulged from her forehead. I swung my tail, knocking over the soldiers swarming me from all sides. The lightest graze sent them flying through the air, horses and all, to slam into the ground. I swung my foreleg toward the soldiers who were coming at me from the front.

"Argh!"

I knocked the soldiers straight toward Ernesis. Two of her subordinates in front of me made eye contact and then raised their weapons at the same time,

shouting, “Clay Wall!”

Twin earthen walls rose up and blocked the path ahead of the soldiers. There sure were a lot of people who knew how to use magic here.

“All right, now split up!”

The soldiers’ bodies slammed into the wall with a crack. The double-layered earthen wall immediately crumbled with a rattling sound, leaving only the foundation behind. No puny wall was gonna hold me back.

Gained 174 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 174 Experience Points.

Hitting the wall must’ve been a fatal blow for the soldiers, because I got a message telling me I gained experience. The soldiers’ bodies had flown directly in between Ernesis’s two subordinates.

“Ah...”

After that, I made a direct attack on Ernesis’s horse. It screamed and toppled over, throwing her off while she still had her eyes closed. She was trampled by her horse, and she let out a scream as she rolled on the ground, leaving a trail of blood behind. “D-Demon Hand!” she shouted as she swung her staff above her face, stained crimson with blood.

A large vortex of swirling red light appeared in front of her, and from the center of it emerged a reddish-black arm, larger than a human’s. The claws—or maybe just fingers, abnormally long from the first joint to the tip—gave it a grotesque appearance.

“E-EEK!”

“N-not yet, Commander! Put it away! Put it away, please! Gyaaaaah!”

The hand suddenly closed tightly, drawing in all surrounding humans and horses into its vortex and tearing them apart, as the one soldier had predicted.

Only their heads avoided the pull; they landed cleanly on the pile of their minced meat. The Demon Hand scraped the dirt away from the ground and shot straight ahead, devouring the flesh and blood of its allies and their fallen horses.

That skill meant serious business. It would've been really dangerous if it caught me off guard—but its skill level didn't look high enough that she could weaponize it as a surprise attack. She used it in a hurry after falling off her horse without even waiting for ten seconds, so she didn't seem to have complete control of it yet.

“Stopping it now'll be a waste of magic!” Ernesis screamed, her bloodied hair hanging in her face. “Stop that damned dragon! I'm gonna kill it! Once this demon hand strikes, nothing can escape its grasp!”

“I-It's no use, Commander Ernesis! Please stop it! Stop, get away from me! Get awaaaay!”

Yet another soldier was sucked into the Demon Hand's vortex and turned into mincemeat.

I flapped my wings and shot off a Whirlwind Slash. I used it eight times, just as before. Blades of wind raced through the battlefield, slicing horses and soldiers in two, pummeling into the ground and kicking up clouds of smoky dust. The soldiers who had been right in front of me didn't even have time to react; they let out brief screams before they died, and then they were gone.

Gained 1136 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 1136 Experience Points.

One of my Whirlwind Slashes was heading toward the Demon Hand. I thought for a second that the Demon Hand had sucked it in and erased it, but the next moment it cut through its palm and appeared again. Blue blood spurted out, and the blood itself turned into a red light.

“M-my invincible Demon Hand...”

Even after the Whirlwind Slash destroyed the Demon Hand, the wind blades didn't slow down; they sliced Ernesis's body right in two as she tried to crawl away, clutching her staff. The blade finally crashed into the ground, raised a cloud of dust where it landed, and then melted into nothing.

Gained 222 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 222 Experience Points.

It had barely been ten seconds since I set my sights on Ernesis. Now, where was the other commander? I looked around and made eye contact with a soldier. He froze and threw down his weapon. He'd finally realized the difference in power.

“Waaaaaah! See, I told you! That's why I said we should leaaaaaaave! Waaaaaah! I'm going hoooooome!”

The plump man I saw before, Captain Libras, ran his horse at full speed to escape. He slammed right into a tree without trying to avoid it and was tossed right onto the ground, but he ignored his injuries, quickly got up, and started running.

Whether this unsightly debacle had stoked fear in the rest of the soldiers, or they thought it was unfair that the captain was the only one who got to run away, or the standards for desertion had been lowered... Either way, the soldiers threw down their weapons and retreated, one after the other.

I was glad. Even though I had made up my mind to do this, I wasn't into the idea of massacring creatures so much lower in rank than me. Not only that, but there was smoke rising from the direction of the village. I wanted to get over there ASAP.

“W-we can't defeat him! Let's just leave Azalea to take care of it!”

“Hey! Why are you running toward the village?!”

“I have to notify Lord Tolemann!”

Hm, so the other commander was inside the village. They must be pretty strong if the soldiers still thought this commander could beat me after seeing me kill Ernesis.

I gotta hurry back to the village...

Part 6

THE SCENE INSIDE the village was horrible. At first glance, all I saw were soldiers from the cavalry. Buildings were crumbling, and there were fires everywhere. It looked like the Lithovars were fighting back, but there would be many casualties. The ground was slick with blood and dense with Lithovar bodies.

I'd failed. I had no idea of the scale of the enemy. Maybe I shouldn't have left at all. Maybe I should've just stayed here? No, there would've been a limit to how many Lithovars I could've evacuated. And if every battalion had come to attack the village at once, it would've been difficult for me to protect them. Every Lithovar who was in a place I couldn't cover would've been killed.

There was no sense in thinking about the what-ifs. I was back. I'd make sure that there were no other casualties from now on, no matter what.

Plus, the damage probably wasn't as bad as it looked. There were several underground emergency shelters throughout the village that had been used for avyssos attacks. I was sure that the civilians were hiding out there. I just hoped that the enemy hadn't found them yet.

I decided I'd need to chase the enemy soldiers out of the village and lure them elsewhere, so I searched for a target for Whirlwind Slash. Suddenly, though, I froze as I spotted a man who looked out of place on the battlefield. He was probably in his thirties—he wore his head in a mass of creepy curls and sported a curly mustache above his lip. There was a gaudy golden harness on his horse, and he wore an equally gaudy cloak embroidered with layers of golden thread. He was clearly dressed differently from the other soldiers.

"Just let me finish him off! See how I handle my sword!" the man said as he drew his weapon, then charged his horse toward a bloody Lithovar who was kneeling down.

"Your swordsmanship is magnificent, Lord Tolemann!"

"Once I kill this one, I'll move onto my next sword! I still haven't tried out the

sword the Earl of Sabern gave me!”

The man called Tolemann was a world apart from the rest. The other soldiers were cruel, but this guy was acting like he’d come on a hunting trip. I was stunned, unable to understand it, but once I came back to myself I was full of anger.

He was far away, but I should be able to make this distance. I shot off a Whirlwind Slash toward Tolemann.

“Hrm? What is that?” Tolemann stopped his horse and turned around.

“Excuse me, sir!” A cavalryman rode up and leapt off his horse, throwing himself at Tolemann, who went flying through the air. The soldier who’d jumped toward him landed face-down on the ground.

The horse, who had remained in place, was sliced in two by the wind blades. Those same blades grazed Tolemann’s shoulder, splitting through his cloak and spraying blood. It wasn’t a shallow wound, but it wasn’t life-threatening, either.

Gained 92 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 92 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 89 has become Lv 90.

I’d messed up. Tolemann gripped his shoulder with bloodshot eyes and screamed. “Aaarrghhh!”

“L-Lord Tolemann!”

“Who is it that has disrespected me? Arrest them! I’ll kill them!”

Yup, this Tolemann guy was totally different from the rest. He must be some kind of key figure among the enemy. Should I kill him or should I capture him?

“Raaaaaaaar!” I looked up into the sky and let out a Bellow with all the magical energy I could muster into my throat.

If the main force was coming here, I wanted to reduce their numbers, but

most importantly, I couldn't let this village be a battlefield any longer. If they heard my roar, the troops coming here would either run away or split up. Either way, it would reduce the number of enemies the Lithovar Tribe would be facing.

Just as I had planned, enemy cavalry began to appear from all over the village. No sweat. I'd deal with all of them together. But first: this guy. I set my sights on Tolemann and began to run.

"Summon!" The cavalryman who had just protected Tolemann swung his sword. Four balls of light shot out into the air, each one transforming into a slender red dragon with large wings. The soldier slipped his arms underneath Tolemann's shoulders and slung him over the back of one of the dragons.

"Lord Tolemann, you were injured due to my mistake. We will withdraw at once. Kill that dragon no matter what it takes!" he said to the other cavalrymen around him. The dragon carrying them began to fly off in the other direction.

It was pretty fast, but not as fast as me.

The three remaining dragons flew at a low altitude toward me all at once.

Species: Little Wyvern

Status: Normal

Lv: 26/60

HP: 221/221

MP: 198/198

These guys were rank C+ monsters who specialized in speed.

"Kraaaaaah!"

"Kraaaaaah!"

"Kraaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

I shot off Whirlwind Slashes toward the three wyverns that flew toward me. I made direct hits on two of them, and they fell toward the ground, blood

spurting. The other one circled deftly in the air, dodging the blades of wind.

Gained 520 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 520 Experience Points.

The wyvern that dodged my attack charged toward me. I ripped into it with my front claws to stop it from moving while Partner stretched out her neck and bit into its back.

Gained 270 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 270 Experience Points.

The dragon carrying Tolemann and the cavalryman was way in the distance now, growing smaller. Man, that thing was fast. The soldier must’ve realized they couldn’t beat me, so he left behind distractions to hold me up while they escaped.

Had I let some seriously evil monster slip away? I should’ve checked his status. I could chase after him right now, but I shouldn’t leave the village in this state. It was still an active combat zone.

“Captain Eren, what’s taking so long for the reinforcements to arrive? What happened to your soldiers?!”

I heard someone shouting from the edge of the village. Someone was yelling at a cavalryman who was covered in blood.

“W-we were attacked by an incredibly strong Lithovar child who killed my whole unit...”

“A child?! All of your soldiers were killed by one child?!”

A child... Wait, was it Allo? She must have come close to the village to help

out against the enemy.

“A-and that’s not all! That kid used really weird magic. We were attacked by monsters too! I only managed to escape when they were all distracted by Sir Azalea’s wyvern!”

“Hmph, if you’re so cowardly that you ran away from a single kid, you should’ve just died on the battlefield!”

“I-I thought I should stay alive so that I could come report...”

Allo was chasing after the wyvern?

I *knew* those two were really crucial people in the enemy camp. If I could capture them, maybe I could end this whole war. Allo made the right decision to follow him instead of coming into the village and possibly creating confusion.

Still, if that cavalryman could easily summon a rank C monster like that, then he wasn’t any old grunt. Although Tolemann was injured, it wasn’t life threatening. It would be a simple matter for him to recover with magic. I wasn’t sure if Allo could handle them. I wished she wouldn’t be so reckless.

I’d deal with that later. I needed to clean up the enemy soldiers here in the village.

“H-hey! Commander Azalea ran away with Lord Tolemann!”

“Commander Azalea can take on an amphis, but this thing is way different from what we heard!”

Fortunately, the soldiers’ morale had taken an obvious beating since their commanders had escaped.

“Everyone! Follow Commander Alan!” I heard someone shouting from the center of the village. I looked and saw a huge man at least three meters tall. The gigantic black horse he rode was much bigger than any of the other horses. It looked like it was a different species entirely. Its legs were incredibly thick. Its mane was abnormally long and stretched all the way down to its hooves. There was a strange glint in its eyes.

“D-don’t worry. My arm killed a dragon all by itself before. It can kill that one too!”

Oh great, another dangerous guy. But...is this one even really human?

Part 7

A CERTAIN NOBLE

“A-AGHH! That damned dragon! How dare he injure my shoulder! Argh!”

We flew away from the battlefield on the wyvern’s back. Azalea supported me as we flew.

That cowardly dragon had attacked me at long-range from my blind spot! Although the dragon was quite large,

it was certainly very cowardly. That filthy, barbaric tribe called it their guardian deity? Pathetic.

“Hey, Azalea! Hurry up and cast Hi-Rest on my shoulder!”

“I understand your urge to hurry, but right now I must concentrate,” Azalea replied. “Please wait until we’ve joined up with the remaining 4th unit. I apologize for the delay in your treatment; it’s due to my ineptitude.”

“What? Y-you’re going to retreat that far?! I can still fight, even wounded! Why are you doing this?”

I’d wondered why Azalea had gone to the lengths of summoning a wyvern to withdraw. I figured he had a plan, so I let him do as he pleased, but why were we going so far? Now Alan would be left to fight against the entire barbarian horde. I’d put a lot of effort into choosing weapons for this very day, and now it would all be in vain! I simply could not calm down.

“Return immediately, Azalea!” I ordered. “I will kill that dragon! If we don’t return right away, Alan will crush it! He’s skilled, but he’s also an idiot! I know he won’t even think of leaving the dragon for me! I can’t allow this!”

Alan was the descendant of a giant tribe that was on the verge of extinction—he was known as Alan the Giant. He was so strong that he had slain a middle-class dragon almost single-handedly. In simple combat, he was by far the best among the Hungry Hunters.

“I can’t let him have the glory!” I wailed.

“My lord, I apologize for my rudeness.”

“What?”

“Not even Alan can do anything, nor can you. Both of you are like pebbles in the road to that dragon. That’s why we’re flying around on this wyvern. The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd units who have already entered the village are as good as dead.”

“Huh?!”

For a moment I couldn’t comprehend what he meant. The 3rd unit, led by Alan, was lacking in application, but it was the strongest of all the units when it came to siege attacks. The 1st unit was all made up of fierce fighters who were incredibly strong—*Azalea* was their leader!

And he was saying they were as good as destroyed?

“That dragon’s speed, range, and power are all leagues above any monster I’ve seen so far. When I was serving Baron Govia, I was sent to slay the Living Mound...but I believe this dragon to be more powerful than that monster. I was confident that I had a wide range of knowledge about monsters, but as for this kind of dragon... I just...don’t know.”

The Living Mound... It was a monster that was likened to a living mountain, due to how it resembled a clod of soil covered in ivy. A rank B monster, assumedly, but since all Living Mounds holed themselves up in the mountains and refused to come down from there, the government wouldn’t intervene to slay them.

Baron Govia owned a mine for several generations, but it was said that he was unable to dig properly because of the Living Mound that dwelled there. And so he put *Azalea* in charge of the unit sent to slay the Living Mound. I was well aware of this. It was why I hired him in the first place.

But this dragon was even more powerful?

“D-don’t be ridiculous!” I told him. “A monster more powerful than the Living Mound? Why would a monster like that be supporting the Lithovar Tribe?”

“My lord, we need to retreat for now and notify the government.”

“Th-that’s just absurd! If I lose every single commander of the Hungry Hunters, I’ll no longer have a path toward becoming the king! I can’t let this opportunity slip away!”

“No! As long as Your Excellency is still alive, there are plenty of good opportunities! I will do my best to support you just as before, so please make wise decisions. This isn’t the place for you to risk your life!”

“Grrr...”

Despite what he said, I doubted I’d ever have such an opportunity again.

Even if this dragon was superior to the Living Mound, Azalea and his subordinates were stronger now, with better equipment. Baron Govia was reportedly frightened by Azalea’s power, and so he tortured him in order to make sure he never rebelled.

Azalea was a survivor of the time when a priest of Govia’s domain had become a heretic. That priest had cast strange spells on the orphanage. It was said that when the royal soldiers broke into the church and captured the corrupt priest, Azalea was found in the basement among the corpses of orphans who had been raised in the church.

Azalea’s high physical ability, along with his ability to use magic beyond the abilities of normal humans, like Flare, likely had something to do with his background. It was no wonder that the baron was so afraid of him.

His famous sword could not be handled by a third-rate swordsman, and his abilities had increased exponentially ever since he came to work under me. If Azalea used his full strength, surely he could defeat even that dragon. Could it be that Azalea was afraid of dying, so he made it seem like my life was in danger so we could retreat? I looked into the distance and saw numerous soldiers racing through the forest. That bright red hair... Was that the commander of the 2nd unit, Glaudel?

When I looked more closely, I could see that there were ten soldiers from different units with him. What happened to his direct subordinates? That bastard... He was a commander, and he was fleeing from battle! Had the other units in the village all been destroyed? I supposed it was a good thing that we’d

spotted them.

“Hey, Azalea! Isn’t that Glaudel up there? Land the wyvern! I need to talk to him!”

“The 4th unit is very near. Please wait until then.”

Azalea *never* argued with me. Where had this poor attitude come from? He knew how irritated I was! I thought him a perceptive man, but he acted this irrationally when he was in danger?!

“Listen to me! This wound is deep! And if you had just done your job properly, I wouldn’t have gotten injured! At this rate, my arm will be permanently damaged! Me, the Prince of Swords! Hurry up and land! Do you hear me?! That’s an order!”

“...Very well. I’m sorry.”

He turned the wyvern around and slowed down as we headed toward Glaudel. As we approached the ground, we saw that the soldiers with him were carrying Lithovar children.

“Heh heh! Lord Tolemann!” Glaudel shouted. “We caught their children! And listen to this! They know where the Carbuncle is!” He had a tense smile on his face, as if he were trying to curry favor with me, as if to say *So please forgive me for running away*.

It was because of this idiot that the battle in the village ended in defeat. I was willing to overlook that now, if only because information about Carbuncle was precious. I’d reward him when we got back home. In the worst-case scenario where I only came back with the Carbuncle, I still had a chance of becoming king.

“Tch... I’ll have to settle for second best! I guess I’ll just take out my frustration on the children!”

“That’s great, Lord Tolemann! Gouge out their eyes! Rip off their limbs! You’ll get them to talk that way, but best of all, you’ll feel very refreshed!”

Hmph. Terrible tastes, as usual. I didn’t dislike watching small fry get frustrated and angry, though.

Azalea was silently glaring at Glaudel.

“What’s wrong, Azalea?” I asked.

“It might work.”

“What might work?”

“What?”

“After you get information from them, will you give me one of the barbarian children? I’ll use it to set a trap for the dragon, and it might render him powerless. That is, if the dragon really is supporting the Lithovar Tribe.”

“R-really? Splendid! I’d expect nothing less from you, Azalea!”

It seemed he was finally back to his old self again. He asked, “If you can lend me some of the remaining soldiers from the 4th unit or other units... If it’s against monsters, I’m sure Nell, who I left behind in the 4th unit, will be able to fight to his heart’s content. I know Your Excellency despises him, but when motivated to fight, he is an excellent soldier who far surpasses Alan.”

“I’ll leave it to you,” I said. “Take as many as you want, at your discretion.”

“It *is* a dangerous gamble, however, due to our lack of information. I think you should leave the forest, Your Excellency. This is far more dangerous than we expected. It would be a huge loss to Ardesia if something happened and you lost your life.”

“I see... Very well, then. I suppose I’ll leave everything here to you, Azalea.” I wasn’t completely satisfied with this, but it was rare for him to be so insistent. That meant that this dragon was certainly very dangerous. I’d just have to trust Azalea and withdraw, and then wait for the good news.

“Whoa! H-hey, stop!” Glaudel screamed suddenly as he pulled on his reins. The horse he was riding on slowed down and stopped abruptly as if it had hit something. And it wasn’t just his horse, but the others as well. Their bodies trembled as if they were bound by invisible rope.

“Wh-what’s going on?!”

“It looks like a monster,” said Azalea, jumping off the wyvern before it landed.

“You have to avoid wasting mana if you plan on fighting that dragon later...”

He landed near Glaudel, drew his sword, and began swinging it. Suddenly Glaudel’s horse began panicking and flailing about, bucking Glaudel off its back and into the dirt.

The wyvern landed, and I touched down on the ground. As I watched Azalea’s movements, it seemed there was some sort of thread blocking him. A spider-type monster... We’d wandered into a spider’s web. Well, a low-ranking monster such as a spider would be no trouble for us.

The moment I landed on the ground, a thick mist began spreading throughout the area.

“Wh-what is that?!” I was stunned. A scream came from nearby.

“I-It’s a monster! A monster! Help, somebody help!”

Why in the world were they afraid of some low-level monster? I thought at first, but then the next moment, I heard some kind of crushing noise in the direction the scream had come from. As I looked over, a little girl began to materialize in the mist.

Only...one of the girl’s arms was abnormally large. It made for an incredibly eerie sight.

“Wh-what...?” I dropped the sword I was holding.

Azalea’s expression tightened. “It’s undead!” he yelled. “It attacked first, so this will take some time! Glaudel! Just in case, ride the wyvern with His Excellency and run with him toward the 4th unit! Everyone else, abandon your horses and take the children away from the fog! Follow behind His Excellency! Do not let go of the children! If you escape empty-handed, you may be saved now, but remember what will happen later! Hans and Jade will remain with me to slay the undead and the spiders! I cannot use magic presently because I need to conserve it for later, so keep that in mind! Should we take too long to return, prepare yourselves and send reinforcements after you join up with the 4th unit!”

It was just one problem after the other. What in the world was going on in this forest?

Part 8

DRAGON-BLOODED AZALEA

THE SILHOUETTE of a little girl was standing in the mist. With an arm too large for her small body, she crushed the head of one of the soldiers. They didn't even scream. They were already dead before they had any idea what was coming for them. The strangely humanoid figure, the mist of miasma...there was no doubt about it. The girl was undead.

And this was the worst possible timing. We were trying to stage a comeback here, with the hostages and Lord Tolemann, only to get ambushed by monsters. It seemed like the spider had spun its web and waited for Glaudel to get trapped in it. It was an efficient way to reduce a horse's mobility. I hadn't wanted to consider this possibility, but this undead girl seemed...intelligent. I wondered if it had been created by the Lithovar Tribe to perform some kind of special ritual and act as a guardian or the like.

"Wh-what is that?!"

Lord Tolemann had just witnessed the tragedy as well. His voice was trembling. His sword fell from his hand, landing on the ground with a metallic sound. Undead or not, my first priority needed to be securing the lives of him and the hostages. If we lost the hostages, there would be nothing more we could do.

"It's undead!" I called out. "It attacked first, so this is going to take some time! Glaudel! Just in case, ride the wyvern with His Excellency and run with him toward the 4th unit! Everyone else, abandon your horses and take the children away from the fog!"

Glaudel was a skilled fighter who had his wits about him, but he was also reckless to the point of cowardice. Since he calmly accepted the most dangerous missions, he had won a certain amount of trust from His Excellency Tolemann, but bravery didn't factor into it. He merely lacked crisis management skills. He was fine on his own...until a life-threatening crisis approached, and then he was paralyzed. And when he sensed danger, he always placed the

blame on his subordinates and fled quickly.

He fled the battle early this time as well, seemingly working to prepare gifts in order to not displease His Excellency. That was how he managed to escape the village so quickly, no doubt. I didn't think that that was necessarily a drawback. He had, undeniably, made achievements with this method. But I was certain that one day it would lead to an irreparable mistake. At the very least, he was a man who wasn't suited to work for Lord Tolemann. It would be better to let him take command of the escape. I didn't want to entrust His Excellency's life to such a man, but I had to choose someone at this point.

"Do not let go of the children! If you escape empty-handed, you may be saved now, but remember what will happen later!"

They had captured ten Lithovar children. Glaudel had ten men now, since one had just been killed. An equal number. I wanted Glaudel to keep his hands free, though, just in case. Leaving soldiers here would mean having less to secure the prisoners.

I wanted to maintain as many hostages as I could, but I couldn't take them on my own without knowing the enemy's strength. I was sure that some of the cavalymen would run away empty-handed even after my threat. I could leave a minimum of two soldiers here.

"Hans and Jade will remain with me to slay the undead and the spiders! I cannot use magic presently because I need to conserve it for later, so keep that in mind! Should we take too long to return, prepare yourselves and send reinforcements after you join up with the 4th unit!"

I absolutely could not use magic right now. I could probably kill our current foe if I used two flares, but I'd have to take on that blue dragon by myself later. I estimated it as an upper rank B, but it could be a rank A if we were truly unfortunate. On top of that, if it was the kind with high stamina, my options for defeating it would be extremely limited. Loath as I was to rely on it, I might have to use Drago Flare for the first time in a while. And the more MP I could conserve, the higher my success rate would be for my battle with the dragon. But if magic wasn't an option right now, I'd be forced to engage in close combat with poor visibility. I couldn't see the spider through the fog. This battle would

put me at a major disadvantage.

I didn't think it necessary, but, just in case, perhaps it would be better to have reinforcements sent in. Nell was on standby in the 4th unit. He was a Felis-human and very fast even among his species, so he would be the first one to arrive here. He wasn't a mage, so there was no need for him to conserve mana. He would be able to handle monsters of this level.

On my order, Glaudel moved as if he had been waiting. He must have been relieved that he wasn't assigned to stay here. He was so easy to read.

"A-all right! Let's go, Lord Tolemann!" He supported His Excellency by his shoulders while he headed out of the fog, keeping an eye on his surroundings.

"Gale!" A girl's voice echoed through the fog.

Gale...it was a spell that created strong winds. The voice that intoned the spell would sound halting from a human, but it was far too fluent for an undead.

A small tornado stirred up the fog, scraping against the ground as it headed toward us. She was aiming at His Excellency in front of me. Her magic was more powerful than I expected. She was no ordinary, low-level undead.

"G-gah!" Glaudel screamed. If he were alone, he would have easily avoided it—but he must have deemed it too hard to achieve while supporting His Excellency. Hopeless.

I guess I'd have to use magic this once. I concentrated energy into my legs to endure the strong gust of wind, planting myself into the ground. I drew my sword and aimed it toward the tornado.

"Resist!"

The tornado lost its momentum and collapsed on the spot. Resist was a high-level magic spell that could nullify the effects of other spells. Success or failure largely depended on the skill of the user and their opponent. It used a lot of mana, but it was a necessary sacrifice at this point.

In the path of the tornado, I could see a gaping space without the fog. The figure of the undead girl came into view. Although she had an ominously large arm with huge claws, otherwise she looked like an ordinary girl.

“What?!”

She couldn't be an ordinary human. I knew that. An ordinary human couldn't transform their body parts in that manner.

It must be a Levana type undead, I thought at first, but since it so closely resembled a human, it must be a lower-level Liche class...but even lower-level Liches weren't common. Research on Liches was forbidden, although countless influential people and sorcerers researched them anyway in pursuit of eternal life. Most of them lost their lives in the process or simply turned into undead beings who merely wriggled on instinct—a famous example was an alchemist named Vermeilen from Ardesia, who believed that if he helped his late lover to evolve again and again, her form would eventually become more human. He spent fifty years transforming her into a terrifying monster.

Resurrection magic wasn't easy to rein in, perhaps due to the magic being imperfect from the outset. That story was over a hundred years old now, but rumor had it that there were enough similar cases in our country that it had become a huge problem.

Inexplicably, the magic the undead girl was using to appear as human didn't seem to be illusion magic. I didn't feel anything unusual about it. To have her take on that level of human form, possessing both intelligence and magical powers, was well beyond the means of some uncivilized tribe.

There were said to be examples of monsters who could easily do such things, however. First was the Skull Lord, the king of the undead who had multiple skulls. Another was the great demon Sarel, sometimes called the keeper of the underworld. And then there was the Ouroboros, a two-headed dragon that could control life and death.

“Wait, that dragon...”

But all of them were legendary-class monsters.

And if that dragon was an Ouroboros, all the strange happenings around the village made sense. As the legend went, they could control life and death; it would be easy for them to gain faith anywhere in this world, not just this village.

If that was the nature of the monster waiting in the wings for us, I absolutely could not use any more magic. Unfortunately, this battle didn't seem a particularly easy one either.

It put me at quite the disadvantage to not be able to locate the spider. It could easily catch me off guard in this thick fog. But if I tried to escape the fog, it would chase after His Excellency in the meantime.

I was at a geographical disadvantage. I couldn't use magic. I had no subordinates I could count on. But I'd been in dangerous situations like this countless times.

"Surround the undead, but stay aware of the monster hiding in the fog!" I ordered. "But don't be too cautious or else you'll miss opportunities to strike and create vulnerabilities!"

Hans and Jade's voices echoed out in response.

"Yes, Sir Azalea!"

"Yes, sir!"

I couldn't rely on them too much. Their visibility was reduced, and their comrade had just been killed. They had no hope of fighting to the best of their abilities right now. However, if we could expose the monsters lying in wait and distract the undead, that would be enough. If I could use Resist, I could aim to shut her out completely. But now I had no choice but to use Hans and Jade in place of Resist.

I hoped they would be even half as useful...

I gripped my sword as I caught sight of the undead girl on the other side of the dense fog. Even an undead would take a lot of damage if I crushed its head or chest. I could kill her in an instant after that. Hans and Jade separated to the left and right, approaching the small silhouette. I followed suit and headed toward it, sword drawn.

I knew that there were hidden spider webs and spider-type monsters within the mist. Hans and Jade, who went ahead, would uncover the ambush to some extent and distract the undead's attention. I would take advantage of that opportunity and kill her in one fell swoop. Undead tended to have high vitality,

but I resolved that my sword would end her.

The small silhouette showed almost no movement. I thought she would use magic again when there was some distance between us, but maybe she ran out of mana? I couldn't be too optimistic, but just maintaining a fog of this scale would require a certain amount of magical power. Perhaps she was trying to get into close combat because of the poor visibility.

Suddenly there was a rustling noise by Hans's feet. "There it is!" He stopped and swung his sword, but it slammed on to nothing on the ground. Three shadows, probably spiders, came crawling out of the ground to surround him. Hans seemed to be caught in their thread; his movements slowed. "Damn it! Sir Azalea! Sir Azalea!"

The ambush had begun. It was his fault for jumping out in a hurry. Still, I was grateful to Hans that he had exposed the positions of those hidden spiders. Had he not jumped out like that, we would've continued being in fear of the monsters we couldn't see. The undead girl had some apparent smarts, but monster-based traps weren't equipped to deal with the small details. Stay calm, move slowly, and you'd be able to dodge through them easily. And now we should have whittled down the main body's defenses a little.

"Ahhh!"

Jade's sword was blocked by the undead girl's huge arm. I immediately sped up. I could easily make up the space between us in an instant. I had deliberately slowed down to let the two of them go ahead and catch the undead girl by surprise. And I had succeeded in closing the gap between me and the undead.

I was able to enter just outside my sword's range. The undead girl was still blocking Jade's sword with her arm, and she turned only her face toward me. I couldn't see her expression through the fog. But she was staring at me in a daze; she hadn't expected me to be there. I saw a spider poised to spit out threads diagonally behind me.

"Get out of the way," I growled.

I slammed my sword on the ground behind me, then stretched out my hand while I drew the sword in a circular motion on the ground. The rising dust cloud obscured the eyes of the spider that was behind me. As I extended my sword,

the undead girl flung Jade aside, using its thick, earthen arm to guard. I swung my sword right toward the arm—it exploded into gobs of earth that flew through the air. I then smashed her defenseless, open chest. She must have thought she could defend against my sword with her arm, like she had with Jade’s sword.

“Ahh...” The undead groaned and retreated backward. But it was too late. If she was good at magic, she should’ve used it before I came so close.

I closed in on her as she backed up. I wasn’t going to back down after a single blow. I was going to finish her off with a series of attacks.

First, I knocked off her other arm, then unleashed three strikes in succession to her completely unguarded abdomen, legs, and chest. Her body was gouged out, sending chunks of the soil that made up her undead body flying through the air. I fired a fourth shot at her neck and sent her head after. The neckless undead body fell on the spot. Her head landed right next to me. The fog that covered the area seemed to thin out a little. It had probably lost its effectiveness because the undead which created it had run out of power.

“Phew, am I done?”

I shouldn’t be too optimistic. If there were other undead like this, it would be a big problem in the future. And if we couldn’t deal with the fog, it could wipe out an entire battalion. I hoped there weren’t more undead that followed Lord Tolemann and ambushed him...

“Just as I expected from you, Sir Azalea!” said Jade. “You destroyed that huge arm like it was nothing!”

“Haah, haah,” panted Hans. “I think we chased away the spiders, but the threads are sticking to my legs!”

It seemed like both of them were safe.

I looked down and checked the head of the undead girl. It had the expressionless, vacant face typical of an undead. When I saw her from a distance earlier, she didn’t appear much different from a normal human, but looking closer, her skin was rough. It was as if makeup had been applied to the dirt. She looked more like a golem than a human. It was eerie because she had

the shape of a little girl.

“When I saw her from a distance before, she looked more human... But it was foggy, so maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me...” That was as far as I got before I felt something strange.

I had overlooked something.

No. This was different from the undead we first saw. Suddenly, the torso of the fallen undead girl split open, and a thin thread shot out from the inside.

“Argh!” Because it was so close and it caught me off guard, I couldn’t avoid it. I slashed out with my sword. As my attention turned to the thread, the soil beneath my feet transformed into an arm and grabbed my ankle. Another arm cropped up to overlap with the first, strengthening its grip on me.

“Sir Azalea!” Jade rushed over. The spider emerged from the undead’s body and quickly skittered away.

“Leave quickly! It’s a trap!” As the words left my mouth, the ground cracked further away and a girl appeared. Unlike the lump of earth I saw earlier, she had smooth and beautiful skin like pottery. She had switched places with an undead she had created in the thick fog. Her real body had been hidden underground using Clay. The unusually large arm was a trap to distract me, so I wouldn’t pay attention to the small, changed details.

There was a spider on the undead girl’s arm—a black spider with a white face. The undead girl’s arm glowed.

“Mana Drain?!”

I had wondered how she still had mana to spare... It seemed that she had a spider monster with high mana waiting nearby and used Mana Drain to draw from it whenever she wanted. And the fact that she’d recharged her magic now meant that any moment...

“Gale!”

A tornado rolled in, drawing a line on the ground as it charged for me. It was more powerful than the tornado she created before. She wanted to finish this battle.

“Damn it...” I focused my strength into my legs to pull them out, escaping from the earthen arm. I dodged the newly appeared earthen arm with a small jump and smashed at it with my sword.

I couldn’t avoid their grasp. Besides, Jade, who had come running to my rescue, and Hans, who was still bound by spider webs, were still here. I couldn’t just run off. I had no choice but to use Resist again. I held out my sword and pointed it at the tornado, right as the figure of the huge blue dragon I saw earlier appeared in my mind.

I had to go defeat that dragon after this. I couldn’t use magic. If that really was an Ouroboros, it was in for an incredibly tough battle. And if I was right, then it was the worst possible dragon I could face—one that specialized in high stamina. A half-hearted surprise attack wouldn’t make sense when going up against a dragon with high stamina; it would be difficult to compensate for that crucial disparity with other tactics. On the other hand, if I couldn’t overcome this, I wouldn’t even get the chance to fight the dragon. Following that logic, if I couldn’t win this battle without being forced to use magic, I probably didn’t have a chance of killing the dragon.

“Ugh...”

I lowered my sword.

“S-Sir Azalea, why?!” I heard Hans accusing me.

If I didn’t use Resist, Hans and Jade would be caught up in the undead girl’s magic and become collateral damage.

I stabbed my sword into the ground, pulling my body back, and turned my face downward. The tornado cut through my back. Even though I was about to be blown away by the storm, I put all my strength into my arms and legs to resist it.

The windstorm cut through my body as it passed by.

Hans and Jade screamed behind me. A little later, I heard the two of them hitting the ground some distance away. I didn’t know if they were alive or dead, but I was certain they were out for the count in this battle. The bright side was that the fog should be mostly cleared up, thanks to the wind just now. Before, it

had thinned out a lot so the undead could fake her death and concentrate on attack magic. My peripheral vision should be clear enough. And even though other monsters were supplying the undead girl with mana, she should be running out by now.

She was maintaining fog covering a large area, had made a copy of herself to act as a decoy, and then used the windstorm magic. It was safe to assume she didn't have enough mana to make any more big moves. When I lifted my head and opened my eyes, there was a large spider in front of me. A mere araneae, a rank D monster. They were skillful at using their threads, however, so I shouldn't underestimate them.

Even though my thoughts had been preoccupied by the thought of the Ouroboros waiting for me, I had made an outrageous mistake here by getting caught up in this little girl's schemes. If His Excellency Tolemann was watching, he would have been very disappointed in me.

The araneae shot out a thread. I soon heard similar sounds coming from all directions. I was surrounded.

"I see... After you used wind magic to blow everyone away, you planned to wipe us all out with a series of attacks. Splendid. You didn't engage in close combat until the end, when you lured us into your traps. The moment I find a gap in your defense, I'm going to kill you."

It was a good threat—executing it was a separate matter. I couldn't continue fighting from this mid-range distance without a protective barrier to soak up damage. There had to be some kind of internal pressure bolstering their ranks... If a single araneae collapsed, they would all fall prey to my sword, but they were presently maintaining their positions without any obvious weak points.

It took a lot of courage to continue this battle with almost no information about me. Although, that wound up being an advantage to my opponent. I would never have engaged in this plan if I had known it was a mage type.

"The fact that they risked their lives by entreating an undead to protect their village is commendable." I opened my eyes and pulled up my deeply wounded, numb arm from the ground with as much force as I could muster. "But you picked the wrong opponent!"

I was seriously wounded from taking the brunt of that wind magic. Considering how Hans and Jade were thrown up high and then slammed to the ground, though, I'd gotten off easy. From the beginning, I was confident that my physical abilities were much higher than theirs. I could still move. Even though I wasn't in the best shape, I could still fight.

The undead girl must have decided that she had already weakened me enough, because she approached, but...she miscalculated. I sensed the position of the threads being spewed at me from all directions and chopped them away with my sword. The undead rushed toward me from behind as if she were chasing after the thread, swinging her large, boosted arm. She must have intended to use that arm to kill me while I was entangled in the threads and rendered defenseless—but I smacked the undead girl's giant arm with the flat of my sword, causing the whole arm to drop to the ground. She lost her balance and fell after it.

I swung my sword to attack, and she reached her hand out for me.

"Clay!" she shouted. An earthen wall appeared between the two of us.

"Haah!"

I straightened my arm and pierced the earthen wall with the point of my sword. I felt something give on the other side of the wall, which collapsed, revealing the undead with my sword piercing into her stomach. Her "skin," molded onto her body like a varnish, began to crack. Then it began to change. It looked more like soil every second. This time it wasn't fake. I hadn't given her time to switch places. She had lost a considerable amount of vitality and mana and was unable to maintain her body.

"I'll remember you. You could've beaten me. I never would've wagered you would push me this far."

All I need to do is pull out my sword and cut her torso in half, and it's all over, I thought. I tightened my hand...but for some reason, I couldn't pull out the sword. I looked down at my sword and saw a rope of soil, trailing out of the wound from the undead girl's stomach, wrap around my sword. Not only that, but she was using magic to cement it there.

"What?!"

I never expected *this* when I tried to stab her.

If it hadn't been for the dirt wall between us, I could have pulled out my sword immediately and struck again. I doubted she had planned this move either; it was pure tenacity on her part. The undead girl placed her normal-sized arm against the blade of my sword. The moment her hand touched it, it lost its distorted shape and solidified, like it had grafted itself to the sword.

And then she swung her giant arm down toward me. I tried to let go of the hilt of my sword and pull back, but she was too close. I couldn't avoid it. I was already injured. And even though the monsters which surrounded me were low-level monsters, a blow like that could easily lead to my death. It was easy to defeat an undead enemy, but I had to make sure I didn't take a direct hit from her. She would knock me off balance, and then the spiders would swarm on me.

If I was defeated here, not only would His Excellency have lost the majority of the Hungry Hunters, but what few subordinates he had left would escape from the forest. And then he would have no path to becoming king.

So I couldn't get killed here, no matter what. I *really* didn't want to use magic in this fight, but I couldn't think of any other option.

"I guess I'll have to."

I stretched out my left hand directly in front of me toward the undead. If I could land a direct hit on her from this close, one round of Flare would be enough to knock her head off. I could take my time dealing with the spiders after that.

I decided to use the spell Fire Sphere instead. I needed that precious mana to use Dragon Flare later against the Ouroboros. Much as I hated to use any magic at all, if I didn't use some now, I would die.

"Fire Sphe—"

I was interrupted.

I saw soldiers wearing the Hungry Hunters uniform running in the corner of my vision. The reinforcements I had asked for had arrived. They were closer than I expected. Only one person could have gotten them here this quickly.

I had planned on being in charge of the first unit with His Excellency. He had been displeased with Nell, so he sent him to another unit to standby. Destroying the Lithovar Tribe had never been something that Nell was suited for. I had thought maybe he should go anyway so he could get used to it, but I decided not to contribute any further to Lord Tolemann's bad habits...and in the end, it had been a good decision to keep Nell on the sidelines.

Fast as he was, Nell wouldn't make it in time for this one blow. I had to get out of this on my own. And I didn't have time to dodge it. I thrust my left hand outward as I pushed my shoulder forward, exactly where the undead's arm had been aiming for. My arm connected with the undead's giant arm. Her sharp claws gouged into my skin.

"Argh!"

The impact pushed me back onto my knees. The undead girl staggered backward and lowered her shoulder. She looked near her limit. The spiders all rushed toward me at once. I'd bought myself some time. If I had taken the blow anywhere else, I would have been even more seriously damaged. It was a gamble on my part, but I had won out.

Nell leapt in and swung his scabbard around to shoo away the spiders, using the momentum to land a roundhouse kick on the undead girl. The weight of her giant arm dragged her down, and she flew unsteadily through the air before falling to the ground.

"Aahh..."

The undead's unique crimson eyes glared at me with regret.

"S-Sir Azalea...are you okay?"

"Thanks to you. Well done, Nell."

Nell's advantage was his overwhelming speed. Were this a swordfight with rules, I would be no match for Nell. Even among the Felis-humans, he was said to have "God's Feet."

"Ugh, the wound on your arm," Nell remarked. "It looks so deep I don't even think recovery magic will heal it completely."

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “I’m a sorcerer.”

It was unlikely that my sword would pierce that dragon. I didn’t have enough attack power or agility. My arms were completely unnecessary for the upcoming battle.

“What about the undead...?”

I glanced over and saw that the spiders had lifted up the undead and were trying to run away with her. Some children we had failed to secure were riding on some of the spiders’ backs, escaping from the battlefield.

“Tch! Nell! Go after them and get rid of them! You should be able to kill them easily right now!”

“B-but...you need to heal that injury right away. You should go join up with the 4th unit and have it healed. Plus, if you were attacked by an undead creature, you might be under some kind of curse. I think the others should be here soon, but I can get you there faster than anyone else can.”

“...” Nell must have seen the spiders earlier, but I assumed he didn’t want to chase after the children. More importantly, he had a point. I had to be careful, just in case there was a curse. There were many skilled white mages in the fourth unit. I should have them check me out as soon as possible, to be on the safe side.

Since the undead girl had high recovery abilities, she might launch another attack, but by now I knew about 80 percent of the tricks up her earthy sleeve. With that information, and so long as I warned the others, the odds would be stacked in my favor for a rematch. Still, the girl was trivial compared to the Ouroboros. This was a good opportunity to withdraw.

More importantly, I needed to think of how I could raise Nell’s motivation. He was staring at the bodies of Hans and Jade, who were bent in unnatural angles after the wind magic attack, and the other soldier who had been crushed.

“Maybe we should retreat for now?” he said.

“Yes. We need to stop fighting the Lithovars,” I replied. “Most of our forces have been wiped out. Something very unexpected happened.”

“Really?” He had a conflicted expression on his face.

Nell had been against the massacre of the Lithovars from the very beginning. He was probably relieved in a sense. But at the same time, so many Hungry Hunters had died that we had to call off the battle. He wouldn't dare show relief in front of me.

“We can't back down completely, though,” I said. “Lord Tolemann's future path to the throne is riding on this. But don't worry, Nell. I won't tell you to kill the natives.”

Nell's superior physical abilities meant that he could pursue the Ouroboros for a while. And I thought he would work very well for me if it came to that.

Part 9

“M-MY ARM...!” The giant flew through the air.

One of his thick arms had been ripped off at the shoulder, and it rolled on the ground ahead of the rest of his body. The giant bounced once and then collided with a house, slamming through a wall. The fact that I hadn’t received any experience points yet meant that it was still alive. *Guess I didn’t hit it hard enough.*

Alan Agrus

Species: Giant-human

Status: Bleeding (Major)

Lv: 41/60

HP: 28/301

MP: 31/69

He had amazing strength. Still, I could kill him with one big hit.

“M-my arm... My, my...!”

The man staggered, crawling out of the collapsed house. Just then, the giant horse he had been riding on galloped toward him.

“Ahhhh! Buska! Don’t fly at meee!” the man screamed, but then the horse crushed him. He stopped moving.

Gained 246 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 246 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 90 has become Lv 91.

The Divine Voice sent me a message notifying me that I had leveled up.

“Commander Alan has been kiiiilled!”

“B-but how could that be?!”

“There’s no hope! We stand no chance against this enemy! I don’t want to die a pointless death!”

The remaining cavalry soldiers began scattering once they lost their commander. I couldn’t see anyone who wanted to stay, and there was no reason for me to chase them. After an utter defeat like this, they wouldn’t think about attacking me again.

I wasn’t so full of malice that I wanted to hunt down every last one of them. I looked down at the blood stuck to my claws. I’d gotten pretty used to killing people now. I knew that I shouldn’t get caught up in this feeling, but...it nagged at me.

“Ughh...”

A groaning noise in the distance pierced the air. I turned and saw a Lithovar warrior leaning against a building, covered in blood. I ran over and glanced at Partner.

“*Graar*,” she roared, and a warm light surrounded the Lithovar warrior. The wound began to heal before my eyes, while the man’s ragged breath grew more regulated. He gradually regained consciousness.

The village had taken a direct hit. There were many more casualties than ever before. I hadn’t used up that much MP during the battle, so I could go around healing people. I was grateful for that.

I looked in the direction where Allo had chased after the enemy boss. I felt guilty, but I couldn’t go that way yet. *Don’t die, Allo.*

I ran around the village, healing all the Lithovars who had sustained serious injuries. I felt bad, but anyone who didn’t have life-threatening injuries got left for later. It would be dangerous to treat dozens of people, even with my huge

tanks of MP. Once everything was over, I could calmly go around and cast Hi-Rest on everyone. At least it was safe to say that this battle was mostly over.

I'd killed, threatened, or chased off a considerable number of enemy soldiers. I was pretty confident that the main force had been the one to attack the village. I had a hard time believing there were many more enemy soldiers who had the will to fight.

I had no proof of that, so I couldn't relax quite yet, but if their goal was to eliminate the Lithovar Tribe, I wouldn't be surprised if they gave up. It had turned out to be a one-sided rout in the end.

After I finished going around the village healing everyone, the priestess's sister, Bela, came running over to me. She quickly intoned a spell, lifted her staff, and closed her eyes.

("Dragon God! W-will you please come with me? I was treating a dying soldier in the shelter, but his pulse has gotten weaker!")

The shelter? Oh, the underground shelter to hide from the avyssos.

I had Bela guide me. She entered a half-destroyed building that I guessed was connected to the underground shelter. I was too large to go inside, so I waited a while, and then a man lying on a wooden board covered with a cloth was brought out. He was half-naked, and his upper body was smeared with a translucent greenish liquid. Wounds marred his stomach and shoulder, and blood seeped through his bandages. The strange liquid must be some kind of medicine the Lithovar Tribe used for wounds.

"Graar." Partner cast Hi-Rest, and the wounds gradually became shallower. The man's pale face regained its color. He should be fine now.

Once the Lithovars saw me, they came out of hiding.

"The Dragon God repelled them!"

"He helped us again!"

I saw a familiar face amongst the noisy Lithovars. It was Tataruk, who had tried to help me escape from the Sacrificial Cave in the anti-dragon god faction. *Huh, I guess the old guy came over here.*

He was leaning against a half-destroyed building with an awning, his head hanging down. Even though he had escaped with his life, he had a gloomy expression on his face. I wondered if maybe he was badly injured, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"You're ridiculous! How dare you come back here!" A woman's screams came from the back of the building, startling me. I trembled involuntarily.

"P-please calm down, Aino! They came to help us, didn't they? He must've been worried about you."

"Then he never should've left! He didn't care about my feelings. He wouldn't have left me and everything else behind if he did!"

Aino? I'd heard that name before...

"Her name is Aino. Aino had a child, but she was killed by a Manticore..."

Was that Allo's mother? I remembered hearing that after Allo was sacrificed, her mother had been in a very unstable state. It sounded like she wasn't pleased that the people of the anti-dragon god faction had returned so quickly.

The story of the dragon god and the shrine maiden, which was used to persuade the anti-dragon god faction, would only cause unnecessary confusion in this village. I'd have to hide that part. Even if I did eventually need to tell them, now was *not* the right time.

Unfortunately, that meant that to the people in this village the anti-dragon god faction had fled the village thoughtlessly and then returned just as thoughtlessly.

Judging by the way Aino spoke, it seemed like someone close to her had left to join the anti-dragon god faction. After suffering the heartbreak of losing a child, it would make sense for her to feel betrayed. *I should leave it alone for now.*

As I was thinking that, Tataruk quietly pulled away from the wall and trudged off into the distance.

Hm? W-wait, was *Tataruk* the person close to Aino? Was he her husband? N-no, but... What's going on?

He'd only recently joined the anti-dragon god faction, after all. And considering that the reason he had left was that his child was sacrificed to the dragon god, that fit the timeline perfectly. Besides, that would explain why he tried to help Partner when she was about to be sacrificed and why he was so depressed when he was put on sacrificial cave duty right after defecting to the new village.

Come to think of it, Allo had a strange reaction when she approached the anti-dragon god faction's village. She might've guessed that her father had gone there after she died. Or did Tataruk try to take Allo to the anti-dragon god faction and failed? Or had he gone by himself against Aino's will?

I didn't know the details, but I was putting together a vague idea of what happened. Still listening to Aino's cries, I stared at Tataruk's retreating back. I was astonished.

Part 10

AFTER THAT, Bela guided me around the anti-avyssos shelters, and I repeatedly healed the seriously injured.

("The next closest is the infirmary, a large building just around the corner.")

When I was receiving explanations from Bela, another Lithovar woman rushed in from behind in a panic. She breathed heavily, and her eyes were swollen with tears. She had a shallow wound on her arm from a sword, and her clothes were filthy with dirt.

I wondered what was going on, but suddenly the woman collapsed on the spot, pressing her head into the ground.

"Bela! Dragon God! Please help us first!"

"Please calm down!" Bela said. "What's going on?"

"The enemies came into our hiding place. They immediately ran away, fearing the Dragon God, but they kidnapped the children!" The woman burst into tears.

They went so far as to kidnap children?!

If they invaded the hiding place, the damage there would be greater than anywhere else. I needed to go there first. Otherwise, it might be too late.

We changed our plans and followed the frantic woman. Once we got to the building, we had the other Lithovar Tribesmen help us carry the wounded outside.

The drawback was that this would consume a lot more MP than I expected, but I didn't think I would need that much MP in battle anyway. I could recover it automatically as I moved, to replenish enough for whatever I'd need for my own healing and attack magic.

While Partner concentrated on healing, Bela was getting information from those who were inside.

Apparently, ten children had been kidnapped. The soldiers were no longer

near the village, so I thought that they had just run away. Nope. They'd done something despicable before fleeing. I really hoped this would be the last stumbling block...

"Why do they want the children?" Bela asked. "Did they say anything? Are they in any danger of being killed right away?"

"Before the man next to me was killed, I remember someone saying, 'Do you know of a shining monster?'"

A sh-shining monster? Was that why they had come into the forest, poisoned the Lithovar Tribe, and tried to kill everyone?

"That matches the information I got from the prisoners," Bela said, wiping sweat from her brow. Her voice was a bit hoarse from fear. "I wonder if they're trying to anger the Feared Gods..."

The Feared Gods... Was she talking about the forest sprites? I'd heard about them before. What did they have to do with a shining monster? Bela seemed terrified to even talk about them. Were they really that bad? I turned my gaze on Bela and asked for an explanation. She awkwardly intoned the spell for Telepathy and answered me.

("It is said that long ago, the Lithovar Tribe was touched by the wrath of the Feared Gods, and half the village was sunk. We pass this story on to our children from an early age so that they shall never repeat the same mistakes. I'm worried about the children's safety, but if they get the information out of the children and anger the Feared Gods, then I worry about the safety of this forest too...")

Th-the forest sprites will destroy the forest? Aren't they just little monsters who run around sucking magical power out of trees?

Just then, screams rang out from the edge of the village.

"A monster! A monster's attacking! Anyone who can fight, grab your weapons! There are still people being attacked!"

A monster right now?! Talk about kicking someone when they're down. Was it a leftover avyssos? No, I remembered the enemy sorcerer summoned a wyvern, so it wouldn't be strange for other monsters to attack.

“H-huh? The monster’s already leaving! K-Kail? It’s the kidnapped children! They’re back!”

Wh-what in the world is going on?

I ran in the direction of the voices and found a Lithovar caring for a child covered in injuries. A group of spiders were skittering away in the distance. Apparently they had brought the child back for us.

“It’s a child the enemy kidnapped!”

“I’m positive the spiders were the ones who brought them back!”

“It’s the spider gods! The spider gods!”

Not exactly... Why does this tribe think everyone’s a god?

I was relieved that they wouldn’t misunderstand and attack the spiders, but on the other hand I felt a bit conflicted...

Bela caught up with me panting and then started counting the children. “Three, four...five. We’re still missing five children.”

It was very possible that the other five children were still with the enemy. And if we left them there, who knew what might happen to them. Not only that, but...I was worried about this whole Fearful God business. If Allo and the spiders came here to bring back the kids, they must be nearby. I wanted to hurry up and check on them.

I’d finished healing most of the people in the village. There might still be those who were hiding, too afraid to come out, but I couldn’t be concerned with that right now.

“Bela!” A Lithovar man came toward us from inside the village. “The hostages told us the scale of the enemy! And it all matches up, so I think we can believe it!”

“Really? So what did you learn?”

“There are six hundred enemies in all. Most of them came to the village and have been destroyed! They probably won’t try to attack again!”

Did that mean there weren’t enough of them left to fight against the

villagers? If we got the rest of the kids back, and defeated the enemy who was trying to pick a fight with the Feared Gods, then the battle should be completely over.

In the back of my mind, I thought about Tolemann and his expensive, gaudy clothes. Knowing they were all after some kind of shining monster, it all lined up. He was definitely the boss. I should've taken care of him when I had the chance. If I had taken him hostage back then, this wouldn't have happened. It pained me that his subordinate got in my way.

"Raar..." I roared in a deep voice to get Bela's attention. Once I had it, I looked back and forth between the forest and the village.

"Ah!" Bela exclaimed. "All right. I'll finish healing the people here!"

With that taken care of, I ran after the spiders.

This should be the last of this fight.

Catching up with them, I saw that the spiders were frozen. The petit-nightmare was among them. As I approached, I found Allo collapsed on the ground, surrounded by the spiders. Her skin was dull and looked like dirt, just as it had been before she evolved.

"Dra...gon... God..." she said weakly. There was a mark on her stomach that looked like she'd been stabbed with a sword.

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Low Liche

Status: Cursed

Lv: 31/65

HP: 43/284

MP: 48/299

Crap! She's all beat up!

“*Graar!*” Partner immediately cast Fake Life. A black light gleamed over Allo’s body, and her wounds slowly began to heal. I stretched my tail out toward her. Allo touched it and used Mana Drain to absorb MP. Her skin slowly began to heal.

She tried to stand but staggered, placing a hand on a nearby tree. It must’ve been some battle. But she had a surprising amount of MP left. Just then, the tree suddenly swung around and turned its face toward me. It was the lesser treant.

Species: Lesser Treant

Status: Cursed

Lv: 11/25

HP: 37/75

MP: 34/60

Treant fought too. Its level didn’t raise much, though... I looked over at Allo. I thought back on the treant’s status, the fact that its MP was reduced by about half, and the fact that it didn’t have any visible injuries.

Ah, so she took some MP from Treant as well... Allo’s status was pretty good, considering.

“Couldn’t win...” she said. “Pale...swordsman. Took...children.”

A pale swordsman? The guy who summoned the wyvern and took Tolemann away from the village? That guy really seemed capable. I needed to make sure I didn’t just take out Tolemann, but that guy too. I should make sure Allo hadn’t seen any other soldiers coming back to the village... I needed to defeat the enemy’s main unit directly. But I needed some guidance. Just then, Treant appeared in front of me. *Oh, are you gonna guide me?*

But Treant was kind of slow, and I couldn’t even carry him around. A spider jumped out in front of me and scurried through the forest as if to say, *Please follow me.*

“Raar.”

I bowed my head to Treant and ran after the spider through the forest.

Chapter 3:

Dragon-Blooded Azalea

Part 1

A CERTAIN NOBLE

A LITTLE WHILE after Glaudel and I joined back up with the fourth division, that tall demi-human brat Nell showed up carrying Azalea, whose back was covered in blood. The shoulder of his clothes was torn and bloody. Seeing that, I became even more irritated.

“S-Sir Azalea was attacked by a monster!” Nell said as he lowered Azalea to the ground. “Someone use recovery magic!”

His blunt address only made me more frustrated. My temples quivered with anger.

“Azalea! Explain yourself!” I demanded. “Didn’t you boast that you would defeat that dragon?! How could one measly undead wretch put you in this state?! What happened to the two other soldiers? Did they die? Don’t tell me you let the undead enemy escape too!” In my anger, I stabbed my sword into the ground on impulse. It emitted a powerful sound, and broken fragments of stone scattered about. I held the sword with its blade exposed and approached Azalea.

Nell was timid again, but when Azalea gave him a signal with his eyes, Nell set him on the ground.

“Your Excellency, I am sorry,” Azalea said. “I have no excuse for such a shameful failure. But regarding this matter, please allow me to...”

“Don’t tell me you *still* want me to entrust you with killing the dragon?! As if you’d be capable in this condition! I had high hopes for you, but when it counted, you let yourself get attacked by some low-ranking monster! Do you have any idea what this means?! What will happen to my path to the throne?! The honor of the Truvenitz family is at stake! You said you would slay the

dragon, so I put my trust in you, and *look* what happened!”

Nell was watching from a short distance away, and he leaned over, trying to intervene. Azalea used his uninjured right arm to swipe a sword from a nearby soldier and stopped Nell with it. At the same time, he caught my sword with his badly injured left arm.

One cannot catch the blade of a sword and escape unscathed. I had wildly swung the sword, so although I hadn’t put a lot of force behind it, it still ended up nearly slicing through his palm and fully severed his index finger. Blood gushed from his hand. His left arm hung limply at his side now, from both that and the damage it had incurred from his battle with the undead.

“What in the world are you thinking?!”

If not for Nell, he could have easily defended or evaded the blade. No, in fact—he could have dodged my blade *while* stopping Nell. Azalea was left-handed. And since he was a swordsman, it was only natural that he be careful not to get his dominant arm injured.

Quite a few people had lost their lives from fatal injuries suffered while protecting their arms.

I had lost my temper *because* it was his dominant arm that had gotten gravely injured. I had thoughtlessly and angrily picked up the sword, but I never had any intention of slicing off Azalea’s finger.

“A sword won’t slay the dragon,” said Azalea. “Someone of my power cannot go up against it. That’s why my injuries have no consequence to the fight against the dragon.”

“Did you do that on purpose to show me that?” I snorted.

Azalea dropped his sword to the ground and knelt there.

“I’ll do my very best to make sure you become king, Your Excellency. I would give my body and my life to make that happen. Please order me to slay the dragon. But please run away from here. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

I was speechless for a moment. I had no idea Azalea would speak of me so

fondly.

“Hmph. Well, in that case, I leave it to you. Don’t make any more mistakes!”

“Yes, Your Excellency! I will bring both heads of that dragon to you! I swear it on my life!”

My anger finally began to subside. I felt calmer now.

“...I think I got a little heated. Hey, you! Hurry up and heal Azalea!” I called out to the fourth unit. Several white mages rushed toward Azalea.

“Anyway, Azalea, how do you plan on slaying the dragon if you can’t do it with a sword?” I asked while the white mages treated him.

“I’m going to confine the hostages in a cave and lure the dragon there. If he’s sticking with the Lithovar Tribe, he will come to their rescue.”

“Is there a cave nearby that can accommodate such a large dragon?”

“No, there’s not. That’s why I expect him to use the Human Transformation skill. A dragon of his caliber surely has it—that is his weakness. When a monster like that has transformed into a human, its physical capabilities will greatly decline. If I wait for that moment and attack him with my sword, it may deal him a fatal blow. That’s the only way I’d be able to inflict any significant damage to that dragon, in addition to reducing its MP.”

“That doesn’t seem like a bad plan at first glance, but isn’t it too dependent on the opponent’s actions? What if he won’t take such a risk for those barbarians?”

“I’m aware of those flaws. But it’s the only way to turn the situation in our favor. After all, it’s a legendary dragon. An Ouroboros.”

“I-It’s an Ouroboros?!” I exclaimed. The people around me also expressed their surprise.

An Ouroboros was a rank A monster. Most of the time, it took the cooperation of several countries to form a special order of knights—several thousand soldiers or more—to defeat a monster of that rank.

I didn’t know much about the Ouroboros. But I did know that it was incredibly tough and fearsome.

“Yes,” Azalea said. “That’s why, if we can slay that dragon, that alone will secure your path to the throne. No other noble will be able to bring anything comparable.”

“Th-that’s ridiculous! How can you be so sure?! If that’s true, are you sure you can kill it? After all, it’s the symbol of immortality...”

“The problem is its amount of magic and stamina. Legendary though this dragon may be, it is still a living creature—and therefore, one capable of dying. It cannot possibly be immortal. If I can just get it to use Human Transformation, it’ll lose a huge advantage. The dragon won’t be able to easily escape the cave once I knock it down in that weakened state. And using the prisoners as hostages will buy us plenty of time.”

It was walking a tightrope. But if we succeeded, I would certainly become the king. In addition, neighboring countries would be incredibly grateful to me for preventing a worldwide crisis. As an added bonus, we would be able to make various magical tools using the eyeballs, meat, and bones of the Ouroboros. People all over the world would be talking about me. Although we had suffered an unexpected blow here, the reward for this plan would far greatly exceed our expected spoils.

“B-but how will you swing a sword with that arm?” I asked.

“I’ll disguise my appearance with magic,” Azalea replied. “Once the Ouroboros tries to escape from the cave, I’ll cast a succession of Flares at max power before its Human Transformation wears off. Its scales will be thin then, and not even an Ouroboros will survive if the Flares pierce through its hide.”

Th-that was true... You might even be able to kill an Ouroboros with that tactic.

“This strategy all depends on you, Nell,” Azalea said, turning to him. “You need to stop the Ouroboros’s human form for as long as you can. I’m sure you can attract it while it’s humanized using your skills.”

Nell gulped and looked down. “Y-you mean we’re going to use the Lithovar’s god of protection against them?”

The air turned icy in an instant. We had a chance to slay a legendary monster,

yet this fool was spouting this nonsense?! That was why I hated that worthless brat. I was only using him because Azalea bought him at a strangely high price, but to be perfectly honest, I loathed the boy.

“H-how dare you say that?!” I snapped. “Azalea is...”

Azalea reached out a hand to stop me. “Your Excellency, Nell is a valuable comrade who can compete with the humanized Ouroboros. A normal human couldn’t hold their own against one for ten seconds. Even I wouldn’t last that long, I’m afraid...”

“You speak very highly of Nell! I don’t understand why you’re letting him do something so important at this critical moment!”

Azalea was silent for a moment, but then spoke. “Nell. I understand that you sympathize with the Lithovar Tribe. They have their own customs and culture... they have children and parents. You are a tremendously empathetic person, which is why I thought it would be best if I put you on standby.”

What in the world was Azalea going on about now? I cast an involuntary glare at him, but his eyes stayed on Nell.

“High-ranking dragons are smart,” he went on. “Among them, those classified as evil dragons are cunning and cruel. They might form attachments to people, but they can never love.”

“Huh? But, I thought you said it would come help the children?” said Nell.

“It’s not uncommon for high-ranking demons or dragons to gather humans as followers and use them for their own conveniences. You saw it yourself with that undead girl. An Ouroboros has the power to create such a strong undead underling. It was said that people who approached the Lithovar Tribe were kidnapped and sacrificed. Can’t you figure out why that is, now?”

“B-but...”

“If that Ouroboros grows more powerful, Ardesia and all the neighboring countries will be destroyed. Tens of thousands of human lives could be lost—including the Felis-humans you paid a pretty penny for, Your Excellency. Will you take a gamble and let a creature much stronger than us take care of the dragon?”

Nell didn't reply.

"You don't like the idea of hostages? A naive outlook like that will just increase casualties. Plus, getting rid of the Ouroboros will only help the Lithovar. They'll no longer have the need to hunt for sacrifices, so no one will want to attack them anymore."

Nell stayed silent. He couldn't take issue with such an argument. I'd expect nothing less from Azalea. I certainly had a wonderful subordinate.

"If you do a good job, not only will you receive a handsome reward, but I'll release you from the Hungry Hunters. I don't care where you go after that," Azalea said, looking over at me for permission. He was the one who liked him in the first place; if I became king, I didn't care what the beast did. I'd give him as much money as he wanted.

"...All right," said Nell. "I'll act as bait and lure the Ouroboros in."

"That's the spirit, Nell. I'm expecting a lot from you," Azalea said, roughly tousling Nell's hair. Azalea pulled his hand away, and Nell hesitantly looked up at him.

"If you can't bear it any longer, you can leave the..." Azalea trailed off for a moment. Nell looked up at him anxiously. "No. You can't leave the cave. If you feel uncomfortable, you'll just have to bear with it and wait it out."

"O-okay..."

It was unusual for Azalea to correct himself. Did something just come to mind?

All of a sudden, I heard a voice in the distance.

"Lord Tolemann! The kids told us everything we needed to know! We can get the Carbuncle easily! I was thinking we could kill the kids to liven things up around here, what do you think?"

It was Glaudel.

Azalea moved to stand in front of him. "Unfortunately, I'm taking those children as hostages. Please take His Excellency and retreat to somewhere safe."

“What?!” Glaudel exclaimed. “But we found out where the Carbuncle is! Why would we withdraw now?! You bastard—don’t tell me you’re afraid of that dragon?!”

Azalea grabbed Glaudel’s neck with his right hand and dug his nails in. Glaudel shrunk back immediately. “F-filthy snake...”

“I don’t trust you very much, but you’re the only one who doesn’t have anything better to do,” said Azalea. “Just think of trying something stupid, and I’ll kill you. Now hurry up and start getting ready to escape.”

“You son of a—!” Glaudel opened one of his eyes wide as he bent over to grab a hidden knife. He went for Azalea, who elbowed him right in the face.

“Argh!” Azalea punched him, and Glaudel staggered back, front teeth broken, and toppled to the ground. Azalea grabbed him by the neck and dragged him up to his feet.

“Let me say it again—I don’t trust you. Don’t you dare try anything stupid. Do you understand?!”

Glaudel nodded weakly, and then Azalea called over the white mages to heal him.

Glaudel was very useful to our cause, but not as useful as Azalea, even with the latter having only one good arm. Both were captains, but Glaudel didn’t hold a candle to Azalea. I knew that, but I didn’t realize the difference between them was *this* staggering.

It was, however, unusual for Azalea to be so strict without my orders. He must have considered Glaudel’s whimsical nature very dangerous indeed. Ultimately, Glaudel followed Azalea’s orders and took me and most of the fourth unit away from the forest.

“Azalea!” I called after him. “You *better* kill that Ouroboros!”

“I know. Even if I have to walk a dangerous tightrope, I’ll cross it. I promise to bring you good news, Your Excellency!”

With that, Azalea bowed and walked away with Nell in tow.

Part 2

I PUT THE SPIDER on my head and ran through the forest. From time to time, the spider would tap my head to tell me which direction I should run. I used Psychic Sense as I searched through the forest, but I couldn't pick up on anyone. I was sure that a large amount of the soldiers had withdrawn—they'd realized it was useless to fight against me and gave up on overtaking the village. However, they might not have given up on that *shining beast* they were talking about. According to the Lithovar Tribe, we also had the potential wrath of the forest sprites to worry about if we didn't do something.

If I hurried, perhaps the children would still be with the main forces of the enemy, held as hostages. I might be able to save them and foil the enemy's plan all at once. I would do whatever was necessary to get them out of this forest. No, on second thought—it would be beneficial in the long run if I held some of them prisoner. These guys might attack the village again in pursuit of the shining beast or me. Who knows what they might do then? There were many possible ways to resolve this situation.

As I ran, I suddenly picked up on something: three enemies, give or take, riding on horses. They weren't doing anything in particular; it seemed more like they were pacing back and forth within the forest. Right now, the enemy didn't have much choice other than to flee outside the forest or join up with another unit. What was their motive here? I guess there was no use in trying to figure it out.

I hunched over and told the spider to hang on tight, then charged directly toward the enemy. They gradually got farther and farther away. They were threatened by my footsteps, I bet.

As I chased after them, I noticed something unusual. They weren't on the opposite side of me, but were making something of an arc, and then they began to run to my side. It was like all three of them were somehow communicating with each other.

Had they been sent out to patrol but got scared being away from the main unit and wound up wandering around aimlessly? If so, then I could guess that they were headed toward the main unit, but it just seemed too put-on. Why would they need to gather and wait right now? Is that really what they'd do in front of me, the Lithovar's god of protection?

If they were trying to lure me somewhere, that meant they were trying to lure me into a trap or perhaps destroy the village while I was away from it. However, from their point of view, there wasn't much reason to target the village. If they attacked the village for no reason, they knew they risked incurring my wrath. Maybe their goal was simply to get information about the "shining beast" from the Lithovar Tribe, and they had no further plans to attack them?

I'd killed more than half of the enemy's main forces. Plus, Allo was standing guard. Were they planning on trapping me? *Bring it on. I'll rip through it easily.*

The enemy was coming closer. I kicked off from the ground, flew to make up the distance, and then landed near the enemies. The ground shook where I landed, throwing one enemy off his horse.

"Waah!"

"Tch! It's too fast!"

"This is impossible! There's no way we can lure that huge monster in!"

The remaining two cavalymen scattered in opposite directions and began to run. The horse of the one who fell ran off alone.

"No! Nooooo!" The man left behind was desperately trying to get away from me. I ignored him, leaned down, and placed my chin against the ground.

"*Raaar,*" I roared, and the spider on top of my head gave me a quietly confused look before it poked my forehead with its legs. I slowly shook my head. It relented and got down, then went back the way it came. The spider had stopped directing me a while back, so I had a feeling it wasn't familiar with the territory up ahead anyway.

Since I'd found some cavalry soldiers, that meant the main unit shouldn't be too far away. I didn't need my spider guide anymore. Spiders wouldn't be too helpful in a potential battle anyway. They'd only get in my way.

That slender man who could summon wyverns had to be a commander. Allo had her HP and MP reduced by quite a lot after tailing him; I was honestly glad she got away. There was such a disparity in their stats that one good hit could've killed her.

After I made sure the spider had gotten away, I proceeded in the same direction the soldiers had been guiding me toward. All of a sudden, Psychic Sense started pinging. It was very unusual to get such a strong reaction from it. I hadn't gotten one like that since the first time I faced off against Adoff, in fact. He had a skill called Decoy that could lure the enemy in. And if this guy had the same thing, I had to assume they were trying to trap me.

I ran toward the place where Psychic Sense was pinging and saw a cave-like opening in a large hill. Two soldiers stood guard in front of the entrance, holding bows. Once they saw me, they yelled something inside of the cave and readied their bows.

It was difficult to pinpoint what was in the cave because so many things were setting off my Psychic Sense, but counting the two right there, there were eleven...no, twelve at the front of the cave. I felt five faint pings coming from inside. That dovetailed with the number of Lithovar children who hadn't returned; that must be where they were keeping them. The entrance was low, and no matter which way I could try to go in, I'd get stuck. Why'd they shut the kids up in such a weird place, anyway? If there weren't hostages inside I'd just knock the whole thing down.

Should I stand at the entrance and use Whirlwind Slash?

No, it looked like the cave went back a ways. If it nicked the walls, it could collapse the whole damn thing. Let's see, how much MP did I have?

Illusia

Species: Ouroboros

Status: Normal

Lv: 91/125

HP: 2402/2402

MP: 1612/2410

All right, I'd recovered quite a lot of it. *That's Automatic MP Recovery at Level 6 for ya.* At this rate, I'd be able to use Human Transformation for about an hour. I'd definitely be able to enter the cave in my human form... The only drawback was that my stats would drop.

I wanted to check. *Divine Voice, pull up the info about that skill again, would you?*

Normal Skill "Human Transformation."

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

My attack and defense power would decrease by half... No one could touch me when it comes to agility though, so it should be fine. Plus, even if my attack dropped down to half, it was still 470. The commander Hannibal only had 300 attack, and that was with his weapon. I'd still be able to take down an enemy, even if they had higher stats than him.

I shot Whirlwind Slash at the two enemies standing guard. The moment they saw my wings move, they bent over and ran into the cave. The blades of wind cut through empty air, gouging out scars in the earth before disappearing.

Tch. They were on guard. I guess that made sense.

I could recover my full MP if I rested for a bit, but I should really hurry. There might be another group out there besides the ones guarding the kids who were hunting the shining beast. I wasn't sure how weakened the kids had gotten, besides. I might need to cast Hi-Rest on them immediately. I couldn't be too careful here.

"Puh-tooey!" I opened my mouth and spit out the thing I'd been carrying

around with me—Lithovar Tribe clothing. I would need it for when I used Human Transformation.

(“Are we. Using. Human Transformation?”) Partner sent me a message via Telepathy.

Yep. Sorry to have to drag you into this.

(“I’ll leave it. To you. But don’t screw. Up... Huh?”)

All of a sudden Partner trailed off and looked behind us.

What is it? Do you see something? I thought and followed her gaze. Two brown-and-dark-green lizards, each about twice as tall as a human, sped out from the depths of the forest just past me.

Forest Lacerta: Rank E. A giant lizard that roams the forest. Its Special Skill “Play Dead” conceals its presence and emits a rotting scent. As many monsters - enjoy rotting meat, the skill is not particularly effective.

Due to its timid personality, it rarely fights against opponents of equal or higher rank. In a territorial dispute with comrades, it will compete to see who can use the Play Dead skill the best.

Lacerta, huh? Reminds me of the black lizard. I didn’t have time to mourn the past right now, unfortunately.

(“Just a. Monster, huh?”)

It wasn’t too particularly strong and didn’t have any dangerous skills, so there was no reason to be afraid of it.

Part 3

I USED HUMAN TRANSFORMATION. Heat seeped through my body, and I felt myself shrink. I was used to the pain by now, and it didn't really bother me anymore. I just wished I could do something about the strange feeling of my stamina whooshing out of me.

I put on the clothes I'd just spit out and headed toward the cave. I couldn't let myself get distracted. I needed to hurry up and render the enemy powerless so I could save the hostages. It was definitely possible with my current physical abilities.

I dashed into the cave to find no lights at all. And since it was a long tunnel, it was pitch-black inside. Still, I had Psychic Sense. If my opponents wanted to fight in the dark, fine! Bring it. I opened my eyes and focused my concentration. I sensed ten spots of heat around me. I could faintly see their outlines when I squinted; my eyes were adjusting.

Not only was my attack, defense, and HP cut in half, but my skills were greatly suppressed to boot. But it shouldn't hold me back too much.

I kicked off the ground and swung my arm toward a presence.

"Eek! Something's here!"

Something shot out from ahead of me. I immediately swung my face to the side. An arrow grazed my cheek, leaving a wound on my skin. An attack like that would graze off my Ouroboros scales with no issue. My defense being lowered was one thing, but my short reach span *really* sucked.

I drew my arm back and swung my fist toward the presence.

"Argh!"

I managed to punch the man's shoulder. I felt his bone cracking. His body slammed against the ground, shaking the surrounding area where it hit. This cave wasn't safe. I had to be careful.

Gained 150 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 150 Experience Points.

Even at half power, I was still plenty strong. I could kill my enemies in one blow as long as it was a direct hit. I looked at the man’s crushed face...and noticed something strange. His eyes were tightly closed. Had he closed his eyes in shock when he hit the ground?

“Follow the plan, everyone! Flash!” A woman’s voice came from in front of me, and a bright light filled the surroundings. Uh-oh. My eyes had just gotten used to the darkness, and now it was incredibly bright.

“Argh!” I stopped moving and covered my face with my fingers.

“Now! Firewall!”

Flames erupted from beneath me, surrounding me on all sides. Since my vision was still unstable, I frantically jumped backward. Three arrows pierced my shoulders in succession.

“Brother! You get the other side.”

“Got it. Heh. I think we’ll be able to kill him easier than we thought.”

Voices sounded from my left and my right. They were trying to turn the battle in their favor while I wasn’t at my strongest. They were too accustomed to working together. Their plan from the beginning was to lure me in here and kill me. But then why had they chosen a cave I wouldn’t even fit into? That must mean they had been planning on me using Human Transformation to come recover the prisoners.

Was that even possible? Did one of them have View Status? Nah, not necessarily. Anyone who could identify my species and had some knowledge about it might know my skills. But I hadn’t even considered it, since the humans had seemed like they’d been so lacking in information.

“Hey!”

I pointed toward the sword that was being swung from me at one side. The

other one had called this guy *Brother*.

“It’s useless!” he scoffed. “Like you can catch my sword with your bare hands!”

I grabbed the sword with two fingers, bent them, and forcibly knocked the sword away. The man who attacked me from the right knelt down on the ground now that he had lost his weapon.

“I-Impossible! Shouldn’t it be weaker in human form?!”

I looked in the opposite direction. A man stood there glaring at me. He was identical to the other man. I guess they really were brothers.

“Come on, let’s see what you’ve got!” he said. The blade of the man’s sword trembled and turned into three. I took a half step backward and adjusted my position.

“You’re up against the wall now!” The man swung his sword upward in a diagonal arc. Once again it split into three, then slashed at my head, my chest, and my legs. I kicked off from the ground and rolled in the opposite direction, firing off a spinning kick in the direction of his sword. I’d practiced that kick many times behind the scenes—it reached the man faster than his sword reached me. My toes dug into his abdomen.

“Oof!” He opened his mouth wide, and blood spurted out. He went charging toward his brother, who was still stunned from being disarmed.

Gained 180 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 180 Experience Points.

The older brother rolled on the ground after his younger brother charged into him, and glared up at me, coughing. There was blood mixed in with his spit. It seemed like his internal organs had been damaged when he got slammed onto the ground. He didn’t look like he could move very well. I’d take care of him later.

The whizzing of an arrow cut through my thoughts. The fire that the enemy had scattered had lit the torches inside the cave, so the visibility inside the cave had improved significantly.

I was sure this was all part of their plan, but I appreciated being able to see now. Three arrows flew toward me. I grabbed each one, snapped them, and tossed them onto the ground. With my huge advantage in speed, I expected to push through even a large number of enemies without much issue.

“E-eeek!”

Once the older brother saw me crush the arrows, he began trembling in fear. “Azalea...! He completely underestimated you! What was he talking about, that it would be fine if we couldn’t defeat you?! How *could* we defeat a monster like you?!”

What was he talking about? He made it seem like they thought it would be fine even if they didn’t defeat me. I thought their goal here was to slay me?

“Firewall!”

I didn’t have time to ponder this, because once again a wall of flames shot up around me. I hunched over so I wouldn’t hit my head on the ceiling and jumped up so I could identify the spellcaster.

It was a woman with wavy light-pink hair, wearing a gaudy robe that looked like it was made to match the color scheme of the other uniforms. She was the one responsible for the Flash and Firewall spells, apparently. Those spells were getting in my way—they were much more troublesome than arrows. I needed to prioritize defending against fire magic. The wall was presumably intended as a scare tactic, but it quickly fizzled away.

If this woman was using a feint attack, that must mean someone else was supposed to launch the real deal. I braced myself in midair. I used Psychic Sense: one person was approaching me from my blind spot.

“Godspeed Flash!” The presence approaching me suddenly sped up all at once. This person was *fast*, rivaling the speed of the fastest monster I’d seen thus far, the Manticore.

I somehow managed to turn around, but failed to avoid this new enemy and

got slashed in the side. The shadow that slashed me spun around in the air, set its feet on the wall, stabbed its knife into the ceiling of the cave, and fixed its body in the air.

The man who just jumped at me was small...no, on a closer look, he was still a boy, maybe fifteen years old at most. He had catlike ears on his head like Nina. A Felis-human.

Sorry to say it, but I wasn't in much of a position to stand around observing him.

"Ugh!"

I was hit hard. Blue blood flowed from my belly. That guy was more than a year younger than all the rest, but his stats were ridiculous.

Illusia

Species: Ouroboros

Status: Human Form Lv 8

Lv: 91/125

HP: 1018/2402

MP: 1492/2410

Having only half my HP and defense was tough. On top of that, I didn't have my usual crop of protective dragon scales. I knew they were setting up some sort of trap, but I wanted to prioritize the hostages, so I went anyway... But if I'd known this was going to happen, I would've made Partner do it. She was the magic user. Although, on second thought... Considering the characteristics of Human Transformation and the fact that I might have to stop these guys messing around with the forest sprites later, better not to use magic here. *I should've taken some insurance measures. Something!*

I had ended up underestimating them due to how easy the battle against them had been so far. *These guys are really strong. I'm glad I didn't leave it to*

Allo and the villagers.

Part 4

I LOOKED AROUND the cave to confirm the enemy. There were seven of them. I had already defeated the archers out front and the twin swordsmen...well, one of the twins was still alive, but he wouldn't be moving anytime soon. He didn't even have a weapon. They'd stay put for the time being. I doubted the remaining four would give me any trouble either. The only enemies left were the Felis-human swordsman who had just injured me, the archers, the pink-haired mage, and a large swordsman who stood in front of her as her guard.

I spotted the Lithovar children in the back of the cave, tied up. They were gagged with rope, looking at me with tearful eyes. They didn't know who I was, but they could tell from the situation that I was on their side...but those teary eyes were pretty anxious, even so.

Still, neither Tolemann nor that guy with the pale face were here. So...their plan was to pick me off, but they split up the main unit? I couldn't help but assume they were just buying time here while another unit went to go provoke the forest sprites. I needed to hurry up and break through here. Last time the forest sprites got pissed off, they sunk half the village.

"You seem pretty healthy." The large man guarding the mage clicked his tongue. "Was the wound shallow, Nell? Do it right next time!"

Let's see who this is.

Varys Varadenda

Species: Earth-human

Status: Power, Quick

Lv: 27/45

HP: 162/192

MP: 99/99

Varys Varadenda. His stats were pretty normal for a human swordsman.

He didn't have any flashy skills, but I could tell he had excellent strength, attack power, and agility. This kind of guy was more troublesome than someone with half-baked skills, but he wasn't a big deal. Sure, he was a little stronger than the enemy soldiers, but I didn't have to be *too* cautious about him. The younger of the twin brothers from earlier seemed to have superior stats and troublesome skills.

He looked pretty big and burly, but there was no doubt that one direct hit would put him out of commission. My only problem was that it would be a lot of trouble if all of these guys worked together.

I had to be more careful of the female mage he was protecting too. I looked over at her.

Norwell Nogmark

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 36/60

HP: 176/176

MP: 142/274

Attack: 49+14

Defense: 78+55

Magic: 277+62

Agility: 53

Equipment:

Weapon: Mythril Long Staff: B

Armor: Mythril Breastplate: B

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 7

Mage: Lv 6

Resistance Skills:

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Hi-Rest: Lv 1

Wide Rest: Lv 4

Care: Lv 3

Quick: Lv 4

Wide Power: Lv 5

Firewall: Lv 4

Flash: Lv 3

Berserk: Lv 4

Stone Spear: Lv 2

Title Skills:

White Mage: Lv 6

Black Mage: Lv 3

Battlefield Angel: Lv —

Hungry Hunters Commander: Lv —

Norwell Nogmark. She was a commander, as it turned out. She must've been the one who cast the status boost magic on Varys. She had support, recovery, and attack magic. That could drag out this battle for a long time. Should I take her out first?

She wasn't the biggest problem. That honor belonged to the Felis-human, who was stuck on the wall over there. His speed was no joke.

Nell Neferias

Species: Felis-human

Status: Power, Quick

Lv: 38/90

HP: 192/192

MP: 65/65

Attack: 212+65

Defense: 151+55

Magic: 82

Agility: 398

Equipment:

Weapon: Mythril Sword: B

Body: Mythril Breastplate: B

Special skills:

Battle Instinct: Lv —

Beast God's Protection: Lv —

Grecian Language: Lv 4

Swordsman: Lv 8

Wild Instinct: Lv 8

Psychic Sense: Lv 7

Stealth: Lv 6

Night Vision: Lv 6

Kinetic Vision: Lv 7

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 6

Slashing Resistance: Lv 7

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 2

Normal skill:

Bite: Lv 7

Scratch: Lv 6

Cat Feint: Lv 7

Godspeed Flash: Lv 5

Concentration: Lv 6

Dragon Drop Thousand Slashes: Lv 3

Title skills:

Demi-human: Lv —

Hunter: Lv 8

Former Swordsman: Lv —

Acrobat: Lv 8

Master of Swords: Lv 8

Falcon Swordsman: Lv —

Hungry Hunter: Lv —

He's got 398 Agility?! He's stupid strong!

What's with that extraordinary speed? As expected, I was the clear winner, but he could have used Quick's assistance and his skills to raise the bar and hit me with that blow earlier. His sword-related skills and title skills were also unusually high. He knew his way around swords, that was for sure. Although his stats were boosted, he was generally tougher than the other unit commanders.

The enemy seemed to have sent their best soldiers to greet me here, which was a mixture of their best captains and commanders. What's worse, I couldn't use my humanized form to the best of my abilities. There was very little room for error in this battle. I could either defeat the Felis-human swordsman Nell first, or kill the commander Norwell first and then defeat Nell once he had no

backup. Either way, the battle would greatly change depending on which tactic I chose.

“Jem, don’t stop!” Nell shouted. “He’s incredibly fast! If he sees an opportunity, he’ll kill us all! I think it’ll be tough to hit him, so we need to divide his attention! Belmond, you need to escape! Let us take care of the Ouroboros!”

Hearing this, the dazed-looking archer scrambled for his bow and adjusted his position. The older brother, the disarmed survivor of the twin swordsmen, stood up with his hands on the wall, panting heavily. “Tch, I’m sorry, but I’m gonna have to withdraw. I have no intention of dying in vain!”

“You’re not the one who decides that,” Norwell told him. “I used my magic to boost you, and I’m not going to let you waste it! Berserk!” She waved her staff. The light emitted from the tip of it hit the brother, who was called Belmond. The moment the light touched him, his expression changed.

“Arghhh!” His hand was weakly placed against the wall. Now he clawed at the wall, scraping away the dirt. His bones should’ve been injured when his brother slammed into him, but he stood up straight. Even though he was unarmed, he charged at me head-on.

“Norwell?!” Nell addressed her in a troubled voice. He had urged Belmond to run away, so her strategy to turn him into a berserker had thoroughly confused him. I shared the same sentiment.

“He might not have a brain in that empty skull of his, but even a spineless oaf like that one can at least serve as our meat shield,” Norwell said with a chuckle.

That did it—I would have to destroy the logistical support first. She was way too dangerous.

Part 5

“**G**_{RAAAAH, ARGHHH!}” Belmond attacked me with his bare hands. There was an insane look in his eyes; he was moving much faster than before. Berserk must greatly strengthen physical abilities in exchange for causing confusion. This support magic came with a considerable disadvantage. Still, I had no intention of letting a guy with a little boost get the best of me.

“Now!” The archer took aim at me and loosed an arrow. It was the same as last time—three consecutive shots. They wouldn’t do much damage even if they hit. The real danger of those arrows was that they could distract me.

I grabbed the Berserker Belmond’s arm.

Just then, Nell kicked away from the wall and darted toward us. He deftly climbed onto Belmond’s back, leapt over me, and then circled behind me.

I seriously needed backup, not that I could do anything about it. Much as I didn’t want to do anything too out of the ordinary, and loath as I was to risk using too much MP, I guessed I only had one option. *I’ll use partial Dragon Transformation.*

After I pulled Belmond down, I threw him toward the arrows. Then I focused my energy into my tail.

“Arghh!” Three arrows deeply pierced Belmond’s abdomen and shoulders. The archer couldn’t deal with Belmond being suddenly thrown at him, and he fell down on the spot.

My giant tail grew and covered my body. I bowed my tail and swung it at Nell behind me. It was a vertical strike, but he dodged it to the right. I tried a horizontal sweep, but he avoided it by jumping. My tail missed, and it smashed into the ground and the wall. Nell kept his distance from me, jumping away to dodge.

Man... I was still unaccustomed to this. Unsurprising, considering how much my body shape had changed. But I couldn’t afford to play around with these

guys. Partial Dragon Transformation was difficult to control and was pretty inefficient when it came to burning through MP, but as for right now it didn't seem like anything I couldn't handle.

If I brought more of my scales back to cover my skin, my defense would stabilize. Besides, with my current body, I was small and my skills were limited—I couldn't take out a group of enemies in one go. But if my arms were larger, they would be just the right weapon. I thought it was worth trying. I braced myself and focused my energy on my whole body. Heat raced and melted through me.

“Arggh!” I roared.

“Oooh! Oohhh!” bellowed Belmond. He got up and ran toward me, covered in blood. When the archer went to throw down his arrows, Belmond mustn't have taken the full brunt of the damage. I was sure Berserk had obliterated his sense of pain too. I should have thrown him with a little more force.

“Belmond, please stop!” Nell was suggesting they take stock of the situation, but Belmond was incapable of listening. “He's acting strange!”

Norwell snorted with laughter. “Idiot. We don't have to wait around to see what the monster does. When would we attack otherwise?” She waved her staff. Light shone over her head. Was she going to use attack magic?

My body swelled more and more. My skin became firmer. The claws growing out of my hands became sharper and more dangerous. I'd entered a half-dragon state where it seemed like I could produce more power than before.

“Ooohh!” Belmond ran toward me, but I shoved him over to the left. My claws tore his body into three pieces. Blood spurted everywhere, and his flesh flew through the air.

Gained 162 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 162 Experience Points.

I was more accustomed to my body than he was to Berserk. My tail was easy to move, and my claws were perfectly suited to finish off my opponent.

“Stone Spear!”

A stone spear appeared above Norwell’s head and zoomed straight toward me. I grabbed it, broke it, and threw it toward the archer who had failed to finish me off. It pierced deeply into his throat and killed him.

Gained 174 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 174 Experience Points.

All right, I can move pretty well. Who’s left now? The sorcerer Norwell, her bodyguard Varys, and the Felis-human swordsman... Three people.

“Wh-what kind of monster is that?! Azalea never told us he could do something like that!” Norwell was bewildered. I darted over to her.

“Varys! Stop him, even if it’s for a moment!”

Varys followed Norwell’s orders and stood between us, but he was unsure of what to do.

“H-how can I stop him?” He hurled his sword at me, shield held up.

“*Raaaar!*” I swung my arms down ferociously.

“Eek!”

Varys raised his shield toward my arm. My claws cut him and his shield in half.

Gained 162 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 162 Experience Points.

Two people left.

“Wait!” I heard Nell shouting from behind. They were all approaching me at once, but at this rate it would be quicker for me to kill Norwell.

“Good job buying me time! Berserk!” She raised her staff toward me. Berserk put the target in a state of confusion in exchange for strengthening the body, so depending on the situation, it could be an effective strategy against an enemy.

But it was useless.

“*Raaar!*” My magical energy counteracted hers, resisting the attempted spell.

“Wh-what? My magic isn’t working!”

Norwell’s stats read Magic: 277+62. Mine? Magic: 1039. That level of support magic was barely a fart in the wind to me. I could dodge it if I tried. My magic power didn’t change even in human form.

“*Raaaaaaar!*”

“St-stoop!”

I grabbed Norwell by the collar and slammed her onto the ground. Her head popped off. Her headless body

twitched for an instant but then immediately stopped moving.

Gained 216 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 216 Experience Points.

Her body fell to the ground when I let go of her. Now only the Felis-human swordsman was left. I hated dealing with children, though, so I wished he would run away...

“*Raaar!*” I lined up my tail with Nell’s sword as he attacked me from behind and used all my strength to knock it out of his hand. He curled up and rolled to stop the momentum and then took his stance, picking up his sword again.

Well, it didn’t seem like he had any intention of retreating.

Part 6

“TAKE THAT!” Nell kicked off the ground and leapt forward, charging toward me. It wasn’t a high jump, but it had a lot of energy to it. It felt like the ground itself was jumping up to meet me. I’d never seen a human so fast—but I was much faster. It was a little harder to move after using Human Transformation to tweak my body, but he had no hope of making up the difference in speed.

Nell landed on his feet and jumped forward in a diagonal. He straightened up, landed, swung his legs backward, kicked off the wall, and finally leapt at me. “Godspeed Flash!” He thrust his sword forward, bolstered by a burst of speed.

There it was! His skill. That skill seemed to grant a huge momentary buff to his speed while raising his overall speed as well. That skill could apparently only be used when you attacked in a straight line. No big deal if he managed it, though. I had him overwhelmed when it came to power, so I could easily counter and finish him off with plenty of time to spare.

My arms continued to grow as they transformed into draconic forelegs, and I swung them overhead at Nell. He immediately drew his sword and spun through the air. He rolled off the surface of my hand and kicked it with his feet, passing by my head and over to the other side.

I glanced behind me to find Nell upside down in the air. He’d completely slipped past me.

“Argh...” He got me. Did he use Godspeed Flash, which was too linear, just as a skill to move away from me? Now he had the positional advantage. Even if I - attacked, his sword would reach me first.

I bent over and continued transforming my body into that of a dragon, strengthening my scales. It’d be a big improvement over Nell attacking my bare skin. I’d rather be sure of my defense than bet on a potentially pointless attack.

“Dragon Drop Thousand Slashes!”

I braced myself when I heard Nell’s screams, but then the next moment an

intense pain raced through the back of my head. The tip of his sword pierced through my scales.

“Argh...”

I thought I could deal with the damage, but then the next moment a blade pierced into my neck. An incredibly fast blade raced up toward my head. I had no time to counter before the rain of blades passed through my neck and back, finally stopping after a heavy blow to my tail.

I turned around to see Nell crouching and jumping away from me. His sword was gone from his hand, replaced with a new weapon: a knife pulled from his waist.

There was a sword stuck in my tail. In the final attack, Nell stabbed my tail with his sword and kicked the hilt away to gain some distance. Apparently, after Nell got behind me, he continued to swing his sword while repeatedly rolling forward in the air to gain momentum and speed. After the first two shots made me lean forward, they passed over my back and all the way to my tail.

This skill of his was *outrageous*. It was clearly a skill meant for fighting against a large monster. And since Nell was small, he could make great use of it to his advantage. I had weathered the attack, but this skill of his made it possible for him to kill a monster which had a large status advantage over him. I’d be in trouble if he kept using it.

But I sensed the end. Nell was panting. He’d used up a lot of his stamina with that attack. I had taken my share of unexpected damage, but it was far from fatal—I had the dragon scales on my body to help defend me. The “Dragon Drop” name was pretty apt. It probably could’ve taken me out back when I was a Plague Dragon...but this match had already been decided.

“N-not yet!” Nell put his back leg against the wall, intending on jumping off of it to accelerate. I quickly smacked the ground with my tail. The entire cave trembled.

“Aaah!” Nell lost his balance before he could jump away from the wall and landed right in front of me. One of his hands was on the ground as he tried to regain his balance. I took the opportunity to close in on him and then swept my tail forward in an attack. Nell jumped a small distance into the air, grabbing his

knife and thrusting it forward. He was trying to avoid a direct hit by floating in the air, I guessed. Any damage he took by getting knocked back would be cushioned that way.

I smashed the knife with my tail. Next, I took aim at Nell's body. He stuck out his shoulder to guard his core. The moment my tail and his shoulder made contact, his body bounced across to the opposite wall, sending up a cloud of dust.

When the dust cleared, it revealed Nell, hunched over, with blood pouring from his leg. I had injured his greatest weapon—his legs. This fight was as good as over.

"Haa... Haa..."

I lifted the tip of my tail, ready to render him completely powerless. He had no hope of dodging the next swing of my tail. I'd knock him unconscious, take the Lithovar children out of the cave, and it would all be over—

I sensed something outside of the cave. My tail froze.

It wasn't a human. It was larger than that. Was it a Manticore? I'd killed the Manticore, but maybe there was another one?

I quickly turned to look and saw a giant head—a lizard's?—peering into the cave. It was smaller than me, but still pretty large, with heavily protruding ribs that made it look more creepy than fragile. Its physique was strangely human. The surface of its body was an uneven, mottled gray color. Something resembling shriveled wings sprouted from its shoulders. It looked like a dragon...but even more like a demon.

"Uoooooooooooo..." It cried out in a really eerie voice.

I stood there, stunned. All of a sudden I saw light gathering in front of the monster's face, so I quickly started to get my wits about me. You didn't see skills like that one too often. It reminded me of the giant centipede's Heat Beam.

"N-no way..." Nell also looked astonished as he looked toward the entrance of the cave. "You said that you'd let the children go no matter what? So then why...?"

Wait, so the dragon is one of his comrades?

I used View Status on the weird dragon.

Azalea Armine

Status: Earth-Human

Status: Dragon Transformation Lv 4, Berserk (Slight)

Lv: 56/85

HP: 162/298

MP: 298/324

Attack: 384 (256)

Defense: 302 (201)

Magic: 311

Agility: 221

Special Skills:

Demonic Dragon's Blood: Lv —

Dragon Scale: Lv 4

Fly: Lv 1

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 2

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 2

Grecian Language: Lv 7

Swordsman: Lv 7

Mage: Lv 7

Resistance Skills:

Curse Resistance: Lv 7

Physical Resistance: Lv 6

Magic Resistance: Lv 6

Fire Resistance: Lv 2

Poison Resistance: Lv 5

Slash Resistance: Lv 4

Confusion Resistance: Lv 2

Falling Resistance: Lv 3

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4

Normal skills:

Fire Sphere: Lv 8

Aqua Sphere: Lv 4

Shadow: Lv 5

Gale: Lv 4

Gravity: Lv 4

Hi-Rest: Lv 5

Resist: Lv 6

Quick: Lv 4

Summon: Lv 7

Flare: Lv 7

Dragon Transformation: Lv 4

Drago Flare: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Dragon Mage: Lv —

White Mage: Lv 7

Black Mage: Lv 7

Master of Swords: Lv 7

All-rounder: Lv —

Hungry Hunter Commander: Lv —

Wh-what was with that status?! D-Dragon Transformation?! Azalea Armine...
This is a human?!

The creepy dragon—Azalea—opened his mouth and swallowed the light that had accumulated. His mouth swelled; there was an evil glint in his eye. I turned off Human Transformation while heading for the outside of the cave. Azalea opened his mouth and, with a mighty roar, emitted a mouthful of red light. It hit the cave wall, destroying it, right as Azalea charged toward me. The entire cave began to tremble and collapse. I stretched out my body and my head hit the ceiling. Partner's face tightened into a frown.

Once again, the roar rang out.

Part 7

“I DIDN’T EXPECT to have to use Summon at a time like this...”

I only needed it to serve as a decoy, so I summoned a subspecies of the Lacerta that consumed less mana. Still, I didn’t like the idea of losing any more of the mana I’d gained by sacrificing my body. Hearing me mutter that, Sherry, the sorceress by my side, lowered her face apologetically. She probably knew that the reason that the Ouroboros was about to detect us was because her Hidden spell, used to conceal presences, wasn’t strong enough.

“Sherry, even Norwell respects your magic skills,” I told her. “But that two-headed dragon is extremely perceptive.”

Seven people were stationed inside the cave, with two outside—Sherry and I—who were going to fight the Ouroboros. The only real reason I had Sherry here was so she could use her Hidden magic to hide us from the Ouroboros. Considering that we needed a reasonably skilled guard to prevent the worst from happening to His Excellency Tolemann, everyone stationed here was very capable. There was no point in keeping more people here than were necessary.

I had no intention of waging a proper fight here, after all. If this dragon truly was an Ouroboros, then it was a magical beast worthy of an A rank. The Ouroboros was known for its basic strategy. It typically utilized its overwhelming physical strength and magical power to send endless undead hordes after its enemies. Fortunately, in this instance, I never saw any undead other than that girl.

The fact remained that this dragon could hardly be beaten in a head-on clash. That wouldn’t change even if we did succeed in weakening him with Human Transformation. Our plan, then, was to lure the Ouroboros to the depths of the cave, where I would turn into a dragon and use Drago Flare, collapse the cave, and bury him alive. That had been my goal from the beginning. It was the only way possible to slay a monster with stamina as high as the Ouroboros.

I’d told His Excellency that I was going to use Flare, but that was just so he

wouldn't find out that I planned to bury the other soldiers alive too. I doubted whether Drago Flare, let alone Flare, would be able to kill the Ouroboros.

There was no way to destroy it for sure other than to surprise it with Drago Flare and then bury it alive.

"Sir Azalea...um, when will Norwell and the others be back?" asked Sherry.

I didn't answer her.

"Sir Azalea?"

"Tell His Excellency that they were the greatest contributors in the slaying of the Ouroboros."

"B-but... You must be very fond of that demi-human child..."

"They aren't likely to be paying attention to us while they're fighting, but do keep your voice down."

Sherry looked like she wanted to say something, but her mouth stayed closed.

The Hungry Hunters had suffered a lot of losses in this battle. Ten more would shortly join that tally, but those lives were a small sacrifice for His Excellency's sake.

Before long, the sound of sword strikes resounded outside the cave. Nell's patented sword technique, no doubt. It wouldn't be much longer now before the boy was completely destroyed. He'd lasted longer than I expected, though.

"Sherry, you're done here. Go after Lord Tolemann and the others."

"Sir Azalea, what are you doing...?"

It had been a long time since I'd used Dragon Transformation. It wasn't a skill to be used casually; it took a tremendous toll on the body. Alas, I couldn't use Drago Flare unless I used Dragon Transformation first. My human body couldn't cast the skill at its full power, never mind withstand the recoil. The force of it would destroy me.

I concentrated magical energy throughout my body, causing the temperature of my blood to rise sharply. I focused intently. I eked out the memory of discovering the dragon's blood mixed inside my veins.

My entire body swelled up at once, and I was consumed with a strong sense of adrenaline. I had been undergoing long mental training so that I could control myself when this happened, but it was a challenging feat, nevertheless. I was filled with a strong destructive impulse, like that of a dragon. My field of vision grew considerably. I could see Sherry's surprised face at the corner of my eye.

I'd used the skill before throughout the course of my missions with His Excellency, so I was sure some Hungry Hunters had heard about it. Sherry wasn't one of them.

My legs grew and I kicked off from the ground with them, jumping toward the entrance of the cave. I grasped the top ledge of the entrance with my claws and peeked inside. There they were. As I'd expected, I saw an oddly shaped figure with scales. It'd regrown its dragon skin, presumably to protect against Nell's attacks. The scaly lump turned to face the cave entrance and our eyes met.

"Uooooooooooooorgh!" I naturally let out a cry. My body—my blood—sang with excitement at the prospect of facing another dragon. I concentrated magic in front of my face, and a ball of scorching heat appeared. Once I had gathered enough magical energy, I swallowed the red ball of light and then spewed it out toward the Ouroboros's human form. The impact of the Drago Flare peeled off the interior cave walls with enough force to destroy them.

The Ouroboros sensed something unusual. It immediately abandoned its Human Transformation Skill, then headed for the cave entrance. Its huge body was pressed against the walls of the cave. Drago Flare burst into its chest while he was pinned in place. A double roar erupted from both heads of the Ouroboros as the cave began to collapse. The collapsed ceiling and walls became large clods of earth, crushing the Ouroboros inside the cave.

It spread its wings, attempting to push back against the clods of earth and escape the collapse through the cracks, but it soon disappeared beneath a new layer of earth. It continued roaring for a while.

The collapsed earth and sand of the cave showed no signs of moving.

I had feared that the dragon would still be alive after the landslide, but apparently not even an Ouroboros could withstand being buried alive under a cave's worth of earth and sand. But "apparently" was no guarantee. I was afraid

that the beast was simply hiding underneath the earth so it could recover its MP.

Once again, I opened my mouth and created a ball of scorching heat right in front of my face. The Ouroboros had tried to fly backward and push against the cave ceiling to escape, so this time I would correct my position and shoot a bit further back. I could see a slightly unnatural bulge there.

I swallowed the ball of light and then spread out my shriveled wings, kicked off the ground, and flew up high to shoot off my second Drago Flare. The scorching heat pushed the earth and sand away, sending tremors through the entire collapsed cave. Once the dirt was cleared off, I could see the Ouroboros lying face down on the ground. I had correctly determined his position, it seemed. Its blue body was charred in places. Rocks were crushed onto his body and I saw blue blood flowing out. His wings were completely squashed flat, and it didn't look like he showed any signs of a struggle.

The Ouroboros didn't move. Even though its location had been exposed by me, the enemy, and the creature had been repeatedly attacked...it didn't move at all. I wondered if it had finally run out of power.

I didn't have enough MP to use Drago Flare again, but I did have enough to pull up its body. I ran over the mound of earth and sand to get closer to it and then jumped up toward the Ouroboros, who was still lying face-down. Just then, it opened its eyes, lifted both of its wings, and spread them for flight. As it flew up, it knocked me away with its forelegs.

"Raaaaar!"

The dragon knocked me onto the ground, but I quickly got back up again. Fortunately, since it had attacked while leaping up, its strike hadn't had much force behind it. But how could it still move so easily? I knew it was a monster with high stamina, but I never expected it to have *this* much stamina.

It had taken two Drago Flares and been crushed by a cave-in, and yet it was still breathing. So why hadn't it moved? I looked over at where the Ouroboros had been and saw that the Lithovar children were all gathered there, largely unscathed. Nell was there with them. No one made a sound.

The reason he had moved toward the back of the cave wasn't to escape but

to protect the children. There was no way that they had all completely escaped the cave-in; he must have used recovery magic on them.

I was shocked. I had really talked up the Ouroboros to Nell to motivate him to participate in the plan, but I didn't think I'd really said anything that was that far from the truth. I never expected it to go to these lengths to protect the children.

The Ouroboros's body was still in tatters. It had prioritized healing the children, so I assumed it was out of mana. That hit was pretty light. I wasn't sure how much mana I had, but I didn't expect it was a lot. It was dangerous to stay in my dragon form for much longer or it would be life-threatening. I could finish him off in this form, though, so...not yet.

The Ouroboros had yet to regenerate or recover the parts of its body that were damaged from the Drago Flare attacks and the cave-ins. If I moved now, I could attack its weakened parts with my full force and kill it.

"Graar..."

The Ouroboros glared at me from a crouched position. It was gigantic. It must be hard to bear its own weight in here.

"Uooooooooorgh!" I charged toward it and slammed my claws into its chest, where the surface of its body had been gouged out, and sliced up from the bottom. I carved four lines into the dragon's exposed flesh.

"Raaargh!"

"Graaar!"

The left and right heads swung around in a rage. I had expected it to do that, though, so I quickly stepped back. I could do this. Its movements were very slow now. It was on its last legs. It was a close one, but I'd won this time.

"Ooooh..."

I pushed off from the ground. Right as I was about to jump up, I collapsed onto my knees—I had run out of MP. I was going to turn back into a human. I tried to move my legs, but an intense, frightening pain ripped through my body.

I'd never used Dragon Transformation for so long before. I was very anxious. I

had no idea what was going to happen to my body. I was in no state to fight, so I would have to shift gears. I mustered up every bit of my focus to try to stay calm and resist the destructive impulses that came with Dragon Transformation. On the other hand...maybe I should just give into my instincts? I let my sense of reason stay in charge of maintaining my form.

“Uooooooooooooorgh!”

My body felt lighter.

My field of vision narrowed. My heart was pounding out of control, though I wasn't sure whether that was from excitement or the limits of my body. All I could hear was my own heartbeat. My body didn't feel like my own.

I knew, even amid all of this, that I was aiming for the Ouroboros's chest. Chunks had been cut out of the surface of its body and left its flesh exposed, so attacks would easily pass through. I had to trust in my instincts that the next blow would kill it.

I heard the Ouroboros roar. It bit my right arm. I tried to resist and pull it away, but the Ouroboros yanked its head downward, tearing off my arm in the process. Fortunately for me, it was a clean break rather than a half-hearted bite.

I flew sideways and swung my claws toward the Ouroboros, who looked shocked. It must've been surprised that an opponent who'd just lost an arm could strike back so quickly. I, however, was confident in my victory. My next attack would land true. I swung my left claws toward the Ouroboros.



I should have struck it. I should have won.

But I felt...nothing. I did not win. I looked down and realized I had never raised my left arm. In my vague consciousness, I remembered something. That's right... My left arm, my dominant arm, had been severely injured by the undead girl in exchange for preserving my MP.

I lifted my head. The Ouroboros's heads were strangely moving farther away. We made eye contact.

It said something, but I couldn't hear it. The next moment, I felt a sharp impact on my side. Strangely, there was no pain.

"Bwa ha ha! Azalea! I didn't really expect you to kill that Ouroboros, but you did it! You're the reason I became king! I did the right thing, hiring you!"

"Even if I hadn't, I'm sure that Your Excellency—I mean, Your Majesty—still would've found a way to become king," I said. Lord Tolemann's mouth quirked up into a smile. Today, he would be crowned the king of Ardesia. I could no longer call him Your Excellency like I used to.

"Enough with your flattery, Azalea! Bwa ha ha! There's no one else who could be my right-hand man but you!"

As I was speaking with Lord Tolemann, Nell showed up. "You look wonderful, Y-Your Majesty."

"As do you! There's no need for flattery!"

"F-forgive me."

"No apologies are necessary either. Honestly, I wish my royal knights would shape up! Conduct yourself with more confidence! Listen, from now on, you must present yourselves to my people as—Azalea, why are you laughing?"

"Nothing. I'm just surprised that you chose Nell to be part of your royal guard."

"Those who have demonstrated merit must be rewarded accordingly! I always say that I cherish the strong. Nell endured a sword fight with that Ouroboros,

gave him the decisive blow, and survived! I must acknowledge that. I admit, though, I couldn't believe my ears when you asked me to hire Nell so long ago on that underground battlefield..."

"Your Majesty once told me you needed someone strong and that I belonged with you. I thought the same thing when I saw Nell fighting there."

"Oh, you remembered that? Back when I rushed into Govia's mansion with the Hungry Hunters to take you out of there... Merely reminiscing about it fills me with exhilaration!" Lord Tolemann laughed heartily and then suddenly saw the clock on the wall. "Hm, it's almost time for the coronation! Let's go, Azalea and Nell!"

I felt dizzy all of a sudden. And then that was the end.

Part 8

“UOOOOOOOGH!” The half-dragon monster Azalea jumped out in front of me. It definitely seemed like he was trying to hit my vital points, while keeping me in check with his arms and eyes. When I reacted and shook my body, he immediately bent down and aimed his claws at the bottom of my neck. It wasn’t a quick move. It was a large, ungainly motion that put his entire weight into focusing on the power of it.

I couldn’t avoid the blow. My legs were crushed, my magic was weak, and my consciousness was faint. I could barely stand. My skin and scales were burnt off. Azalea gouged his claws deeply into my exposed chest, sending chunks of flesh and blood flying through the air while a sharp pain raced through me.

“Raargh!”

“Graaar!”

Partner and I both stretched our necks and bared our fangs at Azalea at the same time. He must have predicted that, though, because he kept his distance and repositioned his claws. He shouldn’t have much MP left. One of the disadvantages of Dragon Transformation must be a steady, significant drain on his stamina. The burden of a human becoming a dragon was greater than the other way around. Then how could he stand around so calmly?

My body was heavy. If I kept dragging this out, my automatic recovery skills would kick in and start to improve my condition, but I doubted the enemy would permit it—he had already reached his limit in maintaining his dragon form. Now he would attack more violently.

I never thought that he would try to bury his fellow comrades and the Lithovar children alive in the cave. He was a cold-blooded killer, and a thorough one at that. I’d tried to use my automatic recovery skills while I was lying inside the clods of earth, and that was why I had been attacked so intensely. If not for that, I would’ve been in a better position than I was now. I should have just

charged outside and destroyed him.

After I evolved into the Ouroboros, I'd never really felt like my life was in danger. Maybe the shock of being cornered into such a position threw me off guard and made me unnecessarily cowardly. I'd unconsciously put an easy plan that prioritized safety over killing the enemy. Aiming for a sure victory backfired on me. In terms of intuition and combat experience, it seemed like he had me beat.

Azalea held up his claws and bent his knees, intent on leaping up on me again.

"Uoooooorgh..."

But then he suddenly collapsed onto his knees. He must be out of MP. I was relieved his MP ran out first, but that relief didn't last long. A glint of tenacity shone in Azalea's eyes. He stretched his trembling knees and recovered.

"Uooooooooorgh!" he cried, as if to encourage himself. Talk about ridiculous mental strength! But it should end here. He'd *definitely* run out of MP this time.

He jumped in front of me and swung his right arm. I dragged my body backward. He stretched out his arm to make up the distance, frantic because he was running out of time. His movements were too direct and simplistic.

"Graaar!"

Partner bit into Azalea's right arm. She chased him, sank her fangs into his shoulder, and then shook her head violently to tear his right arm off. Partner released her grip and tossed his arm far away.

This battle was now decided. I felt relieved—until I noticed Azalea was still crouching. He leapt to the side, sticking his left shoulder under my chin.

I'd thought this would be the decisive blow, so I was completely caught off guard.

I couldn't take any more of this. I squeezed out MP to attempt Regenerate, and summoned all the strength in my body into mowing him down with my front leg.

Azalea should have been faster. He tried to raise his left arm but then lowered it. He took his eyes off me and stared blankly at his left arm. He only lapsed for

a moment, but I couldn't help being strangely impressed all the same.

Then his body shrank rapidly. He had finally run out of MP for real this time.

I swung through and pierced his body, and for some reason he suddenly smiled.

"You chose a hard way to live, monster," he rasped. "I would've been satisfied if just one person had understood me."

My front claws pierced Azalea, tearing his body in half. His torso fell with a thud some distance away.

Gained 784 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 784 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 91 has become Lv 92.



I threw myself down on the spot. I had to restore my HP and MP a little. I wanted to heal my injured legs and chest if I could—my wings would have to wait for later. My eyes caught Azalea's torso, and I froze for a few seconds. I couldn't stop thinking about his final words, which I almost felt like had seen through to my true nature.

He had possessed a variety of unusual skills, both normal and special. Perhaps he, too, had once been treated as a monster?

("What's. Wrong?") Partner called out to me in thought.

It's nothing, I said back and looked away from Azalea.

All we had to do now was to catch Tolemann, who was intent on angering the forest sprites. Well, I had to get out of here first. But I had no idea where to find Tolemann once I did.

Should probably use Regenerate to restore my wings first...hm? As I looked around, for some reason I saw smoke rising in the distance. It was coming from deep within the forest. *H-huh?* Was that Tolemann's doing? Did he set the fire to harass me? Or maybe the fire had something to do with their goal. I didn't know the reason, but I had to do something immediately. If I lingered too long here, they might do something I couldn't take back.

Once I'd recovered more MP via Automatic MP Recovery, I used it to repair the damaged parts of my body with Regenerate. Then I returned to the top of the cave that had collapsed, cut off the ropes of the hostage children with my claws, and freed them. I had them climb on my back. The children cried while hugging my neck. *Guess they aren't too comfortable with the mode of transportation.*

I glanced over at Nell, the fallen Felis-human swordsman. When the cave collapsed, a rock fell and hit him on the head while he was protecting a child. He was out cold. I had Partner use Hi-Rest as a light first aid, but he still hadn't regained consciousness.

"Dragon God... Um... Are you going to kill him?" one of the children hesitantly asked. I quietly shook my head. When the cave began to collapse, this boy was the first one to return to the children. He wouldn't harm the Lithovar Tribe.

After escaping from the collapsed cave, I let the children down off my back. I turned to look toward the village and then at the disturbing smoke rising from the forest. I wanted to take the children back to the village, but I didn't have the time right now. The children, anxious and trembling, seemed to realize the urgency of the situation when they saw the smoke; they nodded.

I took a deep breath and filled my abdomen with magical energy, then turned toward the village and let out a roar, which echoed far into the forest. I was sure the Lithovar Tribe or Allo would come to their aid after realizing what was going on. And if other monsters heard me roaring, they would stay hidden.

I put some distance between me and the children, whapped the ground with my tail, and then Rolled. I'd have to mow down trees, but there was nothing I could do about it. Better to crush some trees than to leave the forest burning.

I didn't have to wait for my body to recover this way, either. I could Roll as easily as I ever could, no matter how badly my legs were beaten up. By the time I got there, my body should be more or less patched up thanks to my Automatic Recovery skills.

I occasionally whapped the ground with my tail to increase my speed, felling trees along the way. If I looked back, I could see a beautiful, open trail left in my wake.

Chapter 4:

Laran, the Feared Gods

Part 1

A CERTAIN NOBLE

“N_{GH}...”

Retreating with the fourth unit in tow, I was anxious the entire time.

Would Azalea really be able to defeat the Ouroboros? If he were to lose, I would be ridiculed by those around me as an idiot who had destroyed my entire private army.

Justice was for the strong. Based on that belief, I'd invested a very significant amount into the Hungry Hunters. I let the money do the talking and recruited the strongest warriors not only from Ardesia but from surrounding nations as well. I was proud that my army could hold their own against the knights of the kingdom.

I'd spent half my life on the Hungry Hunters; it was my purpose in life. I would call it my greatest asset, and I had boasted about it many times in noble social circles. But the Hungry Hunters were helplessly defeated by a dragon and a barbarian tribe. I didn't get what I wanted. The whole mission had turned into an outrageous joke. If I couldn't somehow pull out a victory now, when the throne was vacant, I would forever be blamed for disgracing my family name.

It was all in Azalea's hands now.

I hoped he could win. But how could he, after taking so few soldiers? To face that dragon which had already defeated so many of my Hungry Hunters? I was terrified by the dragon myself, and it was all too convenient for me to listen to Azalea and run away, but...was that really the right thing to do?

First of all, Azalea said himself that this was a tightrope situation, meaning

that this battle would be very tenuous. My entire life was held in the balance of that thin rope. I shuddered to believe it.

Now that I had calmed down, those anxious thoughts kept running back and forth through my head. As I was lost in thought, Glaudel sped up his horse and approached me.

“What is it, Glaudel?” I asked.

“Lord Tolemann, I really don’t think we can let Azalea do this on his own,” he said. “Don’t you agree?”

“I do, but what else can we do with our current situation?”

“Did you forget that I already got the information about the Carbuncle from those barbarian kids?”

I considered this for a moment. “Tell me about it,” I said.

Azalea had interrupted us when we were talking about the Carbuncle before, so I missed out on the update. But to be honest, I didn’t think we would have much success on that front either. Although I was currently with the fourth unit, most of the strongest remaining soldiers had been pulled out by Azalea to be led by Commander Norwell. Even if we fought the barbarians, on top of the geographical disadvantage, we might well be outnumbered.

“The last time a ‘shining beast’ appeared in this forest was when there was a big fire,” Glaudel said. “If we can get our hands on the legendary beast Carbuncle, surely that’ll make up for all the losses we’ve had thus far.”

“If we start a big fire, the Carbuncle will come out on its own? But why?”

“I don’t know. Sightings of the Carbuncle are extremely rare. Perhaps it’s some kind of custom it has that’s not generally known. What do you think, Lord Tolemann?”

“Well, it might be worth trying. If nothing happens, we can just light the fire and run away,” I said, and Glaudel grinned.

“Just what I expected from you, Lord Tolemann!” he said happily. “It’s boring to just withdraw and do nothing. We’re better than that.”

I stopped the others, gathered up people who could use magic, and decided

to set fire to the forest all at once. I discussed the procedure for evacuation from the fire with Glaudel and secured an escape route for the soldiers and for those who could use water magic, working out a detailed plan.

“And then, should we reorganize into a unit like this? What do you think, Azal —”

I stopped myself, remembering that Azalea was gone, and let out a sigh. He was so intelligent—I always entrusted him with these final checks, so it was frustrating to be without him. Although he always understood my intentions and praised me highly, I could also rely on him to spot unexpected things and correct details to provide insurance. Without his checks, I wasn’t sure if the plan was airtight.

“Glaudel, what do you think?” I asked.

“Hm? I’m sure it’s fine.”

I gave him a silent stare. *Hrm*. Glaudel was so unreliable. But he was the only one I had here, so I couldn’t complain much. I sighed again.

When I looked up, I could see small, glowing dwarflike creatures lined up on the branches in the distance. They wore no clothes and had strange faces and bodies, as if they had been molded out of clay by a child.

“They’re creepy... What are those?” I asked.

“Is it the laran?” said Glaudel. “I saw them on the way here.”

“What’s that?”

“Huh? I’m sure they’re harmless. There seem to be a lot of them in this forest.”

I was sure Azalea would know more about them... But it was no use to muse about that; he wasn’t here. I hoped they were harmless, but being watched made me uncomfortable.

“Hey, someone get rid of them,” I ordered. “They’re creepy!”

“Yes, sir!”

When the soldier approached them with a sword, the creatures suddenly

disappeared and moved farther away. The mages tried to shoot magic at them, but no one managed a single hit. The laran would just disappear and move again.

To make matters more eerie, for some reason they seemingly increased in number each time they appeared. At first there had been only ten of them at most, but now there were nearly fifty, scattered upon branches in all directions like an audience.

“What are you doing? Get rid of them!” I shouted.

“I’m sorry, Lord Tolemann! I’ll take care of them right now!”

“Honestly...”

After several minutes, an arrow finally hit one of the laran. Its body exploded with a gush of green liquid. One after another, the others disappeared too.

Just when I thought we were finally freed, I looked away. But then I saw that the number of laran had drastically increased. Nearly a hundred pairs of eyes were looking down on us from the branches.

“Kill them!” I demanded. “Shoot them with your arrows! At this point there are so many of them, even if you close your eyes surely someone will hit them!”

As usual, they mostly dodged them, but more and more of the arrows started hitting their targets. However, by the time we killed ten of them, there were nearly five hundred in total.

“What?! What *are* they?!”

“Don’t worry. They should be harmless...”

“Isn’t it obvious that they’re hostile?” I shouted.

“Let’s go somewhere else. I’m starting to get sick looking at them myself...”

We moved to a different location, but the laran continued to gather around us, steadily increasing in number.

I never would’ve imagined there’d be so many in this forest. It was already troublesome to count them. We would see them sitting on nearby branches wherever we went. It didn’t seem like even killing a hundred of them would

change anything.

“Okay, I hit three of them. But no matter how many we kill, it doesn’t matter,” whined the soldier who’d shot the last arrow. Just then, about a hundred laran appeared, surrounding the soldier in a circle.

“Huh? What?!”

The laran jumped at the soldier without warning. One soldier screamed, and then the other soldiers nearby shrieked, aiming their staffs and bows toward them.

“Don’t shoot! Stop!”

A volley of magic and arrows was fired from the surrounding area. Some of the laran exploded on the spot, but most of them disappeared and fled. The soldiers inside were dead, covered in arrows...but worst of all, their bodies had become thin and slightly shrunken.

More laran appeared in a row, surrounding the other soldiers. The men screamed and tried to run away, but then quickly collapsed in front of their laran opponents, who jumped at them from all directions. A large number of laran were killed in this scuffle, but *all* the soldiers in the middle were left as corpses.

Would they come to attack me next? The thought made me nervous.

“Wh-what’s going on, Glaudel?! I thought they were harmless!”

“I-I don’t understand... Why is this happening?”

“Let’s burn the forest! Hurry up and start! If there’s a fire, they shouldn’t be able to get close!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Yes!”

The mages started shooting trees with fire magic before the unit was even ready. Everyone panicked, desperate to secure an escape route and to find the mages who could use water magic. I decided I should also leave for the time being. While I was escaping, though, I felt more and more laran gathering around me.

As the eerie feeling grew, the leaves on the surrounding trees suddenly changed colors and faded. The leaves withered brown and dropped from the branches, and then a wizened tree fell and blocked our way. The horses reared up in terror and stopped.

“Don’t stop! Jump over it! Huh?”

A huge group of laran grabbed on to my horse’s leg.

“Ooh!” I hurriedly jumped off my horse and drew my sword, after putting some distance between us.

The laran began to descend from the branches. Every plant and flower in their path turned brown, and with every plant that withered and died, the laran glowed more brightly. It was such a horrifying sight that I couldn’t imagine anyone ever describing the laran as harmless forest sprites.

The countless laran emitted bright green lights that gathered in one spot. The nearby grass and trees withered and the flames that spread gained even more momentum, illuminating the burnt field with red. Green and red light trampled the surrounding terrain. The laran lost their individual shapes as if they had been swallowed by each other’s light. Withered trees fell around us, bright with flames. We had no way to escape.

I had no idea what was going on. Was this truly happening, or had we been sent to the underworld? All I could do was stare, wielding my sword in the air. I felt heat approach my back and hurriedly shook my body to extinguish the fire. That was when I came back to my senses at last.

I noticed then that the soldiers were simply staring at the laran with their swords dangling loosely toward the ground. Anger boiled up inside me when I saw how dazed they were.

“Hey! Kill them! I don’t know why, but they’re all here gathered in one place! Kill them! Kill them! What are you doing?!”

No one moved or even reacted to my voice. They just looked at each other with confusion. I knew very well why—the laran were terrifying.

“Kill them! If you just stand still, you’ll be in danger! Kill them! I’ll give a special reward to those who help kill them! And I won’t be stingy! So hurry up

and kill them!”

My cries of encouragement finally broke through. One of the soldiers quietly readied his bow. I hoped that this might signal a turning of the tide, but ten laran appeared at once to tear the soldier’s bow away. Then they pounced on him. The soldiers who witnessed this screamed, threw down their weapons, and scattered. Some even tried to climb over the burning trees, writhing in agony when their bodies caught fire. Meanwhile, the laran gathered in one place and became a gigantic glowing mass.

“S-someone take me and help me escape! Someone!”

“Lord Tolemann! This way!”

I saw Glaudel grab one of the mages by the collar and start running. That mage was capable of using water magic, if I recalled correctly. I rushed after them. The fire had spread to my clothes, but that wasn’t important now. I twisted my body to smash against the rocks as I ran and tumbled to the ground, where I somehow managed to extinguish the fire, and then I caught up with Glaudel and the mage.



By that time, my clothes were largely charred and destroyed, leaving me practically half-naked. I stumbled after Glaudel, clinging to my sword like a cane.

Why did such a miserable thing happen to me, causing me to roll around like this with my life in danger? I grabbed onto Glaudel's clothes, unable to see very well due to the blood oozing from my forehead.

Glaudel stopped walking. He didn't say a word.

"What's wrong?!" I yelled. "Let's get out of here!"

"L-Lord Tolemann, that..."

"What?"

The people around us also cried in despair. Behind me, something had changed in the laran. Since I no longer had sleeves, I had to rub my face on Glaudel's clothes to get the blood out of my eyes. Then I turned to look around behind me.

The mass of laran had swollen up to the size of an elephant. Its form was now a single beast with an angry look on its face. Its entire body emitted a dazzling green light similar to what the laran produced earlier. The beast turned its eyes to the sky and howled loudly.

"Ah-ooooohhh!"

Its cries were powerful enough to be heard all over the forest. As if being lured in by the cry, thick rain clouds were steadily gathering over our heads. In no time at all, the weather completely changed. Strong gusts of wind blew in, and it started to rain. Had the beast caused some sort of change in the weather?

I fell to the ground, pulling Glaudel down with me on sheer impulse.

"I-Is that a Carbuncle...?"

I'd heard that Carbuncles had coats of fur that gleamed like jewels, with large gemstones embedded into their foreheads. The shining beast before us certainly matched that description. I had no idea they were this big, and I certainly didn't expect them to be a collection of laran, but then again,

Carbuncles were very rare monsters—very little information was known about them. It was only natural that some of the information was unreliable.

Someone who saw it could have mistakenly thought the group of laran was a mythical Carbuncle. It resembled the description well enough. Maybe that was it. What mattered to me most, however, was that if I could harvest this beast's fur to take home...I could become king. So what if it wasn't an actual Carbuncle? It was certainly a rare beast with valuable fur.

"S-someone! Kill it! Kill it! Don't leave too many marks! I'll give you as much money as you want! However much money you want, I say! Gooooo!"

The few remaining soldiers slashed at the beast.

They should be able to take care of it. Those laran creatures were low-ranking beasts. They had tried to chase us away with overwhelming numbers, so the soldiers who weren't prepared to die had suddenly lost their wits, but now that they were united in this form we could deal with it as long as we stayed calm.

"Ahh-oohhhh!" the beast howled and lifted both of its front paws, slamming them against the ground. Even though I had kept my distance, I could still feel the ground rumbling.

The shockwave hit me. I rolled over, caking myself in mud. I spit out a mouthful as I stared at the beast. The ground around it split, pulling soldiers in.

The beast mercilessly devoured the head of the frozen soldier. It crushed the torso with its foot, spewing out fresh blood. Then it moved on to the next soldier and repeated the process.

Covered in mud, I collapsed to the ground as I watched the horrific scene. In addition to the storm and heavy rain, the sound of large rocks moving could be heard from afar.

Now what was going to happen? I quickly got up and approached Glaudel.

"G-Glaudel! Kill that thing! Glaudel!"

"It's no use, Lord Tolemann! It would be another matter if we were at full power, but with only these idiot soldiers—"

"I am the man who shall become king! Don't talk back to me! Defeat it! Make

me king! If you can't do that, then die! Die! Die!" The corners of my mouth split open as I yelled at Glaudel.

He frowned at me and kicked me in my abdomen. "Argh!" Unable to respond to his sudden attack, I dropped my sword and fell face-down on the spot.

"Quit dreaming and pull yourself together!" he shouted. "You obnoxious, clueless oaf! Crawl over there and turn into monster chow, you fool!"

"You wretch! You *swiiiine*!"

Glaudel seized the mage again and fled, getting farther and farther away. I couldn't do anything but watch them leave. The windstorm, the beast's howls, the terrifying sound of the rocks crashing in the distance...those three things mixed together to overwhelm my senses. I couldn't even tell if I was shivering from the coldness of the rain or from my fear of the beast.

"G-Glaudel! Come back! Help me! Glaudel!"

Whether my screams were drowned out by those sounds, or whether Glaudel had chosen to ignore me, I couldn't tell. But no response came.

Before long, the beast, who had been attacking the nearby soldiers, suddenly turned its gaze toward me. It slowly approached me, one step at a time.

"S-someone! Help me! Help me! What are you doing at a time like this?" I grabbed my sword, got to my feet, and fled from the beast.

I could hear its footsteps following behind me. But there was no sign of anyone else around coming toward me, save for the laran beast. Everyone else ran away, ignoring my orders.

"Hannibal! Rapal! Alan! Help me! Help me! Azalea, Azalea! Why aren't you near me at a time like this?! Help me, Azaleaaaaa! Azaleaaaa!"

I stumbled and fell. I could see Glaudel and the mage in the distance.

"Glaudeeeelll! I won't forgive you! If I return alive, I'll punish you with every torture that exists! Bwa ha ha ha ha ha! Ah ha ha!"

Uncontrollable laughter bubbled out of me, spurred on by my fear and anger. But this was no time to laugh. What would happen to me? I had no idea.

Just then, a mysterious sphere appeared. It tore down trees in its path and sped over Glaudel and the mage, crushing them. As I watched in astonishment, it suddenly slowed down and stopped a short distance in front of me, stretching out two necks.

“Th-the Ouroboros? Azalea, you failed! You fool!”

I turned around and tried to run from the Ouroboros, but in my path was the beast from before, staring at me with enraged eyes. All my strength suddenly left me. I collapsed on the spot.

Part 2

WHEN I ARRIVED at my destination with Roll, I couldn't believe my eyes. Rain and wind blew sideways as burning trees fell to the ground. In the midst of the fleeing soldiers, Tolemann was crouched in a daze in front of me.

But forget Tolemann. I was more interested in the large beast on the other side of him, which was only a little smaller than me. It had emerald-colored fur, oversized jewels on its forehead, and a grim face like a demon. It looked like a dog or a wolf.

This must have been their goal—the *shining beast*. They had successfully lured it out, but I guessed they hadn't been able to deal with it; the soldiers were scattered and fleeing. The glowing beast glanced at me with disinterest and then turned its gaze back toward Tolemann.

Species: Laragwolf

Status: Fusion, Fury (Major)

Lv: 70/80

HP: 488/488

MP: 301/301

Attack: 272

Defense: 265

Magic: 363

Agility: 267

Rank: B

Special Skills:

Experience Gain Inability: Lv —

Fusion: Lv —

Debuff Reduction: Lv 7

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 4

Psychic Sense: Lv 5

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 8

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 8

Confusion Resistance: Lv 8

Sleep Resistance: Lv 8

Curse Resistance: Lv 8

Petrification Resistance: Lv 8

Instant Death Resistance: Lv 8

Charm Resistance: Lv8

Dark Resistance: Lv 8

Weak Resistance: Lv 8

Normal Skills:

Life Drain: Lv 4

Mana Drain: Lv 4

Telepathy: Lv 2

Bite: Lv 5

Bellow: Lv 2

Regenerate: Lv 6

Tremor: Lv 5

Rain Dance: Lv MAX

Storm: Lv MAX

Title Skill:

Feared God: Lv —

Forest Guardian: Lv —

Laragwolf? Fusion? Was this the laran?

Laragwolf: Rank B. Laran suck mana out of trees but usually never to the point that the tree withers. Should a crisis approach the forest, however, the laran will drain the magical energy from trees until they are husks and then use that power to combine with other laran to form a laragwolf. This beast can summon rain to extinguish fires. It will risk its life to destroy outside invaders. Because it summons storms and shakes the earth, it is widely regarded as a divine beast that can control the weather and cause disasters.

So...it was the laran? I wonder if it had once used the form of this beast to destroy the Lithovar village in anger. I always wondered what the laran were capable of, but fusing into a Rank B monster? That was way wilder than I expected. The Lithovars were scared of the “Feared Gods,” so maybe they were the type to attack indiscriminately when they were angry?

I heightened my vigilance against the Laragwolf and glared at it with some hostility, but it showed no reaction. Come to think of it, the story I heard from the Lithovar Tribe was that it got angry and destroyed their village due to a landslide. But maybe the laran summoned rain to extinguish a fire, and that just happened to cause a landslide?

“Azalea! Azalea, where are you? Help me! Azalea! Come here at once! Where are you, Azalea?!”

I lowered my gaze toward the voice. Tolemann was shouting himself hoarse.

Tolemann Don Gornoff

Species: Earth-human

Status: Normal

Lv: 25/45

HP: 41/95

MP: 56/56

Attack: 99+81

Defense: 70+55

Magic: 41

Agility: 76

Equipment:

Weapon: Grim Saber: A-

Armor: Mythril Breastplate: B

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 7

Swordsman: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Slash Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Rest: Lv 1

Sword Dance: Lv 2

Title Skill:

Marquis of House Don Gornoff: Lv —

Parasitic Leveler: Lv 7

Tolemann Don Gornoff... Wait, this guy was a *marquis*? I was right that he was the enemy boss. He sure acted high and mighty even though he wasn't very

strong, and above all he seemed to be a noble.

As I slowly lifted my leg, Tolemann widened his eyes, and all the color drained from his face. “Hey, hey! Stop! Stop! I’m not the kind of man to die in a place like this! Right, Azalea?! Kill the Ouroboros, Azalea!”

I put my foot just above Tolemann’s head and stopped there. He scrambled across the mud to distance himself from me, his muddy face smeared with rain and tears.

“Haaa, haaa! A-Azalea! Azalea!”

(“Hesitating. Even now?”)

Partner glared sideways at me.

That’s not it. It’s just, there’s something I’m worried about. I’m not sure if peace will return to the Lithovar Tribe if I get rid of him.

(“Hm...”)

Seeing my hesitation, Tolemann must’ve thought he’d found a way out. His tense facial muscles trembled as he shouted loudly, “That’s right! The Kingdom of Ardesia shan’t stand for it if you kill me! Think of all the people in that country—no, and the surrounding countries—who will come after your life! Everyone will see the evil dragon who destroyed my private army as a threat! This is a major incident that will spread throughout the world! You won’t be able to run and hide. It’ll be useless! No matter how strong you are, the hero and the saint will eventually defeat you! No matter what!”

The hero was that guy from Harunae, right? I’d already defeated him. Did nobody know about that yet? *Well, I guess it was kind of an embarrassing incident for Harunae. I don’t blame them for keeping word from leaking out.*

“But, if you’ll let me go right now, I’ll say this was an accident! It’ll all be done with!” Tolemann called out to me. “I don’t care what happened to the other soldiers! Those guys are a dime a dozen! But I can’t afford to die! I-I’m the man who will become the king of Ardesia...!” He gestured wildly as he spoke—he must not be sure if I could understand him or not.

It was as Tolemann said. I’d been worried about that whole battle. The more

important a person he was, the bigger impact his death would have. It also meant that the information regarding his death itself had great significance.

The details of the incident would be widely known, not just the fact that dozens of people had been killed by the dragon. Whether it was okay to kill Tolemann or not depended on how those who knew about this incident would perceive it. After listening to him, now I could see the path that I should take.

I took a big step backward. He was crouching down with his arms covering his head, but now he hesitantly lifted his face and laughed with his mouth wide open, a strained look on his face. Partner frowned and glanced over at me to confirm.

(“Hey. You’re not. Really going to let. That guy go?”)

Tolemann glanced at the Laragwolf behind him, then ran toward me to escape from it.

“That’s right! O-Ouroboros! Kill that thing and make me—”

I flapped my wings. I whipped up a gust of wind and coursed it down to my front claws, where it formed a Whirlwind Slash.

“What?!”

The blades of wind tore apart Tolemann’s body, cleanly cutting off his head. His face was frozen with a surprised expression as his head hit the ground.

What I was concerned about was that the Lithovar Tribe would be feared and destroyed. However, judging from what he had said just now as he rambled about the Ouroboros and becoming king, he clearly had no interest in the Lithovars whatsoever. They were insignificant compared to the evil dragon, at least in his eyes.

In fact, this attack on the Lithovars by the Hungry Hunters seemed to have come about due to Tolemann’s own selfish interests and greed, not resentment or fear. As long as I left, and that fact could be made known, I didn’t think this incident would spur anyone else to attack the Lithovar Tribe. I considered staying here to protect them, but as long as I was here, it was inevitable that people would spot me and constantly try to attack me. The village would be caught in the crossfire.

This incident was much too violent. And a lot of the Hungry Hunters had escaped. My existence would probably become widely known. I could protect the village, but not without some casualties along the way.

I couldn't let this place become a battlefield again.

Part 3

THE BOSS OF THE Hungry Hunters was dead. Most of his troops were also destroyed, with the survivors starting to flee. Finally, the crisis in the Lithovar village should be over.

I watched for a while as the wind and the rain extinguished the fires that had been set in the forest. Before long, it would be completely put out.

I looked back at the village and let out a small sigh. Once again, I would have to leave. What would Allo do? Would she be angry or sad once she heard that I was leaving? She had some lingering attachments to the village, surely. I wasn't sure what those attachments were, but I knew she wouldn't want to leave without taking care of her personal affairs. It was likely I'd have to say goodbye to her here too.

I couldn't explain myself well to the whole village, and I felt like they would try to stop me, so I would have to tell Bela and have her convey the message on my behalf.

When I turned back toward the village, the Laragwolf entered my vision. It squinted as it watched the fire growing smaller and smaller. When it noticed my gaze, it turned around.

("Oh. So you're. Leaving here, Two-headed. Dragon?")

Huh. That's right, I forgot those guys could use Telepathy once they were combined.

I'm sorry, Feared God. I feel pretty selfish leaving after causing so much trouble.

("If not for you. This forest. Would have burned. Down. We would. Have been killed.")

I was expecting them to be scarier, since they were called the Feared Gods, but they weren't like that at all. For that reason, I decided to make a small request.

Even after I leave, please continue to take care of the Lithovar Tribe. I don't know what will happen next.

("We will eliminate. Those who cause harm. To the forest. We are not. Interested in the. Humans. They took it upon. Themselves to. Call us the Feared. Gods.")

But when I met you last time, you guided me to the other village, and thanks to that, I was able to finish off the Manticore quickly. Then I was able to talk to the other tribe and bring the two sides together to reconcile. Was that just a coincidence? Don't you guys watch over the Lithovar Tribe?

("Don't. Expect too much. From us. Our first priority is. Protecting the forest's trees. If those human outsiders. Had succeeded. We would have been. Killed.")

All right, I guess that's enough. We didn't know each other for very long, but thanks for everything.

("We're grateful. To you as well. We thought you were. A suspicious evil dragon. So we were. Watching you. But you helped save. The forest.")

So you were watching me. Well, that's fine, I guess.

Once I was done talking to the Laragwolf, it glanced at the route I had taken to get here with Roll. The trees I mowed down had created a clear path. Laragwolf scratched its neck with its front paws and stared at me.

I-I was in a hurry. I didn't know what else to do. S-sorry.

When Laragwolf saw me bowing my head, it made a sound in its throat as if it were laughing. Then it turned its back on me and disappeared deep into the woods.

I still had a lot of things to do. I needed to keep the focus on myself and not the Lithovar Tribe. It was best to have something in store to ensure everything went to plan, though.

I stood in front of the road I'd made with Roll, then glanced in the direction Laragwolf had left. Then I used Roll again.

I-I already knocked down these trees, so...it's fine, right?

By the time I arrived at the cave where I'd fought Azalea, the rain had started

to slow down. Although it was still raining a bit, at least there was no wind. Thick clouds stayed looming in the sky, but I expected those to settle down soon.

I was looking for the demi-human swordsman, Nell. I left him comatose on the floor, but he was already gone from that spot. I was searching around for the Lithovar children, wondering if they'd taken him back to the village with them, when I found Nell crouching down in front of Azalea's body. When Nell saw me, he wiped his face with his sleeve, picked up his sword, and stood up. He must've thought I'd come back to kill him...but I could tell he lacked the will to fight, even as he held his sword up. One of his shoulders appeared to have been injured by a rock and was bleeding. His right eye was covered with blood, so his vision must have been impaired. He looked like he could barely stand.

I used Human Transformation. Nell's eyes widened in astonishment, but after he glanced toward Azalea's corpse, he swung his sword at me. I bent down and approached him, hitting the hilt of his sword with my hand. His body flew backward, slamming his back into the cave wall. He collapsed on the spot.

"You must've had a death wish, lunging for me like that. Don't worry, though. I'm not here to kill you."

He sat on the ground panting but said nothing. I guessed my ability to speak had shocked him. He did look pretty surprised.

"You risked your life to save a child. I can't ask anyone else this, but I think I can trust you. I have a favor to ask. When you return home, I want you to tell everyone that the reason the Lithovar Tribe was attacking travelers was because the Ouroboros requested a sacrifice."



His mouth hung open. “What?” he whispered.

“That’s right,” I said. I looked around and pointed to a small mountain in the distance. “Then tell them that the Ouroboros has gone far to the north, over there. It might have to travel again, but...don’t worry, I’ll make sure everyone knows about it.”

If this went well, the hatred that would have been directed toward the Lithovars due to the sacrifices—not to mention this battle—would be focused on me instead. Most of the fleeing soldiers would have seen me rampaging and killing their comrades anyway. Nell might have little influence, but his credibility would be sufficient.

“Why? Who are you...?” Nell tried to get up, clearly shaken, but then he crouched down again to hold his knees.

“It doesn’t matter how many people ambush me. I can always escape. Anyway, once you return, relay that message to everyone who’ll listen.”

I backed away from Nell and canceled Human Transformation. My body swelled and my other head grew back. In no time at all, I returned to my two-headed form. I glanced at Partner, who let out a sigh and nodded her head slightly. She turned to Nell, and with a “*Graar!*” she cast Hi-Rest to heal his injuries.

I didn’t have enough MP to heal him properly earlier, but now he should be fine. Nell’s stats were abnormally high. If he was fully recovered, no monsters could pose any threat to him on the way back.

He stared at me in shock as I left him behind and left for the village.

Part 4

AFTER I FINISHED ASKING that favor of Nell, I headed toward the village. I ran into Bela on the way there and found her healing some Lithovar warriors. She had taken several Lithovars with her to go collect the fallen tribespeople on the battlefield, and now she was treating them with magic and medicine. Once the Lithovars spotted me, they ran toward me cheering. Bela silenced them, entrusted the person she was treating to the man beside her, and rushed over to my side.

She uttered the spell as usual, closed her eyes, and began Telepathy.

("Dragon God! All the children have just returned home! It's all over!")

Though Bela reprimanded the other Lithovars who were trying to get close to me, she was unusually excited. Even with her eyes closed, she had a faint smile on her face. She was so young, but she was now in charge of being the dragon god's intermediary, reconciling the two tribes, planning countermeasures against enemy groups, commanding battles, and ensuring medical treatment on the battlefield. I couldn't blame her for losing her composure and showing her true feelings. I stared at Bela's expression, thinking how happy she looked.

It was all over at last. The Lithovar Tribe had been through a lot: the disaster that had befallen their village, the Manticore, the confrontation between the two settlements, the overpopulation of the avyssos, and the private army of that idiot noble. This forest was dangerous, but I hoped it had become a little easier to live in.

Thinking that made it even harder to move on. But I never once regretted my time here. I couldn't. Because peace had finally returned to the Lithovar Tribe and this forest.

"Dragon God?" Bela must've sensed something was off. She opened her eyes to look at me. Realizing she wasn't speaking with Telepathy, she quickly closed her eyes again.

I can still hear you when you speak normally, you know. It just takes longer for

me to tell you what I'm thinking.

"Graar..." Partner looked at me with a slightly sad look. I shook my head, took a deep breath, and sent Bela a message.

I'm sorry, but I'm thinking of leaving this village. The enemy survivors who fled from here now know of my existence. And before long, they'll tell everyone living in the surrounding area. If that happens, they might burn down this entire forest.

("What?") Bela said with a confused look on her face, although she kept her eyes closed. The smiles on the faces of the people behind her faded as they sensed something was amiss. ("B-but as long as the dragon god is with us, we aren't afraid of any kind of attack. So...")

I stared at Bela's crying face and slowly shook my head.

There's no telling who will come. I can't put the Lithovar Tribe in danger.

I was worried about what Tolemann said before he died. "You won't be able to run and hide. It'll be useless! No matter how strong you are, the hero and the saint will eventually defeat you! No matter what!"

Those words implied that someone as powerful as the hero and that slime was lurking around in this world. And most likely, they had the backing of the Divine Voice. After everything I'd seen so far, I had a hard time imagining they'd be anyone good. And now that I was this famous, I wouldn't be able to escape.

I'd never seen a monster comparable to my A rank before, so my existence was a threat to the world. Now that the hero was dead, there was a high possibility that they would send out the saint next, and if they were more powerful than the hero it wouldn't matter how many Lithovar Tribes banded together to try to stop them. I absolutely could not involve them in such a battle. I had no choice at the time, but I was the one who had chosen to evolve into such a dangerous monster.

Bela could tell I didn't want to stay. Both arms dangled limply at her sides, and she made tight fists with her hands. She opened her eyes weakly, and tears began to flow. "B-but if the dragon god leaves us again...what should we do??"

I felt my resolve begin to waver, wondering if maybe there was a way to stay

here, if she was that desperate. I had some insurance by way of Nell, but there was no way to guarantee that I'd be able to turn all the attention that was directed toward the Lithovar tribe to me.

First of all, I worked really hard. Didn't I deserve a reward every now and then? If I had to start over in a new land again, I really couldn't get involved with anyone else this time. An Ouroboros was a monster that should never coexist with humans.

Humans would never accept my existence. My power was too overwhelming. I realized that while fighting against Tolemann's private army. Anyone who could easily defeat hundreds of soldiers was either a god or a monster. If I left here, I doubted I could interact with humans again until I came to terms with my dragon body. And how long would that take? A year? Ten years? Considering the life span of a dragon, it might take more than a thousand. So... even if I didn't stay forever, couldn't I stay here for a little longer?

I looked at Bela, and she guessed I had to say something, so she wiped her tears with her sleeve and squeezed her eyes shut.

Bela, hey, I'm... No. Now that I thought about it, my resolve hardened. I saw an image in my mind of the Lithovar Tribe collapsing in the forest and a hero standing in the midst of it with a smile on their face.

I didn't know if the Lithovar Tribe could stay safe forever. But if I stayed here, a saint would come to slay me. I was oddly sure of that above all else. I knew the Divine Voice's terrible personality all too well. I didn't know if it was an enemy, an ally, or even if it was someone who could be resisted in the first place. However, even if I died, I had no idea what would happen to those around me.

I turned to face Bela, who was waiting with her eyes closed. I saw strong resolve in her expression.

I'll come back again someday. It might be in ten years, or maybe even a thousand years. But I promise I'll come back.

Silence continued for a while. Bela sobbed and then sniffled. ("Yes. I'll be waiting for you. Even if I'm no longer alive, the Lithovar Tribe will be waiting for you, Dragon God.")

If I stayed here any longer, I'd lose my resolve. I felt bad, but I would just have to leave the Lithovars to Bela. Next, I had to talk to Allo, the spiders, and Treant.

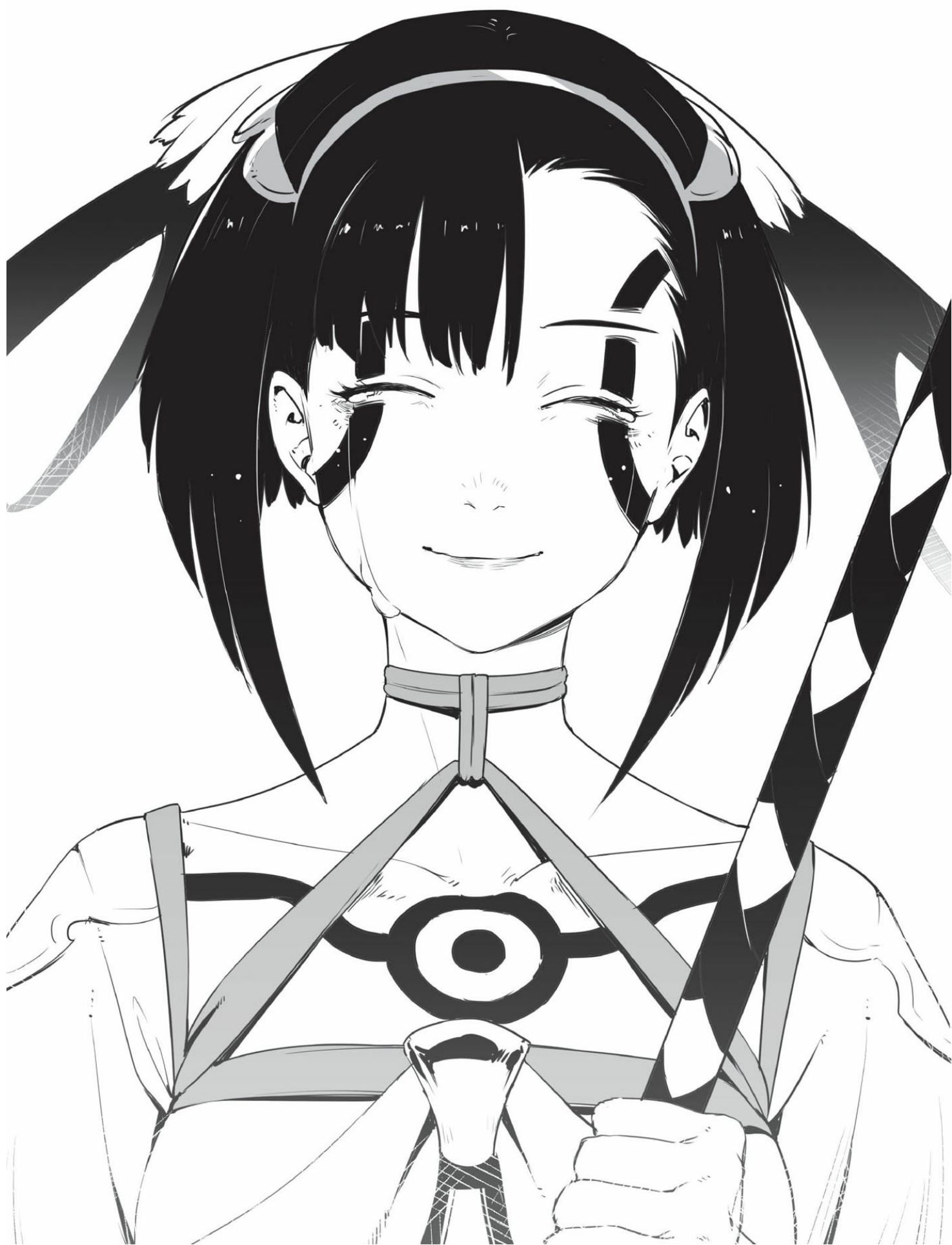
Just then, I heard a flute-like sound coming from the village.

That was the truga made from a graffant's bones, if I wasn't mistaken. It was how they communicated with each other over distances. It seemed like they were joyfully blowing it to celebrate the safety of the Lithovar Tribe. I smiled and tried to leave after I looked at the Lithovar's faces for the last time.

Everyone suddenly turned pale.

I figured it out then—the truga was *never* blown in celebration.

"H-has the enemy returned to the village?" Bela muttered.



Who was stupid enough to come back and attack the Lithovars again after they'd seen how I rampaged? I only stepped away for a moment!

Panicked, I ran toward the truga's sound.

Chapter 5:

The Undead Girl Allo

Part 1

RAPAL, WIELDER OF THE LIGHTNING SWORD

“COMMANDER RAPAL of the sixth unit!” My subordinate Paige knelt on the ground as she reported back to me. “Just as we thought, I couldn’t locate the other soldiers. They must have already escaped.”

“Hrm, I see. I wasn’t expecting much of them. Well done, Paige. So then, shall we launch our final assault on the Lithovar Tribe alone, as planned?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Hungry Hunters were being destroyed. According to the information I’d received from my subordinates, Alan the Giant, commander of the third unit; the witch Ernesis, commander of the fifth unit; and one-eyed Hannibal, the commander of the seventh unit, had all died in battle at the very least. Lord Tolemann had reportedly already escaped. Most of the surviving main forces had withdrawn, but Azalea had been left behind with a small number of soldiers to slay the dragon.

Under normal circumstances, our two choices were to either stay to support Azalea, or simply flee like the others did. But it would be unacceptable for us to be defeated by some forest barbarians.

Azalea intended to bring back the dragon, but he was unlikely to be successful. From my single encounter with the beast, I knew very clearly that I could never win against a monster like that.

Lord Tolemann had a tendency to be very stubborn, whereas Azalea was calm, but in the end he always tried to follow Tolemann’s orders over his own judgment. I thought that Azalea was the only strategist among the rather hot-blooded and shortsighted Hungry Hunters who could stand shoulder to shoulder with me, but perhaps I had overestimated him; he had ultimately -

prioritized Lord Tolemann's heedless orders and rushed to his own death. No matter the circumstances, what he did was reckless. His chances of winning were very slim.

If Azalea failed, Lord Tolemann would be laughed at for his ineptitude and then would obviously be removed from the list of candidates for the throne. It was foolish to act recklessly and let one's emotions get in the way, even if it meant disgracing Tolemann's name.

Once I heard that Azalea had lured the dragon away with the goal of slaying it, I got the idea to attack the Lithovar village again. Even if we didn't come back with the Carbuncle or the dragon, as long as we could destroy the village, we could preserve Tolemann's honor. We could also bring back information regarding the dragon.

If we did that, we could save his neck and possibly secure his spot on the throne. And then, I could also become a royal knight. If Azalea died and I improved my reputation as his successor, I should be able to take his position as commander in chief of the Hungry Hunters.

Yes, that would be tragic for Lord Tolemann, but for me it would be an opportunity.

The moment I first saw that dragon, I was shocked. It had a gigantic body with two strangely shaped heads and huge wings that could shoot an inexhaustible supply of Whirlwind Slashes to tear people apart and kill them. It could fly, and when it landed, the impact created an earthquake. Looking at it from afar, I chalked it up to something we couldn't have predicted and decided to withdraw as soon as possible. Others who saw us might say we deserted, but that was incorrect. Rather, I made the calmest decision possible.

The dragon had devastated the Hungry Hunters and most of the survivors ran away. I took advantage of that. I didn't engage in unnecessary battles with the Lithovar Tribe and turned to flee completely. They didn't dare come after me because they didn't have the means...and that made this moment possible.

I pretended to be running away the whole time, but in fact I led the unit and moved around the village, looking for opportunities to attack. That opportunity had arrived, and with the best possible timing. The only question was, how long

could Azalea hold out?

I only had seven of my direct subordinates from the fifty-first unit, but that was no problem. They were my elite soldiers. Without that dragon, disposing of such barbarians would be like twisting off a baby's hand.

"Let's go. If anyone has a strange flute, shoot them immediately."

"Yes, sir!"

That whistle could be heard from quite far away. I didn't want them raising any alarms. If they summoned the dragon, we would lose our opportunity here.

"Go inside the village and kill everyone who is coming at you," I ordered. "While they're in a panic and confused, I'll destroy them all with my secret weapon. Be careful not to be caught in the crosshairs of the attack."

"You're going to use...that?"

"Yes. It's valuable and dangerous, and I'd prefer not to use it, but who knows when that dragon might show up. Anyway, let's hurry. It took too long to sort through the information. If we dally anymore, we can count ourselves as dead."

I raised my sword and my subordinates followed suit, raising their voices as well. Smiling, I decided to attack the Lithovar Tribe from the least populated route that I had explored while wandering around in the area.

After Paige used his magic to conceal the presence of our soldiers, we charged all at once. We soon encountered the Lithovar people who were out on patrol. There were five of them. Thanks to Paige's magic, we caught them by surprise. One immediately raised his flute in a panic while the others charged toward us with spears.

"Shoot!" I pointed my sword forward.

My soldiers obeyed and shot arrows all at once. One arrow pierced the side of the man holding the flute, and he collapsed on the spot. The second arrow destroyed the whistle.

"Argh!"

"Tataruk!"

You're being attacked and you think you have time to worry about your friend? Or do you lack the intelligence to understand the situation you're in? I snorted and gave instructions to attack the ones wielding a spear.

The man with the flute was still breathing, but he certainly wouldn't be able to walk anymore. We could finish him off later. The soldiers switched their aim to the ones armed with spears in the front. As one would expect from people who lived in a forest infested with monsters, the men dodged our arrows as they headed toward us. My subordinates obeyed the instructions I gave by tilting my sword, now shooting their arrows according to my controlled movements. They cleverly controlled the men's movements, creating an opening by forcing them to run into each other, then firing at those who made a fatal mistake. One by one, the tribespeople collapsed. A large number of arrows pierced the backs of the fallen Lithovars.

I felt like an orchestra conductor. I directed the arrows of my subordinates and made the Lithovars dance. I was humming before I knew it.

The last young Lithovar man dodged the arrows with movements that were much faster than the others. He darted left and right, approaching me as I led the soldiers. Although he was young, he was a head taller than the others. Inefficient as they were, his movements were unpredictable; he reminded me of a beast.

"Hrm."

"Get out of here, outsiders! I, Valon, may die, but I will bring you with me!" The big man swung his spear. I was unsure if he was the type to normally lash out or if he'd been spurred on by sheer fury.

"You're full of openings, beast-boy." I caught the base of his spear with my sword and flicked my wrist. The spear bent and flew out of the young man's hand. There was no comparing the skill of a barbarian warrior to me, who had been trained in swordsmanship since I was a child by the legendary Rampard family.

The best solution for this giant man's movements popped into my mind, and now all I had to do was execute it. It was difficult to read his movements, but he still didn't stand a chance against me.

“Argh, y-you...!”

The young man hesitated for a moment but then jumped at me barehanded as I sat on my horse.

Did he think he could surprise me? No, he was probably just desperate. He wasn't very intelligent, after all. As expected of a barbarian.

“Let me show you why I am feared as Rapal of the Lightning Sword!”

I raised my sword to the sky and poured magic power into it. “Lightning Slash!” Clad in lightning, I thrust my sword forward. It gleamed with its own dazzling light as I charged toward the giant barbarian man—

Suddenly, fog covered the area.

“Hmm?” With my eyes wide open and my sword wreathed in lightning, I stabbed a shadowy figure in the fog. I grinned when I made contact, but that smile only lasted for a moment.

I hadn't stabbed a human. This was dirt. I looked at it again from a closer distance; it was just a mound of dirt haphazardly piled up.

“Tch! Clay? Ah, I see an enemy adept with magic has appeared! But don't think you can deceive me!”

I controlled my breathing and tried to focus on my surroundings. With a chill, I sensed something sinister. It had the form of human and was some distance away, right by where the man with the flute lay.

“Over there with your arrows!”

My subordinates heard my voice and fired arrows all at once.

“Gale!”

A gust of wind repelled the large number of arrows. Fanned by the strong winds, the fog split into two and grew thinner. A red-eyed girl from the Lithovar Tribe stood in front of the man who had been shot down by the arrows.

She was unbelievably powerful. My attack was not something that could be head-on. I never thought there was such a sorcerer in the Lithovar Tribe.

“Who are you...? A-Allo? Is that you?” The man who had been saved looked

utterly astonished. His mouth hung open in fear as he stared at the girl's face. She leaned over and touched his abdomen where the arrow was stuck. She clenched her jaw as if she had made up her mind and tore out the arrow stuck in his stomach.

"Arghh!" he groaned.

The girl turned her gaze to the tree behind her. The tree wavered slightly, and the man's legs glowed, then the injury to his stomach healed in the blink of an eye. Or had the girl simply used Rest? I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand.

"Allo? Is it really you?" Weeping, the man tried to walk over to the girl. He had a happy expression on his face you wouldn't expect from someone who had just been on the brink of death.

The girl made a slightly troubled face and turned her gaze toward the village. "Return and tell the others."

"Ah...!" The man gasped, as if he finally remembered his role. "B-but it's such a dangerous place! Let me stay here so you can tell the others!"

My soldier shot an arrow toward the girl. She chanted, "Clay," and held up her hand. A clump of dirt formed between them and caught the arrow.

The man seemed to realize he wouldn't survive long here. After a few seconds, he gritted his teeth and seemed conflicted, but then ran off toward the village. "I'll definitely come back soon! Please don't die!"

The girl's expression was somewhat sad when he said that. She whispered something, but then she turned and looked straight at me. I was stunned and stopped my horse for a while, but then I held my sword and glared back at her. "It doesn't matter if you can use magic! A little girl like you is no match for Rapal's lightning sword!"

"Commander Rapal!"

Footsteps sounded behind me, and I whirled around.

"Sorry, but I'm here too!"

It was the large man who had called himself Valon. He was holding a spear

made out of earth, perhaps created by magic.

“Argh!” As I moved to block, the tip of the spear shattered and sent up a cloud of dust. Valon punched at me with all his might while my vision was blocked. I tried to dodge it, but I caught his fist in my shoulder. The impact knocked me off my horse, and I careened onto the ground.

“Wh-why, you... Lightning Diffusion!”

The lightning strike from my sword dispersed. The big man leapt away from me, putting distance between us, and I used that opportunity to adjust my stance. The big man was unarmed again, but when the girl held up her hand, the earthen spear once again appeared at his feet. He wiped at the scratches that had appeared on his face from tumbling onto the ground, then took hold of the earthen spear.

“I don’t know who you are, but I owe you my life,” he said to the girl. “I’ll leave the rearguard to you.”

“You barbarian!” I shouted. “Turn to dust in front of my sword!”

The man ran toward me with the magical earthen spear. He appeared to be somewhat capable, but in the end he was nothing but a barbarian warrior. I was overwhelmingly superior to him in terms of strength and equipment. I admitted, though, that it would be a little troublesome if that red-eyed girl unexpectedly cast magic at me. Thank goodness we had the numbers on our side. We couldn’t get stuck in a place like this.

“You two, drop your bows and back me up!” I ordered.

“Yes, sir!”

Two of my seven subordinates dropped their bows, drew their swords, and stood on either side of me. The remaining five scattered around on horseback, surrounding the girl on all sides. She may have possessed powerful wind magic, but in the end she only had a straight-line attack with limited direction. She wouldn’t be able to take all of us out if we surrounded her.

Two subordinates stepped forward in front of me. One of them caught the large man’s spear while the other stabbed at his body. The man abandoned his weapon and leapt back, then immediately sprang from the side toward my

subordinate on the left. Unfortunately for him, my subordinates responded to his movements and were already repositioning their swords.

“Looks like there’s no place for me here.”

He was demonstrably stronger than my subordinates, but he was still outnumbered. Not only that, but he was vastly inferior to *me*, Rapal of the Lightning Sword.

My subordinate swung his own sword at Valon as he charged at him. Just before I thought he was going to hit him, the earthen weapon that the barbarian had thrown down suddenly exploded, throwing up a cloud of dust.

“Hrm... More trickery...”

I looked over at the girl, who was pointing her hands toward the weapon that had just exploded.

“Damn! Argh!” My subordinate swung his sword blindly. The sword certainly seemed to hit the shadow in the dust cloud. His face relaxed when he felt it connect, only to turn into a frown seconds later.

When the cloud of dust cleared, the big man stood there bleeding, having caught the sword with his left shoulder and arm. My subordinate tried to draw his sword, but the big man held on to it firmly. The sword wouldn’t budge.

“Ohhhhhh!” The big man swung his right arm vigorously and pulled his left arm, the one holding the sword, away. He twisted his body, accelerated, and punched the subordinate right in the gut with his gigantic fist.

“Argh!” My subordinate spewed blood as he rolled off his horse and hit the ground on his shoulder.

“What a vulgar and violent fighting style...” I muttered as I glared at the big man, who glared back at me and held up the sword he had stolen. His bloody shoulder was aimed in my direction.

“What’s wrong?” he called out. “You just gonna watch from up there on your high horse?”

“Listen here, you filthy barbarian!” His arrogance infuriated me. Yes, he had defeated one of my subordinates, but I was much better than him. That man

wouldn't stand a chance against me in a fair fight. Unfortunately, we were too likely to be interrupted by a certain someone here. No fun in that. I turned to look at the red-eyed mage in question—she was receiving a barrage of arrows from five of my subordinates. She was somehow using Clay to create earthen shields on all sides to defend herself, but it was only a matter of time. She wouldn't be able to help the big man. If she kept using that much wind and earth magic in succession, she'd be completely out of magical power soon. She looked pale, besides. I guessed she was nearing her limit.

“Well, you two barbarians have endured well against my elite subordinates.”

I focused magical energy into my sword to infuse it with lightning again. It was time to fight with this man head-on, and I was going to pull out all the stops.

“I shall fight against you, Barbarian. Hey, Marcus! We'll attack him from both sides!”

“Yes, sir!” My subordinate, Marcus, temporarily distanced himself from the big brute and dodged over to the other side of him.

The big man silently moved his dark eyes, trying to grasp the movements of both Marcus and I at the same time.

It's useless. If you pay attention to us both, you won't be able to focus on either of us. I didn't want to waste any more time on this. I'd finish him off in one blow.

“Hrm?”

The fog was thickening again.

It was the same fog as when the red-eyed girl had appeared. Turning to look at her, I saw that she was crouching weakly inside her earthen wall. Two arrows stuck out from her shoulder. It was clear that her physical strength and magical power had run out.

Was that fog her last ditch effort?

“Enough of this!” I told my men. “Forget the arrows, just kill her with your swords!”

A sudden, sharp pain raced through my shoulder. I hurriedly glanced behind

me and saw an eerie giant spider with a white mask on its face, perched on my shoulder. I worried that it might be venomous; a burning pain spread from my shoulder through the rest of my body.

“G-get away!” I swung my arm frantically to brush it off, and the spider flew away from me in the mist. I couldn’t see it, but it must be dangling out there from a thread somewhere.

I certainly hadn’t expected the enemy to appear silently from above. My subordinates screamed all around me. There were more spiders. Perhaps the girl had waited to sic the spiders on me in the mist while I was distracted by the battle.

“Calm down and get rid of them!” I shouted. “Rely on your ears to find them! Once we kill that dying mage, the fog should clear!”

I closed my eyes and concentrated on sensing her presence. The red-eyed mage gave off a strange aura for some reason, making her easy to find. I spotted her and went to approach her while paying close attention to my surroundings. As I approached, my subordinate screamed from the position where I could sense the girl.

“Arrghhh! Ahhhh!”

I ran faster toward them, and I could see the red-eyed girl hugging my subordinate from behind. When she let him go, he collapsed limply to the ground. The fog made it difficult to see his face, but I swore he had just had the life sucked out of him.

Wh-what was that? Worse, the girl was now standing straight up. The same girl who should have been seriously injured and on the verge of death! I couldn’t even see the arrows that had pierced her.

She was creepy. I’d thought she was just an ordinary mage, but there was something strange about her appearance. She wasn’t looking at me at the moment, though. I needed to stab her right now and kill her. As I drew my sword, something gripped my right leg. I frantically looked down and was met with the sight of many earthen arms growing out of the ground. One grasped my ankle; the second and third were wrapped around my calves.

“N-no...!”

The girl turned her body toward me and stretched out her hands. “Gale!”

A strong gust of wind blew in my direction, clearing the mist.

I couldn’t move my legs, so I had to face it head-on. The wind lifted my body, cutting into my skin. Then it slammed me into the ground, making me tumble. My consciousness began to fade.

“You’re just a *barbarian*...” I grabbed a nearby tree branch and managed to pull myself up. I drew my sword and swung it to check the condition of my arm. My poisoned shoulder didn’t move well. *Better not to use my left hand.*

I looked around to see how many subordinates I had left. There were three of them still standing, panting heavily and nervously looking around. All three had gobs of spider’s silk stuck all over their bodies.

W-we should still be able to take care of them, now I know the enemy’s hand. If I fought head-on without being deceived by her trickery, I couldn’t possibly lose. I needed to get back on my feet immediately and head to their village. Too much time had passed, and we’d suffered too much damage.

“You’re in for it now!” I snapped. “This is the end of your cowardly—”

A strange flute-like sound resounded throughout the forest, cutting me off. I saw fifteen Lithovars lined up, led by the man who had fled to the village earlier. He was holding a whistle like the one we had destroyed before.

“Grrrr...”

I gritted my teeth. My time was up. Now that the flute had been blown, I feared that the two-headed dragon would return. Besides, the village was now on high alert *and* had to do something about that creepy mage and the big Lithovar warrior. Our odds of winning here were too slim. There was no longer any merit in pursuing this further.

“Th-these filthy barbarians have gotten the best of me?!” I spat. “That’s ridiculous!”

“Give it up! You’re finished!” The Lithovar warriors charged toward me, voices raised.

"I'm finished?" Laughter welled up inside of me. Apparently, they didn't understand the situation.

I would admit it. I misjudged the enemy and fell behind, failing in my objective.

"Wh-what's so funny?" asked one of the barbarians.

"I'll give up on the village. But you're the ones who are finished. I will survive."

Oh well. I wanted to use it to destroy the village, but I was out of options.

"Wait, Commander!" one of my subordinates protested. "We're not ready..."

"We've got no time for that!" I said. "You need to hurry up and get away from here!"

"But...!"

My three remaining subordinates got to their feet and frantically scrambled onto their horses. The Lithovar warriors readied their bows and aimed for their backs, oblivious to what was going to happen next.

Part 2

RAPAL, WIELDER OF THE LIGHTNING SWORD

"ONE, TWO, THREE... Hm, seventeen people in all?" I counted the number of Lithovars on my fingers.

I could release a large number, but my injuries weren't minor. It was possible I might get swept up in it. I had used too much magical power. Factoring in the possibility of being attacked by monsters while I escaped, I realized it was necessary to reduce the numbers to conserve magical power. Releasing about twenty of them here should be enough to let me escape.

"He's the commander! Don't hesitate! Stop him at all costs!"

The Lithovars had been standing still, wondering what I was doing, but then one of the warriors ran out in front of me. *Hrm, he can be my first victim.*

“Wide Summon! Trell rattons, come forth!”

A yellow light spread around me. Twenty large mice covered in downy yellow fur sprang forth from the light. The tips of their limbs and their tails were hairless, exposing their pink skin. Large white horns grew from their foreheads, crackling with electricity.

“Squeak, squeak!”

“Squeak, squeak!”

They were thunder rats called trell rattons. Each one was as tall as a human child, and although their attack power was low, they were very agile. They became extremely agitated when they sensed danger and would approach nearby animals and jump on them to self-destruct.

The trell rattons swarmed around me.

“What? Huh?” The Lithovar warrior who jumped out first was surprised by the group of trell rattons and stopped.

“Yes, Berserk!”

Next, I cast Berserk magic on the trell rattons that was nearest to the Lithovar warrior. Its expression changed, its breathing grew heavy, and then it pounced on the Lithovar warrior.

“What is this demonic beast?!” The warrior tried to stab the trell ratton to death.

“Spread apart.”

Electricity built up around the trell ratton’s horn.

“Clay!” The red-eyed girl cast a spell. A wall of dirt appeared between the Lithovar warriors and the trell ratton.

Hm? How boring.

It wasn’t a clay wall. It was just Clay.

Clay was versatile, but it consumed a lot of magical power. Since it wasn’t a defensive spell, it tended to be more vulnerable to attacks than Clay Wall. They wouldn’t last long against the herd of trell rattons if she only had Clay up her

sleeve.

The trell ratton lowered its head and drove its horn into the dirt wall. Its horn turned bright red, its head swelled up, and it exploded with a lightning strike. The charred remains of the trell ratton scattered around, destroying the earthen wall and knocking the Lithovar warrior off to one side. Black smoke rose from his body as he was thrown to the ground.

Oh? Why wasn't he dead? Well, whatever.

The other Lithovars screamed and tried to approach the fallen warrior.

"Don't get too close! It's a trap!" An elderly Lithovar man shouted, but it was too late.

The trell rattons' horns all began to glow red one after the other. The beasts feared their lives were in danger, so they prepared to self-destruct. Once they had seen their comrade blow itself up, it set them on edge; they instinctively judged that there was an enemy lurking around and switched to suicide tactics. You could make use of Berserk to excite them and make them self-destruct, - causing a chain reaction of suicide bombs.

The trell rattons rushed toward the Lithovar Tribe in a curved formation. Several of them set their sights on me and began to charge toward me, but I had a countermeasure for this. I'd summoned them for a reason.

I raised my sword to the sky and charged its tip with magical power.
"Lightning Diffusion!"

Lightning struck the tip of the sword and scattered around.

The trell rattons who were facing me quickly turned at a right angle and headed toward the Lithovars. When the trell rattons saw something like a horn crackling with thunder, they misidentified it as one of their comrades and wouldn't attack it.

"Heh heh. This is my present to you, who squeezed out the last bits of your meager intelligence to try to get rid of Rapal, Wielder of the Lightning Sword! Do your best to escape, barbarian tribesmen!"

"U-ugh, Commander Rapal? Help!"

The trell rattons were running toward one of my subordinates who had been trapped by a spider. They exploded. The limbs of my subordinate flew wildly through the air.

“Hm, I lost another ratton... Honestly...”

Seeing this power right before their eyes, the blood drained from the Lithovars’ faces and they began to flee all at once. I snorted with laughter as I watched them. Right as I was about to slowly turn around, I heard loud footsteps—I readied my sword and whipped around.

“I’ll never let you escape!” The big man was aiming his spear toward me. He had been unarmed before; he’d probably picked up one of the spears the others had abandoned.

A single trell ratton was chasing after him.

“Hmm, planning to blow yourself up alongside me? But...”

I flipped the tip of the spear sideways with my sword, then slashed diagonally. The barbarian managed to block the direct hit with his arm, but I succeeded in slicing deep into his right arm and then landed a shallow cut around his waist. The big fellow collapsed on the spot.

“A-argh... Damn it...”

“We’re both injured, yes, but what sets us apart from each other is the difference in our skill,” I sneered, looking down at the man. “Just because you were able to fight well with the help of magic, don’t think a lowly barbarian like yourself is better than me.”

He glared up at me with hatred.

After glancing at the trell rattons, who approached him with breakneck speed, I slowly began to walk away.

“Gale!”

That was the red-eyed girl’s voice. I glared at her as I ran.

A small tornado appeared and chased after the rats. The tornado pelted them into the air and then rolled over the giant man’s body. I was only able to escape from the tornado because I noticed it quickly and was some distance away. All

the trell rattons who were swept up in the tornado exploded in midair. Blood and flesh rained down upon the ground.

“Ugghh...”

The big man was obviously in pain from being hit by Gale, but he had escaped the blast of the trell rattons. That must have been her goal from the beginning.

“Hmm?”

How is that red-eyed girl still casting magic?

Her magical power seemed to be bottomless, no matter how you tried to rationalize it. How many times had she used magic so far while fighting me? Puzzled, I looked at her again. The aftereffects of her wind and earth magic had ravaged her surroundings. Many of the Lithovars had been injured by the magic, but as far as I could tell, the trell rattons’ suicide bombing hadn’t taken a single life.

“Wh-what? That’s impossible!”

How could one person suppress the rampage of twenty trell rattons? She had a downright strange amount of mana. No, not merely strange! An impossible amount! I checked her appearance again. Her skin was dark and cracked, and her hair was frizzy. In a matter of minutes, she faded as if she had aged a few decades, but her red eyes gleamed with a savage light.

“S-she’s not human?”

I’d thought it strange how she hugged my subordinate and drained him of his vitality. Her bottomless mana reserves gave me similar pause. And her injuries had healed so quickly... That was unsettling too. I’d sensed something sinister about her from the very beginning.

“She’s undead...? No wonder I couldn’t take her out!”

It seemed like the undead girl had finally reached her limit. I assumed it was due to her lack of magical power that she couldn’t maintain her form and was barely able to stand, exposing her body of rotting flesh. She didn’t have it in her to chase me. I found it profoundly irritating that I couldn’t even kill one person, let alone an undead girl. But no matter. Escaping was enough for me at this

point.

“Hmm?”

“Ughh...”

The last trell ratton headed straight toward a Lithovar man who lay on the ground: the man with the flute who had notified the village. Come to think of it, the man had spoken with the undead before. There must be some kind of special relationship between the undead girl and this man. Given the age difference, I guessed they were parent and child. The undead girl couldn't use a single decent magic spell in her current state. The man would have to watch his undead daughter die.

“Heh heh. This is too good! At least I got some satisfaction in the very end.”

“Arghhh!”

The undead let out a groan. I saw that her left arm was swollen, covered with dirt. She kicked the ground and jumped up, hunched over, to land between the Lithovar man and the trell ratton. She shoved the man away with her right arm and thrust her left arm toward the trell ratton like a shield.

“Squeaaak!” The rat exploded.

The undead was hit directly by the blast, and most of the fleshlike substance covering her body was peeled off to expose a number of her bones. Her jawbone was visible beneath her face as she lay on her back, silent.

The sight was so shocking I froze in my tracks for a few moments.

“Allo! Allo is here?! Allo!”

Someone was screaming in the distance.

“Aino! Calm down! Allo was sacrificed to the Manticore! Remember? Tataruk must have been mistaken! Please, come back to your senses! According to what Tataruk said, we would have seen her by now, remember?”

“Stop! That's enough!”

More of the Lithovar Tribe had arrived, about five of them. Reinforcements? No, these people weren't warriors. After thinking about it, I calmed down. I

decided I needed to escape from here immediately.

“Eeeeeek! A monster!” a Lithovar cried out, having caught sight of the undead girl who had fallen in the blast.

“A-Allo! Is that Allo?!”

“Aino! Don’t get too close! Hey! Get away!”

One of the women tried to approach the undead girl, while the other pulled her by the arm to stop her. The undead girl weakly stretched out her arm, but the man stepped in and blocked the two. The undead girl’s arm caught in the air before successfully grabbing the man’s ankle. A suspicious light flared around her arm, and the man collapsed on the spot.

“I-It sucked something out of me! I feel weak!”

“It’s undead! Kill it!”

“No! She helped us!”

“It’s Allo, I’m sure of it! She came back as a monster because we sacrificed her! She’ll curse us all to death!”

After shaking my head, I turned on my heel and started running. No one was around to chase me, so my escape was an easy one.

“Heh. Idiot girl. I’m disappointed I couldn’t kill you, but apparently you’ll meet a fitting end for a monster—huh?”

I heard a roaring in the distance. It was growing louder. *If it’s some kind of creature, it’s coming here incredibly fast...* That was as far as I got when I was overcome by a sudden spell of déjà vu.

I couldn’t go this way. Before I could turn and run the other way, a huge ball appeared. It knocked over any trees in its path.

Part 3

SENSING THAT I'd stepped on something, I immediately canceled Roll.

Damn it. I was so impatient because the village was in danger that I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings. What if I had run into a fleeing Lithovar? I hastily swung my head to the left and right, looking for whatever I'd run into.

I didn't bump into it very hard, so it should be a light scratch at worst... If I use recovery magic on it quickly, it shouldn't be in danger of losing its life...

("Is that. It?")

I followed Partner's gaze and saw a man there breathing heavily against a tree. He had an impressive, well-groomed mustache, but his clothes were torn in various places and he was covered in dirt. There was a mark on his shoulder that looked like a bite from a monster and the arm connected to it was faintly purple. Poison, undoubtedly. Had a spider gotten to him? He was dressed the same way as the enemy; there was no doubt he was one of them.

"Argh, damn! Damn it! Talk about terrible timing! You disgusting monster!"

I guessed I injured his leg when I collided with him, because he was panting and gripping his knee. He was pale all the way to the tips of his ears. He was covered in plenty of wounds aside from the one I'd just given him.

("What should we. Do with this guy?")

I had no intention of killing those who didn't even have the ability to fight. I didn't feel like it, not when the battle was almost over. This guy was in no condition to fight. I had no reason to go out of my way to heal him, but I had no reason to kill him either. I was about to hurry on my way when he suddenly held his sword high up in the air.

"Lightning Diffusion!"

Light gathered at the tip of his sword, and electric shockwaves crackled about him. Electricity zipped through my face. I squeezed my eyes shut and then wiped my face with my front leg. I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt a bit, but my

life definitely wasn't in any danger.

The man stood there looking desperate. He nearly dropped his sword, but then he lifted it again and screamed, "Wide Summon! Come forth, trell rattons!"

A ring of light surrounded the man, and then a dozen yellow ugly mice appeared from within it. Large white horns grew from their foreheads. They all tipped their heads blankly and started wandering around. I did *not* have time to worry about this guy, but apparently he was attacking me in desperation. He must have thought I was here to kill him.

I filled my stomach with magic power and raised my mouth upward.

"Berser..."

"*Raaaaaaaaaar!*" I let out a Bellow to drown out his attempt at a spell.

The man was completely paralyzed, unable to move, and his injured leg collapsed beneath him. He dropped his sword.

"*Squeak! Squeak!*"

My Bellow seemed to have set the yellow rats on edge. They began to cry out while scampering around, electric shockwaves running through their horns.

Why are they acting so weird?

Trell Ratton, Rank D+. A monster with high agility but no other particular strengths. Should it sense danger, it will grow extremely agitated and leap on nearby creatures to unleash a powerful suicide attack. By doing so, they believe they will reduce the number of outside enemies to protect their own species.

A suicide attack when in danger? Did my Bellow trigger their self-destruction switch? Ugh, I definitely didn't mean to do that... Why'd this guy have to summon such an annoying thing?

Just then, all the trell rattons jumped on the man at once. What the—?

"Ahh, ahh!" The man scrambled to pick up the dropped sword, but as soon as

his hand touched it, the group of yellow rats began to explode. Their bodies were swelling up to release an electric shock before they exploded. A deep crater was left in the earth where the man had been, the only remnant aside from charred rat remains and pieces of flesh from his hands and feet.

The sword had been thrown up by the explosion. It landed with a clang against a rock. Its hilt was charred black, and the blade was covered with soot. I looked at it, speechless.

What the heck was that guy trying to do? I was gonna let him go, but he blew himself up in a big way.

Gained 32 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 32 Experience Points.

Thirty-two? That’s all? Well, I guess I didn’t actually do anything. I just happened to run into him.

I was stunned for a few seconds, but then I remembered my reason for racing through here in the first place. I decided to head in the direction where I’d heard the truga. The survivors of the Hungry Hunters, like this man, might be attacking the village. The sound had come from nearby.

I stopped using Roll and ran instead. I picked up on multiple humans using Psychic Sense, so I decided to go in that direction. I didn’t detect any violent movements, so they probably weren’t fighting at the moment. I was about to slow down with relief when I noticed that Allo’s presence was mixed in with the other people. I heard the screams of the Lithovar Tribe...and then I realized someone was swinging a weapon.

Part 4

I ARRIVED AT THE VILLAGE to find Allo surrounded by a group of Lithovars. They were making quite a fuss over her. She was squatting on the ground, visibly close to death. Her flesh had peeled away from her face, stomach, and arms in places. She was continuing to use Regenerate, and her missing flesh *was* regenerating—although the progress was slow, perhaps due to her lack of MP. The ground around her was hollowed out and many fallen trees lay nearby, suggesting that a fierce battle had taken place.

A corpse that looked like that of a Hungry Hunter and scraps of flesh from the exploding trell rattons were scattered around too. I noticed a Lithovar spear had been pierced into Allo's shoulder to pin her to the ground.

"What are you doing? I'm telling you to stop!"

"Why should I stop? This thing is a monster any way you look at it! I mean, look! It grabbed Gran's leg, and he's been complaining of chills ever since! That thing's to blame, no doubt about it!"

"Did you go insane too?!"

One Lithovar, the one who had stabbed Allo, was arguing with another. Both of them looked ready to tear each other apart.

"Hurry up and cut it to pieces! The undead will bring forth a terrible disaster!" an old Lithovar woman with a cane shrieked incessantly, her face bright red. Then she noticed me and gasped. She fell to her knees in tears with her shoulders trembling. "Oh, Dragon God! Please get rid of this evil and protect us!"

I didn't know what to do either. I was kind of freaking out, to be honest. I had no clue what was going on in front of me. Just then, Allo and I made eye contact. The flesh near her chin had been scraped away, and she had a big wound on her forehead like something had hit her.

She smiled sadly at me with her ragged mouth, moving it as if to speak to me.

“I’m satisfied,” she seemed to say.

I still saw a hint of regret in her eyes. She cared about me, I realized. That was why she was thinking of letting herself die to settle this situation.

“Raaaaaaaaaar!”

Before even thinking about it, I let out a loud Bellow. All the Lithovars fell silent and froze to the spot. After that, I could finally think things through calmly.

My worst fear had come true. Allo had worked so hard to regain her human body, and yet she’d been thrown out in front of the Lithovar Tribe in this crumbling form. She could speak by now, so I’d had the naive idea that she might be able to blend in after a peaceful introduction. But this whole plan had been a mistake from the beginning. I realized everything I had done up until now had only caused Allo suffering, instead of making her happy.

I grabbed the spear with my mouth and pulled it out, then gently nuzzled my face closer. Allo hesitated for a moment and then touched my face. Her hands lit up. I felt a small amount of my MP ebb away, and then Allo’s body began to regenerate faster.

“Dragon God, why...?”

Allo got up and looked around. The Lithovars were stunned. She then slowly extended her arm.

“...Gale!”



The soil beneath her feet exploded into a sandstorm, startling me. I thought that she launched into an attack, but no—she scattered the dirt under her feet to distract everyone. The second we were distracted, she slipped away from the Lithovars and ran far away.

“Wh-what is that?!” New screams erupted from the Lithovars.

A few rabbit-like creatures made out of hardened soil were moving around. It was Allo’s Clay Doll skill. *I bet she made them so that no one would chase her.*

“Those are the undead monster’s familiars! We must shatter them and seal them away with a ritual! Someone fetch the Dragon God’s priestess! Where is that traitor, Bela, anyway?!”

Amid the uproar, a Lithovar woman who was being held down by a man shook him off and ran after Allo. I finally figured out who Allo had been looking at earlier.

“I’m sorry!”

“Argh!”

Another restrained Lithovar, a man this time, took advantage of the Clay Doll commotion to kick his captor in the side and escape. He ran toward Allo too.

They were Allo’s parents, Aino and Tataruk.

“Idiot! That’s no longer your daughter! It’s a monster!” One of the Lithovars clung to Aino’s back and held her down. The next moment, Tataruk punched him in the face, pulled Aino by the hand, and chased after Allo.

“This way, Aino!” he said.

“H-hey, Tataruk!” A man kneeling on the ground pointed at Tataruk’s back. “Come back! Hey, someone stop those two or that thing will kill them!”

“There’s no time for that! Hurry up and kill its familiars! Dragon God! Oh, Dragon God!”

The old woman was surrounded by three adorable clay rabbits, screaming while spittle flew out of her mouth. Allo had created those clay rabbits. They were seriously unlikely to harm the Lithovar Tribe.

I took a glance at the commotion, and then I followed behind Aino, Tataruk, and Allo. After everything we'd been through, I still ended up creating a rift in the Lithovar Tribe.

Allo was standing in front of a large river. Aino and Tataruk stood behind her, side by side and out of breath. Allo was still beat-up all over, but regenerating steadily. At least there were no more bones exposed.

"Allo! It's really you, isn't it? S-say something!"

Allo's face was lowered to hide her red eyes, but when Aino called out to her, she carefully raised her face. Her eyes opened.

"Mother, Father..." she whispered.

With those words, Aino and Tataruk, who were desperately calling out to her, fell silent.

"Ever since the day I was chosen to be sacrificed...you've both been arguing about the dragon god's priestess. I was so worried this whole time that Father would leave Mother and go to the other village... Father...you didn't like what the priestess was doing, so you went to the other village by yourself, didn't you?"

Tataruk looked down, speechless. So that's why he had gone over to the other side—the sacrifices demanded by the dragon god's priestess had made him grow distrustful of his own village.

"But that monster is gone and the village has been reunited," Allo said. "I'm so glad that you and Mother came to see me today. Please don't fight anymore."

"Oh, no! I will never do anything to make you feel upset, Allo!"

"Please come here, Allo!"

Aino reached out while calling her daughter's name. Allo gently took her hand and squeezed it regretfully. Then, she slowly shook her head and withdrew her hand.

"I-I can't stay here. Goodbye, Mother and Father. I loved you."

She looked down and took a step back. A gust of wind blew, raising up a cloud

of dust. By the time it settled back down, Allo had disappeared. A white fragment of something fell in front of Aino and Tataruk. It looked like a shard from one of Allo's bones.

Tataruk gently picked it up and carefully handed it to Aino. They burst into tears and embraced each other, as if they had come to the same realization at the same time. Besides the sound of them weeping, I could hear nothing but the flowing river.

After looking at the small bone fragment Aino held once more, I decided to follow the river downstream and leave the forest.

Allo's lingering regrets were bound to involve Aino and Tataruk. Because the two of them had been arguing, she had been terribly worried about what happened to them after her death. It would make sense for Allo to return to the afterlife now that it was all settled.

Even as I felt a gaping hole open up in my heart, I continued downstream, convincing myself I was doing the right thing. Suddenly, I heard a rustling noise and turned around to see a black spider with a white mask on its face. The petit-nightmare was walking toward me.

"Raaar..." I called out feebly.

Oh, you came here? Thanks. What about the other araneae?

The masked spider slowly shook its head. The other spiders intended to remain in the forest, I guess. The environment was very important to monsters, because it would determine their life or death. Their instincts made it hard for them to leave.

I turned around sharply to find a tree standing in front of me.

T-Treant! You're here too? I see... You're coming with me as well? B-but how should I carry you? You're too slow, Treant... Well, I suppose there's no reason to rush. I guess I can take it slow.

But just then, I saw a small child sitting on a branch. She hopped down carefully and stood right below my head. Allo. I lowered my head and brought my face closer to her.

Wh-why? Didn't you want to rest in peace? Are you sure you want to come with me? I have to leave this forest, you know.

“...I can't stay here anymore either.” She looked back at the forest sadly. I fell silent, feeling unbelievably sorry. She frantically gestured when she saw the look in my eyes. “But it's fine now. I said my last goodbyes. They said they wouldn't fight anymore. I thought that if I could see Mother and Father getting along well again, I would surely disappear. But...there's one other thing left that I want to do.”

Something else you want to do? A-are you sure you should leave here? You don't have to worry about me, you know.

She cupped her hand and then beckoned me over with her other, telling me to lend her my ear. Wondering what she was about to say, I put my ear up to her mouth...and she gently kissed my ear.

“It's a secret.”

She turned and started running out of the forest, with an innocent smile and slightly pink cheeks. For once, she really looked like the young child she was.

Dumbfounded, I glanced to the side and saw that Partner was staring at me with a grin. I turned around in embarrassment and chased after Allo. After I ran at her pace for a while, I suddenly came back to myself. When I glanced back, I saw Petit-Nightmare running right behind me and Treant far behind it, desperately trying to catch up.



Bonus Story 1:
A Girl's Journey to the Capital

Part 1

IN THE CENTER of Ardesia, the largest country in the world, there was a territory where the strongest monsters appeared: “Brave Road.” The road connected various cities throughout the country, making it a perfect potential trade route, but only chosen heroes felt brave enough to walk the road freely. It was said that being able to safely explore Brave Road was what set the first-class adventurers apart from second-class adventurers. Some adventurers who lacked skills and experience challenged themselves to the journey and overcame Brave Road with incredible growth. But, of course, there were many more stories of reckless adventurers who challenged themselves and never returned home. Still, many who challenged themselves to conquer Brave Road sought power, wealth, and fame. Merely making it to the end would win the respect of adventurer groups.

Ardesia’s police actively supported Brave Road challengers in hopes of developing the road further, obtaining ingredients from rare, small monsters, and to improve the general quality of adventurers.

“Additionally, some adventurer groups have criticized Princess Chris, who originated this policy, for driving adventurers to needless deaths. The princess and her retainers have made no comment on the matter.”

In a room at an inn in Roburg, a city in Ardesia, a girl with short, bobbed hair was reading a book. Her name was Myria Milleania. In search of a certain dragon, she had set out on a journey to broaden her knowledge and improve her magical abilities alongside a swordswoman named Meltia. Their paths crossed when Meltia visited her village.

Myria let out a sigh, closed the book, and looked at the cover. It read “How to Travel in Ardesia.” Her mentor, Meltia, had bought it for her.

“This *could* be taken as criticism of the royal family, but wouldn’t it be bad to censor it?” she said to herself. “Where did Meltia buy this, anyway?”

Princess Chris had always been a private person when it came to politics. Her

father, the king, and her older brothers who were set to be next in line to the throne had all died one after the other in mysterious ways; she had been named heir to the throne to maintain the royal bloodline. The princess had begun to appear more frequently in public after that, often meddling in various things.

Myria put the book on the desk and stretched. “The Brave Road, huh? Sounds nice...but Meltia and I have a hard enough time defeating rank C monsters at the moment. I’d better wait on any death-magnet roads,” she muttered to a giant black lizard which lay on the floor.

“Kssh.” The black lizard gave an indifferent reply but did respond, nonetheless. This lizard was a Venom Queen Lacerta—a very dangerous monster who could control strong poisons. Ironically, she had saved Myria from being attacked by other monsters. They parted ways after that event only to bump into each other from time to time. Eventually they reunited for good, and Myria filed paperwork for the black lizard to officially become her working monster-slash-familiar. Now they could walk freely through the city together.

“Hmm, so you think it’ll be too tough too?” Myria took it upon herself to interpret the black lizard’s response, then leaned over, laying her cheek upon the desk. The black lizard didn’t seem to think much of it. She lifted her neck and scratched herself.

I’m sure that challenging myself at a place like that would be a good way to get a lot stronger all at once, but I’m just not powerful enough yet. I might be able to make it through if I have Little Miss Inky here fight for me, but I can’t let her do all the work...

All of a sudden, the door burst open. Myria was so lost in her thoughts that the noise startled her, and she jolted straight up in her chair. The black lizard was especially sensitive to loud noises, having grown up in the wild. She stretched out her legs, quivering all over.

“Myria! We’re gonna challenge ourselves on the Brave Road!” The person who opened the door was the golden-haired, blue-eyed swordswoman, Meltia. Her cacophonous arrival earned her a fierce whap of the tail from the haughty black lizard.

“Oof, watch it!” Meltia gripped her sword and knocked the lizard’s tail away with the hilt. The lizard hissed at her but didn’t attack her any further. Instead she resumed her crouching position.

“What’s wrong, Myria? Lacerta’s pretty on edge. Ha ha...did you two have a fight?”

“No, it’s because you just burst through the door like that,” Myria replied. “Monsters are sensitive to noise. Please stop doing things to irritate her for no reason.”

The lizard gave Meltia a threatening glare that she apparently didn’t notice. She set her sword against the wall and plopped down with a carefree smile on her face.

“Ha ha, sorry about that!” she said. “Anyway, about Brave Road...”

“I don’t want to,” Myria told her. “There’s no way we can do it.”

“Wh-why not? You’ve gotten way better at magic lately. You’re definitely good enough to count as a black mage. Other magicians have even complimented you on it!”

“That’s just flattery,” insisted Myria. “All my magic is good for is causing distractions or lighting the fireplace. Weren’t you the one who said the most dangerous thing is to go somewhere when you don’t have enough skill?”

“And who was it who went to all kinds of places she had no business going because of some dragon?” Meltia retorted. “You’ll never get strong enough to fight a rank B dragon at this rate, you know!”

“I-I’m not going to fight him! I just want to check on him...”

“Who cares about how a dragon feels? That same dragon killed a bunch of villagers and went missing, right? You can’t predict what he’s going to do. I know you’re really gung-ho about finding it, but you’ve gotta keep in mind how dangerous stuff could get.”

“I know that.”

The mood in the room had gotten a little heavy. Meltia knew that Myria was on this journey to find her old friend, the dragon, who had saved her life. The

problem was that Myria didn't know where the dragon was. No country had ordered any dragons to be slain recently. This dragon of hers might pop up and attack them. She had to get stronger so she could continue her journey and achieve her goal.

"But setting foot on the Brave Road is the same thing as marching straight toward your own death!" said Myria. "The risks far outweigh the returns. It's said that 30 percent of novice adventurers who tackle it will die within three years, you know. It's just too dangerous."

"The returns *are* greater," Meltia argued. "We'll cross the Brave Road to take a shortcut to get to the capital of Ardesia, Alban!"

"Alban? I've always wanted to go there, but... We can just take the long route. There's no need to go out of our way to take the dangerous road..."

"You don't get it, Myria. After the hero died in Harunae desert, it's clear that information is being suppressed! Personally, I'd bet my buttons that the top brass in both Harunae and Ardesia are behind it!"

They'd thought that the incident of the wicked dragon attack in Harunae would become clearer as time went on, but actually it had only grown more mysterious. The official story put out by the church of Ardesia compared to eyewitness accounts just didn't jibe, and a little bit of digging uncovered lots of rumors.

"What about it?" Myria said. "You're the one who said that incident probably had nothing to do with the dragon who visited my village."

"Yeah, the dragon who attacked the country and killed the hero can't be the rank B dragon who showed up in Noah's Forest," said Meltia. "They've gotta be different dragons. What I'm *trying* to say is that it's not unusual for the government to keep information about high-ranking monsters secret from the public. They don't wanna stoke hysteria, or maybe it's some political bargaining junk. Either way, it's not information that the average person can get ahold of."

"I suppose if we could get that information, we'd be able to learn about people who have seen Illusia," Myria mused. "But we don't have any way or connections to ask someone from the royal family directly."

“If we make it through Brave Road to the capital, we might be able to curry favor with Princess Chris!” Meltia insisted.

“Oh!” Myria exclaimed. She finally understood what Meltia was getting at. The black lizard turned her head as if to express her displeasure at Myria raising her voice. Myria immediately clamped her hand over her mouth and apologized. “S-sorry!”

“Princess Chris is unusually enthusiastic about supporting adventurers and implementing policies that concern them, to the point where she gets criticized by some citizens over it,” added Meltia. “Sometimes she even gathers up adventurers and has parties for them inside the castle! She seems to be very fond of adventurers around your age who have completed the Brave Road. I bet that’ll win you an invitation to the castle. And once that happens, we can just switch on the ol’ charisma to get the details we need. I really think we should give it a try!”

Myria gulped. She’d accepted it might be necessary to travel around the world to find her dragon, but all this was a lot to take in at once.

“Princess Chris was a sheltered girl who was kept from public view her whole life. People criticize her, saying she’s gone crazy with the sudden amount of power she has, but me? I don’t think she can be as bad as everyone says she is,” Meltia went on. “Like...she must have some kind of long-term goal in mind, considering she’s giving all this support to the adventurers. I think she has some hidden agenda behind her policies and actions that makes her *look* selfish at first glance, that’s all. People only get suspicious ’cause she’s mighty *and* innocent at the same time. I just think it’s worth talking to her, you know? We might get invited to the party, meet her, and have nothing more come of it...but we may as well try!”

“M-Meltia... You’ve put a surprising amount of thought into this.”

“Surprising? Rude.”

“It was a slip of the tongue. I’m sorry.”

“*Myria*. Is that how you see me?”

Myria gave a wry chuckle to smooth it over, but then frowned. “But I really

don't think it's right to get you caught up in something so dangerous just because of my own situation..."

"Oh, please! Don't be ridiculous! I'm super excited about this! I've been thinking that I should land myself in some dangerous territory sooner or later if I want to grow as an adventurer. Plus, we've got Lacerta with us," Meltia said breezily, wagging a finger toward the black lizard. The lizard smacked her hand away with her tail. Meltia chuckled and then returned her gaze to Myria.

Myria figured that Meltia had extended her hand to the lizard knowing it would get smacked away. She was deflecting her embarrassment.

"Meltia..."

"Besides, I've heard there are giant mandrake roots buried along Brave Road. If we gather them, we'll be rich! This is a rare opportunity! We've gotta give it a try! Don't you think?!"

This is another way of hiding her embarrassment, right? Myria felt slightly anxious, but she eventually agreed that they would travel via the Brave Road to get to the capital city of Alban.

Part 2

“THIS IS THE WOOWOOWOORST!” Myria screamed as she ran through a field. “Why did this have to happen to me? Why did this have to happen to meeeeeee?”

A mass of green flesh about three times her height chased after her. On top of its giant body was a head that looked like a cross between a pig’s and a human’s. Saliva dripped endlessly from its mouth.

“Run faster, Myria!” Meltia called out to her. “This is the lowest rank monster there is on the Brave Road! A B-rank troll! It’s one of the final evolutions of a goblin! Way more dangerous than a lower ranked dragon, but at least it’s slow!”

“Are you sure it’s not faster than me?!”

“Don’t worry! It’s very rare for humans to be captured by trolls! You don’t hear news about that too often!”

“Then why is its club covered in blood?!”

“Hrm, maybe because the humans it does capture don’t live to tell about it?”

“How can you be so calm at a time like this, Meltia?!” Although Myria was screaming as she ran, Meltia looked totally fine.

“It’s not fast enough to outrun a swordswoman like me,” Meltia replied. “It might be difficult for a novice white mage to outrun one, but maybe you’re carrying too much stuff. Gimme your staff!”

“R-really? Oh, I know!” Myria was about to give Meltia her staff, but instead she tightened her grip on it and swung it behind her. “Since it’s running in a straight line, it should strike it. Please let this work... Fire Sphere!” She shot off a mid-class fire magic spell called Fire Sphere. The perfectly round ball of flames kept its form as it attacked the troll’s face.

“Grah!”

A direct hit. The troll’s giant body staggered.

“I-I did it!” she cheered.

“That was foolish, Myria!” Meltia told her. “Trolls are known for their high defense and stamina. An attack like that won’t do anything! It’s a lower rank B, remember?! If it was that easy to defeat it, no one would struggle. The only stat a troll is low in is agility!”

“What...?”

“*Graaaaah!*” There was barely any sign of damage where the fireball had struck the troll’s head. The faint burn mark that remained disappeared with a twitch of the troll’s cheek.

“N-no way!”

“Trolls have incredible regeneration abilities! The only thing you’ve done is totally piss it off, Myria! Turn around, it’s speeding up!”

“No, I don’t wanna look! Waaaaaaah, get away! I never should have come heeeeeeeere!”

“C-calm down! Anyway, give me your staff! You need to get lighter!”

“O-okay... H-huh? Where’s Inky? Don’t tell me the troll ate her?!”

“You mean Lacerta? She already sped off way ahead of us. She’s pretty good, to outrun a troll that fast.”

“Waaaaaaah!” Myria sobbed. “Inky abandoned meeeeeeeee! Inkyyyyyyy!”

“C-c’mon, calm down!”

“Ah ha ha! Ah ha ha! I’m so scared I’m laughing now! But it’s no wonder! The troll’s gonna catch me! Go ahead without me, Myria! There’s no hope for me! I’m done for!”

“Will you calm down, Myria?! I’m begging you, relax! Okay?”

“Please tell Marielle from my village that I’m sorry!”

“Ah, jeez. There’s nothing I can do for her,” Meltia muttered, giving up as she watched Myria careen further out of control. The girl looked like she was about to throw herself on the ground and let the troll bash her to death. Nothing Meltia said seemed to help. Myria would never outrun the troll at this rate.

Meltia looked around for something, anything, that could help. Just then, she saw a black ball racing up a big hill. It was coming this way.

“Is that Lacerta?”

Once the black ball climbed to the top of the hill, it bounced off it and soared through the air over Myria and Meltia’s heads, slamming right into the troll’s head. The ball ricocheted off the ground by the troll’s feet and then flew far backward.

“Graaargh!”

Even a troll was no match for the black lizard’s Roll attack. It toppled to the ground, its face bright red. When it stood up in a rage, the black lizard was already far behind it.

“Graaaargh!” The troll stomped its thick legs and took off after the black lizard. Five minutes later, the black lizard easily doubled back and overtook the troll, casually strolling back to Myria and Meltia.

“Inky... You used that hill to attack its head?”

It would’ve been impossible for Myria to escape from the troll after she had provoked it. The black lizard had noticed and therefore used the topography to her advantage to launch a heavy attack on the troll.

“I’d expect nothing less from you, Inky! I’m sorry that I doubted you...” Myria threw down her staff, held out her arms, and tried to embrace the black lizard—who shrank back and turned away in a huff before stomping ahead. Myria was left frozen in that position. She chased after the black lizard, her cheeks puffed out in an angry grimace.

Part 3

“FALL BACK and keep attacking it with fireballs!”

“O-okay!” Not long after they outran the troll, Myria and Meltia came up against a new enemy: a zheep. It had a round body with a coat like that of a sheep and three monkey-like heads. The creature was as big as a human, with spindly, hairless legs. It had considerable reach to boot. Zheep were C-ranked monsters. Several first-class adventurers could defeat monsters of that rank when working together, but there weren’t many humans who could take on a monster like this alone.



“Zeh-eh-eh-eh!” the zheep bleated, curving its legs.

“It’s gonna jump! Attack toward its trajectory!” Meltia ordered, and Myria cast Fire Sphere. A fireball landed squarely in the zheep’s face.

“Zeh-eh!”

“I did it! I got it!”

“Yeah! Lucent Luna!” Meltia raised her sword. A gleaming ball of light appeared at the tip and arced into the zheep as it fell toward the ground.

“Kssh!” The black lizard fired Clay Gun from the opposite direction. The zheep quickly whirled around, batting away the ball of light from Lucent Luna and the bullets from Clay Gun.

“Take this!” Meltia’s sword forced the zheep to stop. Its white fur flew up into the air as its momentum slowed. Then it kicked off from the ground and backed away from Meltia. All three pairs of its eyes blazed with fury.

“Kssh!” Once the zheep stopped spinning, the black lizard attacked it with her claws. The zheep skillfully dodged the attack and grabbed the lizard’s tail. The black lizard spun through the air after her claws came up empty, slamming down into a landing. The black lizard curled up to defend herself when her body struck the ground.

“Zeh-eh!”

“Leave Inky alone!” Myria swung her staff, striking the zheep.

“Myria! Get away from it! There’s no way a mage can take on a zheep in close combat!”

“I’m within close combat range! Fire Sphere!”

“Myria?!”

Fire spewed forth from Myria’s staff, loosing fireballs which exploded into the zheeps’ faces. Stunned by the attack, the zheep let go of the lizard’s tail. The lizard whacked the zheep with her tail and then leapt backward, putting distance between them. Since Myria’s fireball had exploded so close to her, the recoil blew her back as well.

“Dangerous way of fighting,” Meltia remarked.

“Eh heh heh. Yes, but that attack made it let go of Inky.”

“You can’t predict the zheep’s movements. One hit from that thing and you won’t be able to stand. You’re being too reckless! Don’t ever do that again or I’ll slap you, I’m serious. Your life’s at stake, here.”

“...Okay.” Myria lowered her voice.

“Zeh-eh-eh!” the zheep screamed, its faces contorting with fury.

“Anyway, we need to focus on the battle at hand!” Meltia said. “The zheep is angry, so it’s the real thing this time!”

“G-got it!”

They cornered the zheep from three sides and planned a simultaneous attack. The zheep’s physical abilities were overwhelming, and it refused to go down without a fight. By the time the group finally finished it off, it was close to sunset. The sky was beginning to turn red.

“Zeh-eh...”

After a hard-fought, hour-long battle, the zheep finally succumbed to the black lizard’s poison and collapsed on the spot.

“Finally...we finally beat it,” Myria panted.

“Yeah, that was a pretty weak enemy. Hrm? Hey, Myria! D’you see that giant mandrake over there?!” Meltia’s face lit up. She pointed with her sword in the distance.

“Huh? Where?”

“Can’t you see it? Over there, on the other side of that tree!”

“You must have good vision. That’s really far away...”

“I’m gonna go check it out! You rest and then come after me!”

“What? H-hey! What if another monster shows up?! You shouldn’t go off on your own!” Myria had flopped down on the grass with exhaustion, but now she rushed back to her feet.

“This was the zheep’s territory,” Meltia assured her. “It’ll probably be safe for a while!”

“P-probably...”

Meltia ignored Myria’s attempts to deter her and chased after the mandrake.

“It’s a wonder she hasn’t gotten herself killed in her adventures... Yuno’s a lot like she is, so I guess Daz was the one holding them both back...?” Yuno and Daz were members of Meltia’s party. They weren’t around right now, but they had all cooperated on a survey of the forest near Myria’s village.

“I don’t see any monsters nearby, sure, but you never know what might happen. Rest!” Myria reached out her arm and healed the injuries she got from the battle.

“Honestly...”

She smiled at the black lizard by her side. The lizard lifted up her head, looking bored, squinted at the sun, and yawned. Then she turned her sharp gaze to Meltia but immediately began to shudder all over.

“I-Inky?!”

“Ksssssssh!” The lizard made a loud cry, as if to warn Meltia who had run off ahead, but unfortunately Meltia didn’t hear her.

“Waah! I-Inky?! Hey! Meltia! Come back! Something’s wrong!”

“Yo, Myria! This mandrake root is bigger than I thought! Like, way bigger! I think this might be a rare species!”

The top of the mandrake root began to come into view. Myria was looking at it from a decent distance away, but from her perspective, it seemed to be at least the same height as Meltia. She had no idea how big it would be if they picked it.

“Come back! This is definitely dangerous!”

The next moment, the ground exploded. Now exposed, the giant mandrake root showed its demon-like visage. All color drained out of Meltia’s face.

“Oh no! It’s an ogre mandrake!”

“Ooooooooooooooooooooooh!” The ground trembled as it stretched out its roots and whacked Meltia from below. She was tossed at a low distance through the air, then her back slammed onto the ground as gravity took effect.

“Oof! I’m done for! Run away, Myria!”

“Meltia! How did we get into this mess?! What do I *do*?!”

“Ksssssssh!”

Myria sobbed as she ran, but the black lizard curled up and began to dash.

Part 4

SEVERAL DAYS LATER, in Alban, the capital of Ardesia. Myria, Meltia, and Lacerta had safely made it through Brave Road. They were staying at an inn when a soldier from the royal guard came to visit them.

“Princess Chris has sent me to invite the young female adventurer who conquered Brave Road to a party at the royal palace.”

“R-r-really?!” Myria couldn’t believe her ears. Up until now, they’d gained nothing from overcoming Brave Road. They had defeated a few harmless monsters, but they had to run from the rest of the road’s length from start to finish. The toughest battle was when they cooperated with the lizard to rescue Meltia from the ogre mandrake after it ambushed her. That was a close one. One wrong move could have gotten all three of them skewered by the ogre mandrake. They just got lucky. After they rescued Meltia, the lizard whacked her in the face with her tail.

I wonder if it was that last fight that got us recognized. The ogre mandrake is a high-ranking monster, after all.

“Y-yes,” said the soldier. “We’d like to invite Lady Meltia to the royal palace...”

“What?! Meltia?!” Myria exclaimed.

“M-me?!”

Meltia looked baffled when the soldier called her name. She was definitely more skilled than Myria, but not so much that she should get invited to the palace over her. In fact, Myria was closer in age to Princess Chris. During the crucial battle against the ogre mandrake, Meltia hadn’t done much more than scream and swing her sword wildly without much effect.

“Uh, yes. That’s right. Her Highness ordered me to find the swordswoman who peeled the skin from the root of the giant ogre mandrake on the feared Brave Road. You’re the leader of your party, aren’t you? I thought so, anyway... You may bring one guest with you, so your friend can come along.”

“Really?! I’m going to meet the princess too?!”

I guess it’s appropriate that they invite Meltia since she’s the leader, but why do I feel so bitter...?

Myria thought back to how frantically Meltia had rolled around while she and the black lizard desperately fought to free her from the ogre mandrake...

Bonus Story 2: Azalea and Nell

“...**A**LL RIGHT. I'll act as bait and lure the Ouroboros in.”

I felt inward relief that Nell had agreed to participate in slaying the Ouroboros but took care not to show it on my face. I could force Nell to come, of course, but then his motivation would suffer. This battle had to be done with the fewest amount of soldiers as possible; victory or defeat would be decided by who was leading the battle. Placing Nell inside the cave would be essential to our strength.

“That’s the spirit, Nell. I’m expecting a lot from you,” I said, roughly tousling the boy’s hair. I pulled my hand away, and Nell hesitantly looked up at me.

I’d probably feel more at ease knowing I’d succeeded in persuading him to join us. I thought I should probably say something, but the image of the collapsed cave came to mind, so I blurted out something unnecessary.

“If you can’t bear it any longer, you can leave the...” I trailed off for a moment. Why was I being so foolish? If Nell ran away from battle, the chances of defeating the Ouroboros in the cave-in dropped considerably. There were hostages, but it would be nearly impossible for Nell to escape with them while leaving the Ouroboros alone inside.

I had made up my mind to silently betray Nell and Norwell in order to bury the Ouroboros alive. After more than a hundred soldiers sacrificed, was I getting cold feet now at the thought of Nell being one of them? Impossible.

Nell looked up at me anxiously.

“No,” I said. “You can’t leave the cave. If you feel uncomfortable, you’ll just have to bear with it and wait it out.”

“O-okay...” Nell answered. This was all for the best. Nell would have to be sacrificed in order to make His Excellency’s dreams come true.

I chose eight soldiers from Norwell’s fourth unit and headed toward the cave

with them, Nell, and Norwell herself. Her unit was a very tight-knit group. They surrounded their commander as they traveled, a gaggle of groupies armed with swords and bows. They chatted with each other occasionally. After I confirmed the formation, I separated from Norwell's group and walked silently over to Nell.

"U-um, Azalea...?" Nell said to me. Had he changed his mind? I cautiously glanced over at him. "I'm really grateful that you took me in. And thanks for always protecting me from Lord Tolemann. I don't really have much chance to tell you that, so I thought I would now."

"I just advised His Excellency that he could use you," I replied. "There's no other meaning."

"You're always strict with me in front of him and try to calm him down before he punches me..."

I fell silent. Was it that obvious? I wasn't sure what to say.

Why was I so protective of Nell, anyway? Maybe it was because I'd always believed that one day His Excellency would acknowledge Nell's strength even though he hated demi-humans, just as he had acknowledged my cursed body and saved me from the baron's abuse.

"This is the decisive battle," I said coldly. "We shouldn't waste time talking."

"O-of course. I'm sorry..." Nell lowered his head.

It didn't matter what he had read into my words. Everything was over; it would all end here. Depending on the outcome, I might survive. But Nell, and Norwell, and her unit, would die no matter the outcome. I would betray them and cause a cave-in to kill the Ouroboros.

Maybe there was something else I wanted to say to Nell, but I didn't know what it was.

Afterword

HELLO, this is the author, Necoco! Thanks so much for buying Volume 6 of *Dragon Hatchling*. This volume contains the final part of the Lithovar Tribe arc. We finally get to see the haughty noble Tolemann launch his attack on the village.

Readers were really looking forward to this story, apparently! To be honest, I wanted to put in an evolution in this chapter, but I realized that it wasn't necessary for the protagonist to evolve to win this particular battle. The Ouroboros is a bit *too* strong now, if anything. Maybe I should have wedged another evolution in there before this one?

I wanted to write more about Allo, Azalea, and Tolemann, but out of consideration for those who read the afterwords first—and because I always feel somewhat embarrassed when authors discuss in-depth details of the work outside of the main story—I chose to avoid that in this afterword.

By the way, the manga version of *Dragon Hatchling* is currently available on Comic Earth Star's site and other manga sites! For those who haven't heard about this yet, please go check it out. It's really thrilling to see the protagonist in action!

At the time of writing this afterword in January of 2018, the manga has depicted the battle against the darkwyrms, the dragon meeting Myria, his escape from the Little Rock Dragon, and his battle against the venomous spider Taranturouge. That's everything that happens in the first volume. Oh, the memories! Personally, I can't wait for the battle against the slime. The slime has so many different attack variations... I bet the manga illustrations will look really creepy. The first volume of the manga is set to be published in spring or summer of 2018 here in Japan, so please look forward to it!

Wow, I've written so much already, and I'm just at 700 characters for this afterword? That's only about a third of what I'm supposed to write... I always have trouble filling out the afterword. I used to include daily observations about

my avocado tree to fill in the blank space, but as I told you in the last volume, it died.

I already covered the manga version, but I don't really have anything else to write about. I'm not really sure what to do now. I thought about growing a dragon fruit plant I've heard everyone talking about; it's hardy and difficult to kill, since it's a kind of cactus, but once I thought about it more I don't have much desire to eat a ton of dragon fruit. So much for that idea.

I briefly considered including original crossword or sudoku puzzles here, but I ran into slight problems. It turns out those kinds of things aren't that easy to make, so I threw out that idea as well. I guess I'll just continue to bore you with more personal details!

I graduated from college this year and finally became an adult in the real world. I'm really starting to feel the effects of everyday life as a salaryman. I had so much free time when I was a student, but now I can't do anything! I had two months off for spring break, headed to college before noon, and after my lectures were finished, I could head on over to my club activities and mess around there for a while. I wish I could go back to those days... It's so hard to find time to write now compared to back then.

Once I get home from work, I don't have much time before I have to sleep... and to make matters worse, I'm physically exhausted by then. I have to try hard to plaster a pleasant smile on my face when I hear my boss saying he'd like me to study more or practice driving outside of work, but I'm doing my best here.

Part of my job is getting sufficient sleep, so it's really hard to find time to write. Don't give up, Necoco! You can do this, Necoco!

If any students are reading this, please savor the time you have right now. Okay, that sounds like a lecture... If I were able to rewind, I'd probably just laze around and do nothing like I did before anyway...

All right! I hit 1,700 characters! I'm supposed to write 2,000, but we can't always get what we want. Anyway, everyone—thank you so much for buying this volume. I hope I see you in the next afterword!

—NECOCO

THANK YOU FOR ALL
YOUR SUPPORT. THIS
TIME I'M DRAWING THE
PROTAGONIST TO SCALE.

I ALWAYS HAVE SUCH A
HARD TIME FIGURING
OUT WHAT TO WRITE IN
THE AFTERWORD.





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